



Fire! Fire! Fire!

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: Palmer describes a display of photographs and relics of York's volunteer firemen. At annual tournaments teams of firemen competed in various races, and the public enjoyed "a Midway with the most lurid of attractions."

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FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!

BY ANNA BEMIS PALMER

DOWN in the basement of the City Library at York, Nebraska, members of the DAR maintain a museum, not so much in size, but with many priceless relics and souvenirs of the pioneers who built the city and helped to open up the state, and the citizens are adding to it rapidly.

One frame on display shows a faded group photograph of thirty-three men in uniform with many ribbon badges prominent on their shirt fronts, and above them is the legend, "WORLD'S CHAMPIONS, Time 44 4/5 seconds, 1887." These are the men who comprised the Hook and Ladder team of the York Volunteer Fire Department nearly seventy years ago and brought to the small town the honor of being the home of the fire department holding the world's championship. Below the photograph are two ornate gold medals. One of them, given to Captain W. R. Knapp by the running team, is embellished with a beautifully engraved hook and ladder, a fireman's helmet and the inscription, "To Capt. W. R. Knapp from the running team, 1886, Time 45 seconds."

A more decorative medal, won at the state tournament in Grand Island, in 1885, was presented to George Chilcote, York's ladder man. This one is surmounted by a laurel wreath and ornamented with a palm of victory, a fireman's axe, hooks and ladders galore, and the words, "Champion

1885," enamelled in black. George Chilcote, short and slender, was always at the top of the thirty foot ladder by the time it was upright, and very much resembled the monkey who used to accompany the old time Italian with the hand organ, as he scampered up the ladder while the men were raising it aloft. Mr. Chilcote appears in the photograph holding the belt which was won at Kearney in 1887.

A white satin badge heavily trimmed in gold lace and fringe contains the names of thirty-two men with the following inscription, "Champions of the World, Running Team, York Hook and Ladder Company # 1 Time 44 4/5 seconds, 1887." A number of homes in York still boast a red satin ribbon with the names of the entire company on it. The one in the frame is the gift of Mrs. W. R. Knapp and was worn by her husband while he was Captain.

The running team pulled a seventeen hundred pound truck with a thirty foot ladder and ran three hundred yards and had a man at the top of the ladder when they stopped. No man could join the running team (all young boys aspired to it) unless he qualified by being able to run three hundred yards in thirty-seven seconds.

During tournament time, mornings were devoted to business meetings with election of state officers, and other matters pertaining to the conduct of firemen over the area being discussed and adjusted. Afternoons were devoted to the races when the different teams from over the state each displayed their best efforts. They raced, not against each other, but against the time keepers' watches. No paid firemen participated in the tournament, but few towns outside of Lincoln and Omaha had other than volunteer companies. Especially good contestants remembered came from Kearney, Stanton, Seward, Aurora, Grand Island, and Red Cloud. At one time there were five time keepers on the job since each team trusted only certain men in that important position. When the wheels of a truck crossed the line, an electric starter recorded it, and when the ladder man hit the highest round all stop watches clicked.

There were other races on the agenda. The different hose teams raced with each other, there was a coupling contest

to see who could connect the nozzle to the hose first, and the chiefs of each department always ran a hundred yard foot race. Also the usual fat men's race, sack race and others, but none of these were taken seriously as was the race of the running team. At the close of the meeting officials recorded the results, they were attested and most solemnly sworn to and sent to the different states—no breathless waiting at the radio then nor any radio to wait with.

Competition was very keen, not to say fierce, in those days, at other than tournament times. A bad fire not controlled was considered a disgrace among the members and when the Methodist church at York burned to the ground, the building and contents a total loss, the York company was favored by a telegram from the Stromsburg team congratulating them on "saving the lot." This was especially bitter for the firemen as it was not their fault that there was no water pressure that night. York had two fire trucks, one down town and the other in north York and when the fire alarm sounded there was a wild race to see which one reached the fire first with the loser highly penalized by the ensuing sarcasm and ridicule.

Through the foresight and intelligent thinking of some of the former and the present men in charge of the fire hall, a fine collection of photographs and trophies has been preserved, dating back to the eighties, and also a file has been kept of the printed proceedings of the annual conventions of the Nebraska State Volunteer Firemen's Association since 1923. That year the meet was held at North Platte and a large concourse is pictured with the Norfolk Fireman's Band in the foreground. A worn old velvet banner proclaims York H. and L. Co. Champions, 1886-1887-1888 and there is a copy of the by-laws of the company dated 1893. Fifty years ago a crack ladder team from Omaha gave exhibitions over the state and their photo is on file captioned "Omaha Pompier Team," with a picture of the scaling ladder near the men. They were in York in 1921. In 1903 the association met in Crete and photos show a large attendance. Appended is a list of the meetings from the first one held at Lincoln, in 1883 down through the first forty years.



ABOVE: A Hose Cart Team of the 1880's.

BELOW: York's "World Champions," 1887.



1. EMERY BLAIR 2. GILSON STAFFORD 3. 4. DAVID R. GOULD 5. A. HARPER 6. E. M. CO. DRAVES
 7. FREDERICK V. BARNUM 8. GEORGE SCHOLTLER 9. 10. CHARLES ROSEKLOF 11. V. HYDER 12. JAMES B. DEELEY
 13. JOHN R. COOPER 14. JOHN V. HULL 15. THOMAS BUCHHEIM 16. J. WELLY 17. F. FISHER 18. GEO. R. SACORAN 19. SAM. RAC. FREE
 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31. 32. 33. 34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51. 52. 53. 54. 55. 56. 57. 58. 59. 60. 61. 62. 63. 64. 65. 66. 67. 68. 69. 70. 71. 72. 73. 74. 75. 76. 77. 78. 79. 80. 81. 82. 83. 84. 85. 86. 87. 88. 89. 90. 91. 92. 93. 94. 95. 96. 97. 98. 99. 100.

THE PLACES AND DATES OF MEETINGS SINCE THE
ORGANIZATION WAS ESTABLISHED

| | |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Lincoln, February 15, 1883..... | First Meeting |
| Lincoln, August 28-31, 1883..... | 1st Annual Convention |
| Fremont, January 22-24, 1884..... | 2nd Annual Convention |
| Lincoln, January 20-21, 1885..... | 3rd Annual Convention |
| Seward, January 19-20, 1886..... | 4th Annual Convention |
| Columbus, January 18-19, 1887..... | 5th Annual Convention |
| Plattsmouth, January 17-18, 1888..... | 6th Annual Convention |
| York, January 15-17, 1889..... | 7th Annual Convention |
| Wahoo, January 21-22, 1890..... | 8th Annual Convention |
| Grand Island, January 20-21, 1891..... | 9th Annual Convention |
| Fremont, January 19-21, 1892..... | 10th Annual Convention |
| Kearney, January 17-19, 1893..... | 11th Annual Convention |
| Beatrice, January 17-19, 1894..... | 12th Annual Convention |
| Norfolk, January 15-17, 1895..... | 13th Annual Convention |
| Grand Island, January 21-23, 1896..... | 14th Annual Convention |
| Columbus, January 19-21, 1897..... | 15th Annual Convention |
| Kearney, January 18-29, 1898..... | 16th Annual Convention |
| Beatrice, January 17-19, 1899..... | 17th Annual Convention |
| Norfolk, January 16-18, 1900..... | 18th Annual Convention |
| Seward, January 15-17, 1901..... | 19th Annual Convention |
| Nebraska City, January 21-23, 1902..... | 20th Annual Convention |
| Crete, January 20-22, 1903..... | 21st Annual Convention |
| Fremont, January 19-21, 1904..... | 22nd Annual Convention |
| Columbus, January 17-19, 1905..... | 23rd Annual Convention |
| Beatrice, January 16-18, 1906..... | 24th Annual Convention |
| Grand Island, January 15-17, 1907..... | 25th Annual Convention |
| Nebraska City, January 21-23, 1908..... | 26th Annual Convention |
| Norfolk, January 19-21, 1909..... | 27th Annual Convention |
| Fremont, January 18-20, 1910..... | 28th Annual Convention |
| Alliance, January 17-19, 1911..... | 29th Annual Convention |
| Kearney, January 16-18, 1912..... | 30th Annual Convention |
| North Platte, January 21-23, 1913..... | 31st Annual Convention |
| Columbus, January 20-22, 1914..... | 32nd Annual Convention |
| Nebraska City, January 19-21, 1915..... | 33rd Annual Convention |
| Crawford, January 18-20, 1916..... | 34th Annual Convention |
| Auburn, January 16-18, 1917..... | 35th Annual Convention |
| Fremont, January 15-17, 1918..... | 36th Annual Convention |
| Fremont, January 21-23, 1919..... | 37th Annual Convention |
| Scottsbluff, January 20-22, 1920..... | 38th Annual Convention |
| York, January 18-20, 1921..... | 39th Annual Convention |
| Norfolk, January 17-19, 1922..... | 40th Annual Convention |
| North Platte, January 16-18, 1923..... | 41st Annual Convention |

A time-hardened leather helmet, white once but rather gray now, is proof that one of York's fire chiefs won the Chief's race in the old days, and a pair of prancing horses is reminiscent of the days when harness dropped on their backs as the old gong, still preserved, sounded. The old seventeen hundred pound truck, homemade by York's pioneer blacksmith, W. E. Gould, is now on exhibition at Lincoln and drew a crowd of onlookers at last fall's state fair.

And now that the morning business and the afternoon races have been attended to, may we have a minute for the evening's funfest? What fun everybody had with the population of the town added to by hundreds of visitors and a Midway with the most lurid of attractions. One barker with a baritone that a Metropolitan star might envy stood far into the night intoning only one sentence: "This way to the home office for your little rubber return balls." The thousands of little rubber return balls sold during the week were small rubber balls fastened to a rubber band of most wonderful stretching capacity, and when thrown at a passerby, gave one light blow and returned to the thrower. If one were quick enough to catch the ball it became his property, or rather hers, for pretty girls were most often the target and some of them ended the night with enough balls to start a "Home Office."

A fireman's ball was a must and of course there were water fights on the street when never an exhibition of the firemen's skill with the hose took place but that at some time it was found necessary to turn the streams directly where the onlookers were the thickest, but a very wet and sometimes a very angry crowd soon forgave the "accident."

Games of chance that would put bingo to shame were rife around the unpaved, dusty courthouse square, and dancing girls, glass blowers, a merry-go-round, and "the only *real* man of Borneo" helped entertain. Speaking of those dancing girls, some of the public-spirited citizens who were shocked to the point of rebellion lodged a complaint with the police magistrate, alleging indecent exposure, since the ladies wore dresses that were very low at the top and very high at the bottom. Appearing in court the next morning the girls, all very demure and innocent looking, were found to be a bevy of boys ranging in age from 14 to 16 years!

At present only one man of the old champion group is left in York, Everett Gould, who at the age of eighty-seven, lives on the farm adjoining the town where his father homesteaded in the seventies and if occasion arises, he still can run with a lot of vim. Mr. Gould was able to identify all of the men in the photograph and can tell many a tale of the

time when they were so important a part of the life of the city.

Incidentally, the photo in the museum was found by Gertrude Furman in the basement of the old building where her father, W. J. Furman, a member of the team, used to run a cafe in the eighties and the moral is, search your basements and attics and put the early history of Nebraska where it will be kept to inspire future generations and make them pioneer conscious.