

THE TOP OF THE HIGHEST PROFESSION

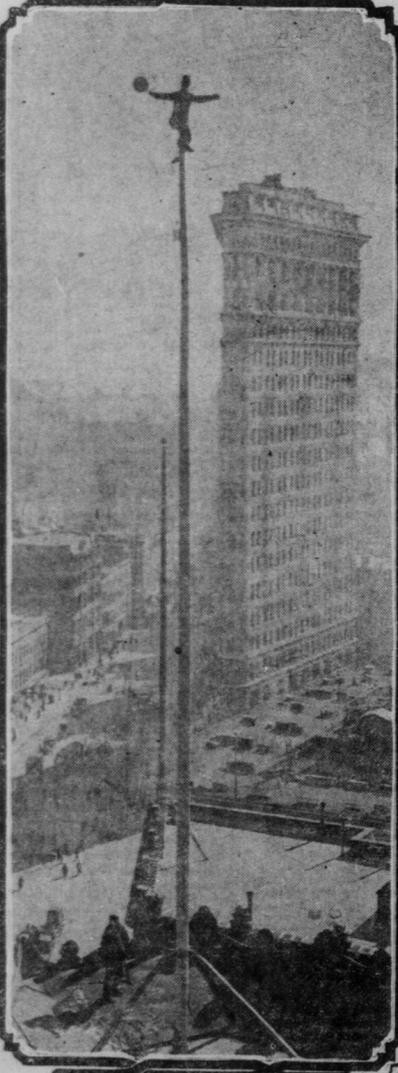
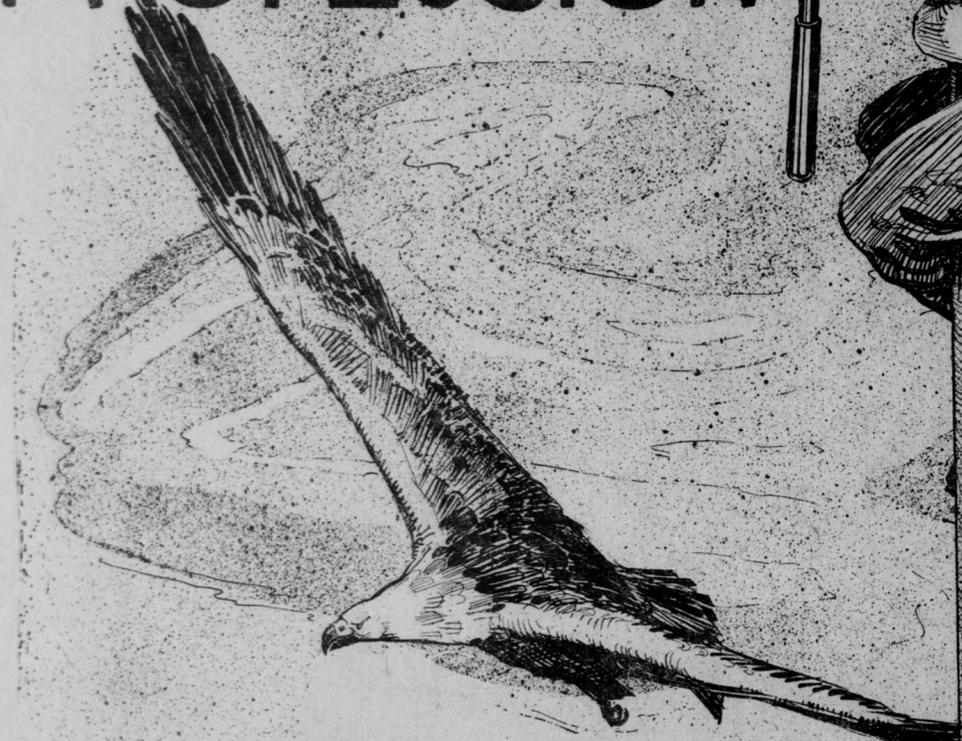
JAMES H. WILSON, CHAMPION STEEPLE-JACK, TELLS HOW HE HAS SEEN THE UNITED STATES FROM THE TIPS OF ITS TALLEST SPIRES AND CHIMNEYS



JAMES H. WILSON, STEEPLE-JACK, IN CLIMBING HARNESS

not get down without disturbing the swarm, so tried to plug up the hole where the hornets went in with my handkerchief. But the hole was just out of my reach, so I started to descend as quietly as I could, hoping not to arouse them. I was only a little way down when the whole swarm came out and I was badly stung about the face and hands before I could reach the street. I waited until cold weather before I finished the job.

ON THE STAFF OF THE CALL BUILDING - SAN FRANCISCO



ON FLAG POLE OF 18-STORY ST. JAMES BUILDING, NEW YORK, FLATIRON BUILDING SHOWS IN BACKGROUND

steeplejack's business is becoming a poor paying one, and I am contemplating leaving it in a few years, if I survive that long. I find that, the whole country over, the more hazardous the calling and the less the pay the more people there are who seem to be attracted by it. There are at the present time nearly 100 steeple climbers in the United States. They are mostly sailors, who, being expert climbers and riggers and out of a job, will do this work for a wage, astonishing as it may seem. I know of one man who painted a flag pole on a saloon building in Chicago. When he got through he owed the saloon keeper 90 cents more for drinks than he received for the job. This reminds me of the fact that nearly all the men who follow this occupation are hard drinkers. I suppose it is on account of the relaxation which follows after a nervous tension they undergo while actually at work. Sometimes, unhappily, they drink at the wrong time and become reckless, and take risks which result in a sudden awakening in another world.

For my part I am a teetotaler, 30 years of age, weighing 150 pounds and am in the prime of life. The sensations that one has at these dizzy heights are peculiar, but you get used to them. Whenever I go up a tall flagpole or steeple there are large crowds craning their necks and making comments. Some call it a brave deed, others call me a fool. Nor is it all steeple and spire climbing. I claim the championship in climbing up the bare wall of a tall building. The work I did on the wall of the Humboldt bank building in this city was not a circumstance to the affair of the big Flatiron building in New York. There I had contracted with a moving picture firm to scale the exterior of the Flatiron building, it being understood that I was to climb up from the Broadway side to the cornice at the top, then down on the other side into Fifth avenue. I started all right and had ascended eight floors when the police interfered. They said I had blockaded the whole locality. The crowds watching me from the street were so dense that the streetcars and all other vehicles had to stop. Traffic was at a standstill from Canal street all the way up to Fifty-ninth street, by Central park. Besides, the owner of the building objected, for what cause I can only imagine. I would have made

STANDING ON A STAFF OF THE CALL BUILDING, NEW YORK CITY, WINNING A BET OF \$50

It all right, though, if I had not been interfered with. The building is constructed in a peculiar style, with many crevices and projections, and I was going up hand over hand, almost perpendicularly.

Of course, I have had accidents at various times and have often narrowly escaped death, partly on account of bad judgment and partly on account of decayed material in the structure I was mounting. I have had only one bad fall. I was painting a sign for the Delgado building in Chicago. The reason I fell was that I was using another man's rigging, the ropes of which were old and much worn. I was hanging directly over the veranda of the hotel entrance, when the ropes gave way, letting me drop. I fell eight stories and lit on my back, but I was not so seriously hurt after all, and was able to go back in two weeks and finish the job. It is difficult to explain in writing how I climb tall smokestacks and towers, as I rarely use the same method twice, but as to flagpoles, I merely shin my way up to the top and put on the pole what is known as a "catspaw," a half hitch with a loop in one end for my foot. This can be loosened and lowered upon raising myself. The photographs will help to illustrate this method of working. The photograph of me standing erect on the top of a flagstaff was taken on a wager of \$50 between a member of a sporting club and myself.

It takes a man of iron nerve to do this work. Imagine yourself at a height of 200 feet above the ground, clinging to something which you are not sure will support you. As I have said before, this is perhaps the greatest danger of the whole business, and I once had the closest kind of a shave. I had been working on a pole on the Milwaukee avenue bank, in Chicago. I had shinned up to the top and rigged it, and left, intending to go back the next day and finish the work. When I went back I found that the pole, which was rotted at the base, had been blown down by a wind which had sprung up. Some of the buildings whose spires or poles I have ascended are the Park



SLIDING DOWN A 200-FOOT ROOT CHIMNEY AT YONKERS, N.Y.



BETWEEN STACKS OF POWER PLANT AT HUDSON RIVER, T.P.

Row, Flatiron, Singer, Metropolitan Life Insurance, St. James and others in New York; the Montgomery Ward tower, Masonic temple, new postoffice, Auditorium in Chicago and others too numerous to mention.

And now let me tell of one unfortunate feature of the steeplejack's trade. There are men throughout the United States who regularly defraud the steeplejack of his hard earned pay in order that they may get their dangerous work done for nothing. For example, a man will have a smokestack that he wants painted. He tells the painter to report when the first coat of paint is on in order that it may be inspected before the second coat is applied. Then, when the first coat is on, the owner will find some fault and insist upon its being all scraped off, saying that otherwise the job will not be accepted. The painter generally throws up the job in disgust rather than do it all over again without extra pay, so the owner has a coat of paint on his stack for which he pays nothing. This has happened to me at least a dozen times.

On the other hand, a steeplejack will sometimes use inferior material, which will wash off, requiring the services of the next steeplejack who comes along. One of my roughest experiences was during the gilding of a cross on St. John's cathedral, Indianapolis. After scaling the cross I found it to be hollow and filled with hornets. I saw I could

By J. H. Wilson
MANY people have asked me why I took up the calling of a steeplejack and why I stick to it. The fact is that I adopted it by accident, and I have continued to follow it probably on account of its fascination. It is a gamble with death from one job to another, but I have become so accustomed to the danger there is in it that I do not mind the thought of falling. I am a firm believer in fate, and believe that when my time comes I shall die anyway, whether it be from the top of a steeple or while on the ground.
I took up the calling by accident in San Francisco in 1896. I was out of a job and applied to the manager of the Richelieu hotel, in Van Ness avenue, who, I had been told, wanted a dish washer in his kitchen. The job I got was a decidedly different one. He told me that he had no place in his kitchen for me, and I was on my way out, feeling very blue and depressed, when I was sadly in need of funds, when I noticed that the janitor was trying to replace the rope on the flagpole. Watching him for a few moments, I soon became convinced that he did not relish his task. I was desperate for want of work and applied to the janitor for the flagpole job. He readily acquiesced. With the aid of a stepladder and a few ropes, which I drove into the pole,

making steps all the way up, I succeeded in rigging the affair satisfactorily and received 50 cents as my compensation. It took me half a day. This was not a vast amount of money for the work, but the experience gave me an inspiration and I resolved to travel the country over seeking similar work. It was my initiation into the calling of a steeplejack, which I have followed ever since. During the last 13 years I have painted and rigged nearly every important flagpole, smokestack, church spire and tall peak of other kinds in the United States. Back in 1896, when I commenced this work, there were only a few men engaged in it, but they have increased largely of late years, perhaps owing to the increase in the number of tall buildings. The result is that the

