

The New Secretary of the Interior

By George C. Sikes

IN accepting the position of Secretary of the Interior as successor to Richard A. Ballinger, Walter L. Fisher, of Chicago, has taken upon himself the task of dealing with one of the most difficult and important problems that confront the Nation—that of the proper conservation of natural resources. The people of Chicago were not surprised that President Taft should select Mr. Fisher for this onerous work. They have been accustomed to see him undertake in their behalf the solution of problems that baffled all others. And usually they have seen him succeed. Tackling hard jobs has been Mr. Fisher's specialty. When he accepted the position of traction counsel under Mayor Dunne, five years ago, to try to straighten out Chicago's traction tangle, which had been brought into even worse confusion by the Mayor's enthusiasm for immediate municipal ownership, a friend warned him that any man who thought he could solve Chicago's traction problem was presumptively crazy. Yet Mr. Fisher worked out a solution that was approved by the people on a referendum vote. In much the same manner he has been called upon to deal with one difficult task after another. As traction counsel he received a salary from the city, but his other activities of a public nature have been carried on without pay.

The problem of Conservation, though broader in scope, partakes very much of the nature of the questions with which Mr. Fisher has been dealing in Chicago. In his efforts to establish a proper relationship between the city and its local public service corporations Mr. Fisher has received a training which must prove of great value in the working out of a policy for the wise use, without wasteful exploitation, of such natural resources as water power, timber, and the products of the mines.

Mr. Fisher is forty-nine years of age. He was born in Wheeling, West Virginia. His father, Daniel Webster Fisher, was a Presbyterian clergyman, and for many

years was President of Hanover College. Shortly after finishing his law course Mr. Fisher became special assessment attorney for the city of Chicago. After a comparatively brief service in that position, he engaged in the private practice of law, taking little part in public affairs.

In 1901 the Municipal Voters' League, an organization formed in 1896 for the improvement of the City Council, needed new leadership. Mr. Fisher took the position of secretary, and Mr. Charles R. Crane the presidency. Under the direction of these two men the League became even more of a factor in the field of municipal politics than it had been before. Mr. Fisher proved a genius at this line of work. He "liked the game," and took more pleasure in circumventing the gangsters and in driving from office the "Gray Wolves"—a term coined by him to characterize the corrupt aldermen—than he did in playing golf, of which sport he is fond.

In attempting to defeat bad candidates for aldermen and to elect good ones Mr. Fisher naturally was obliged to consider the problems that confronted the Council. Those that excited the most controversy and the greatest public interest had to do with the relation of the city to the public utility corporations, especially the street railway, gas, electric light, and telephone companies. Whenever a crisis arose, Mr. Fisher would be called in, usually not in an official capacity, but as a citizen adviser. It was the man's powerful intellectual grasp of the problems involved, his reputation for honesty and absolute fair-mindedness, and his comprehension of the popular point of view, that rendered his services in these cases indispensable.

Naturally, a man of his force did not escape vilification. The public utility interests at the outset of his career abused Mr. Fisher mercilessly, because he was interfering with the political methods which underlay their long-established policy of exploitation. Later they were glad enough to have his help in securing for themselves even fair treatment at the

hands of the representatives of a people exasperated by long-continued abuses. The extreme radicals in the community, too, have been at times bitter critics of Mr. Fisher. He has remarked occasionally that it was evident that he was pursuing a straight course "down the middle of the road," since he was getting bricks from both sides. However violent the antagonism during the period of a controversy, Mr. Fisher usually has had the respect of his opponents at its close. Lincoln Steffens once said of Fisher that he brought to the service of the people in their contests with powerful interests the kind of ability usually to be found only on the side of the corporations.

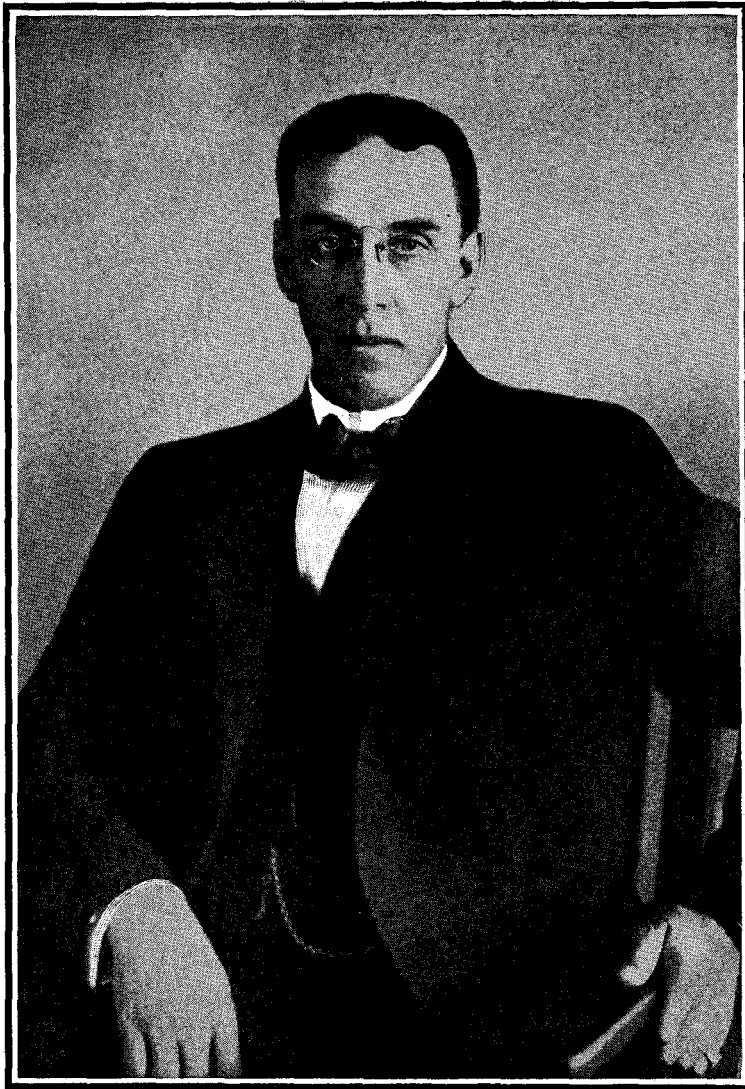
In 1905 Edward F. Dunne was elected Mayor of Chicago on the issue of immediate municipal ownership of street railways. Mr. Fisher had drafted the law authorizing municipal ownership, and had led the delegation of citizens that forced its passage through the Legislature—after several sensational incidents. One such incident was a revolutionary riot in the lower house of the Legislature, during the course of which the Speaker, who had tried to kill the bill under the gavel, fled in fear from the Speaker's chair to his private room and was not allowed to return and resume his duties until he agreed to give roll-calls on all important questions. It had not been Mr. Fisher's idea, however, that the city could actually municipalize at once under this law. The practical difficulties in the way, financial and others, were too great. While friendly to the municipal ownership idea, he is not a doctrinaire advocate. In fact, he objects to allowing doctrinaire notions to govern in the settlement of any important governmental problem. His fundamental philosophy is that the city itself should have full power to manage public utilities, or to intrust the operation to a private agency under public control, reserving the right on equitable terms to substitute the one form of management for the other at any time. With these powers in its possession, he would have the city adopt the one policy or the other in any particular exigency as might seem wise in view of the situation at the time.

After a year of floundering, Mayor Dunne and his radical advisers reached

the conclusion that the street railways could not be municipalized "immediately." Following conferences, and agreement upon the main outlines of the course to be pursued, Mr. Fisher was made special traction counsel. Shortly before the close of Mr. Dunne's term as Mayor a plan of settlement was formulated which provided for a franchise grant to the companies, subject to termination by city purchase, on specified terms, at any time the city could raise the funds for the purpose. This plan had been worked out with the approval of the traction interests, the Council Committee, and Mayor Dunne. Shortly before its submission to the Council, however, Mayor Dunne, largely on account of political complications, turned against the settlement plan. Nevertheless, it was passed by the Council and approved by the people on a referendum vote, Mr. Fisher speaking for it and Mayor Dunne against it.

Mr. Fisher served as a member of the Municipal Ownership Commission named by the National Civic Federation, which made extensive investigations in this country and in Great Britain. The report submitted by this body, both in its recommendations as to policy, which showed the influence of Mr. Fisher's personality, and in its presentation of facts, is thought by many to be the best on the subject ever published in this country.

A notable tribute to Mr. Fisher's ability as a graft-fighter was his selection by the lawyer having the matter in hand, Mr. Murray Nelson, to take charge of the examination of witnesses in the Illinois Central graft case. That railway company, in the four years prior to December, 1909, had been defrauded of more than \$2,500,000 through padded bills for repairs. The frauds were made possible by the connivance between important railway officials and the managers of five concerns engaged in the car repair business. The dishonesty was obviously an imitation of the corrupt system by which public money is stolen by politicians. Mr. Fisher's services have been enlisted in other cases of this general nature. He was a member of the Merriam Commission, created by resolution of the City Council, the Chairman of which, Alderman Charles E. Merriam, is now running for Mayor of Chicago, largely on the record made in that

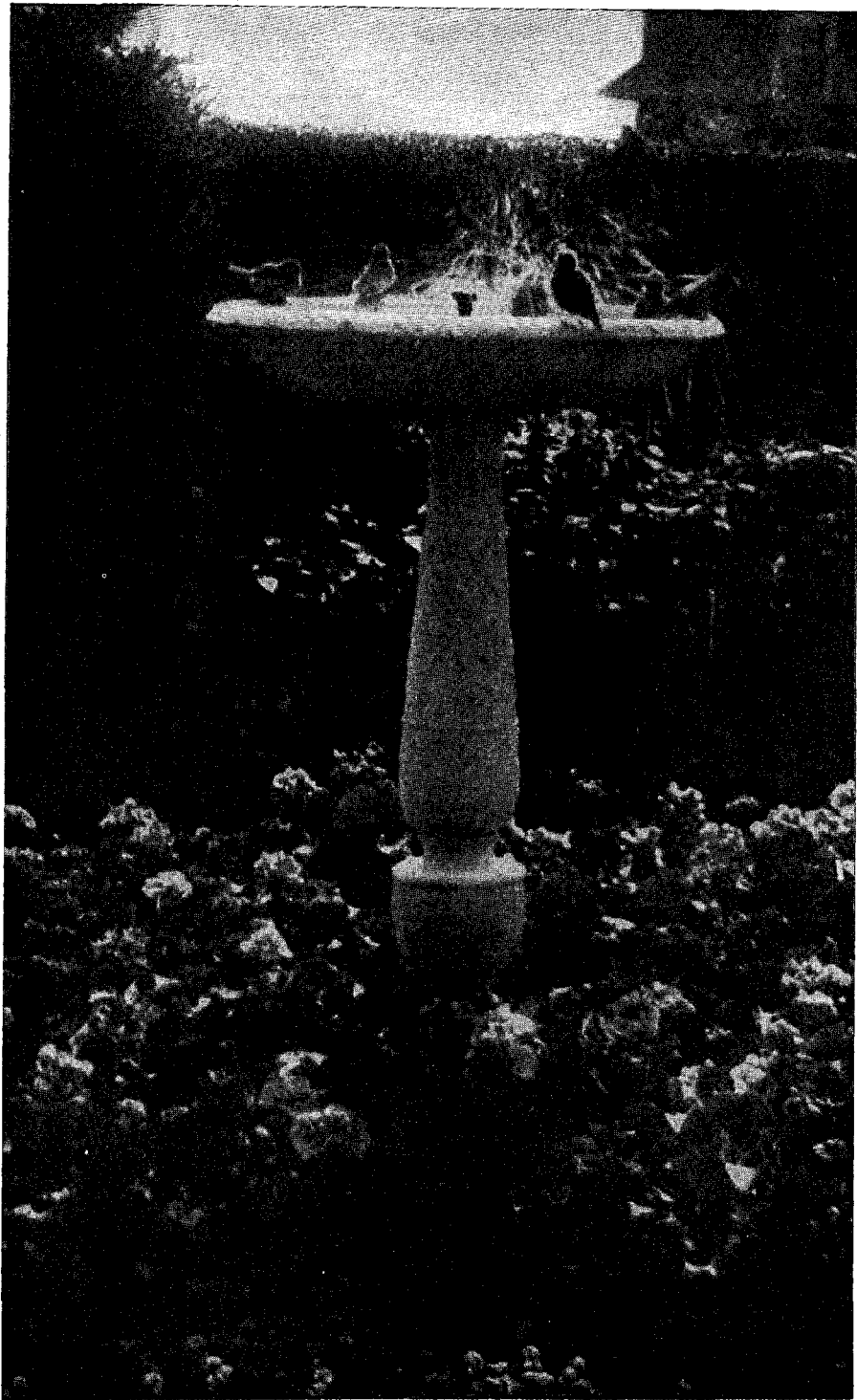


WALTER L. FISHER

connection in disclosing dishonesty and waste in the management of city affairs. Mr. Fisher served as attorney for the Merriam Commission, without salary, and conducted the examination of witnesses. At the time of his appointment as Secretary of the Interior by President Taft he was about to be made attorney for a committee of the Illinois State Senate that is planning an investigation of the "jackpot" and other scandals of the Legislature which made William Lorimer United States Senator.

For some months Mr. Fisher has been serving as a member of the Securities Commission appointed by President Taft to outline a plan for the control by the Federal Government of the stock and bond issues of railway companies. In the recent rate hearings before the Inter-State Commerce Commission he appeared on behalf of certain shipping interests.

Mr. Fisher has been deeply interested in the Conservation movement, and is in touch with its leaders. He served a term as President of the Conservation League.



WINGED HERALDS