

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Fire Department

Personal Experience

O H 69

ROY GELONESE

Interviewed

by

Michael Kurilla

on

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## ROY THOMAS GELONESE

Roy Thomas Gelonese was born on December 1, 1912 to Bruno and Catherine Gelonese. He grew up in Youngstown with one sister, attended Lincoln Grade School and later graduated from East High School. Mr. Gelonese's father owned a fruit market and grocery store on East Federal Street where he worked in his youth. When the market was sold, Mr. Gelonese found employment at the General Tire Company in Youngstown. After various jobs such as driving a bus, selling clothes at a clothing store, and working at General Fireproofing, Mr. Gelonese took his fireman's examination and went to work for the Youngstown Fire Department on May 22, 1945.

During the course of his thirty years at the fire department, Mr. Gelonese married, and he and his wife, Helen, have four children. His successful career at the department was highlighted by a promotion from fireman to engineer in 1967, followed by his later promotion in 1969 to the rank of captain. He served in this position until his retirement in 1974. Mr. Gelonese's colorful career has included the experience of delivering a baby, and also the honor of receiving the Life Savings Award in 1973. Asked why he chose a career in the fire department, Mr. Gelonese replied, "To work with the people and try to save lives, if possible."

R This is an interview with Roy Gelonese for the Youngstown State University Oral History program, on the Youngstown Fire Department, by Michael Kurilla, on May 30, 1975

Mr Gelonese, could you provide some information on your background and schooling?

G Yes I graduated from Lincoln Grade School, and from East High School I am 62 years of age I grew up here in Youngstown and have lived here all of my life I have one sister My dad was the late Bruno Gelonese He had a market and grocery store down on East Federal Street for thirty years We later sold out to Rudi Brothers Market After East High School, I worked for the General Tire Company in Youngstown In 1936 I went with the Youngstown Transit Company, the Youngstown Municipal Railway, and drove a bus for eight years

From there I went to the Printz Clothing Store and sold clothes for two months After that, I went to General Fireproofing and worked there two years. I took the Fireman's Examination and came to the Fire Department on May 22, 1945 I have been working at the Fire Department for thirty years, from 1945 up until May 21, 1975 I was married in 1935 and have four children, three girls and a boy My son lives in Akron and my girls reside in Youngstown. My son works for a big optical company in Akron on West Market Street He has a very good job managing the optical business for seven doctors

K Why did you become a fireman?

G I wanted to become to work with the people and to try to save lives, if possible The Youngstown Fire Department, at that time, was a better paying job than driving a bus, and it was more secure At that time we worked 72 hours a week We had no television in our station We also had no refrigerators in our stations, but we had old ice boxes. The fellow on watch used to have to put up the sign for the ice that time

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

G Well, the first year on the department I had a very bad call one afternoon I was supposed to be the cook, and we had a call on Elm Street This lady had crawled into a coal furnace and set herself on fire to commit suicide When we got there, Chief Quinn asked me to watch the door, and not to let any reporters in Bless his heart, I was so tickled because I did not want to be present when the squad burned the whole door down to get her out I did not want to be there because I had only been on the Fire Department a few months They finally got the lady on the board that they had, and she was just a mess That was my first experience of a really bad incident, seeing a person burned to death like that

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

- G I served at Station Number 7 on Elm and Madison for eight months. Then I served down at Number 11 on Poland Avenue for twenty years. From Poland Avenue, I served at South and Boston for, I would say, ten years.
- K When did you receive your promotions?
- G I received my first promotion as an engineer in 1967. Then, from an engineer I was promoted to captain in 1969.
- K What type of promotion system does the Fire Department have?
- G The Fire Department has a promotion system based on written civil service examinations, rank, and time in grade. You start as a fireman and have to serve in that capacity for two years. After two years, you can take another examination to become a captain. From a captain you have to wait another two years and take an examination, then you can become a battalion chief. You will have to wait two more years to become an assistant chief. That is the highest you can go in rank.
- K What does the physical make-up of a typical fire station consist of? By physical make-up, I mean what type of equipment do you have, and how big of a staff do you have in your capacity as a captain?
- G Well, at a regular fire station, we have four men. We have a captain, an engineer, and two firemen. When we go to a fire, the captain sits on the right front seat of the truck or Pumper. The engineer drives the truck. The two hosemen are in the rear. When we go to a fire, the captain sizes up the situation when we approach a fire. He decides what kind of equipment must be used, the line of attack, and generally makes sure everything is brought under control as quickly as possible. Saving lives is of the utmost importance, with property second.
- K Do you feel that the four man staff is adequate at a typical situation?
- G No. I feel that there should be at least five men on a truck. It would be more efficient than four men because with four men there is always one off on vacation, off sick, or on detail. It leaves you three men most of the time. With five men, having one off for some reason would leave four men on duty, which would be more efficient and better for the department.
- K Who were some of the chiefs that you served under during your career?
- G Do you mean the big chiefs?
- K Yes, the fire chiefs.

- G The fire chiefs of the department that I served under were Roy Halstead, Amos Lynch, Joseph Flask, C V Thomas, and George Panno
- K. What is the relationship between the chief who is the commander in effect of the department and the assistant and the battalion chief? Does the captain of the station have full command?
- G The captain of the station has full authority, and runs the station. The district assistant or battalion chief is his superior. The captain is the one that has to know his territory and has to know the rules of the fire department. Everything has to go through the captain. The captain keeps the log everyday. When he first comes to work he marks the man's name in the book, just like in the Navy. He logs the time that he arrives and the time that he quits for each man.
- K. What type of training did you receive on becoming a fireman?
- G When I came to the fire department we had to train for two weeks. We did some ladder work, climbing hundred foot ladders. Then we had to use the ladders with poles, but they do not have those anymore. We used to have the big ladders, and that required at least four men, two on the poles and two on the ladder. Then we had to jump in the net from the second story. We also had to know knots, and had to train on how to wrap a two and one half inch line around the plug. Of course, we had to use the different nozzles, spray nozzles, different tips for different pressures of water.
- K Was there more emphasis on classroom training or on the experience of what they taught you?
- G There was more emphasis on the experience of the people that taught us than on classroom training.
- K. Could you describe a typical day of Captain Gelonese? Take us through a typical day, through the movements that you would make at the fire station and the things that you would do.
- G Well, the typical day would start at 8 05 in the morning. The captain would receive us. The test was at 8 05 in the morning. The test was at 8 05 every morning and 6 05 every night, they would have to have a test from the alarm room to see if the alarm apparatus was working right. After the test is given the captain calls back and verifies that he got the test and that everything is okay. Then he records the details of the test in the log. He starts with his name first, for example Captain Gelonese, then Engineer DiCiccio, Fireman Wells, and Fireman Sipe. Then as each alarm comes in the captain marks it down.  
The next thing we do is have coffee and have a little bull session. After that, we start on the cleaning of the station. The captain designates to each man

what to do. For example, I used to sweep the dormitory, Engineer DiCiccio used to take the apparatus floor, and Fireman Wells would take the kitchen. We would get all that done, and then Sipeen would take the bathroom. We would sweep that out and mop after that. After it would dry up, we would make our beds. We would put new sheets on the beds, and put the same blankets on, but we would use different pillow slips. If it was Wednesday in the summertime, we would mow the lawn. On Saturday, if a company would be out, we would put the hose up from the cellar. We would bring up the dirty hose, and wash it before Saturday, because that hose has to be up by Saturday.

K What do firemen do with their free time? Is there free time during a normal shift?

G There is some free time. You could read, or you could watch television. Or, you could take a nap because we have to work 24 hours. Of course, at night you do not know when you are going to get called out. You could get called out at one, two or three o'clock in the morning. And this way if you get a little bit of a cat nap during the afternoon, your performance would be better at night.

K Do you remember your first fire?

G Well, my first big fire was down on East Federal Street. A Polish dentist got burned to death in his apartment, located above the Army & Navy Store. It was quite a fire. We had to go up with the ladders. When we went into his apartment, we had to fight through the smoke. We went into his apartment and found him dead on the cot. He suffocated to death from smoke inhalation.

K Could you take us through the motions of a fire crew from the sound of the alarm until the return to the station?

G Do you mean the excitement when the bell hits?

K Yes.

G The bell hits five times. When the bell hits once, the firemen are very alert, they get ready. They go for their truck, the doors are already wide open in the truck. We start putting out boots, rubber coats, and helmets on, and we are ready to go. By that time we have our clothes on, and the alarm comes in over the speaker. It will say, "Number 14, go to Boston and Lucius. There is an attic fire, or a store fire." Whatever it is, the alarm operator will tell you. So, we go to that fire and the captain gives the orders of what to do.

K What do you remember about some of the large fires that you have participated in? For example, were you at the St. Columba fire?

G I was at the St. Columba's fire and I was at the Imperial fire.

- K Do you remember anything specific about the St. Columba fire
- G Yes, when we first got there I was working at the Fosterville Fire Station at that time filling in. When we first got there, I looked at what was burning I thought that we would have it licked in no time. It just seemed like a little smoke was coming from the steeple It started to rain, and I thought that the rain would help it out, too But the longer we were staying there, the worse the fire was getting. It finally got so bad that we could not handle it It was high to begin with, and it finally burned down
- K What do you remember about the Imperial fire?
- G At the Imperial fire, I was the first company to come in I ordered my crew to lay a one half inch line directly from the fire plug to the fire We could not get over the wall because the heat was so intense We were shooting the water over the wall We could not see too well, but we were trying our best to knock the fire down Finally the smoke got so bad that two firemen and myself got filled by smoke, and we had to go to the hospital The other crews did knock out the fire, but the building did burn down
- K Were you at the A&P Warehouse fire?
- G Yes, I was at the A&P Warehouse fire. We got called there on the second alarm from South and Boston that night When we first got there and the fire was really bad, I got orders to send my crew in to help the other firemen We took in a two and one half inch line, that is the big line, and fought the fire until 2 30 a m from 9 55 p m
- K In a multiple alarm fire, say in the last one that you just spoke of, who coordinates efforts? Does the first unit do a particular function, and then the following units do a particular function? Who coordinates the things that the firemen do?
- G Your assistant chiefs and battalion chiefs give the orders to the captains The big chief, the one that runs the fire department, gives the orders to the assistants, and the battalion chiefs, if he wants to He usually does not, because he leaves it up to the assistant chiefs and the battalion chiefs to run the fire department.
- K Were you at the Youngstown Club fire?
- G Yes
- K What do you remember about that particular fire?

G We got at the Youngstown Club fire about three o'clock in the morning, and that was on a third alarm. When we got down there it was pretty well gutted out, and we had to, what they call "wet down" after the fire is pretty well licked. They had out company down there to wet down, that is to finish the embers that are left.

K Were you at the Hume Furniture fire?

G Yes, we were at the Hume Furniture fire. My battalion chief, Chief Beardon, had my four men take fifty feet of hose up the hundred foot ladder. We got on the Warner brothers building, and that is a bubble roof. When we got up there, we had to hook four sections of fifty feet each. That would make two hundred feet of two and one half inches so we could use it all up on the roof. We were shooting the water from the Earner Brothers Theater to Hume Furniture Store. We finally knocked that fire down, it took us about four hours. It was about 6:55 p.m. by the time that we got into the station, from early in the morning.

K Throughout your experiences, what would you classify as the worst type of fire?

G The worst type of fire I can classify would be a cellar fire, and the next one to that would be an attic fire.

K. Why would you say those?

G These are more dangerous because there is more smoke and the smoke has no place to go when it is in a cellar or an attic.

K What emergency situation, other than fire fighting, is a station capable of handling?

G Well, in my time, I have delivered a baby, put tourniquets on people that were cut, and put a jack under a car that a man was working on. There were a couple of milk crates that he had for jacks. It slipped, and had him pinned down when we got there. We put the jack that we use for the fire truck under there to lift him up. That is one kind of problem besides fighting fires that we have.

Also, many years ago, we used to have a baseball excursion. Freddie Bowser used to be our fire chief, and he started this excursion with a station wagon with six boys in it, it wound up that we were hauling 1,500 boys in trains from here to Cleveland, to see the Cleveland Indians play once a year. We used to wait to buy the tickets in the fire stations.

K Did you incur any injuries during your career?

G Yes. I had fifteen minutes before I was to go home one morning, and the bell hit. We went to a house on Poland Avenue with my crew. I had only three men that day, myself, the engineer, and one fireman. The fireman took the plug, I went in.

there with the line, and my engineer had to stay at the truck to give me water and pressure. I got in there and had the fire knocked out. Then my battalion chief came down with other fire trucks. He asked me if I had gotten the fire out upstairs. I said, "Yes chief, I knocked the fire down upstairs." He said, "well, let us go up and see, Roy." So we went up and when he was talking to me he asked me if I had gotten the back end of the building cleared. I said, "Yes, I got the back end, Chief." Just then the floor caved in and I went down and broke four ribs. I was in the hospital from April 18th that year until July 7th. That was my worst injury. I got a knee injury one night when I slipped on the pavement trying to hook a two and one half inch line into our snorkel.

K: What changes in the fire department have you observed during your thirty years of service?

G: We have gotten much better fire stations and much better working conditions. We went from 72 hours to 56 hours per week, we get severance pay now, and sick leave pay. We get quite a few more benefits than we have ever gotten since I came on here thirty years ago.

K: Do you believe that the pay is adequate for the risk involved in the job?

G: No, I do not believe that it is. I think it should pay more than what it does with the risk firemen take. A lot of people do not realize the risk there is in fighting fires, or the excitement. I put on thirty years working at the fire department and had to retire on account of a heart condition. Before I got on the fire department I was in perfect health, but if you put on thirty or thirty-five years and do not have a heart condition when you are finished at the fire department, you are lucky. The excitement and the smoke inhalation is a combination that is not good for your heart. In the days when I first got on the fire department, we had no masks for smoke. The last five years it has improved a lot because we have two masks on each truck, plus the captain has a mask in the front end of the truck. That has served a lot of lung conditions and a lot of inhalation of smoke for the heart.

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

G: The first thing that goes through a fireman's mind is that he wants to be there first. He wants to save a life. I do not say this because I am a fireman, but from working with the firemen all of my life. When that bell hits, they are on that truck in less than one minute and ready to go. In a split second, they are out the door.

K: Is there always a feeling of anxiety, waiting for the bell, when a fireman is on shift?

G: There is a feeling of anxiety because you are waiting there, especially when you first start on the fire department. You are just waiting and waiting until that bell

hits, but just like anything else, the tension will wear off in time. You will get used to it. At night when the bell hits, you are usually sleeping. After eleven or twelve o'clock, we go to bed, and if that bell hits at night, we have our "night regan" with our boots on right beside our bed. Our rubber pants is what they call a night regan. We slide into them and put our suspenders up. Then we jump on the truck and are out of the station in less than a minute. That is the excitement that you have, especially when you are sleeping at night.

K Today when one views the news, a prevalence of arson fires is seen. Were arson fires prevalent in the 1940's and 1950's?

G I would say that there were just as many arson fires in those days as there are now. You get arson fires when things are slow; when there is a recession or a depression, and people want to get out of business. Of course, they set the fires or have somebody set the fires for them. That is when you get more arson fires than any other time. It seems to me that when business is very good there are less arson fires.

K How frequent and how much of a nuisance are false alarms?

G False alarms are very frequent. They are a nuisance and they have killed firemen. When I first came on the fire department in 1945, the Christmas morning of that year I was detailed at Fosterville Fire Station. An alarm came in before I got to work. I was on my way to work when this alarm came in and they answered it. The fire truck from Falls Avenue was the squad truck, and that was taking the whole city. It was leaving from Oak Hill and Falls, and going across town to the north side. When it was coming down Oak Hill across from the cemetery, by the South Side Hospital, it slid on ice. In those days the road was brick, and it had a little wee bit of ice on it. The truck slid and turned around twice in the middle of the road, and hit a telephone pole. It knocked the two firemen off the rear and killed both of them. Our crew had to come down from Idora Park and pick up all the hose. I picked up the one spander wrench that locks the female and male hose connections together. When I went to pick up that wrench, I saw the man's brains right by the telephone pole. That was the first Christmas I spent there, and I will never forget that morning.

K How much of a risk do you believe is involved in fire fighting? You can compare it with other occupations or just from your experience. What is your personal opinion?

G Well, there is a lot of risk. When you are pulling up to a building or a house, and if the fire is in one room, you cannot open the door right away because you will get a backflash. You better have your line and water ready. That is one risk there. There is also risk when you open your windows for ventilation. You have to step aside to break any glass, because you cannot have your face there in

case of an explosion. There are all different risks that you take when you fight fires. You could fall from a ladder from the pressure of the hose. In the winter time it is more risky than in the summertime because everything is frozen and you could fall down and break your back.

K: Certainly no given week could be called typical, but are there seasons when fires are more prevalent? Or, how many times would a station receive a call during a week or a month?

G: Well, you could go for one week and you might never go out from the station, or then again, you could go out four times in one day. Fires, I would say, are like bananas, they run in bunches. You may get a real good fire this month, and you may go two months and just get some small fires, like grassburning, or a frying pan on a stove, or a kid with some matches, or a fire in the clothes closet. Things like that.

K: Is there a type of friendly rivalry that exists, say between different stations? For example, I have heard the term used that a particular station was a "fast house", and someone would not want to get stuck in a slow house.

G: There are firemen that like to work in "fast houses". The younger firemen, they are more or less raring to go. There are some firemen that would rather go normally. When I came on the fire department, the young fellows always wanted to go on the squad because that covered everything. That was like the city ambulance, it went all over. They liked that, they liked action. They like to have "the stink blown off". That was what they called "blowing the stink off".

K: How was the operation of the main fire station located downtown different from the ordinary stations?

G: Well, the main fire station downtown would be more interesting because you have more of a crew. You have double the crew that you would in a small house. Instead of four men in a house, you probably have fourteen men working downtown. The more men there are, the more excitement you have. You eat together, sleep together, practically in a dorm, and you have more excitement than you would in a smaller house. Then when the bell hits and you are working downtown, you have Chief Panno, the assistant chief, the squad, the pump and the snorkel all coming out of there. They might all go to the same fire, or they just might send a squad or the pump to the same one, but mostly they send the whole four.

K: Does the main station have the fine boundaries like the other stations, or are they called on special occasions?

G: The squad has a little extra territory than any of them downtown, but they have

their district like normal small fire stations. We all have our own districts. The captain should know, and the engineer, as his driver, should know just where every street is, and every block number. The captain and the engineer should know the streets.

K Did you have any unusual experiences in your career as a fireman?

G Well, my most unusual experience was when this man came in about three o'clock in the morning, and I was working at number 11 fire station at 1241 Poland Avenue. He was blowing the horn, and I thought his car was on fire. I had one of the men grab the carbon dioxide, that is the fire extinguisher that puts all fires out. Of course, the man did have a fire. It was not a real fire, though. I opened the door and he hollered that his wife was going to have a baby. So, I looked at his wife, and God, the expression on her face! Why, she was going to have a baby.

So the other fireman and I got her out of the car and we took her in the back. I asked the fireman to call her doctor, because her husband asked me to call her baby doctor. The doctor was trying to tell this other fireman how to deliver the baby. Well, this fireman got so excited that he left me, and went out to the front of the station with a flash light to flag down the ambulance, as if the fire ambulance did not know where the fire station was at. I said, "Sid, you better come in here and give me a hand. I need you in the dorm."

He came into the fire station and tried to tell me what the doctor told him on how to deliver the baby. Well, I was getting excited myself, and I just asked the good Lord to help me. Finally, the ambulance came down, and these men wanted to take her back to the hospital. I said, "No, we had better deliver the baby here," because the baby's head was already out. I got some rubber gloves from the ambulance and put them on. I finally got the baby delivered, but did not cut the cord. I smacked the baby a little bit so it would come to, and it finally did come to. I put the baby between the lady's legs and I did not cut the cord. We put a blanket on top of the baby and the mother, and they were delivered to the hospital.

When the doctor got the news, he called me at the fire station. I was the captain then, and he told me that he was going to come right down because he had to take Mr. Matigue, the little baby's father, back to the station. I asked the doctor how the baby was. He said that the baby was perfect. They named the baby little baby Kelly, because firemen years ago were mostly Irish. When the doctor was drinking coffee, he got the biggest kick out of the firemen because he said, "Boy, I bet you fellows really scattered when you heard that man coming in there saying that his wife was having a baby." I said, "You are not kidding, doctor. One went one way and one went the other."

Anyway, Mrs. Matigue came out of the hospital and she and her husband came by the station one day and brought us down a ten pound ham that they had cooked. They asked us to accept it, and we thanked them. The little girl now is a young lady, and she is going to graduate from high school this year.

Mrs Matigue saw my retirement last December 31st in the paper, with my picture in it, and she sent me a beautiful card. She thanked me for what I had done in those years with baby Kelly, and she said that baby Kelly took my picture and showed the girls in high school who delivered her. That is the end of my story.

K After many years of experience as a fireman, engineer, and captain, would you have any suggestions to make in the operation of fire stations, or the fire department in general?

G One suggestion that I would like to make to help the firemen avoid heart trouble is that they should eliminate the bell system in the fire stations and put a different kind of a system in there. They have a new system in there now, but they do not use it. They claim that it does not work as well. There is a system that they could get that would not jar the firemen, and would not make them as tense as they are. That big bell does jar you and it is not any good for the heart.

K Given the same conditions, but with the knowledge of your thirty year experience, would you become a fireman again if you had the opportunity?

G Yes, I would become a fireman again, because I love my work and I love to serve the people. At times I used to feel sorry for the people when their houses would burn down and especially if they lost a loved one. I would always try to console them at fires, and I like to help people. I would become a fireman again and I do miss the work now that I am retired.

K When did you retire, and why did you retire at that time?

G Well, I retired on December 31, 1974. The reason I retired is that I got a slight heart condition, and pension doctors told me that I would live a little longer if I would retire and get off of the job on account of the excitement and the smoke inhalation. They said that that would help my heart more than being on the job.

K This is a question in reference to your earlier years in Youngstown. Do you remember the depression here in Youngstown, Ohio?

G I certainly do. I can remember when I was a young fellow that I was very fortunate. After school, I was working downtown for the general Tire Company four hours a night. I would come down from Oak Street and cross the Oak Street bridge. I had a little car, and I would turn left there on Summit Avenue. When I got to Wood Street, there was a soup kitchen there. There would be people standing in line all along the bridge with little tin cups, waiting for a cup of soup. It was not too good of a soup, I understand, it was just something like bean soup. In America you would never think that could happen, but it did happen, and I saw it happen. If it was raining, the people would still stand there, all soaked and wet, waiting for a cup of soup.

Later on in my experience, I got a job driving a bus. I used to haul people from the Square to Rayen Avenue for a hand out. The government would give butter, flour, sugar, and groceries at this one particular place on Rayen Avenue. I would take them there and bring them there and bring them back. A lot of times, the people did not have a dime to ride the bus. I know I was not doing the right thing for the company, but I used to feel sorry for the poor people, and would give them a ride for nothing. When I would leave them off downtown, I would even give them a transfer to get another bus, so they could ride home with their shopping bags.

K Mr. Gelonese, do you have any observations or comments that you would like to make at the close of this interview?

G Well, I would like to make one comment. For the thirty years I spent on the fire department, you would not want a nicer bunch of me to work with. You could be on non-speaking terms with maybe one fireman that worked in the house, but when you went to the fire, they disregarded all that. If they could save your life, they would, and 99 percent of the fellows on the fire department are wonderful men.

K Thank you very much for this interesting interview.

G Thank you very much.

End of Interview