

What is a Fire Buff?

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Bufs have been variously defined as "sidewalk superintendents of fires," as "fire-engine chasers who think they're the guys for whom the bell tolls," as "frustrated firemen," and as "smoked hams who are never quite cured." Irreverent as these definitions are, buffs have been called still nastier names by some firemen and chiefs. Traditionally, most professional fire-fighters look down on buffs, without good reason. The best behaved spectators at fires are usually the buffs. It is a principle of good buff behavior never to interfere or offer unsolicited suggestions, but to stand ready to perform any task requested. As buffs watch fires they resemble baseball fans watching home games. They cheer the direct hits and scoring plays, they groan at mishaps, and sometimes they tell each other the trouble started back when the second alarm was turned in too late. They may even criticize the chief for not bringing up the water tower to pinch hit for the deck pipe, but they'll say it quietly. Buffs are great rooters for the home town fire team, and they only wish they could be in there pitching.

Those fire chiefs who look down on buffs as nuisances might find on looking deeper into the subject that these men formed the core of auxiliary fire departments during World War II, when regular departments suffered draft gaps. In New York City, various buff clubs furnished most of the auxiliary personnel to man the fire alarm telegraph bureau. Overseas, Army, Navy and Marine fire departments were run by buffs, and a good many were cited for excellent duty. Even in peacetime, the Kansas City (Mo.) department, for example, has been forced to send out SOS calls for buff assistance, when strained to the limit by multiple coincident alarms. In case of another war, conflagrations may spread regular departments so thin, the buff is likely to become "the man of the hour" for chiefs to depend on.

A buff is not trained, but born. He's the boy who's always playing fireman, looking at pictures of fire engines and getting his daddy to take him to the fire house. Later, his childhood curiosity about fires develops into a mature understanding of the art of firefighting. He learns by watching and trading information with other buffs. But the original excitement and intense interest never diminishes.

Nothing can bring blood to the eye of a buff more quickly than being confused with the arsonist of the species... the fire-bug. The socially destructive pyromaniac bears as little resemblance to the intelligent buff as a fly does to a fly swatter. The bug's attention (if he's foolish enough to hang around) is centered on seeing how much damage his "pretty" flames can create. The buff is interested in seeing how much damage can be avoided and how quickly the flames can be controlled. A buff's hobby impresses him with the destructiveness of fire and keeps him alert to the dangers in his own home and neighborhood, making him an extremely valuable asset to any community.

The name "buff" originated in the hose-and-wagon days when enthusiasts with smoke-bleared eyes stood on icy street-corners for hours, huddled together tightly under buffalo robes. Firemen humorously named them "the buffaloes," which soon became "buff" for short. In some cities, they are known as "fire-fans" and in a few as "sparkies" but whatever they're called they're easily recognized. They're the boys who attend each major blaze with almost religious determination.

Buffing knows no social or class distinction. Doctors, lawyers, bakers, factory workers, grocery clerks and Wall Street financiers all answer the call of bell or siren. George Washington not only chased a goodly number of fires in his day, but also donated a hand-drawn hose cart to the volunteer department of Mount Vernon. Benjamin Franklin was a familiar figure in early Philadelphia firefighting. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes is remembered as a buff in Boston and Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia in New York City. The radio comedian Peter Donald is a buff. Not to be outdone, the female "engine chasers" are represented by no less than Mrs. [Harry] Truman.

It is impossible to say how many buffs there are in existence today, and almost as difficult to find a community without one. There is a little buff in everyone-- who doesn't rush to the windows to see the fire engines whistling past?-- and many buffs hide their lights in unorganized areas. In large cities, where firefighting is a danger-filled occupation completely restricted to professional highly-trained men, buffs have organized clubs.

Many buff clubs have permanent club rooms where members can gather in off hours to pool their knowledge, discuss fire reports, examine old documents, and enjoy photographs and relics. Some clubs are fortunate enough to have a bell installed in their headquarters with fire department sanction, even though buffs seldom receive official civic recognition. At the clubhouse, the buffs listen to the calls pouring in from

all parts of the city. It's a sure bet that, seconds after a second alarm comes in from a potentially hazardous area, little will be left of a clubhouse gathering but jangling hangers on an empty coat rack.

Bufs can reel off the locations of alarm boxes from their alarm numbers, some even recalling an entire large city system strictly from memory. In many cities, bufs carry their "bible" (the list of alarm box locations) with them at all times. One buff in New York City, Morris Heitowit, has even gone to the extent of printing a "bible" with other information to make up a Firemen's Manual for bufs to buy and enjoy.

True bufs seldom leave their radios. When they depart from the side of their club radio, tuned in always to the station broadcasting fire news, the members will go home listening to the same station on their car radios, and then keep an all-night half-waking vigil next to their bedroom radios. You'd be surprised how many bufs manage to attend early morning fires. Lately, some of the boys have converted their wives into bufs-- the ladies join their husbands at club functions and chase the engines too, rather than be left home alone.

New York City houses a number of buff clubs: The Fire Bell Club (where it's harder to become a member than in millionaire lodges), The Third Alarmers, and The "77" Club. To name a few, Philadelphia has the 1776 Club and The Second Alarmers, it's the Box 12 Association in Detroit and Toronto, the Box 52 Association in Boston, the Friendship Fire Association in Washington (D.C.) and the Phoenix Society in San Francisco. Buff utopia was reached recently by the Box Thirteeners in Cincinnati who now actively assist their city's firemen.

Becoming a buff club member is generally by-invitation-only, but since the fraternity is so closely knit the steady engine-chaser has little difficulty striking up acquaintances while watching fires. If there is an opening in the club membership, and the prospect's interest is sufficiently backed up with some technical knowledge of firefighting, he will be invited to apply for membership. Firemen of paid departments are not eligible for club membership. Occasionally, when a club member goes to join a paid department his club places him in a special nonvoting class where he still can participate in social functions and clubroom comradeship.

The pinnacle of success for a buff was achieved by Dr. Harry M. Archer, when he was appointed 2nd deputy fire commissioner of New York City, but refused to accept his salary in order to maintain his amateur buff standing. Dr. Archer believes he has attended more than 200,000 fires in his 60 years of buffing. When he began his medical career as an intern in the 1890's at Bellevue Hospital, there were no emergency stations at fires to take care of the burned and injured. Dr. Archer, of his own accord and often at his own expense, set up facilities at the scene of many disasters. Nobody called him at first, but he was always there... sometimes ahead of the firemen, and usually ahead of any other doctors. Today, at the age of 83, Dr. Archer is still active.

Just as a medical career can lead to buffing, so can buffing lead directly to a career: in news photography, as a fire insurance agent, as a writer, or possibly as a salesman for an equipment manufacturer. Many of the photographs in this book were taken by bufs arriving with firemen at the scene of a blaze. One well-known writer-buff for the past twenty years has gathered most of the material for his articles and books from on-the-spot observations. Some of the finest fire equipment salesmen have reached the top because they know their products from watching them in actual operation for years.

If you're not a buff you can't really know what a buff is. Those not infected with the desire to "chase fires" can't understand the bufs' deep inner urge to be on the spot when a blaze is in progress. One prominent buff explained his attitude this way, and it corresponds so closely to the attitude of the fire chief, it's worth noting: "I don't want anybody's house to burn down. But if yours does, God forbid, I want to be there to see it."

Most of us fire bufs are not there to get in the way. We are there to show off how great these firefighters do there job. Most of the public are unaware whar fireman have to battle everyday. Many of us do this by building websites for the public to view. To learn about the people who put there life on the line. Many of us choose not to become firefighter b/c we try to make a difference for the firefighters. so that they are noticed for the risk they take for someone they do not know. Most of the public do not know what kind of dedication these firefighter give to protect the public. It is not just a job it is there evryday life. They do not think twice about puting there life on the line.

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