

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Fire Department Project

Life as a Firefighter

O. H. 46

HOWARD L. WEBB

Interviewed

by

Michael Kurilla

on

May 27, 1975

HOWARD L. WEBB

Howard L. Webb, Engineer of the Youngstown Fire Department, was born on November 22, 1914 in Youngstown, Ohio. He is the son of Anna and Elmer J. Webb. Near completion of his sophomore year at South High School during the Depression, Mr. Webb left school to care for his family at the age of sixteen. Mr. Webb worked at General Fireproofing Company from 1933 to 1942, the Ohio State Highway Department from 1939 to 1942, and received an appointment to the Youngstown Fire Department in October of 1942. He married his wife Evelyn in June of 1936 and has two sons-- William R. Webb, a civil engineer in the U.S. Forest Service; and Edward J. Webb, a faculty member at the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia.

The initial assignment of First Class Fireman Webb was Number Seven Station at Madison and Elm, where he spent four years. He served the remaining twenty-eight years of his career at Number Eight Station at Market and Glenhaven. After five years in the Department, Fireman Webb was selected to be the driver for Battalion Chief Kay. In 1952, Mr. Webb was promoted to the rank of Engineer. Subsequently, Engineer Webb never aspired to achieve higher rank, indicating that the position of Engineer "was the best job in the Fire Department." The career of Engineer Webb came to an end with his retirement in February 1975, following a fire related heart attack suffered in December 1973. A member of the International Association of Firefighters and the Western Star Number Twenty-one, he was cited in a resolution from the Youngstown City Council for more than 32 years of loyal service.

The thirty-three year career of Mr. Webb represents a model of public service of one of the many professionals dedicated to the protection to the community.

Michael Kurilla  
October 21, 1976

## YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: HOWARD L. WEBB

INTERVIEWER: Michael Kurilla

SUBJECT: Life as a Firefighter

DATE: May 27, 1975

K: This is an interview with Mr. Howard L. Webb for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Youngstown Fire Department, by Michael Kurilla, at the Webb residence at 2497 Sierra Drive, in Youngstown, on May 27, 1975, at 9:20 a.m.

K: First, Mr. Webb, would you provide some information on your family background and schooling?

W: I was one of seven children and of course, when I was in high school, the Depression was on. We were lucky that we had enough to eat, let alone enough to buy our books and supplies. At that time, you had to buy your own books going to school. I nearly finished the tenth grade, sophomore year, at South High School. That's as far as I went in the line of education. Soon after reaching sixteen years of age I was taken out of school to take care of my sick mother who was bedfast for a period of several years. I did that for about three years after I quit school, and took care of the younger children in the family, such as a mother would do. I did the washing and the ironing and the cooking.

At nineteen I received my first steady job, at the GF. At that time, in December of 1933, the Depression was on. The wages were thirty-five cents an hour with a five cents an hour bonus, or about sixteen dollars for a forty-hour week. I stayed at that and was married about three years later. I worked on the Ohio Highway Department from about 1939 to 1942. I worked at the GF from December of 1933 till 1939, at which time work went bad

again, another sort of recession set in. I had the opportunity to go to the State Highway Department as a heavy truck driver, driving heavy equipment. I stayed out at the State Highway Department Maintenance Repair in Canfield for two years, then I became foreman of a crew at the West Austintown, Ohio Highway station until I became a fireman. From the State job I went to the Fire Department in 1942. That was my last job.

K: Can you tell us about when you were married and your children?

W: Yes. We were married in 1936. We had met in high school, got married and had two children. After thirteen months our first son was born and four years after that, our second son was born. They are Bill and Ed respectively.

K: What are they doing presently?

W: They both went through the same school that my wife and I went to, Wilson High School. Wilson changed to a senior high school in the meantime. When my wife and I started there in 1928, it was just a junior high, to the ninth grade, then we had to go to South High for the sophomore year. By the time our boys grew up, we were still in the same neighborhood, so the boys both graduated from Wilson, on the National Honor Society, and went to Youngstown University.

Both of them worked their way through college. They worked most of the time in supermarkets and consequently, were about twenty-five or twenty-six when they graduated from the University. The wages in my work weren't enough to cover their total expenses for school, plus try to keep a decent home. When I started on the Fire Department, the annual wage the first year was about seventeen hundred and some dollars, and that was for a seventy-two hour week. So, you see, I didn't have too much money to spend on extracurricular activities. In fact, I had to work part time to make ends meet. The boys worked part time to pay for their education.

Both of my sons earned their degrees from Youngstown University. Bill, of course, was first, and he earned a degree in Civil Engineering. He had a job waiting for him in the U.S. Forest Service. The week after he graduated, he was married and his honeymoon was from here to Porterville, California, where the Sequoia National Forest office is located. He started out as a civil engineer in the U.S. Forest Service at the Sequoia National Forest at Porterville, California. He was there for two years and received a promotion and was transferred up to Tahoe

National Forest, further north in the gold mining area of California and Nevada. He worked there two years and was transferred by virtue of another promotion to Daniel Boone National Forest with offices in Winchester, Kentucky. He spent some seven years there and turned down several offers for transfers, which would have meant another promotion. After you turned down so many chances for transfer, you're compelled to take one. So this last time he had turned down his quota of chances to move. He was only 390 miles from home this last time, then he was transferred to Tallahassee, Florida. There are three national forests in Florida and all of the offices are in Tallahassee. He was transferred there just last February.

Our second son graduated from Youngstown University and he did a lot of work for the Sheriff's Department. He worked as a security guard at some local stores at Christmas time. He was always a great student of guns from the time he was six or seven years old. He started studying gun magazines, weapons and bullets. When he got out of college, he pursued that very thing. He headed for the FBI and through a lot of complicated interviews and investigations, he was accepted as a candidate for the FBI Academy as a special agent. He was appointed on a temporary basis to go to the FBI Academy for his basic training in Quantico, Virginia. After some fourteen weeks of training at the Academy, he made the grade and his first office was in Greenville, South Carolina. He spent a year or so there as a new agent and was then transferred to Washington, D.C. He spent three years on the streets of Washington, D.C., which was practically a jungle as far as law enforcement was concerned. In the meantime, he was still working with guns and he became an assistant instructor at the FBI field office there in Washington, D.C. He became an assistant instructor of the agents there because of his background in weaponry. It was the procedure of the Bureau not to promote a man until he had had five years of service in. But after about three years of service, they waived that five year limit and promoted him on the spot on the faculty of the Academy in Quantico. He's an instructor in all the different weapons that the FBI uses, plus defensive tactics and S.W.A.T. team. He's stationed at the Academy at Quantico, Virginia and is doing very well.

K: You mentioned that you held a few other jobs before you became a fireman. Why did you become a fireman?

W: It was in my blood, just like guns were in my son's blood. As a young lad I would see the Market Street fire wagon coming up Market Street to operate, and from that time I decided to become a fireman. In fact, before I was

even in my teens, I turned in a false alarm just to see those trucks come out. That was long before they had police radio cars in Youngstown. It was way back in the middle 1920s. I thought, "That is for me." As soon as I became twenty-one years old, when I was able to take the civil service exam, I applied, but like I said, things were so bad economically at the time that I competed with five hundred applicants for about two vacancies. That's how tough the competition was. At the same time, there were about three hundred and fifty policemen applicants. There was a total of about eight hundred that went through the YMCA at the same time for a handful of jobs in both departments. The firemen and policemen both went through the YMCA for the physical at the same time. I didn't get a job at the time, and that eligibility list would stand for two years. After that, there would be another exam and I could retake it. It seemed that the total amount of applicants was reduced each time the exam was given, because the economy was improving a bit. The second time I rated much higher on the list, but it wasn't high enough. I was about twenty-seven or twenty-eight when the next exam came along and I took it again, determined to get it sooner or later. I was still working in the meantime. I finally received an appointment after the third exam, after a period of six years. That was in October of 1942. It was really an example of perseverance, though. I really worked on it. I went to the library. I went to the Red Cross for First Aid courses. Mr. Reed used to run those. I received information from him just to be prepared for anything that might be asked in the exam.

The examination for the Fire Department consisted of a written examination, a physical where you went through the YMCA Gym, and then a medical exam where the doctors take a look at you, and an oral exam where you appear before the mayor, the fire chief, and possibly the law director of the City administration. They wanted to talk to you in person to see who the applicant was, what he looked like, and if he would possibly fit into their program. They would just have a two or three minute conversation with you. I was successful the third time, in October of 1942.

K: What do you remember about your first years in the Department?

W: They were very exciting and very interesting years. Everything was just as I expected it to be. Before I had five years on, I was picked to be a battalion chief's driver. This gave me a lot more knowledge over other young fellows because by driving the chief, I had the advantage of going

to many more fires. When I retired I think they put that part in the paper, about my driving the Battalion Chief, Howard Kay. I had the benefit of much of his experience and he told me things that the fellows with me would never have heard. I had that extra benefit. There are things I'll never forget that he told me, such as little tricks about fires, et cetera. I'll always remember him. Some of the young fellows never did get the benefit that I got.

In 1952, about ten years after I went on the job, I competed for engineer for the second time. An engineer is equal to a lieutenant. He is assistant captain or driver-operator of the pumper or aerial ladder, whatever situation it should be. The engineer's job always appealed to me. When I got that far I never aspired to go any further, because that was the best job in the fire department, as far as I was concerned. I just made it a point to learn what every nut and bolt and wheel and everything else on that truck was for. I never competed for any higher rank, which was an injustice to myself because you have to go for a higher rank in order to increase your wages. That was just the rank I wanted and that was what I stayed at for twenty-odd years. I stayed engineer at Number Eight Station for those years.

K: Which stations did you serve at during your career as a fireman?

W: I served four years at the Number Seven station at Madison and Elm and the last twenty-eight years at Market and Glenhaven, Number Eight station. I was a fireman at Market and Glenhaven before I made engineer. When I was promoted to engineer I stayed right at the same station because the vacancy was there and that was the truck I wanted to operate.

K: You mentioned that you were promoted to engineer. What type of promotion system did the Fire Department have?

W: It's all competitive. At that time, you had to serve five years as a hoseman before you could even qualify for an engineer's examination. You could only apply for the next higher rank than what you were. In other words, I couldn't apply for captain. I had to go step by step. I couldn't jump a rank. You have to go right up the line. Engineer was the first promotion above hoseman and that's what I applied for and I was satisfied with it. I never did seek captaincy or battalionscy.

The exams are all competitive and governed by State law. The top grade, the top man on the list gets the next

vacancy, by law. They can't jump around one like they can on the original cadet list. On an eligibility list for promotion, the top man on the list gets the first vacancy, the next man gets the second vacancy, and so on down the line. It was nearly ten years before I was lucky enough to get the engineer's promotion. You weren't even allowed to compete the first five years. I did compete a little after five years on the job. There were a little over fifty questions on the examination and I had all of them right. Due to the rating system, however, a man with ten to twelve years seniority was given extra bonus for his time and service. I, being a rookie of five years, was penalized five points, so I couldn't get over ninety-five percent, even though I got all of the questions right. I wasn't allowed to have over ninety-five because I only had five years of service. So actually, men that missed a question or two, that had twelve or fourteen years on the job, were promoted and I wasn't at that time, and I actually had better grades than they did. That wasn't something discriminatory; that was the procedure and I knew it before I started. Now, things have changed. I think at this time you only have to spend a year or so to compete for the next higher rank, and you spend a year or two there and take the next exam to compete for a higher rank still.

- K: What was the physical make up of a station while you were a fireman? By physical make up, I mean what type of equipment did you have at the typical station, and what kind of men staffed the fire station?
- W: Well, I worked at Number Seven and Number Eight stations and they were both busy houses. Number Seven was the hub of the North Side. We had the assistant chief running out of Number Seven in the 1940s and the biggest aerial ladder in town ran out of Number Seven, plus a pumper. After I spent four years there I was transferred to South Side, Number Eight station at Market and Glenhaven, which was just the same thing. We had an aerial ladder, pumper, and battalion chief on the South Side. So I never did work in a little, single unit house, in what you might say was a dead spot. I worked at two of the busiest stations in town, including the downtown station. Number Seven and Number Eight stations are the very hubs of the North and South Sides. Wherever the fire came in on the South Side, Number Eight ran one direction and the other and we were just about an equal distance from anyplace on the South Side, and Number Seven on the North Side was just the same. It went clear to the Sharon line and to Briar Hill, downtown and Gypsy Lane, going north. I never chose to go to a quieter place, until after this heart attack. Then I couldn't work any more.

K: What type of men staff the station?

W: They have to be good men and they have to work together, or else you just don't have a fire department. No two fires are ever alike and you have to be able to depend upon your fellow man. Maybe you're going to pull him out of a hole or maybe he's going to pull you out, and you have to be close. You have to be a close-knit group to be efficient. You can't have animosity in a fire house and be successful and do a good job. It's impossible. Each fireman has to be like your brother. Of course, there are a variation of ages. There are young men and there are the older men.

Some of the older men took some of the younger men as their sons, as far as tutoring. I was one of them. One of the older men took me under his wing and showed me things, taught me things, just like a father would do. Some of them were old enough to be my father, because when I first started, it was not uncommon for a man to spend fifty years in the Fire Department. I worked with men that had that many years or more in active work before they retired. It isn't that way now.

The pensions were not nearly as attractive and of course, the wages weren't attractive either, then. The pension system was not nearly as sound or as widespread as it is now. It has been improved in many ways. Those men just had fire in their blood and that's all they knew, and they died with their boots on. Now, if a man goes forty or forty-two years, he's had it. At seventy years of age now you have to retire, regardless of how many years of service you have. I know two very good men who were forced into retirement at seventy years of age. They were better, physically, than a lot of the younger men I know.

K: What kind of positions or rank within the Fire Department staff a truck for any emergency facility you have within the station? What kind of people do you have at a station?

W: At the average station, you should have a captain, an engineer, two hosemen minimum, such as Brownlee Woods, Number Nine station or the South Avenue station. The only station that has more officers than that is the Number One station downtown.

When I speak of the chief running out of the Number Seven I mean that the downtown station was torn down in 1932 and so the chief ran out of Number Seven station. The old wood frame building at Hazel and Boardman used to be the central station.

The assistant chief is the highest rank in the department under civil service status. He was the top man in his platoon and was under the big chief, or the appointed chief downtown. The battalion chief was second in command under the assistant chief. One assistant chief would answer calls north of the Mahoning River, and the battalion chief would answer calls south of the Mahoning River. They had exactly the same work, but the assistant chief outranked the battalion chief. There was a slight difference in pay, too. If the battalion chief got into trouble, he had the assistant chief to go to, but if the assistant chief got into trouble, he only had the top chief to go to.

Whenever a second alarm was turned in, the chief went to the fire and called for another group to come out, then the chief on the other side of town would come in and be his aide, regardless of which way it went, from north to south or from south to north. The assistant chief and the battalion chief would assist each other.

The two men that ride in the seat of a pumper are the captain and the engineer. The engineer is what some departments call a lieutenant. In Youngstown, though, they're called engineers. If I am on vacation there is a man riding alongside the captain in my place and he does exactly the same work that I did, only he's substituting for me. He still is a hoseman and gets hoseman's pay. If the captain is off on vacation or sick leave or accident leave, I, as the engineer in rank, move over and ride on the captain's spot and the next man in line for driving comes up and acts as the engineer. I act as captain and another man, a hoseman, acts as engineer. That's the way we carry on. Of course, if that runs us too short of men, a house in town that is fully staffed and not a busy station will transfer a man into the house that is short a man. Understaffing is a chronic problem in the department today. It causes a lot of problems when a station is understaffed. There should really be five men to a crew and sometimes you will see only three, due to vacation, sick leave, accidents, and so forth.

Due to the make up of the departments, you just can't go out and hire ten men for a month or so because of the civil service status. The salary ordinance provided by City Council states that only like one hundred and seventy-five hosemen are allowed to be paid and only fifty captains. Therefore, by law, they can't bring in anyone else, because they would be in violation of this law. They're only allowed to pay so many men. If they're missing, they're missing. They can't be replaced without an act of council. It's good in a way because it's job protection, but it has

many disadvantages, too. A number of men need to be added on a permanent basis to supplement these weak spots as they occur due to vacations, et cetera. They should be able to act in any rank from hoseman, engineer, to captain or acting battalion chief or acting assistant chief. They're doing that right now, but they are robbing from the lower levels. Then when you get a rather large fire, you have to put in a second alarm in order to get the manpower. You have lots of equipment there, but the trucks don't put the fires out. You have to get the men there to really do the job.

K: Who were some of the fire chiefs for whom you worked?

W: Do you mean the top men?

K: Yes, the top men.

W: Well, I was appointed under Mayor Spagnola and his fire chief was Mike Mellillo. I worked under Chief C. D. Thomas. I think that was under Mayor O'Neill. I worked for Chief John Lynch, who had been the former captain of Number Three station. I've worked under Chief Fred Bowser, who was the chief under Mayor Harry Sevasten. Now George Panno is chief and I've had more years of service than he has had, but he was appointed under Mayor Hunter and has stayed in that position since that time. Chief Joe Flask was a brother of Mayor Flask. He was chief for his brother's tenure as mayor. I have worked under a number of them. I've never had any trouble with any of them.

K: What is the fire chief's role? Is he the main supervisor and coordinator for all of the fire stations?

W: The fire chief is the man appointed by the mayor. He's not under civil service while he is chief. If he is taken from rank, he goes on leave of absence from his civil service status. He's John Q. Citizen as fire chief. In other words, he can play politics and so forth, whereas a man under classified service--under civil service-- is prohibited from playing politics in any way, shape, or form. I know some men do it, but I never did. I never had a political sign in my yard, or a sign in my window or on my car, or any where, regardless of how much I liked the candidate. I never violated that rule, and after I have gone so long, I don't think I'll do it yet.

K: So the fire chief is the central coordinator. Does he go around to the different fire stations and make periodic checks?

W: The appointed chief by the mayor is on unclassified service. He's fire chief in name really. When something very big

comes up such as a large fire, a multiple alarm, then he will be called out. The office is always in contact with him. He has a staff of three assistant chiefs, from three different platoons, and he has a staff of four battalion chiefs for the other half of the city, and he also has a fourth battalion chief, who is drillmaster or training instructor. The training instructor has a battalion chief rating. He is the oldest man in years of service and he is training instructor. That is Chief Wittenberger. He has over forty years of service and he is carrying Badge Number One. We go according to badge number. The badge numbers are issued according to seniority. If there are two hundred and sixty-five members in the department, the youngest rookie is wearing Badge Number 265. The oldest man in the department theoretically has Badge Number One. However, when one reaches the rank of district chief, he goes to the gold uniform trim and wears a gold badge, the chief's badge, which carries no number. The chief's rightful seniority number badge is held in the main office and will not be issued to anyone else. In Chief Wittenberger's case, he wears a gold badge, but he actually holds Badge Number One. Every so often they call the badges in and reissue them according to the latest seniority standings, which may lower you one or two numbers, depending upon how long a period between the times they gather up the badges and reissue them. I think the last badge number I had was twenty-seven, but they hadn't called them in for a couple of years. If they would have called them in and reissued them, I would have dropped down into the middle teens, as far as seniority is concerned. Actually I should wear Badge Number sixteen or seventeen. A fireman's badge tells how long he has been on the job. If you see one with a two or a three, you know that he has top seniority.

K: What type of training did you receive in becoming a fireman?

W: Well, when I started there was no formal training program like there is now. The program now requires one hundred and some hours of extensive training, that is really conducted by pros. When I entered the department, we were trained right in the station. Rookies would go into a station, be it summer, winter, or fall, and the crews would take you out and teach you all the fundamentals. They taught you how to tie onto hydrants, how to properly jump off of the truck with the line in your hand and grab that plug. They also taught you how to scale ladders and how to raise ladders. That training was all done right at the company with which you joined.

Some of these oldtimers would put you through the ropes. You were more or less under their wing when you went out

and they helped you until you gained some self-confidence. For a while you do have to watch somebody and follow somebody just to see what's expected and the next time you go to a fire, you know what is supposed to be done and you just go ahead and do it. You don't have to be told. That's what makes a good fireman; one who doesn't have to be told to do something, he just does it, unless told otherwise by an officer. The training was done strictly by the crew you joined. They did a very good job.

Right now they have a formal training program for policemen and firemen. I'm not sure just how many hours it is, but I think it's quite a long course, before they're even actually accepted. When I joined, their probation period was ninety days. You had a ninety-day trial period to see if you were going to make it or not. At the end of ninety days, the superiors could say, "This kid isn't worth anything. He's afraid of a ladder. He's afraid of going to a fire." You had no standing whatever in civil service. If you survived that ninety days, you automatically went on civil service status and then you had job protection. You were on probation for one year. If you couldn't get to work on time during those three months, or if you were late one day a week, then that would be grounds to fire you and you had no recourse whatever. All they had to say was that they didn't want you and you went. You had no protection for your job at all during those ninety days. I'm not sure what the length of time is now for the probation period. I know it has changed.

- K: So then your training was basically drawing upon the experience of older firemen? Did you have mock fire drills?
- W: We had books that we studied in the meantime for the theoretical end of our training. But believe me, you cannot throw a book at a fire to extinguish it. You have to learn the hard way. You can learn a lot through theory, but you have to get in to where the fire is to extinguish it. It's nice to have the book knowledge of what should be done, if you're qualified to do it.
- K: Could you describe a typical day, Engineer Webb?
- W: Well, our starting time is eight o'clock in the morning. Although my home is a little over three miles from Market and Glenhaven Avenues, I walked to the station every morning. I would leave here around six thirty in the morning, regardless of the weather, except rain. No matter how cold or how hot, or how much snow, I walked it. That would be the beginning of my day.
- I'd be at work within an hour and I would relieve my buddy. He was platoon engineer ahead of me and he would go home as

soon as I arrived. I, of course, would change out of my uniform and get into the blue shirt and trousers that you usually see the men around the station wearing. By eight o'clock, most of the men are in. There are stragglers sometimes, and if there are, the men from the turn before wait until the late man comes in so that the job will be covered.

One house differs from another and it depends upon the captain. Where we worked, there was a battalion chief and his driver. We still do have a pumper there, and we had an aerial ladder. That meant a total crew of about nine or ten men, if we were all present. At about eight the coffee pot is put on and for some of the men, this was the first time that they had coffee that morning. After coffee, at about eight fifteen, we started out the daily routine of the station, which was sweeping the floor, cleaning the stove, cleaning the kitchen, and general house-keeping. In my job, I would check the truck, first, to see that it was in good shape. Although I knew that the man before me was very dependable, I just did it as a routine to see if the batteries were all in shape and ready to go, full of gasoline and motor oil. Everything would be working well on the truck before I'd be satisfied. The other firemen were working sweeping the floor, dusting or something like that.

If the truck had been on a run during the night and there was dirt on it, we'd wash the truck in the morning until it was nice and shiny. We didn't have to wash the truck if we went out after nine o'clock p.m., if the roads were dry. If the roads were wet or in the wintertime, at one or two o'clock in the morning, you had to come in and wash the truck, just like it was a mirror. After a dry run, say at one or two o'clock in the morning, we didn't have to wash it, but the next morning, the crew coming in had to wash those tire wheels. After we had all our daily duty done, and getting the station in A-1 shape, it was time to get lunch. We had to do our own cooking, or go hungry.

Suppose the night before, they had had a fire, the soiled hose that was brought back to the station after six in the evening, was dropped down on the basement floor and was left there until the morning crew came in. Dry hose was put on the truck. The turn coming in would have to scrub that hose and spread it out on the hose rack to dry, which was in the basement of the building. Our rule down there was that when that hose was dried, the turn that worked the following Saturday after the hose was scrubbed, no matter what day of the week the hose was laid, had to bring the hose back up on a reel. We used this to store our dry hoses on.

We had something like two thousand feet of extra hose, so we could leave the wet hose until it dried. Many times, when we've had fires too frequently, we have had to put wet hose on the equipment, but it was no good because it would mildew.

K: Do you remember your first fire?

W: I certainly do. It was down at Marshall and Oak Hill Avenues. A little old Jewish fellow was coming down through the intersection. Now, at that time, there were trolley buses running. There is a little bridge just north of that traffic light, where the railroads pass over. They had to lower the trolley wire under the bridge. The little Jewish fellow was in an old truck loaded with sheet-like sections of auto bodies, stacked very high. It didn't seem to be an awful lot of weight, though. He was probably on his way to a junkyard to sell it for waste. He didn't realize how high his load was or how low the trolley wires were, due to the overpass. There were something like six hundred and sixty volts in those lines. He was moseying through the traffic light and part of his load came into contact with the low trolley wires, causing the current to go right through his truck and set it on fire. This was about ten o'clock in the morning, the first run I was ever on. It was October of 1942, and I'll never forget it. I don't remember others as well as I do this first one.

When the man left the truck, he had the presence of mind to jump clear. The truck was setting on rubber tires, and it wasn't a perfect ground, but had he stood on the ground and touched the door or something, he would have got the six hundred and sixty volts. He jumped out of the truck and let it burn. We came down and doused it and used our pike poles, the hooks we use to pull plaster down, to handle the hot wires. Then the trolley wires fell down. We had to keep people back from these wires and every once in a while the wires would jump around with electricity in them. That was my first fire. That little Jewish man turned fourteen different colors, he was so scared.

K: What do you remember about some of the large fires in which you participated?

W: Well, in really big fires, the men take actually less punishment, physically, than they do in smaller ones, such as in a dwelling fire. Maybe you'll get an alarm and the house is just oozing with smoke. It may be the result of just a mattress burning or smoldering. You can cut the smoke with a knife. It may be coming from just one bedroom, if it hasn't spread any further. That's where you really take punishment, when there's smoke. You've got to run

into where the fire is. Years back, we didn't have the Scott air masks that we have now. These masks simplify things an awful lot, because you can take your air supply with you. You can go into a dense, smoky area with another fireman with you or with a rope tied to you, so you can find your way back down. It's so much different than at the beginning.

K: Were you present at the Youngstown Club fire?

W: Yes. My turn was due to be off at the time. In fact, I had gone to bed and was in bed for an hour or so. It was one o'clock in the morning that the call came from my captain. He said, "Report back to my station as soon as possible." I wasn't supposed to go back to work until the next day, at 8 a.m.; for that matter the whole crew wasn't due back till then either. I reported pronto. If I'm not mistaken, it was late on a Saturday night or early Sunday morning. I went down to the station and the other members of the crew were arriving. One of the chief's cars was there to take us down to the fire because our trucks were already down there.

It was a bitter cold night. We were going down Market Street and we could see the flames coming out of the building, up high about the tenth or twelfth floor. That was a "bad one." We were there from one o'clock in the evening until nine o'clock in the morning, when we were finally given the signal to go back to the station for twenty-four hours more duty. During that night the temperature dropped down to about ten above zero. The aerial ladder was put on the Federal Street side and so much water was sprayed over it that it froze and was inoperable. We couldn't get it up or down. It was just frozen until the ice had thawed off of it.

The big fires are hard work, laborwise, but you don't take the physical beating that you do with the small fires. A big fire, usually a two or three alarm fire such as a lumberyard fire or similar fire, is one where you stand back with big lines and there are four men on a nozzle and you are in the fresh air. You're using the stream as a deluge, just to flood out the fire. You're not where you are going to be taking a smoke beating. What's harmful to a fireman is what he inhales through his lungs. Hard work never hurt anybody. You get tired just from dragging these heavy lines, but you get over it. Once you've had a load of toxic fumes in your lungs, that's what knocks you down. It's hard work, but it isn't like going in and taking a beating with the smoke and toxic fumes from plastics that you have to deal with today.

- K: What changes in the Fire Department did you notice in your thirty-three years there?
- W: In what respect? A fire is a fire. They're never going to change.
- K: You mentioned that some of the administrative capacities changed to civil service and there also was a change in your training program.
- W: I don't know for sure when this new formal training program was put into effect. It's been quite a few years back. It does prepare the rookie. Many of the firemen coming on have never been in a fire station before, until they're assigned to work in one. I was in those stations, watching what was going on, long before I was even qualified to take an examination. I was getting a general idea of whether I was going to like it. I knew I liked it long before I'd been made a cadet there. I wanted to try to get in. So many of these fellows today, when they're assigned to a station, on their first day of work, is the first time they've ever been in a fire house. You wouldn't believe it, but it's true. You could go down to the Market Street station today and I'll bet you'll find three or four men on that turn that were never in a fire station until the day that they were assigned.

I think there is just a little difference in that thought of fire work today. Years ago, I think, men took it more as a liking and they realized that it was a desirous, dangerous career. Many men take it strictly for the monetary benefit, not realizing what the job entails, or caring if they do it completely and efficiently. I think years ago they took it more because they wanted to do that kind of work. I actually took a cut in wages when I took that job. I was making more as a foreman on the State Highway Department than I was making my first year in the Fire Department. During the first year in the department, I made \$147.75 a month, for a seventy-two hour week. For the second year, I went to \$150 a month. At the end of the second year, I went on a full pay scale, which was \$165 a month, but the dollar could buy a lot more then than it does now. However, there were lots of jobs that paid a lot higher than the Fire Department, but the Fire Department had a pension plan, it provided steady work and that was one of the attractions for me, besides liking the work.

You worked hard and you'd come back and clean up and reload the truck and you rested, waiting for the next one. I liked that better than working a steady, monotonous routine for eight hours a day. I'd rather go out and work

hard and come back and take it easy for a while. You never knew when you were going to get called. That's what made it fascinating for me. If you sat down to eat a sandwich at noon, you'd never know if you were going to finish it I like that.

K: How much risk do you believe there is involved in fire-fighting? Was there always that feeling of anxiety waiting for the bell to ring?

W: You're laying your life on the line every time you go out, because you're riding an emergency vehicle and you're traveling fast and many times, you're taking chances that you wouldn't take in your car. Of course, you have the benefit of being on a heavy piece of machinery, rather than being in an automobile, but there is danger any time you go out. You never know, when you're in a building that's afire, when some part of it is going to cave down on you. You always have that fear, but it is something that you like.

K: What type of injuries did you receive?

W: They weren't really serious, just leg injuries, ankle, arm and back injuries, but nothing that kept me out of work more than two or three weeks. If you were hurt on the job, your salary went on. You had the security.

K: It was interesting to see on TV during this period of "recession" the increase in arson fires. Were arson fires prevalent in the 1940s and 1950s?

W: No. In the early part of the Depression they were. I was not on the Department at that time, but I heard my fellow workers talking about it. They used to say that on Saturday nights they never even took their boots off, they knew that someplace was going to burn down on East Federal Street somewhere. Business was bad and that was how they covered for bad business. They'd light the place up and collect the insurance and that was the profitable way out rather than going bankrupt and lose everything they had. Then it tapered off and arson was nearly a thing of the past for a long time. But in the last few years, arson has been something terrible. I don't know why for sure, but it just has.

Last March a young fellow, Billy Walsh--his father had been my captain--a rookie for about eight months, got caught in a tavern fire on Belmont Avenue. It was an arson fire. They recovered eighteen or twenty containers of a volatile liquid that were supposed to go up, but the fire was cut off before it could reach all of the containers. In spite of that, he was burned very seriously. His clothes were burned right off of him; his rubber coat and his pants were burned off. He was pretty nearly stripped. The only thing

that saved him from death was that he had his Scott Air Pack on. That saved the flames from going into his lungs, or he would have been a casualty. His hands look like a piece of raw beef. They have healed over now, but they look like fresh-cut steak, and his legs are the same way. That was an arson fire just last March. I was down in Florida at the time and they sent me a clipping and letter from his dad.

Arson is a major crime. It is the easiest crime in the books to get away with. I read fire magazines and it tells you in these that ninety-nine percent of the arsonists get off Scott free because of lack of evidence. You get all kinds of circumstantial evidence, but how do you say, "You're the man who did it." In court you have to prove a man's guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Although everything points to his guilt, you can't say he actually did it; he's innocent. You can say, "I closed my store at 12:00 and everything was fine and at 1:00 it's up in the air." Here's all this evidence setting around here that's going to cause fire, such as volatile liquids in plastic containers. We confiscate it and bring it back as evidence. We have a truckload of evidence, but who can say who actually did it.

I think that's what these crooks are looking at today. It is one of the easiest things in the world to get away with, unless when you're lighting the match, you get caught before you get out of the building. That has happened before. We had a beer joint over on the West Side and a fellow was going to light up his own place. He was using gasoline, which burns too fast, and he got half way out of the window and that's where we found him. He burned up half way out the window sill. If he'd have used kerosene, he'd have got through all right, but he used gasoline and it went up too fast and it got him before he could get out of the window. Some do their own; some have someone else do it for pay. It's so prevalent lately. I don't know what it's coming to. Legitimate fires are dangerous enough. You are leaving the station, running to the fire. There is a danger of accidents. Then after you get to the fire and find it is an illegitimate fire, and for injuries to be sustained, or death, it's just murder. You can get hurt or injured enough in a legal, legitimate fire, without arson.

Within the last year, there was a place lit up on the South Side and whoever the arsonists were knew the firemen would have a tendency to enter a certain way. So the arsonists had a wire stretched eight inches high across a passageway where they figured the firemen would be entering this part of the building where the fire was supposed to be seated. When the firemen went in, the most logical opening to get into the building was this passageway so they would drop

right into the blaze bodily. That's how vicious it is getting.

If you read the papers, you know that City Council is concerned with arson and how to deal with it. You've got to see the culprit lighting the match before you can convict him. They still need plenty of proof beyond that even. If you want to commit a major crime, arson is the easiest one to commit. I don't know how to cope with it. I hated to leave the job, but maybe it's a good thing I did leave because these arson fires are getting more and more prevalent. As I said, the legitimate fires are bad enough, but when you have an arson fire, it's ten times worse because you never know when an explosion is going to take off right alongside of you. You might be next to a tinder box or a bomb, so to speak. If enough heat hits a five gallon container of gasoline or a volatile liquid, then you're gone. Another recent hazard is plastics. A lot of plastics won't burn, but they will get hot enough to give off a toxic fume. It will drop you just like chlorine gas. It will knock you over just like a fly. This is nothing but the fumes from plastics. You don't know if there are plastics in the fire area. You drag one of the firemen out and try to figure out what happened.

There was a fire about twenty-five years ago at the A&P warehouse on Hubbard Road. There were a lot of cardboard boxes, similar to what the canned goods come in, flattened out. They [the workers] would take them out, unfold them, and ship goods in them to different stores. That night we had a three alarm fire. The firemen out there were just dropping over like flies. We could revive them by giving them oxygen. We couldn't figure out what was causing this; it was just an ordinary fire. Finally one of the men suggested that most of the trouble was occurring near the stack of flattened cardboard boxes, so they suggested bringing a sample of the boxes back to the station and burning one to see what kind of fumes it exuded. We brought it to the Market Street station. It didn't flame up like cardboard would burn, but instead had a flame about a half inch high and it was blue. The flame consumed the box, but it was a small flame. That is where the toxic chemical came from. That was not a malicious or an arson fire.

K: Mr. Webb, when and why did you retire?

W: I retired on February 1, 1975. I had a heart attack in December of 1973 and as I said, if we had had a crew that night on the truck the size that it should have been, I may never have had it. It was a case when a fireman was trying to do two men's work and at 59 years of age, it didn't work. I thought I was over the danger period and I would work

right alongside these 30 year old men. After numerous physicals and so forth that I have gone through, the doctors say I am through. The only thing to do now is to take it easy.

K: We were talking about your earlier days and that you had experienced the Depression. What was the Depression like here in Youngstown?

W: I think that's nearly a story in itself. People were very happy to get a twenty-four and a half pound sack of flour to bake their own bread. I mean, things were so bad that people weren't working. My father was a machinist, and a good machinist was always in demand. Still, he wasn't working. He'd get called out maybe one day in two months. The company was so bad off that they couldn't pay him when payday would come, not even for that one day. That's how scarce money was. It's hard to realize you could get a furnished apartment for sixteen dollars a month in those days. Gasoline was twelve or thirteen cents a gallon, if you had something to burn it in. Every once in a while, I used to tell our boys what things were like back during the Depression and they just looked at me with question on their faces. I know they don't think I'm lying, but it's the astonishment of it. It's hard for them to conceive that such things took place. People had their utilities shut off and there were bread and soup lines for the hungry. There wasn't welfare like there is today. At St. Columba Cathedral there used to be a soup line every day. Different agencies would make these big pots of soup and people would come through to get their dry piece of bread and soup. It was a nightmare. This was during 1930, 1931, and 1932.

In December of 1933, I obtained my first job through a very good friend, who was the chief inspector of the GF, which was a high position in the GF. He was a neighbor of ours at the time and I worked around his home, helping his wife beat carpets. At that time, you used to hang the rugs on a clothesline and beat them with a beater. I also did little odd jobs. I was from a big family. She'd give me odd jobs to do because her husband was employed, although the wages were down. He'd give me little things to do just to share the wealth and to help our family out.

My mother had incurred quite a doctor bill at the time. I was hired to help work out the doctor bill. I would work on the doctor's big yard every week and each week they would deduct another dollar and a half or two dollars from the bill. I was doing the lawn work and that took all day long. There was no money involved.

I bought my first automobile before I started working at GF. I was about nineteen years old. I bought that first car for

fifteen dollars. It was a new Overland sedan with four new all-state tires on it. It was in fine shape. You could get about twenty-six or twenty-eight miles to the gallon of gas. I had a job at a place on Euclid Boulevard, at Euclid and Hollywood Avenue, on the northeast corner. That man who owned it was the comptroller at the Sheet and Tube. His name was J. Sugden. I worked in his yard every week. It was a big yard and there were lots of shrubs; it took all day. I received seventy-five cents working on that yard every week and I paid for the car with that, beside giving some of it to my parents. That was probably in 1932. I can tell you things you would never believe, as far as the Depression is concerned.

K: Are there any other comments you would like to make?

W: The only thing I would like to add is that I would like to see a lot more men appointed to the Fire Department because the Fire Department needs the men, especially due to the rash of arson fires and so forth and to save men the fate that I have had by increasing the personnel. It's going to save a lot of this trouble. In fact, my captain right now might get out of St. Elizabeth Hospital today after having had open heart surgery. That's where it is getting the firemen, right in the heart.

I have worked with two men that died at age 31 and 33 of heart attacks and Jerry Sause was in his early forties and he died after open heart surgery. It's this idea of jumping from total relaxation right into very bad conditions at a fire and the heart just won't take it. If you had the men to share the work, and not have to do two men's jobs when you get there, you're going to last a lot longer. I think the City would be wise to bolster the forces to save the men's lives. The National Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that firefighting is the most dangerous occupation in the United States today. There are more lives lost at fires in the occupation of firefighting than in police work or mining or anything that you would want to mention. That's not a partial statement. That's a statement put out by the U.S. Department of Labor and is actually non-partial. I think the only answer to it is to get more men in there and divide the work up. Technically, there are enough men there if they are all working, but they don't take into consideration that the men are getting more vacations, they have sick leave, they have injuries and so forth. While that's going on, they are running short of men all the time. If they could go full strength as they had it set up, and have everybody there, fine, but about one-third of the men are going to be missing due to these various things. That makes one man do two men's work and he's going to likely end up in

coronary care. That's what happened to me. I think that's my main suggestion as far as firefighting is concerned. They should spread the work out a little bit so that it's easier on the hearts of these brave firemen.

K: Well, thank you very much for a very interesting interview.

END OF INTERVIEW