

Urban Fire Fighters: The Strength of Occupational Folklife

Robert McCarl

Since the first horse-drawn fire engines clanged down a city street, fire fighting has been an urban service occupation that has continued to generate a feeling of romance and respect. Yet beyond the excitement and pride felt by those who advance the hose lines, make the rescues or throw the ladders,^{1*} there are a variety of techniques, customs, gestures and stories that form the work culture passed from one generation of fire fighters to the next. The veteran's advice, for example, given over a hot cup of coffee after a rookie² has just run the line on his first working fire,³ shapes the way a new firefighter will think, act, and feel on the job. Washington, D. C., has a long and rich history of fire service, and within every neighborhood of the city there is a fire house in which these stories and skills are being passed on to the fire fighters of the next generation.

Stories fire fighters tell about past experiences express not only the way things have been done in the past, but also the humor, intelligence and flair of those who tell the stories or are described in them. The following narrative was related by an experienced officer to a couple of younger fire fighters one night as they sat around the watch desk⁴ listening to calls coming in over the vocal:⁵

"One man that I respected quite a bit, his name was Brown. At the time that I worked directly with him he was the captain of the

*Numbers refer to terms in glossary.

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squad,⁶ and I was the wagon driver on the engine.⁷ And he had a reputation for being an excellent fire fighter both in terms of actually taking the pipe⁸ and advancing it—you know that type of fire fighter—and led his men well and was always calm and didn't raise his voice much.

Well, we had a fire up on Park Road and Mt. Pleasant Street one day. It was a large apartment building so that the apartments were large, many rooms, you know, two or three bedrooms with little maid's quarters and things like that. And we had a fire on one of the upper floors. The squad was given the line⁹ because it was so hot and smokey that they couldn't find the fire.

So the squad ended up taking the line and even *they* couldn't find the fire. There was a tremendous amount of heat.

So Brown told the men to hold their position right where they were. And he left the apartment that was on fire without saying anything to anybody because that wasn't the kind of thing where—particularly with the masks¹⁰ on and everything—you could convey your thoughts.

He knew what he wanted to do. He went to the floor below, to the corresponding apartment... went in, looked the situation over and found that there was another bedroom back here off to the side of the room in the hallway.

By the stack principle¹¹ he knew that it would be the same as the one above. He went back upstairs, took his company and said, 'O.K. fellas here's where we have to go,' and in they went and put the fire out.

And so I catalogued that in my mind. I've never had an opportunity to use it. But believe me, if the situation ever presents itself I'll be



1 Arriving at the fire Photos by Robert McCarl for the Smithsonian



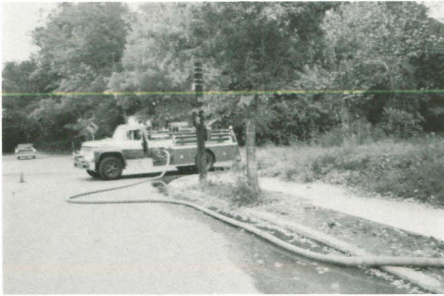
4 Taking the hose line into the building



7 Talking it over on the fire ground

able to bring that thing up just like a computer would."

This brief story provides a glimpse into the culture of fire fighting through its folklore. The special language, the attention paid to the type of building involved and the pinpointing of the action at a particular city intersection not only gives the audience a professional's picture of the fire but it also requires from them a quick mental review of how they would have gotten to that location of the city, since the "running route" taken by a driver is predetermined and must be memorized by every fire fighter as part of his or her probationary training. Other elements that are revealed in this narrative include the suggestion of what makes a good officer—someone who is aggressive in a fire situation but at the same time anticipates the next move before it is reached. As professionals, fire fighters know exactly what to do without being told to do it. Usually, the only occasion an officer has to



2 The charged or full hose line running from the pumper...



5 Hitting the fire with water



8 The verbal critique in the fire house

say something to a fire fighter in a fire situation occurs when something unusual requires modification in the method of attack.

The central concern in this story is anticipation and quick thinking in a very common fire situation—a room or hallway totally engulfed in heat and smoke in which it is impossible to find the actual location of the fire. Crouching in this completely dark environment with the heat sapping the energy from his body, a fire fighter must try every way he can think of to locate and extinguish the fire. The story and countless others like it provide the accumulated techniques and bits of information that can be called on in situations like this to enable the fire fighter to do his job.

Fire fighting is dangerous and filled with sharp contrasts. A fire fighter might be sound asleep one minute and virtually the next he could be crawling down a smoke filled hallway trying to drag someone to safety. Danger must be anticipated; life or death situa-



3 ... to the wagon



6 Placing exhaust fans and checking for hot spots

tions require all the knowledge and skill an individual can muster. A fire fighter prepares for this every day through training, experience, and the collective knowledge of past generations of fire fighters communicated through occupational folklore.

Glossary

¹ Hose lines, rescues, ladders: engine companies take the hose into a burning building to extinguish the fire. Truck companies put up the ladders, ventilate the smoke and heat and search and rescue. The rescue squad goes above the fire and to it to search and rescue.

² Rookie: a fire fighter trainee, also called probationer or "probie."

³ Run the line: advance the hose line into the building; working fire: a tough or hot fire that requires a great deal of effort to extinguish.

⁴ Watch desk: the desk in front of the fire house where fire fighters take turns listening to the radio for fire calls.

⁵ Vocal: the radio speaker over which the fire calls are given.

⁶ Squad: the heavy duty rescue squad used for rescue aid on fires as well as for rescue jobs like extracting people from automobile wrecks, etc.

⁷ Engine: the wagon driver drives the first vehicle (called a wagon pump) of a two piece engine company while the pumper driver drives the second (called the pumper). The wagon driver leads the way to the fire and gets as close to the fire as possible while the pumper stops at the nearest hydrant and connects to the hydrant to pump water to the wagon.

⁸ Pipe: the nozzle at the end of the hose.

⁹ Line: the hose line.

¹⁰ Masks: the oxygen bottle plus facepiece carried by all fire fighters in the fire building.

¹¹ Stack principle: simply that the apartment on one floor is probably laid out the same as the one below, or above it.

Suggested Readings

Byington, Robert H., ed. *Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklife*, Smithsonian Folklife Studies, Number 3. Los Angeles: California Folklore Society, 1978.

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Smith, Dennis. Report from Engine Co. 82. *New York: Saturday Review Press*, 1972.

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