

# Volunteers Under

By WILLIAM ECENBARGER

With higher expenses, tougher regulations, fund-raising difficulties, reputation problems, and decreasing membership, volunteer fire departments are becoming an endangered species.

America is in danger of losing the biggest bargain it ever had — the volunteer fire department, a 248-year-old institution that a presidential commission estimated in 1972 offers essential services worth \$4.5 billion a year.

For every person who is paid to fight fires in the United States, there are eight who do it for nothing. But this taxpayers' bonanza may be dying out. Memberships are down and expenses are up in nearly all the nation's 29,000 volunteer fire departments. Today's volunteer spends more time chasing dollars than fires, and the old "surround and drown" theory of fire fighting has given way to more sophisticated and costly techniques to meet more complex fires.

The modern volunteer fire department must maintain standards that impress insurance underwriters, who grade them on personnel, training, and equipment. It must carry negligence insurance to cover the increasing number of lawsuits

from citizens who say volunteers put too much water, or not enough, on their burning homes; and it sometimes must live with a reputation for incompetence, sexism, revelry, or arson.

There are a few reassuring signs. Beer and other alcoholic beverages are being banned in many firehouses. Fire fighters are going to aerobics classes to get in shape, and departments are establishing weight limits for members in the belief that the fat should not be in the fire. Competition — once so intense that there were brawls at intersections when rival companies met en route to a fire — is



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# Fire

being replaced by cooperation.

Other signs are not so reassuring. Despite chronic membership problems, the volunteer firehouse remains a bastion of male chauvinism. Many departments still resist taking a strong role in fire prevention. And that old nemesis of the volunteer fire department — fire fighters who become fire lighters — persists.

Is the volunteer fire company at the





end of its ladder? Yes and no, according to the National Fire Protection Association. Says Robert C. Barr, director of the NFPA's Public Protection Division:

"The populated, suburban areas are definitely in trouble. The time demands for training, fund raising, and fighting fires are keeping many people out and driving out some that are already in. Commuting distances make protection difficult during working hours. We're probably heading for what's already happening in the Washington, D.C., area, which is paid fire fighters supplemented by volunteers.

"The rural areas are another story, and about 20,000 of our volunteer departments serve areas with populations of 2,500 or less. There's a lot of roots and tradition here. Fire fighting tends to run in families, and they will endure longer in these areas."

Those fire fighting traditions began in America almost 250 years ago. Soon after Benjamin Franklin emigrated from Boston to Philadelphia, he became concerned about the primitive, disorganized state of fire fighting techniques. In December, 1736, Franklin organized the Union Fire Company, made up of 20

volunteers and 40 buckets. Although Boston and New York City can make strong claims to having America's first volunteer fire company, most authorities consider the Union in Philadelphia the first voluntary organization to make a specialty of extinguishing fires and rescuing people. And thus the volunteer fire company, today a fixture of suburban and rural areas, began as an urban necessity.

The idea spread throughout America, and though the cities created full-time, paid fire departments, the volunteers rooted in rural America. They soon developed a reputation for rowdiness that, somewhat undeservedly, survives to this day. Rival companies would brawl while fires burned unattended, chop each others' hoses at fire scenes, and place baskets over unused hydrants to prevent other companies from joining the fire fight. As late as 1942 the Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, volunteer fire department was fighting a fire in neighboring Haverford Township when the Brookline company, the "home" department, arrived on the scene and put its hoses to work — on the Bryn Mawr fire fighters.

Such antics aside, these volunteers

perform America's most dangerous profession. They are roused from dinner and sleep to follow the siren's song to a gamble with the unknown — a unique combination of fire dynamics and combustible materials. Death often is only a ladder rung away. It can come from burns, toxic gases, hidden explosives, collapsed floors, and caved-in roofs. The fatality rate for American fire fighters is 15 percent higher than for coal miners, police, and construction workers.

The real enigma about volunteer fire fighters is not why they wear red suspenders, but why they volunteer at all. Fire fighting offers a unique blend of danger and altruism. The fire fighter is a soldier who brings life instead of death. Ordinary citizens leave their jobs and, for a few hours a month, become larger-than-life figures. At their best, volunteers are the preservation of an American ideal of neighbor helping neighbor, an old-fashioned barn raising, the spirit of the bucket brigade in modern dress. Volunteer fire fighters know what they are doing is important, and therefore they are important.

Dennis Smith, until recently a paid New York City fire fighter, is a heroic,

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emulated, and revered figure to all volunteer firemen. Currently the editor of *Firehouse Magazine*, Smith wrote a book about his experiences fighting fires in the South Bronx, *Report From Engine Co. 82*, which has sold 1.6 million copies and been translated into eight languages. One of eight books, including four novels, that Smith has written, *Engine Co. 82* can be found dog-eared in most American firehouses.

Smith is fighting a deadline in Manhattan rather than a fire in the Bronx on this day, but he returns a telephone call to talk about volunteer fire fighters:

"They have been one of the bulwarks of this nation, but there are dangerous things happening today that must be addressed by the communities they serve. When you've got to come up with 300,000 dollars for a new aerial ladder, that gets very complicated for a small volunteer company. I have prepared a series of video training tapes for volunteers that I can't sell for a penny less than 1,450 dollars. A lot of volunteer companies can't afford them. The communities must begin spending more money for the volunteers — or they won't have them any more."

The necessity of raising money for the equipment they need to support the

services they perform always has posed problems for volunteers. The Reisterstown, Maryland, volunteer fire company came up with the idea in 1982 of a "beefcake" show featuring male dancers in bikini briefs. It was an immediate hit with the community's women, some of whom stuffed money into the dancers' briefs. Explains fire-chief Craig Coleman:

"It has come down to this because none of the traditional fund-raising efforts — the bake sales and spaghetti dinners — has raised enough money to cover the fire company's costs. We need money and we need it bad."

But most volunteer fire companies continue using traditional fund-raising methods such as carnivals, car washes, pancake breakfasts, spaghetti dinners, dances, and flea markets. These events help keep alive the flickering tradition of the firehouse as the community center. Their moral virtue is tempered by the fact that they don't work very well in meeting today's budget demands. Aerial equipment can cost up to \$400,000, and even a custom pumper goes for \$150,000. And while most volunteers don't complain about the danger of fire fighting or the demands for increased training, they do resent the time

they spend performing the task of fund raising.

Most volunteer departments get small allocations from the governing bodies of the communities they serve. In New Jersey, fire fighters have dusted off a little-used 1879 law that allows the creation of special taxing districts with voter approval. Fire districts are becoming increasingly numerous, especially in Camden County. There are a number of fire departments in the Washington, D.C., area where some firemen are paid, others are volunteers.

Dissatisfaction with money-raising duties leads directly to the second chronic problem of volunteer fire companies: declining memberships. The national trend shows a steady decrease in volunteer companies and members within each of the remaining companies.

Fire-chief Mike Tlebani of Bristol Borough, Pennsylvania, says people don't volunteer as readily today as they did 20 years ago:

"They don't have the time or they don't want to do it without pay. Who wants to put his life on the line for nothing?"

*William Ecenbarger is a Pennsylvania-based free-lance writer.*

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By Mike Henson

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