

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Fire Department Project

Early and Current Firefighting Experiences

O. H. 31

HOMER WHITTENBERGER

Interviewed

by

Michael Kurilla

on

August 8, 1975

HOMER S. WITTENBERGER

Homer S. Wittenberger, Battalion Chief of the Youngstown Fire Department, was born on May 26, 1908 in Struthers, Ohio. He is the son of Grace Ann and Percy A. Wittenberger. After graduating from Scienceville High School, Mr. Wittenberger worked for a short time at Republic Iron and Steel and on January 1, 1930 began a career as a fireman. He married his wife Margaret in 1936 and has three children--Richard John Wittenberger, an employee of the Dollar Bank; Norma Jean Schneider, a nurse; and Sandra Kay Tullio, a dental technician.

Mr. Wittenberger started as a first class fireman at the Number 1 Station on the corner of Boardman and Hazel streets. He was promoted to the rank of Engineer in 1937, Captain in 1944, and received the promotion to Battalion Chief in 1972. As Battalion Chief, Mr. Wittenberger is the Training Officer in charge of directing the entire training program for the Youngstown Fire Department. In addition to managing the training needs of the department, his primary responsibility is conducting the one hundred and sixty hour cadet training program required of cadet firemen by the State of Ohio. Mr. Wittenberger also assists in conducting instructional programs throughout the community. A member of the International Association of Firefighters, he has received the "Instructor of Firefighting" award from the State of Ohio and the "Industrial Division of Safety and Hygiene" award.

Spanning nearly five decades to date, Mr. Wittenberger's career is exemplary of the dedication and professionalism exhibited by the firemen in the Youngstown Fire Department.

MICHAEL KURILLA
June 4, 1976

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- K: This is an interview with battalion chief Homer Whittenberger for the Youngstown State University, Youngstown Fire Department Project by Michael Kurilla, at the main station in downtown Youngstown, on August 8, 1975 at approximately 9:55 a.m.
- K; Chief Whittenberger, could you provide some information on your family background and schooling?
- W: I was married in 1936. My family is composed of two daughters and a son. My son is an employee of the Dollar Bank in the comptroller's office. He graduated from Youngstown University with honors. He also graduated from Ohio University, and the University of Wisconsin, with very high honors. My oldest daughter, Norma Jean Schneider, is a graduate of Youngstown State University. She is a nurse and has a one year old daughter. She works part time as a nurse at the North Side unit of the city hospital. My youngest daughter, Sandra Tullio, is also a graduate of Youngstown University. She is a dental technician with Drs. Murphy and Lewis. Her husband is a teacher at Paul Bunn School, and my oldest daughter's husband, Robert Schneider, is a teacher at Princeton Junior High School.

The Youngstown Fire Department was completely motorized in the year of 1923, making it the first city in the United States to be completely motorized. I started my career as a fireman in 1930. This was shortly after a disastrous fire on Poland Avenue which sent thirteen of the Youngstown firemen to the hospital, severely burned. Some of these men were injured so badly that they were unable to come back on the job.

I happened to witness this fire as a civilian. I was working for the Republic Iron and Steel and I happened to be in a position where I could see these firemen; their clothing was being burned off of them. I was in the position in the mill, where I was unable to offer any assistance to these men because of the high fences that were between where I was located and where the fire actually took place. Some ten weeks later, I was a Youngstown fireman.

I started in the station that was located across from the Hotel Ohio at the corner of Boardman and Hazel Streets. I was attached to the squad that answered all fires for some number of years. A great many fires took place in the time that I was a regular fireman at the Number 1 station.

Some of the fine men that I worked with taught me the art of firefighting. Now in those days, we didn't have instructors that spent time with the men to show them exactly what to do as well as what not to do. We learned our trade as firemen in the actual combat of fire. This was a day and age when the older firemen, the skilled firemen, took enough interest in the young men to teach them the right way in the profession of becoming a firefighter. Many of these men were excellent firefighters. It still is a great pleasure for me to look back and reminisce on these fine men that helped me to survive in the years of service that I managed to give the city of Youngstown.

Through the course of years, I attended all the large fires, or most of the large fires that happened in Youngstown. I've been injured a few times at fires, but in my years of service, I've lost only two days of sick leave since the year 1930. In the course of my career, I have been promoted from fireman to engineer, from engineer to captain, and then from captain to the present position that I hold.

K: When did you receive these promotions? Do you remember approximately what years?

W: Well, the first promotion from first class fireman to engineer was in 1937. The next promotion was about the year 1944. And the last promotion was in 1972. This present position required the instruction of not only the young men of the department, but all the firemen in the department. I do instruct the employees in the hospitals, in the operation of extinguishers and the hose lines that are in cabinets in the different hospitals.

Instruction takes place each year for the newcomer or the new employee of these institutions. We make tours with our firemen in the different industrial corporations to familiarize the men with the different hazards that are presented in these corporations. Our people have procedures that they use in the combat of fire. It depends, of course on the type of building and the hazards that are present, as to how the men combat a fire to extinguish it.

K: What type of training program does the fire department have now? You mentioned that in your first years as a fireman, there really wasn't that much classroom activity, it was really an ongoing process where you gain experience at actual fires. How does it differ today? What type of a program do you carry out as the man in charge of instruction?

W: The state of Ohio required one hundred and sixty hours of training for the cadet firemen. The Youngstown Fire Department and every fire department in the state must train the cadet firemen, the firemen that are just coming into the department, for one hundred and sixty hours. That's the requirement. This course lasts four weeks and we hold this school once each year. Then at the end of the course we give an examination to each man and if the cadet is unable to pass this examination, he has six months to be given the training over again. This is compulsory, a state law that we must adhere to. This course deals with the proper procedure of the newcomer or the cadet in the fighting of fires, the use of all the equipment, and the principle of the department's efforts as far as the public is concerned.

A great deal of effort must be exerted by the cadet to learn and make himself a better person in every respect as far as his job is concerned. We encourage the men to study the different fire manuals even after the regular fire fighting courses are given. We do want our people to keep up with the technical part of firefighting. We want new ideas, if possible, even from the new men and we encourage each individual to work for future promotions and better conditions and this all amounts to a more satisfied employee, and a better fireman in respect to each individual.

K: You mentioned that classroom training, the one hundred and sixty hours that they have to fulfill as a cadet. Before they go to their first fire, is there any type of mock fire drill situation?

W: Yes. The way we put this into effect is we use old buildings and ignite them. There are different types of tools that we use for entry into these buildings and we also have

the scott air packs or smoke masks that the men use to go into smoky interiors of buildings, and we have the cadet get accustomed to using all these different types of tools. The scott air packs are a means of keeping a person from inhaling too much smoke or toxic gases that are detrimental to the lungs and to the breathing apparatus of the body. So they learn all these things that are necessary to keep them on the job and in a healthy condition. It's just as important to know the right thing to do as it is to keep from getting into unnecessary predicaments whereby they could loose their lives or become seriously injured. In other words, it's just as important to know what not to do as it is to know what to do.

K: What are your specific duties and responsibilities as batallion chief in the fire department?

W: The duties of the batallion chief are ordinarily being in charge of a district. In the case of my position, I'm considered the training officer of the department. I'm responsible for the training of every man in the entire department. Naturally I have gone to different instructional schools. The last school I went to was at Bowling Green State University and I took instructions there. As a young fireman and officer in the department, I have taken fire instruction courses at Ohio State University and also had instructions by the state fire instructors and I participated in many fire seminars in the state

K: Could you describe a typical day on duty?

W: I am the Fire Department's Training Officer. As of right now my duties are to train the men in some of the dilapidated buildings we have. I have companies respond to the location of an old dilapidated building and we set the building on fire, and then we have our companies come in and practice by putting out the fire. Sometimes we let the house get completely engulfed, and our job is then to protect the exposures, that is, the buildings on either side of it, and to keep the fire from spreading. This is a practice drill.

We must have practice because this gives us the opportunity to see the results of the day. If a high wind comes up, this gives us an idea of how to protect our exposures. They learn how many lines of hose and how much water is required to put out a given flame, so we are always in the practice of drilling the fire companies. When I'm not available or when other companies need the proper exposure for their jobs, we have our company officers that are training the men in each and every station, call out the companies each day. Each man in each firehouse gets a practice drill.

K: Throughout the course of a day, what does a fireman do? You've been around the department a long time. What does a fireman do with his free time or is there such a thing as free time? I think the public has a mistaken notion of firemen sitting around with their feet up on a table playing cards around the clock. Is there such a thing as free time and what do the firemen do with the free time that they have?

W: A fireman, when he becomes a city firefighter, is subject to call at all times. If he's off duty, he's still subject to call. There are three turns and when he reports to work on a given turn, whatever turn he happens to be on, A, B, or C turn, he's on for a twenty-four hour period. He's subject to any fire that may occur in the city. Or if there's some fire that happens in another city, there's a moral obligation, and the Youngstown Fire Department may be called to give aid and assistance to another city's department.

After reporting on the job at eight o'clock, the first duties would be to put in order the premises, keeping the firehouse clean, checking all the tools and the apparatus that each man rides to a fire. The semi-maintenance is up to the firemen that are assigned to an apparatus in a given period of time, that is, in a 24 hour period. A man might go to as many as 4, 5, 6 or more fires. This may happen during the period after midnight, or in between the daylight hours and midnight. He may be relieved of duty at eight o'clock the following morning, and he may go home and be called out for some large fire. Having the three turns in the department gives us extra men in case of a large fire where it would be necessary to call extra firemen.

K: Do you remember your first fire?

W: The first fire that I recall going to was a fire on Pike Street and it was a construction company's building, which housed many pieces of machinery, trucks, tractors, and so forth. This fire came in the late evening and I was assigned to a ladder truck at the time. I was assigned to this ladder truck for three weeks and then assigned to the squad. The squad answered all the alarms within the city as well as out of the city. At that time the smaller, surrounding cities didn't have fire departments as they have today. They required a lot of assistance from the Youngstown Fire Department because Youngstown, being a larger city, had a regular fire force. We were called many times to assist the volunteers in the smaller communities.

K: What do you remember about some of the large fires you participated in? Were you at the St. Columba fire or the Youngstown Club fire?

- W: I can say that the St. Columba fire was quite spectacular. It required many pieces of apparatus and many, many thousands of gallons of water to extinguish this fire. This fire was caused by lightning that struck the church. The Youngstown Club fire started on the top floor of the Union Bank Building and it required a great deal of strategy because the fire was at such a great height and it was a fire that had made great headway before the department was summoned. It was in the winter and it required water being pumped into the standpipe system. Some of our hoses were frozen and it was a very difficult approach, because of the great height of the building. The fire was extinguished with a minimum amount of damage, and in a very quick manner.
- K: Is it easier to fight a larger fire of the nature of the Youngstown Club and the St. Columba Cathedral, say, as opposed to a house fire?
- W: In a small fire, naturally, you need a lesser number of firemen. The larger the fire, the more quantities of water you need, and the larger number of men and more apparatuses. There's always a greater danger at a larger fire and greater chance for the men of the department to become injured. Yes, the fact that a large fire would require a great deal more perseverance and stamina from the men, makes it more likely to cause our people to become injured.
- K: Have you received any serious injuries during your career?
- W: I received one in the Truscon Steel Corporation fire. I had to have surgery after an accident in the performance of my duty. Fortunately, I had been very lucky because actually the statistics say that the firemen have the most dangerous and the most hazardous job of all employees. The job of the sand hog, who tunnels under rivers and bodies of water, is considered as hazardous as far as the danger in getting the job done.
- K: Could you provide a description of the physical makeup of the type of machinery you have here at the main department? What type of equipment do you house here at the Number I Station?
- W: Fire apparatuses are specially built. They are required to do a tremendous job of running at different temperatures, at great speeds. When they're pumping, motors are racing at sixty to seventy miles an hour while the trucks are standing still. The idea of the pumper is that it must be rugged. It must be made to the specification of the city for the type of job it's required to do. These apparatuses are very efficient. They have huge motors,

12 cylinder gas combustion motors as well as diesel motors. The apparatuses are very heavy; they have to be built this way to stand the tremendous job that they have to do. They're very high-priced, because they're made to order, and they're made to specifications for whatever city they are required. There are 266 men in the Fire Department, 13 Fire Stations in operation, 14 pumps, 1 snorkle, 2 ladder trucks, 2 spare pumps and one foam apparatus.

K: How does the squad apparatus differ from the regular pumper?

W: The squad is an apparatus that carries numerous tools that are not available on the other apparatuses, such as the gasoline saw, the burning torches, the lighting equipment and different types of entry tools. The ladder trucks also carry some of this type of equipment. We consider our squad for manpower because we usually carry extra men on what we call our squad. The ladders, of course, respond to all alarms.

K: Could you take us through a dry run of a hypothetical fire? If somewhere up on Wick Avenue someone pulled an alarm, what would happen? How many units would answer and what would occur upon the pulling of the alarm?

W: Let's go to the still alarm. Say an automobile was ignited in some manner from an accident or the car just happened to ignite. Well, we'd send one company, the closest fire company, to the location, and that would be called a still alarm. If it was a larger fire, a house on fire, a building of some sort, a small business, then we would send the three nearest companies. That would be three pumps, possibly the squad and a ladder truck. So this would be the first group of companies moving into the fire. When the companies arrived, if they found that the fire was larger than they could possibly handle, the officer in charge would put in a second alarm and then there would be a response of three more pumps and another ladder.

K: Then is the batallion chief in charge of coordinating all these activities?

W: There's a system that we use in the Youngstown Fire Department. The assistant chief answers the first alarms on the North and the East sides and the batallion chief that is on duty will answer the first alarms from the South and the West sides. If in either one of these locations, the South or the West sides, there would be a second alarm, then the assistant chief will answer that alarm. It would be vice versa on the East or the

North sides. I would be called to the central station and would respond to any place in the city with the remaining companies that were left in the stations.

K: How much of a nuisance are false alarms?

W: This varies from year to year. Some years we have a very pronounced number of false alarms and this is a nuisance because of weather conditions, and grass fires in the spring, summer and fall. This varies. Some years we're handicapped because there are a lot of false alarms and in other years it sort of tapers off and we don't have such a great number of unnecessary runs.

K: What changes have you observed in your services in the department?

W: I would say that our apparatuses are more often replaced than in yesteryears. The more modern apparatuses give us better results, and we have less breakdowns. Our equipment is better, we have better tools and more modern hoses. Our companies now are being furnished with large water reserve tanks so that we can use the booster systems to put out a lot of fires. The Youngstown City Ambulance service is under the direction of the Youngstown Fire Department. It is a twenty-four hour service, manned by firemen and maintained by the Fire Department.

K: Has firefighting itself changed much over the years? In theory, would you train firemen today as you were trained?

W: Well, practical experience is a great teacher. It's a fine thing to have a training program. A fine job can be done with people that are on the job. Teaching people that are interested is part of the department goal. We want to do the right job in the most efficient manner. This is important because today, we have many more different types of fires. We have plastic materials that cause toxic gases. We have many kinds of hazardous materials and we must know how to approach the fire, or we lose our men. We could cause a larger fire or a terrible explosion that would involve our civilians in the process of the fire.

K: Can the firefighter adequately cope with the advent of the numerous new chemicals and plastics?

W: Without the technical knowledge of fire fighting, with so many of the hazardous materials that are made today, and that are being transported both by rail and over the highway, we would be actually taking many more risks than

would be necessary. So we do school our people in how to approach the chemical fire, which we just recently had with the derailment of the eight cars at the Westlakes crossing. There was a tank car that held something over twenty thousand gallons of alcohol, and without the knowledge of how to proceed at a fire like this, we could have lost a great number of our own men as well as the civilians who were witnesses at this fire.

K: Given the risk involved in firefighting, have salaries and benefits improved satisfactorily compared with other occupations?

W: I could probably give an opinion, but I couldn't speak for everyone. In the years of service that I have given the city of Youngstown, I'd say that the wages rose very slowly as compared to the other workers. But now I feel that we're getting to the point where our living wage is becoming a more appropriate figure than it had been in the past.

K: What goes through a fireman's mind when the alarm sounds?

W: Generally speaking, most men that are firemen do not show the excitement that takes place within a person's mind. We're not all alike, actually. I think you have to look at it in a general sense. Most of us are anxious to answer this alarm that's coming in. First, we don't know what, really, to expect. I think sometimes this makes the job that much more exciting. Once we have our gear on and we're on our way to the location where we are responding to, many things pass through the individual's mind such as: What is it? Are there any people involved? How much hose or how much water will we need at this particular location? Ladders might have to be raised to a second story or even to a fifth or sixth story. A lot of things will come up in the individual's mind.

I think the fireman, because he desires to be a fireman, does not have the fear that ordinarily would be expected, so, he does his job with the least amount of fear. I think that's possibly the reason that, even though it's a very hazardous occupation, the injuries are kept at a minimum. Because a fireman desires to do the job, he's anxious to overcome an emergency that has risen, and his good physical condition also helps him to overcome a lot of obstacles. If he wasn't fit physically, he would not be able to come out of that emergency without being injured. One of the important factors in a fireman's life is to keep himself in the best physical condition that's possible. In doing so, he is a better fireman, has less injuries, is always alert and is able to respond at all hours of the day and night

- K: Do you feel, from your experience, that the four-man staff per shift at a typical station is adequate?
- W: This is a factor that's governed by, let's say, the number of stations, the number of men that are employed, and the financial fitness of a city to provide the number of men that is required. I think that four men should be the minimum. The fire underwriters of the United States say that their standard is five men on a pump and the minimum is four. So, for the sake of illness, accident leave, and vacation, these three factors would necessarily put the standard of regular contingency on an apparatus. There are six men on a pump and that would allow for the sake of accident, vacation and sick leave, to provide at least a four man minimum.
- K: Do you have any other comments, suggestions, or observations that you'd like to make over the many years you've been with the department?
- W: I feel we have to abide by the finances of the city for employment, for the number of people in any given department. I think that tools and equipment are a great necessity. Without the proper equipment, a job cannot be done to the best of a person's ability. I would say that every new year an apparatus should be purchased, and there should be finances for the replacement of equipment, that includes hoses, tools, and every necessary thing that is required on our fire apparatus. We should have benefits for the men on the job, regular advancements in pay just like every industry has. I don't think that the politicians should hold a department down by not giving it the proper wage that's due to the individuals in that department. I think that Youngstown is trying to keep things on an even level, but there is always a place for improvement.

END OF INTERVIEW