

"The 1896 Firemen's Fair and Festival"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

This year the Westminster Fire Department marks its centennial of service from its present location on Westminster's Main St. One of the first public events held in the building was the "Firemen's Fair and Festival". The event was described in an article in the November 28, 1896 issue of the Westminster Democratic Advocate newspaper:

"Every visitor to the new Fire Department Building this week needs to have a pocket book well lined with either silver, gold or greenbacks. A man with no small change is like a fish out of water. On entering the main door-and even for a considerable distance up and down the street-the visitor is surrounded by an eager throng of youngsters selling tickets for raffles, boxes of candy, or some small item of bric-a-brac for which no human ingenuity has yet discovered a use; and if he escapes with his life from this onslaught, he is only out of the frying pan into the fire, because he gets into the thick of the fray as soon as he gets inside. It is a beautiful sight. The first booth on the ground floor is a "Country Store," and a more appropriate name could not have been devised. Pots, pans, kettles, sugar, oil, pumpkins, notions, and every et cetera which makes the heterogeneous mass of the village store, is found here in abundance, and though the prices are a trifle above the market quotations the things sell rapidly. This counter is presided over by Mrs. Slagle and Mrs. Herr.

Next in order is the "Fancy Table,"-an appeal in itself to the artistic instincts of the beholder. No man, and a man is writing this, can do justice to the pretty things in every old and new stitch under the sun. Needle work, painting, crocheting, are piled in bewildering masses all around, and though they are rapidly disposed of, there seems to be a hidden fountain of supply, as the quantity never grows less. Mrs. Gilbert, Mrs. Wentz and Mrs. Brundige to do the honors here.

Beyond this counter is the "Candy Booth," presided over by Miss Bettie Shriver, Miss Augusta Shriver, Miss Mollie Shriver, Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. J. T. Hering.

There is an insidiousness about candy that is absolute; "it gets there" every time, and the sight of the high-piled masses of caramel and pea-nut brittle, all home-made, the quaint and dainty little boxes, made of vari-colored paper, makes a fellow's hand seek his pocket involuntarily, especially so if in addition to a pair of bright eyes at his side there is another pair across the counter drawing money from him like water from a well. It is really astonishing, by the way, what enormous quantities of caramel a pretty girl can get away in one evening.

At the head of the room is the "Toy Department," where are dolls galore and dainty toys for little girls and boys in a mass of golden hair, staring blue eyes, outstretched arms, which appeal so irresistibly to the little folks standing about, if one judges by the longing looks on their faces.

Mrs. Bond, Mrs. Parke, Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Person and Miss Roop look after these delights of the childish heart, and in addition there are three or four young ladies going about like that roaring lion, seeking whom they may devour, and disposing of "chances" for some very magnificent dolls with no more effort than that of a smile into the victim's face. It fetches him every time!

Miss Mary Shellman and assistants are coining money in a "Cafe" off from the main room, and a peep in the door means your bodily entrance, where you will be regaled in a manner which the mere mention of these ladies guarantees.

The "Garb Bags," or "Fish Ponds," do a rushing business under the care of Miss Thomas and Miss Eloise Bond, and the "Wheels," two in number, on which every kind of thing is raffled, are ever on the go, and their "whir," with the cries of the paddle sellers, make a noise that is a great addition to the whole affair.

On the second floor the first thing to greet your eyes is a booth of great beauty in charge, of Mrs. Henning and the Misses Bennett. Everything thereon is raffled or sold at auction, Mr. David Cowan, auctioneer. Among other things is a '96 Rambler' bicycle in which many chances have already been sold, and which bids fair to break the record in price for the year.

Lamps, china sets, fancy work, candy, are also in profusion; indeed, this booth seems made of every good thing, even to the "specials" down stairs, and is making much money. A feature of it is a festoon of tiny incandescent lights, hid amid the leaves of evergreens, sparkling out in red, blue and green tints, like fairy lamps.

The ice cream and supper rooms are on this and the third floors, and seem to be generally crowded. It is somewhat astonishing to think of so many people being hungry at one time, outside of a big city.

Mr. E. J. Lawyer, who has devoted so much of his time, energy and means to promote the Fair, says it is most successful and thinks that the finish will show more than was ever hoped for.

One of the indefatigable and tireless workers is Mr. F. T. Shaeffer, who for the past six months has been putting his energies at work upon pretty pieces of art and mechanism for sale, and whose handiwork is rapidly disposed of.

On Monday night three of the Lodges of Westminster took supper at the Fair-the Odd Fellows, Sons of Temperance and Patriotic Sons of America, about 175 in number. On Tuesday night the Ind. Order of Mechanics took 150 chances at the supper table and won every time. On Wednesday night the College students were in evidence, 136 rushing the supper table. On Thanksgiving Day and night the crowds were very large, and the Royal Arcanums, all light feeders, attacked the supper table, at 50 cents an attack each.

Mr. Lawyer says that it is extremely gratifying to see the generous response made by the public to this cause. Everybody, whether owners of real estate to be protected, or not, seemed to think it not only a duty, but a pleasure to do what was possible for the Fire Department, and that with the people behind in so satisfactory a manner the Fair cannot help being a gigantic success. One of the most active workers for the fair was Miss Mary B. Shellman, whose good taste designed the decorations and arrangements of the first floor. To a layman it looks as though Mr. Lawyer knows that he is talking about. A happy, joyous, eager and enthusiastic crowd is surging nightly through the handsome building, dropping pennies here, dimes there, and dollars somewhere else; and on all sides is heard praise for the strong effort to have everything "go off" with propriety-and profit. Tonight Beneficial Society and the Catholic Legion will take their supper at the fair."

The 1896 Firemen's Fair was only the first of many events held in the Fire Department building. Few, however, could compete with the excitement that characterized the first fair.

Photo caption: Edwin J. Lawyer posed for this portrait in his State Fire Marshall's uniform and Westminster Hose Company No. 1 cap in c.1890. Lawyer was President of the Westminster Fire Department in 1896. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Mrs. Roy Kendig.