

FIRE!

Disastrous Blazes in Omaha History Firemen's Life and Death Battles Narrow Escapes Amid Smoke and Flames

By EDWARD BLACK.

Fire!
An old scrapbook contains a clipping from the Warsaw Clipper, giving an account of a fire by a cub reporter, who began his illuminating chronicle in this manner:

"At the midnight hour of January 12, when the inhabitants of Brink Haven were wrapped in nature's fond embraces of sleep, the wild, weird cry of 'Fire! Fire! Fire!' rang out in thundering tones upon the midnight frosty air, calling in no unmistakable voice to the unconscious sleepers to flee for their lives."

The same book also contains another cub reporter classic, published some years ago by Tid Bits. It began:

Paralyzing Suddenness.

"The angels of night had spread their ebony wings over the vast city and a stillness as deep and profound as that which envelops the starlit, trackless prairie was brooding over the red-tiled cottages of Kimberly Crescent, wherein the weary workers, worn out by their Herculean labors, were snatching an all too brief interval of repose on the lotus-scented breast of Morpheus, when from out the eerie void of silence there rang forth with paralyzing suddenness a stentorian shout of 'Fire!'"

It is said that Nero jizzed up his fiddle when Rome was being consumed by the element of incineration, but whether the old ruler was motivated by a desire to keep cool, or whether he merely wanted to accelerate the efforts of the fire department, is a detail of history that has not been cleared up. The old records do not disclose that he was a member of a volunteer or paid fire department.

Compelling Appeal.

Those who guard property and life against the ravages of the fiery element are the minute men of the community. There always has been a keen interest in the spectacular features of a fire and the dramatic life of the fireman. The sound of the fire bell has a compelling appeal to old and young. The boy in his day dream plays the role of fireman, cherishing a hope that some day he might be a real fire-fighter.

Much of the picturesqueness of the fireman's life has been replaced by modern mechanics and methods, all in the interest of efficiency. The red shirt worn by firemen years ago has been discarded, and horses which rushed from their stalls to suspended harness have been replaced by motorized apparatus. No horses are now used in the Omaha department. The complement of machines consists of 40 pieces of motor apparatus—pumpers, aerial trucks, water towers, combination trucks, chiefs' cars and work cars.

Organized in 1860.

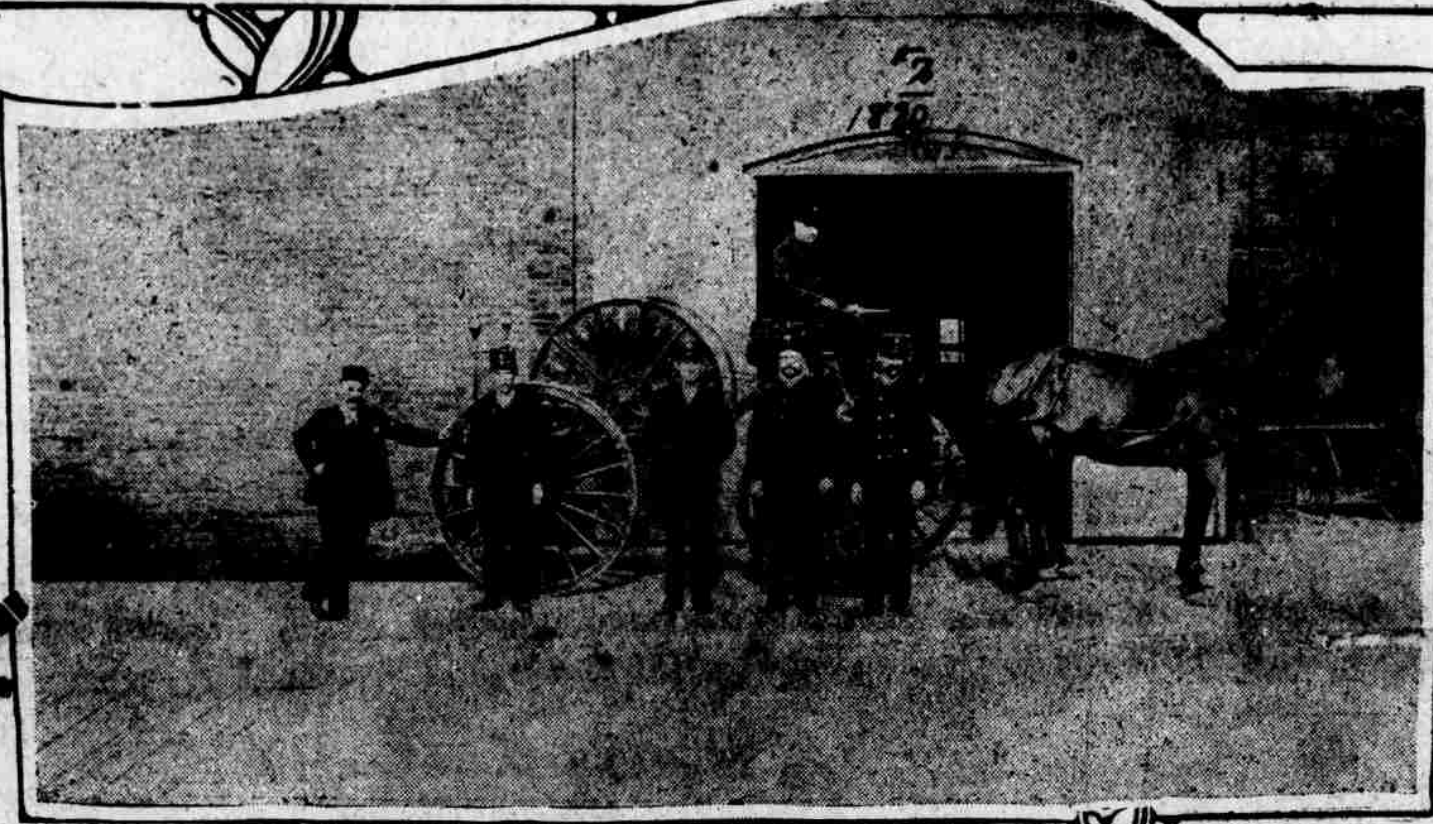
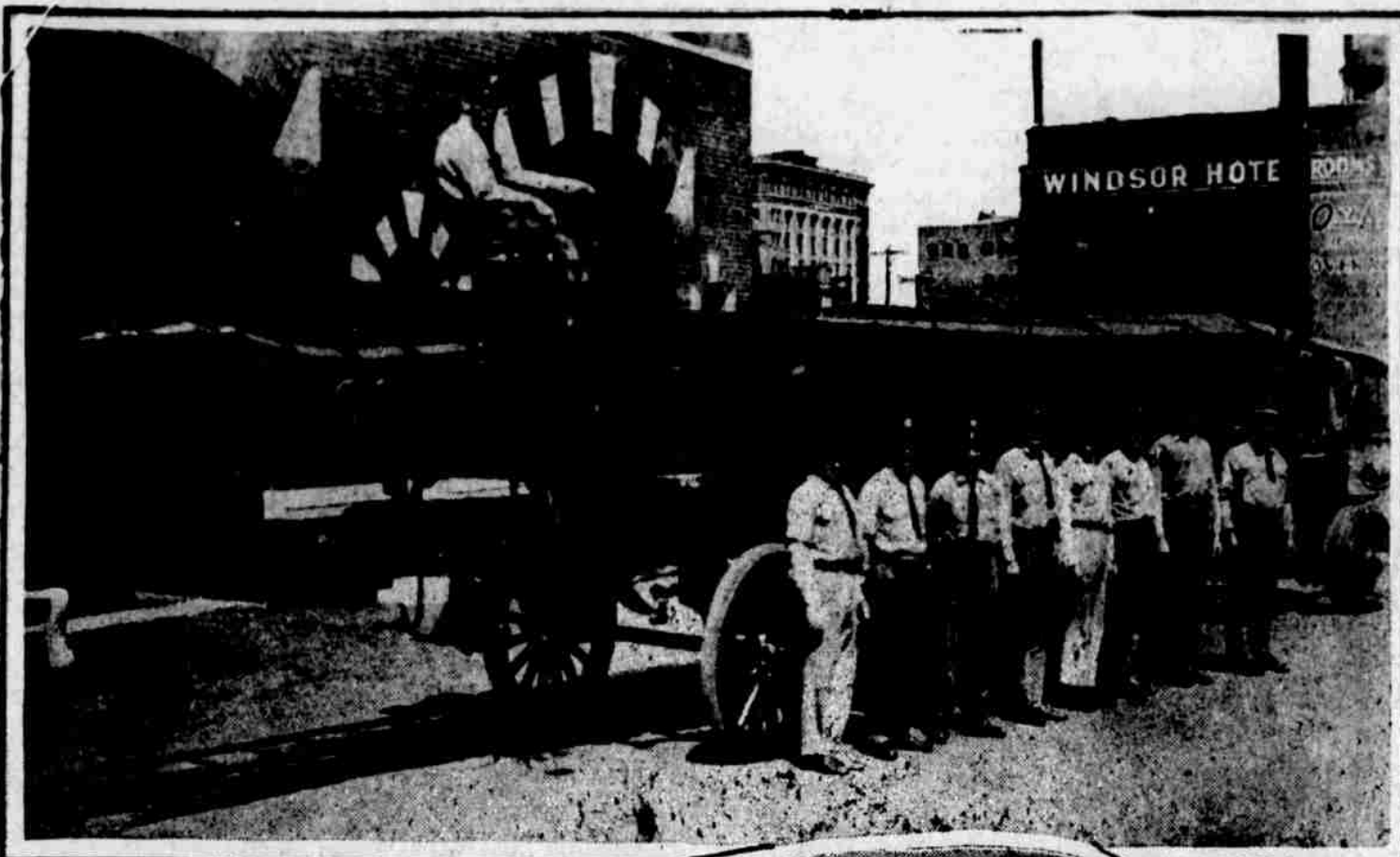
Chief Charles Salter's experience in the fire department covers a span of 45 years, beginning on June 1, 1876, when he first entered the ranks as a member of the old volunteer department. Omaha was something of a country town when the present chief began to "run with the machine." The first organization was known as the "Pioneer Hook and Ladder company, No. 1," started in 1860 by prominent citizens.

When the chief joined during the centennial exposition year there were only a few pieces of apparatus. The volunteer fire ladders worked at their respective employments and responded when the bell of the Methodist church was rung. At first they pulled the apparatus by means of a rope, and it was rather an honored position, that of city fireman, in those days. A fireman at that time held police authority to the extent that he could command the assistance of any bystander.

Used Hand Pumps.

Hand pumps were the first machines used, being displaced by steamers and horse-drawn apparatus. Water was drawn from a series of cisterns which were kept filled with river water, each having a capacity of 1,000 gallons. On May 5, 1885, the volunteer company met for the last time in its official capacity, making way for a metropolitan department.

Chief Salter has been identified with the department from the days of volunteers to its present strength of 325 men, working on the double-shift plan, with 23 fire stations and 40 pieces of modern motor apparatus.



Above—Hose wagon used in 1890. Below—One of Omaha's modern ladder trucks.

When the chief entered the department there were only 13 paid men on the staff. The chief became stoker to fire engine No. 3, and later was in charge of this machine, then located in a fire station on the west side of Sixteenth street, at the alley between Farnam and Harney streets.

Grand Central Hotel Fire.

The chief's first large fire was the memorable conflagration which destroyed the Grand Central hotel, September 24, 1878, on the present site of the Paxton hotel.

"I had charge of steam engine Nebraska No. 3, which I attended outside of the fire house on Sixteenth street. We had a line of hose down the alley to the Grand Central and pumped water out of a large cistern at the fire station," said the chief. "It was a long and hard shift and as I recall it now I was at that post 24 hours without a stop. While we were pumping the water down to the fire a fireman—I believe his name was Jacobson—came running and asked me to shut off the engine which I did at once. The purpose of that was to get firemen who were in the burning building to come to a window and then rescue them."

Four Men Killed.

"While Jacobson was on his errand the walls of the hotel fell with a crash and sent four firemen to their deaths. Another fireman who had been inside got as far as the entrance, but was caught by falling walls and was killed. Five lost their lives in that terrible fire. Jack Galligan was chief at that time."

The most thrilling experience of Assistant Chief George C. Crager occurred during a fire at the transportation building on the Transmississippi exposition grounds more than 20 years ago. Crager was captain of Hose Company No. 11 at that time and A. J. Clark was pipeman. The wind was from the north and they were south of the building when a "back draft" caused the fire to burst forth with terrific fury before the wind.

Tear Off Blazing Clothes.

"Clark," said the assistant chief, "was on fire and my clothes were scorching. We ran as fast as we could. I kept urging Clark

to speed up. George Windheim, then second assistant chief, was standing on Twentieth street, yelling to us, 'Come on!'"

"Citizens tore the blazing clothes from Clark. That was the fastest sprint I ever made in my life. I have been in foot races

Delays are not always dangerous, according to the log book of Martin Dineen, assistant chief. He has in mind the Shiverick fire in 1893, when he reverses the popular notion about delays.

"It was in June, on a Saturday night, as I recall it," said the assistant chief, "when the Shiverick fire alarm was sent in. I was with Hose company No. 7 at the time and while ascending an outside stairway I met Tom Gray, who was carrying a hose line and who complained that his wrist had been sprained. So I helped Gray and then got onto the Maurer roof which was next to and lower than the Shiverick building."

"I was just in time to see the west wall of the Shiverick building totter and I called to the men on the roof to get away. I made one jump across the skylight over the Maurer building and landed at the Pundt building wall just as the Shiverick wall came down with a crash and going through the skylight over which I had jumped a few seconds ahead of the crash. Captain Cox and Rob Oury of my company were killed beneath that wall and I would have been with them if Gray had not delayed me on account of his sprained wrist."

Old Boyd Theater Burned.

Many Omahans remember the fire which destroyed the old Boyd theater at the southeast corner of Fifteenth and Farnam streets on October 2, 1893. Zina Smith does. He is serving as driver at fire station No. 2, Eleventh and Dodge streets. He has been in the fire department 29 years, which length of service usually earns the sobriquet of veteran, but Mr. Smith avers that he does not feel like a veteran.

From stage driver in the Black Hills to driver of modern motor fire apparatus is a far cry, but not too far for Driver Smith, whose nerve seems to be as steady today in guiding his heavy machine at a rapid pace, as it was when he negotiated the hills and turns in the Black Hills with a six-hand years ago.

"I entered the service of the fire department during September, 1892, and the first large fire I attended was at the old Boyd theater in 1893," he said.

At the time of the theater fire Mr. Smith was driver for Hook and Ladder company No. 1 and C. C. Trobee was driver for Engine company No. 4. The train entered the burning building by way of the stage door in the alley and it was Trobee who suggested that they should retrace their steps to safety.

"I told Trobee that I was willing to go on with the work or to leave as he suggested," continued Mr. Smith. "We returned to the alley and within a minute the wall fell out. I admit that I experienced a queer feeling, because I had not been in the department very long."

"The Waifs of New York" had just finished a rehearsal at the Boyd theater when a gas jet in the files ignited the scenery and started a fire which destroyed the building.

Horses to Gasoline.

Zina Smith was a familiar figure on the streets when he drove four horses attached to a large aerial truck. His experience as a stage driver served him well as a driver of horse-drawn fire apparatus. When horses were replaced by motor apparatus and the men were expected to become familiar with motorized equipment, some of the fire ladders marveled at the ease with which Mr. Smith "made the grade" from horses to gasoline.

"He drives the motor truck just like he did the old four-horse team," remarked Capt. R. W. Oliver, "and you know what a chariot rider he was with the four horses."

A Narrow Escape.

Jerry Sullivan, now serving as battalion chief in the South Side, joined the department on March 17, 1891, and he has served at nearly every large fire in Omaha during the last 30 years. The Kingman fire is underlined in his memory's book on account of a narrow escape he had from death. He was a member of Hose Company No. 5, Eighth and Pierce streets, at the time. He and sev-

eral associates placed a line of hose along Ninth street, carried the line into the building at the elevator shaft and they were about to proceed with the line upstairs when something happened.

"As I now recall it," said Battalion Chief Sullivan, "the men with me on that occasion were Martin Mulvihill, since retired; Chief Salter, then assistant chief; Ed LaPage and Herman Geiseke. We were about to turn the water on the fire when the hose went flat. Then we returned to the street to investigate the cause, learning that Engine Company No. 2 had disconnected our hose at the hydrant. We were just about out of the building when it collapsed, all of the floors going down. Of course, it is evident that what would have happened if the water at the hydrant had not been turned off at that particular time. We had not suspected the weakness of the building. We would all have gone down with the floors, as other firemen have done at other fires, if that fortunate incident had not occurred."

Suffocated by Fumes.

Mr. Sullivan added that the Kingman fire was the nearest call to death he has had during his long experience as a fire-fighter. At the Haydens' store fire he was suffocated by fumes and was carried, with others, to a hospital.

"The Shiverick furniture store fire at 1206-8-10 Farnam street, June 3, 1893, was another bad one," Mr. Sullivan continued. "Martin Dineen, now assistant chief, was driver of No. 7 Hose company and I was driver for Home Company No. 2, then at Tenth and Douglas streets. I happened to be in the alley when the building went down. Pipeman John P. Oury was found dead the next morning in the cellar. Several others were injured, including George Coulter, superintendent of



Citizens once tore burning clothes from the body of Assistant Fire Chief George C. Crager.

the police and fire alarm system, and also a spectator. Capt. Charles D. Cox of Hose Company No. 7 also was killed. I always remember the Shiverick fire because Chief Galligan was on the sidewalk, yelling to beat the band, as we drove in. The chief was in Maurer's when the alarm was sent in and was the first to reach the fire. Chief Galligan had a forcible way of giving his commands, but he did not mean anything personal in his remarks. He would have given the shirt from his back to have helped a man in need."

Caught in Burning Building.

Ernest C. Newhouse, whose official designation is battalion chief, North Side, entered the service on

April 20, 1895. He is working at present on special duty out of the chief's office, not having recovered from the effects of injuries suffered during the Schmoller & Mueller fire last October. At that fire he and four associates fell from third to second floor. Fireman Fred Blazek being killed. That was the second time Mr. Newhouse had been caught in a burning building. On the last occasion he was extricated by being pulled out of his boots, with the flesh of both legs seriously burned. Firemen turned a hose on him to extinguish the fire which was burning his limbs. He remained four months in a hospital and now is taking treatments. At the Kirkendall fire, January, 1905, he suffered a fracture of a hip when the roof fell in and covered him. Three months in a hospital and a year on crutches were his lot after that fire.

Pulled Out of Boots.

"At the Schmoller & Mueller fire I called to the men to turn the hose on my legs which were being burned," said Mr. Newhouse in recalling that grim event. "Of course, I never will forget the feeling I experienced when Captain Quinlan and his men of Hook and Ladder company No. 1 came to my rescue. I could see them through the smoke and fire. They had to pull me out of my boots to get me out."

Patrick Cogan, battalion chief on the North Side, rounded out 30 years' service with the department on September 3 of this year. He has been in many tight places and has missed death by a jump on several occasions. The nearest he came to being counted out was the occasion of a serious fire at the Hartman Furniture company's establishment.

"I was in the street when a wall fell out," he said. "I was covered with debris and was pulled out by



Above—Landing in the life net. Below—Manning the wagons after an alarm