

# "When a Man's House Is Afire He Wants Action"---Alarm Operators Show How They Give It To Him

BY MARIE COCHRAN. *7/15/36*

**S**HORTLY before 4 o'clock Thursday afternoon, July 16, Fred Couter, seated in the front room of his home at 260 Bay Street, East Toledo, jumped from his chair at the sound of an explosion.

He rushed into the yard. People all down the block also were running into the street and many were shouting "Fire!" Smoke in ugly, black clouds was pouring from windows in the house next door to Mr. Couter's, and the man who lived there staggered through the doorway of the burning residence, his arms before his face.

Mr. Couter lost no time. A block away, he knew, at Case and Lee Streets, was a fire alarm box. He ran down Bay Street and around the corner. He reached the alarm box and pulled the alarm.

That alarm, pulled at 3:53 p. m. that day at Case and Lee Streets, sounded simultaneously in the operators' room of the Fire and Police Alarm Building on Erie Street. Less than 30



seconds later firemen and apparatus from two East Toledo engine houses were on the street en route to the fire.

"When a man's house is afire, he wants action," Fred Wechsel, senior fire alarm operator, had said to me the previous day. And Wynn Meyers, junior operator, had added: "And that's what he gets because it's our job to give it to him."

That fire on Bay Street, in a block of frame houses with shacks at the rear, was a second-alarm fire which menaced an entire neighborhood. But no lives were lost and the fire was kept within a very small area.

The fire alarm operators who receive and transmit fire alarms and the firemen who fight the fire gave East Toledo residents action.

WHAT happens at the scene of such a fire is a show for any fire fan who follows the engines. It is drama, colorful and glamorous, pointed by danger and fear of sudden death.

What happens in the fire alarm receiving office during the same fire is none the less dramatic for being a behind-the-scenes per-

formance, staged without benefit of siren or applause.

The fire alarm operators sit at adjoining telephone switchboards, two on duty during each eight-hour shift. The alarm box circuits, where alarms are received, are a few feet to one side.

John McCune, son of former Fire Chief John McCune, was senior operator on duty at the time of the Bay Street fire; Harry Updike, the junior.

John was saying in answer to questions, "The only way to find out what to do and whether it's important, is to see for yourself. We've been doing it so long it's almost automatic."

Said Harry, "And you won't learn it in one . . ." A bell began to ring . . . "Here it is!" he finished.

A visitor doesn't speak when an alarm sounds, I learned. A visitor keeps quiet and out of the operators' way. A delay of seconds might mean a life lost.

The bell rang, sounding out the alarm box number, 734, as the number appeared simultaneously

in spaced perforations on a moving tape on the box circuits. The number sounds and appears four times.

Before the second of the series came, John McCune had pushed a button, sounding a warning gong in every engine house in Toledo, and had pulled a switch which relayed the box number to all engine houses. Before the last repeat he had confirmed the box number by radio broadcast.

Before the last repeat Harry Updike had lifted cards from nearby files. One, for Box 734, listed apparatus and chief to respond to one, two, three, four and general alarm fires in the district. The other, with street name, showed cross streets, block numbers and box numbers on the street.

Less than 30 seconds of work and Harry said, "They've gone!"

"Charts in every engine house show boxes they respond to," John said briefly. "If the number's theirs they don't wait, they go!"

THEY were both pushing phone cords into numbered holes in the switchboards. First, for another

check on the engine houses assigned to respond to the alarm, to see if they had. If either of the two previous alarms had failed, telegraph or radio, this check-up would find the mistake and rectify it.

Next move, notifying the Community Traction and Toledo Edison Companies by telephone, this in case of wire trouble resulting from the fire. And last move in a swift series, entering source, time and other details about the fire in the log book.

"A minute and a half since the alarm sounded," said John finally, "If we don't get a second alarm, all we have to do is wait for the tap."

He was wrong to this extent—they had plenty to do while waiting for the tap, or for the second alarm which did come nine minutes later. Somebody in that East Toledo district, seeing flames and smoke from a distance, pulled another alarm box.

Nearby residents, excited or apprehensive as the fire continued to blaze, made dozens of telephone calls to the alarm office in several minutes' time.

"It looks," said John, as the calls continued to pour in, "as if we'd get a second alarm all right."

He explained: "When several boxes are pulled and we get a lot of phone calls, it's because the fire looks bad. You develop some kind of sensitiveness for it, working on this job."

His intuition didn't betray him. The second alarm came at 4:02 and they went into action again.

Fire Chief Fred Schlorf goes to all second alarm fires, as do a deputy chief and an additional district chief. The Fire Department Rescue Squad also responds.

Men and apparatus from three other houses, one the third East Toledo company, the other two from the West side of the river. The operators sent an ambulance and the Police Department sent a scout crew, a patrol wagon and an ambulance.

The senior operator was busy at the radio microphone steadily, sending out information, instructions. The junior operator was at the telephone for the same purpose.

The operators were "worried," they said, when calls continued to come after the second alarm apparatus had been sent. . . . They learned later that an aerial hook and ladder truck, an ambulance and the patrol wagon, all from the West Side, had been held up by an open span on the Cherry Street Bridge.

"It isn't just a question of getting apparatus to the fire," John McCune said later. "There's also the business of moving other apparatus in to fill in for companies out on the first fire."

He explained that had the Ash-Consaul Bridge not been closed apparatus from No. 1 Engine House, Bush and Erie Streets, would have gone, as it was the nearest company from the West Side. Hose and truck from No. 2,

Cherry near Superior, was sent instead over the Cherry Street Bridge, and No. 1 apparatus was moved into No. 2 Engine House to insure protection in case of a downtown fire during that time.

"Another problem—with all three East Toledo companies there on the second alarm, there was no apparatus left on the East Side to handle any other fire over there. We moved No. 9, Broadway and Orchard, over to No. 10, Oak and Fassett."

The tap came at 4:14, signaling fire under control. Most of the apparatus left at that time. Not all of it was back in service until 7:25 p. m.

When it was all over we sat down to check up.

"Well," said John, "all we have to do now is make sure all the apparatus is where it should be, do half a dozen other routine jobs, and then, if we don't get another fire we can eat our lunch."

"We even eat our lunch out of a box," said Harry:

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FRED WÉCHSEL, former No. 3 hose wagon driver, has been in the fire department 19 years and has a brother, Carl, who is acting lieutenant on the rescue squad. Ben Minor, also with 19 years' service, is the son of Burrence Miner, a fireman at No. 17 engine house, and himself formerly was at No. 18.

"Bill" Armstrong has been in the department 18 years and came from No. 3. He has a brother, Jack, who is a city policeman. John McCune, son of former Assistant Fire Chief John McCune, has been in the department 17 years and formerly was at No. 17 engine house.

Wynn Meyers, of 19 years' experience, was a lieutenant at No. 3 engine house, and Harry Updike, with 17 years' experience, was a lieutenant at No. 7. Walter Bartow, once a ladderman at No. 18,

has been in the department for 16 years, and has a brother, Harry, who is a fireman at the same engine house now. And Ross Kasper, with 16 years' experience, was at No. 3 before he went into the alarm office. His brother, Harold, is at No 4 engine house.

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With only eight men to work three eight-hour shifts a day, seven days a week, extra-time work is in order for all of them these days, during the vacation season.

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"Bill" Armstrong was due back Monday after a two weeks' holiday. And where had Bill been, I inquired?

"Up in northern Michigan," said Ben. "He's been fighting forest fires."