

# Fire Prevention: A Municipal Function

By PERCY BUGBEE

THE idea of balancing fire prevention with fire fighting, making the two of equal importance, is gaining headway. Some municipalities still persist in carrying on along the old lines of doing nothing but fighting fires with all the water that can be thrown upon them, giving no thought at all to how they might have been prevented. However, the possibilities of systematic control of fire hazards have fortunately already been recognized by many cities and towns and the recognition of the practical, common sense procedure of putting out fires before they start, is becoming more and more widespread.

The first step in fire prevention that any municipality must take, is the enactment of suitable municipal by-laws covering the elements of building construction and the protection of the every day, well known fire hazards. Any municipality down to the smallest of villages should enact a by-law providing for fire limits and the construction and equipment of buildings. A building by-law does not need to be a highly technical and comprehensive sort of a document. The elementary items that should be covered in such a by-law include the establishment of a fire limit area for the community within which no building or structure of frame or unprotected metal construction should be erected. Provision for proper construction of alterations and additions to existing buildings of ordinary construction in the community should be provided and there should be provisions for the removal or repair of definitely unsafe buildings. It is desirable to impose simple limits of height and area for various classes of construction. Thickness of masonry walls should be established and provisions for protection of wall openings, stairway, elevator and

other shafts, skylights, and type and number of exits should be covered. It is most desirable to call for fire retardant roof coverings throughout the city or town limits because of the well known conflagration and fire hazard from the use of wooden shingles. A provision requiring fire-stopping in all buildings is very important. By this is meant that all walls and partitions and spaces between joists must be stopped with incombustible material in a manner to cut off all concealed draft openings. Simple provisions for the proper construction of chimneys and smoke pipes and other common heating appliances are very important.

In addition to the building by-law, it is very desirable to enact other by-laws covering such common things as the proper construction and protection of garages, the storage of common flammable liquids, the storage and use of motion picture film, explosives, fireworks, etc. It is very desirable to give the fire department the legal right to order the removal of accumulations of combustible materials, to require the proper containers for storage of hot ashes, and other dangerous materials, and to have control over bonfires, burning of rubbish, etc.

There is no excuse for any community to fail to enact proper by-laws for the control of fire. There is ample available material that can be used as a guide and the fire department, whether it be paid or volunteer, should be given the basic legislative authority to control elementary fire hazards.

Equally important with the necessary legal authority to control fire hazards is the proper procedure developed by the fire department for the regular inspection of buildings throughout the community for fire hazards. No modern fire department, even the smallest, should neglect this vital function of some sort of simple

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inspection work. Even if the value of the inspection work from the standpoint of fire prevention is questioned any fireman, either paid or volunteer, must appreciate that a knowledge of the buildings in his community may some day make the difference between life and death at the time of fire. Inspection work can be arranged in any fire department so that it will not be a burden upon any of the men. Proper division of the responsibility and the cooperation of each of the men in taking their share of inspection work will prove to be in practically every case not an undue burden to any individual fireman. When inspection work is first started in any fire department, the work should be concentrated on the simple elementary fire hazards, but it should be remembered that these perfectly obvious hazards are the ones that cause the great majority of our fires and therefore the most elementary inspection work is bound to produce good results.

It has been generally recognized that any fire department should have the right to inspect business and factory properties for fire hazards. Within the last few years the large increase in the number of fires in dwelling houses has led to the development of the simple inspection of dwellings for fire hazards in a great many communities throughout the United States and Canada. This work has been done on a purely voluntary basis. The fire department does not have the legal right in many cases to enter anyone's home but if the firemen call at the home and explain that they are trying to save life and property by a simple inspection of the home for fire hazards the average householder will welcome such cooperation. The cities that are carrying on inspections of dwellings have shown a remarkable reduction in the number of fires and losses in homes

and fire prevention authorities generally have the feeling that during the next decade this idea of home inspections will become universal and that we may well expect a very substantial reduction in the unusually heavy loss of life and property in homes that we have had in the past.

A logical further step in any municipal fire prevention program is for the municipal authorities to develop a cooperative effort with the people of the community towards an improved fire record. It is entirely logical and desirable that a local fire prevention committee of citizens including representatives of the Board of Trade, the school system, the boy scouts, the insurance men, the newspapers, the luncheon clubs, and others, should be operating on a year round basis to educate the people in the observance of fire safety precautions and to back up the fire department in its attempts to reduce fire hazards. An excellent example of fire prevention educational effort has been the school essay contest conducted by the Provincial Fire Marshal of Nova Scotia for several years past. The attention of thousands of boys and girls in the Province of Nova Scotia has been focused on fire prevention work by this simple but effective contest procedure.

Finally there is no lack of evidence that any effort put into preventing fires will positively produce results. The communities that are fire conscious, have low fire loss records; the communities that fail to observe the common sense precautions against fire, have bad fire records. There is no escaping the fact. Every community throughout the Maritime Provinces should have a well considered fire prevention program backed up by the necessary legal provisions and under the leadership of its local fire department.