

## A Glimpse "Behind The Scenes" In Local Theatre Usher's Life

By W. Stoddard White

"For'd . . . hrrh! Keep in step, you! What's the trouble, Mr. Smith, can't you keep your head straight? Co-m-pan-y about!" This sounds like an army drill. The hard-boiled sergeant barks out his commands, the company moves perfectly, as one man, swinging on a beautifully-oiled pivot.

But this is not the Army. It is the nightly drill of the corps of ushers who guide you to your seat in the Birmingham Theatre. As a part of the strict discipline maintained by the Kunsky Corporation

the ushers are nightly paraded back and forth in the foyer of the theatre, harking to the gunshot-like orders of the drillmaster, preparing themselves, far and keeping in shape for the night's work.

The purpose of the drill is to keep the ushers in correct military form: erect heads, ramrod-straight bodies, military step, square corners and military salutes.

Through the drill no usher sounds a corner in "clippy" fashion. Far from it, the turning of a corner is an art. Precise, un-

gree turns are the required thing. Military etiquette requires that the patron be saluted by the usher before he is directed to his seat. Practice in saluting is also given the ushers.

The drill is under the direct supervision of the assistant head usher, a military-school graduate, whose perfect form is assured.

**Adopt Formality**

As I talked with the boys in the foyer, I was struck by two facts: first, that they invariably said "sir" to me, although we were all informally dressed, and in informal attitudes; and second, that even when they are alone, among themselves, and in the building, they are to each other "Mister" Smith and "Mister" Jones, never "Jack" or "Bert" or "Pat".

When on duty, and soon becomes a habit. When on the street, they do not feel the disciplinary air of their soldierly training, they break informally, but in the building, whether off or on duty, they are quite precise in their speech.

The entire management of the theatre, which the patron comes in contact with, the exception of the manager, is handled by the ushers. The assistant manager has complete charge of the theatre in the absence of the manager. During the time when the manager is on his vacation, the assistant takes over the management of the theatre, largely giving out the orders as to its operation.

For each usher and his assistant are also under the charge of the head usher, who is in charge of hiring and discharging of all ushers, of whom there are five, in the full force. The full force, used on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday holidays, consists of a doorman, ticket taker or "box" man, "pot" man, as the usher directing patrons in the foyer is called, and two aisle ushers. One of the ushers and the doorman are dispensed with on week ends and afternoons.

**Signals Evolved**

As the ushers are forbidden to speak to each other or to patrons while on duty except in cases of exceptional necessity, an elaborate and unique system of signals has been evolved. Certain motions mean certain things. For instance, a patron calls and wishes to speak to the manager. As the phone is in the box office, he must call to that point. The box office girl speaks to the ticket taker, who taps on his box, attracting the attention of the "pot" man, as the usher directing patrons in the foyer is known. The box man then motions, forming his thumb and forefinger into a circle, the signal for the manager. The assistant manager's call is signalled by placing one finger of the right hand on the left arm, and the head usher by two fingers placed on the arm.

If the head usher desires aisle ushers to check up on the number of patrons seated on an aisle, to

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At 32, Professor Matthew W. Stirling, above, has been appointed chief of the bureau of ethnology at the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D. C. He has led several expeditions to South America and recently discovered tribes of pagans in the jungles of Borneo. He has been teaching at the University of California.

prevent over-crowding, it attracts the attention of the usher, who, forming a circle, signals the "check-up" signal.

The patrons, quelled, the usher returns. Upraised fingers of one hand held erect denote hundreds, fingers held on the chest tens, and fingers pointed downward units. Through this system of counting, the exact number of patrons can be reported without a single word.

By use of this elaborate and highly effective code of signals, practically all of the normal terms found necessary to transfer from one man to another can be done without the aid of a single word.

**Have Ball Team**

The ushers regularly "pick up" some additional help and make up a basketball team, which plays teams from the other eleven theatres on the Friday evening. Swearing with the initial "K" in the theatre, and even theatre is differently decorated, are brought by the boys. In what might be termed a club of which each usher is a member, they may discuss which go toward parties and their basketball equipment.

The uniform of the usher consists of a tuxedo "jacket" with shirt front, red vest, blue-gray coat, blue-gray striped trousers, the same color laced trimmed, visorless hat, white gloves, and black shoes. The uniform is made of the standard uniform cloth worn by all military schools, which, while sometimes worn in summer, is comfortable, duster wear, and has proved the best-wearing all around cloth.

All of which goes to show that there is a side to the theatre usher's life which the public almost never sees; that there is a strict and unflinching discipline back of the stiff boy who politely shows you to a seat and that that military precision which is drilled into the usher is helping him and the establishment to give the degree of polite service which is essential.

James E. Wilson, 72 years old, of New Albany, Ind., who forged a check to pay for a Bible, has been sentenced to prison for two years.

## Too Much Money



Her producers have decided that Pola Negri's \$10,000-a-week salary is too big for what appeal she may have at the box office. So she must take a cut if she is to continue in films on this side. Her popularity is great in Europe, however, and Pola may center her future activities on the continent.

## BIRMINGHAM FOLKS

By G. E. COOK



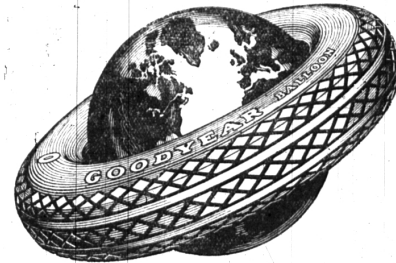
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