



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Youth Looks at the Fire Service

Membership in Boy Scout Explorer Post lets 14 to 18-year olds drill alongside firemen and learn how a department functions

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What is our most precious natural resource? The obvious answer is the tremendous asset of our youth. They are the potential of the future, and as such, they deserve all the help available to realize their goals. All sorts of programs have been instituted to provide outlets for young men to develop themselves. Some have been successful and some have been somewhat less effective. However, one long-standing youth organization, the Boy Scouts of America, has established a reputation for developing character, a sense of responsibility and citizenship. It was surprising to find out that the young men who need this training the most were failing to get it.

A survey conducted in 1955 for the National Council of the Boy Scouts by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research revealed that boys in the 14-to-18 age group were sadly missing in the Boy Scout Program. In fact, of the young men available for teenage scout activities, less than one boy out of eight was participating. The reason the researchers pinpointed was that the Boy Scouts exploring program at that time just didn't meet the varied interests and abilities of this age group.

William H. Spurgeon, a member of the Explorer Committee of the National Council and a resident of Orange County, Calif., decided that something could be done about this and proceeded to undertake a project that has grown to monumental proportions. Spurgeon developed a pilot program combining the interest of youth with the experience of successful professional people in an environment of sharing knowledge.

Variety of Interests

This "special interest" exploring placed the emphasis on bringing together boys with specific interests or vocational inclinations with the most successful men in these fields. On this basis, a wide spectrum of interest areas immediately became available: law, merchandising, science, electronics, banking, medicine, law enforcement and fire protection.

As Spurgeon said, "You cannot preach citizenship and character building to high school boys. But if you make it possible to be with the best men in their communities who are successful and respected, these men then become the image of our moral fiber, which is the only way boys can rise to the challenge of ethics."



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Schools, business and industry have embraced this concept of youth orientation with enthusiasm. The potential is tremendous for it is easy to see that this sort of program is a natural area for a sponsoring agency to assist youth in preparing for a given vocation. It is also ideal for the young men because they can decide at a relatively early age whether interest in a specialty will hold out and whether they want to choose it as a profession. To say that "special interest" exploring satisfies its objectives is an understatement, for the program has exceeded the wildest expectations of its founders. Today it reaches across the 50 states and into almost every city in the country.

Sponsored by Fire Departments

Several fire departments have participated in the "special interest" exploring by sponsoring the organization of posts that consist of young men interested in a fire service career, or who may not want to become firemen but who want to be more aware of fire department functions.

In the Orange County area two such posts have been organized: one in Santa Ana and one in Costa Mesa. The Costa Mesa unit, under the guidance of Chief John Marshall, consists of 15 explorers recruited from local high schools and two advisers from the fire department. The organization and activities of the Fire Explorers is like nothing that is experienced anywhere else in the scouting movement. They are not considered to be part of the fire department in its actual operation nor are they junior firemen, but rather a group of young men who gain the experience of working with firemen, working with firefighting equipment, and experiencing the responsibilities of fire protection activities.

The youths are recruited much the same way that we recruit firemen. They are requested to submit an application that reflects their background and sincerity, and then they are requested to complete a physical agility course that determines their ability to keep up with the group on drill activities. Then last, but not least, they go before an oral board made up of the officers of the post and the post adviser or assistant adviser. Upon acceptance, they serve a two-month probation.

Fire Service Ranks Used

The organization of the unit is based on fire department rank structure. The post president is the chief, the vice president is assistant chief, the secretary is a captain, etc. Their uniforms are similar to the fire department ones with the appropriate designations for the post numbers. The officers are expected to carry out their duties through the chain of command and to be responsible for the general behavior and performance of the entire unit. All members of the unit respond to orders and commands of their officers as they would if they were a part of an actual fire company. This semi-military arrangement is not imposed by the post advisers but by the post officers. In fact, they are very well oriented to disciplining themselves without intervention by the advisers. This acceptance of responsibility for their actions carries on into the time away from post activities, for if these young men are to learn our



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techniques, they must also learn our community image.

Post activities are varied and aimed at satisfying the explorers' curiosity first and pursuing technical details secondly. Each aspect of fire protection is touched upon, and the temper of the group determines how much time is spent on any area and how much detail is brought in. For example, the meetings are arranged in two sections. A business meeting, supervised by the post officers, considers financial matters, acceptance of new members, field trips and all internal matters. The second half of the meeting is a drill session during which the youths learn various techniques that would interest them, and give them physical contact with the tools of our profession.

Periodically, the group makes field trips to various locations or activities that are of interest. This is done primarily to stimulate their knowledge of all of the facets of fire protection. Examples of this sort of activity are: tour of Los Angeles Harbor aboard a fire-boat, visiting the Orange County Communications Center, participation in mutual aid drills and touring other fire departments' facilities.

Fund-Raising Projects

Although the fire department is the sponsor of the post, it cannot be responsible for paying its bills. Therefore, the Fire Explorers have hit upon several useful fund-raising projects that are not only financially lucrative, but are an actual adjunct to fire department activities. Their first project was to offer to paint house numbers on curbs so that addresses could be more easily seen. By painting white squares on the curb and then adding black letters, the house numbers almost leap out for the responding apparatus to read. Donations were accepted from house owners for this service. However, if the person did not care to donate, or was unable to at the time, the number went on anyway. Later, in conjunction with a local cleanup, fix-up, paint-up week, the post took on the task of hauling off any debris that homeowners could get to the curb. Once again, donations were accepted but not required. One project was not to make money but friends. The members of the post spent many hours repairing and painting a fire truck that was sent to Tepic, Mexico, as part of the California Partners for Progress Program.

A good summation of the philosophy of the program can be found in the charter of Post 400, which reads in part that the authorized representatives are to carry on an exploring program for "character building, citizenship training, and physical fitness." To this I would like to add future public servants, for this program and ones like it that are cropping up all around are going to produce many of the outstanding applicants for our profession in the next few years.