

March 25, 1933

THE CONGRESSIONAL FRONT.
(By Congressman Everett M. Dirksen.)

Greetings to all the folks in the 16th District. This is the second of a series of news letters, which I hope, may prove informative and instructive and keep you reasonably well advised on what is happening here in Washington. You are aware of course that the administration is moving with unprecedented speed. In fact never since the Civil War, has Congress passed so much important and far reaching legislation in so short a space of time.

In the first news letter, I promised to say something about procedure and how an idea for a bill ultimately becomes a law. A Member of Congress gets his ideas for legislation from reading, from study and research, from suggestions by other people, or from an acute condition that demands a remedy. If he has an idea on how to cure the ills of the farmer, he studies the matter thoroughly and perhaps seeks the advice of the Legislative Reference Bureau. This is an advisory service for all members. They aid him in drawing the bill. The bill is then introduced by laying it on the table of the Clerk of the House. The bill under direction of the Speaker of the House is then referred to a committee for consideration. There are 47 such standing committees. The Committees are entitled, Appropriations for the expenditure of money, Ways and Means for the raising of money, Rules for the mode of procedure, Judiciary for passing on the legal aspects of matters, Interstate Commerce, Foreign Affairs, Post Office and Post Roads and a host of other committees. Each committee has an appointed meeting day, perhaps each week, sometime several days in the week, at which time the bills referred to the committee are considered. At the time that bills are referred to committee, they are also ordered to be numbered and printed. Each new Congress begins with Number one. The only way a bill can come before the House for consideration is after it has been favorably reported out of the committee. It is then placed on the House calendar. Most bills are then considered by the Committee of the Whole House. This means that at a given time, the bill is taken from the Speaker's table and brought before the whole House for consideration. It is usually accompanied by a resolution determining how much time shall be allowed for debate. The bill is then considered and generally debated on it's first reading. After the time for debate has expired, the bill is then read for Amendment i.e. it is read a section at a time and any member can either amend it and have five minutes to talk on his amendment or he can ask to strike the last two words of a section, which also constitutes an amendment, and then speak on the section involved. By this process, even a short bill consisting of only a few sections may be delayed in it's passage for hours by the system of amending and speaking on the amendment. After the entire bill has been considered, the previous question is moved, and thus a vote is secured on the bill. This may be a yea and nay vote, it may be a vote by division in which the speaker asks all those for or against to stand and make a count, or it is voted on by roll call. A yea and nay vote and a division is not a record vote. Only the totals for and against the bill appear in the record with no indication as to how each member voted. On roll call, each member votes as his name is called. Roll call is a long tedious process that requires a half hour. A system of bells, ringing three times, apprise the members both in the Capitol and in the House Office Building that a roll call is in progress. Inasmuch as there is always a second reading of the names that did not respond on first roll call, it gives those members who are in their offices and opportunity to hasten to the chamber and vote.

After the bill passes the House, it goes to the Senate for similar procedure. If it is passed by the Senate without amendment, the bill returns to the House to be enrolled on parchment, examined by the Committee on Enrolled Bills, signed by the Speaker, then by the President of the Senate, and is then transmitted to the White House for the President's signature. If the Senate amends the bill, the bill returns to the House to be considered by the Whole House or a Committee may be appointed by both Senate and House to confer on the differences. The conferring committee usually prepares a report on the bill and submits such a report to the House for approval or rejection. The President either approves or disapproves a bill. If he approves it, he at once signs it and files it with the Secretary of State. If he disapproves it, he returns it with a message stating why he disapproves. It then requires a 2/3 vote of both bodies to pass it over the President's disapproval or veto before it can become a law.

This procedure of a bill is important in view of the emergency legislation that was recently passed. I refer to the Emergency Banking Bill, the Economy Bill, the Beer Bill, the Farm Relief Bill and others. All of these bills were reported under a rule whereby debate was limited to a certain number of hours, and no opportunity given to amend the bill. It was a case of take it or leave it. One might wish to support the President but be reluctant to do so because of certain obnoxious provisions in the bill. Under the special rule under which the bill was reported, there was no opportunity to vote on separate sections of the bill. Each member was compelled to vote for or against the bill in its entirety. Such a rule is commonly known as the "gag-rule" and because the Democratic majority is so large, it is easy for them to secure enough votes to adopt the "gag-rule" and then pass any kind of administration legislation.

While the gag-rule is a splendid device for securing speedy action on legislation, it is after all a denial of free and complete consideration of the provisions of a bill and had it not been for the adoption of this rule, it is doubtful whether some of the emergency bills would have passed the house because there seemed to be unmistakable indications that a great many members of the President's own party were opposed to some of the provisions in these various bills. The next letter will be more personal in character and contain glimpses of official life in the national capital.