

Battle Of Words Flares In Fire Department Squabble

A new Battle of Words broke out this week over the Winter Park Fire Department, following recent examinations for police and firemen.

On Monday, City Manager Clark Maxwell, together with two members of the Civil Service Board, denied the statement that two captains failed to receive promotion because they did not make passing grades.

Joseph Krizek, board member who gave the examination, said the reason for the men not being promoted was because of their attitude toward the fire department. Mr. Krizek said each member of the fire department was given an oral examination by the committee of three civilian members of the board, and when the question "Would you be happy to be promoted back to captain?" was asked, they replied "No". The board then asked if they were made captains if they would make an effort to work harmoniously and efficiently with the present conditions, and again the reply was "No".

A third question was then asked, "Would you be happy if put in the position of captain, and would you make an effort to cooperate and attempt to restore harmonious conditions in the fire department?" One man answered, "I would lie to you if I said yes". The other said, "No, not under present conditions."

Mr. Krizek stated the board could not see any possible reason why these men should be promoted in grade and salary rating if they would not attempt to cooperate with the present chief.

Heskin Whittaker, another member of the board, was very much disturbed by a public statement of Robert Wallace, president of the Taxpayers League, who said the action of the board was "an injustice to the City of Winter Park" and that he would take it to the Taxpayers League for action. Mr. Whittaker stated that his committee had 10 meetings with the fire department within the past 30 days and knows conditions and feels Mr. Wallace is making statements about which he knows nothing.

In answer to Mr. Whittaker's accusation Mr. Wallace, who was a former examiner of the Civil Service Board, Tuesday issued the following statement:

"It is regrettable that Heskin Whittaker, present board member, apparently didn't read my statement in the August 12, 1955, issue of the Orlando Evening Star. My statement therein was my own and not of the Winter Park Taxpayers League. So, Mr. Whittaker, it will not be necessary for the league to

request their president to learn the details of incidents before he publicizes them in the name of the league.

"Let it be clearly understood that these are my own remarks and not those of the league. Mr. Whittaker is correct; in order to speak for the league, it would be necessary to have the approval of the board of directors.

"I do know that our fire department has suffered a terrific blow and has gone from one which was rated A-1 down to an undetermined position. In view of the delay in correcting the organizational difficulties, it is my opinion that the citizens are entitled to a resume of what has happened. This is not intended to be personal in any way.

"Civil service was shown to be the choice of the voters in a referendum held December 2, 1952, by a vote of 1,643 for, and 426 against. Several civic organizations appeared before the Orange County legislative delegation and protested a change in the law wherein the chiefs would be removed from civil service. As a result the bill was dropped.

"The law states that 'The chief of police and fire departments of said city shall be in command of said police and fire departments and at all times responsible directly to said board for the conduct and administration of their department.'

"This means that the civil service board has the responsibility of getting the maximum efficiency from each department and to relieve the city management of a certain amount of their load. This responsibility is to all people of Winter Park

"Immediately upon creation of the civil service board, an effort was made to improve the police and fire departments. The results were outstanding in reducing turnover and building up the morale of the departments. In line with a program of strengthening these departments the then chief of the fire department, J. Q. Smith, approached me with a sug-

gestion we engage Allen E. Erwin who was a younger man possessed of broad training. After consulting members of the fire department and other members of the civil service board, it was agreed that Frank Williamson, board chairman, would approach the commissioners for their approval.

"Erwin stated that Winter Park had one of the most outstanding fire departments in the state manned with well-trained men and he was proud to associate with such a fine set-up.

"Incidentally, we members of the civil service board spent many hours, weeks and months in laying the groundwork for a well-run board. Under the able chairmanship of Williamson, the relationships between elements was splendid. Then in February, 1955, two members of the board were replaced by two outstanding citizens and, of course, they had to travel the road of the beginner as we did at the start.

"During the following weeks conditions changed and the morale of the fire department dropped far below normal. When this began to show up, I personally contacted Williamson and he agreed to come to my home to discuss the matter fully. Although this was several months ago, Williamson hasn't shown up yet. Before any action was taken by the board, I explained to Joseph Krizek the necessity of quick action. His reply was it could wait for a regular meeting of the board.

"We have a large investment in the men and equipment of our fire department. Why should these men all of a sudden become more or less worthless? If they were good men a year ago, why are they so bad now? They have families dependent upon them. Certainly the members of the board want to be fair in their decisions. Edwin Ballard and William Rice were lieutenants when the civil service went into effect and at the request of Chief Erwin, this position was abolished and that of captain was created. Ballard and Rice passed the written examinations with high grades, their efficiency records were very high as was their grade in the oral examination. Ballard has served as a member of the civil service board since its inception.

"The civil service board of three members appointed by the city commission, one elected from the members of the fire department and one from the members of the police department. Each of these members has a vote. The chiefs of each department are ex-officio members, entering into all discussions but don't vote. The board acts as a group, not as a committee of only the three appointed members.

"In the oral examinations which were held in connection with Ballard and Rice, they were asked, as I understand it, 'As captain would you be happy to serve under the chief?' The answer in one case was 'No, but I would serve under anyone you designate with the maximum of cooperation.'

"These men have been loyal to the department and the city and in a determination by the board, each member should view the situation without prejudice and vote according to his own decision. Was this done?

"It has been stated by certain people that the action against Ballard and Rice was taken with the hope that they would resign. Aren't we interested in protecting our organization and investment?

"On July 13, 1955, prior to the meeting with the board, I suggested to Chief Erwin that he go before the board stating his case against Smith, Ballard and Rice and others requesting a stay of action for 30 days during which time he would become a leader and clear up the dissension. The meeting was held and the complaints made by Chief Erwin as a matter of record.

"When asked what action he was going to take on the letter sent to Smith requesting his resignation, Chief Erwin replied, 'None'.

"On July 13, Chief Erwin stated everything was working smoothly in the department.

"On July 15, Smith was advised verbally by Chief Erwin that he was suspended from service. This was later the same day confirmed by letter advising the suspension was for 60 days, or until such time before that period the civil service board reached a decision.

"Under Section 16 of the civil service act, Ch. 17166, No. 39, Senate Bill 6671 Act, suspension shall not be for more than a maximum of 30 days.

"About July 25, the suspension of Smith was withdrawn. It was stated by a city official the charges were not legal.

"It has been stated on good authority that the recent changes were Chief Erwin's suggestions of how to correct conditions in the department. Is causing our best men to resign, degrading others and suspending another, the way

(OVER)

to build confidence and loyalty or is it the road to destruction?

"Regardless of law, let's return our fire department to a high degree of efficiency with the same spirit which prevailed a year ago. The civil service board has a huge responsibility in achieving this and should function according to the rules and regulations, bearing in mind that we must treat the other fellow as we would like to be treated ourselves.

"Civil service can function constructively and be an important factor in our daily lives.

"Let us save civil service for our city by having the board accept its responsibility and conduct and administer the affairs so we don't lose any more men and build back the harmony that prevailed a year ago.

"These statements are made by me as an individual and in no way represent the sentiments of the Winter Park Taxpayers League.

"Signed,

"ROBERT H. WALLACE"