

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Fire Department

Work Experiences

O. H. 338

JOHN ZAMARY

Interviewed

by

Mike Kurilla

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Fire Department

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN ZAMARY
INTERVIEWER: Mike Kurilla
SUBJECT: Chief Alarm Operator, Alarm Systems, Training
DATE: September 25, 1985

K: This is an interview with Mr. John Zamary for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Youngstown Fire Department by Mike Kurilla at the main fire station in downtown Youngstown on September 25, 1975, at 3:45 p.m.

Mr. Zamary, will you provide some information on your family background and schooling?

Z: I attended all the schools in Youngstown and graduated from Ursuline High School in 1951. I went to the service in 1954, and returned home in 1956. I am married and the father of four children. I was appointed to the Youngstown Fire Department in 1959. At that time I began attending Youngstown University on a part-time basis and finally graduated in 1973 with a Bachelors in Business Administration, and a major in Public Accounting.

K: What occupations were you employed in before becoming a fireman?

Z: From the time that I left high school until I entered the service and then after the service I was with the General Fireproofing Company, working in the desk assembly division, approximately from 1952 to 1959.

K: Why did you become a fireman?

Z: At the time, the work situation in Youngstown was experiencing an economic decline. At that time, I was layed off from General Fireproofing and a vacancy occurred here on the department, so I took the examination for a fireman.

- K: What do you remember about the first years on the department?
- Z: When I was first appointed to the department I was assigned, initially, to the Number 11 Fire Station that since has been closed. This station was on Poland Avenue, and I worked there and other stations on the south side till about the middle of 1960. In 1960 we acquired the ambulance. In January of 1961 I was assigned to this station downtown to ride the ambulance. One day we were involved in a serious accident with it and demolished the ambulance. This sort of changed the whole tone of my future on the department. That incident was responsible for me arriving here in the alarm office. After the accident I returned to work, went back to working with fire trucks for awhile, but the nature of the injury was such that I eventually had to come in here. I believe it was 1971 when I took over after the death of the chief alarm operator.
- K: What are the duties and responsibilities of the chief alarm operator?
- Z: Basically, it's record keeping. With every endeavor we have people here who go out and put the fire out, but someone has to maintain records of them. The duty of the chief alarm operator is to see that these records are kept, and to prepare the monthly and annual summaries of the activities of the fire department with respect to training and fire fighting. In addition to that, I am responsible for the operation of this room and everything that is in it. That includes preparing contracts for radio service, the radio equipment, new, replacement, repair, and so on. Another duty which is almost continuous, kind of large in scope, is to redefine fire districts. If we move a fire station, close a fire station, or some new obstacle occurs in the city, as we are going to have next year the closing of the Market Street Bridge, this will necessitate changing some of the fire responses from what they are today. The opening of the freeway, which is about a month off is another area where we will take a hard look at what we are using in the southeast section of the city and maybe move some different companies in that can utilize the freeway or move them back into the downtown area.
- K: How does one become chief alarm operator? Is it a test? Do you have to achieve a certain rank before you can become one, or what are the qualifications?
- Z: As with most of the jobs on the fire department, a test is given. And since there is only one of this classification it is rather infrequent that a vacancy occurs. As I mentioned earlier, the way I became chief alarm

operator was through the death of the previous alarm operator. Prior to that time, I think he had held the job for approximately fifteen years. It is promotional, it's one step above fire fighter; the responsibilities are somewhat higher. Many years ago the position of chief alarm operator was, and still is, in the organization department considered at a chief's but they have changed the pay on it.

K: Can you describe the physical makeup of the alarm room and the type of equipment your staff uses?

Z: Primarily, probably first in the order of importance is the TVX switchboard where we are sitting. All of the telephone calls incoming to the fire department come through this switchboard. As you can see, there are a number of other "plugs," as they are referred to. These are stations with various extension lines. Anything interstation or from the outside into the fire department runs through this board. In addition to the fire stations and our normal office extension, we have direct lines to the hospitals, police department radio dispatcher, and several of the industrial plants in the area, and approximately half a dozen of the ambulance services. The reason for all these extensions is because it is important that we have rapid communication with the ambulance services and several of the industrial plants.

Next in line we have what we refer to as the console, which has on it a dictaphone recorder which we use to record emergency calls. This is provided primarily for our benefit to be sure that we get the address correctly. The playback tape capability allows us to check it while the fire trucks are enroute. Along the top it has three remote receivers for our radio transmitter. And the reason there are three is that over a period of years we found that we had some dead spots and it requires three different transmitters in the city to get the kind of coverage we felt that we needed. One of the transmitters is located in this room back in the corner, one is on the north side of the water tower, and the other one is out on the east side of McGuffey Road at the water tower. Everything comes into this room from the transmitter sights on a telephone cable and then goes out on the air.

Just below is the mechanism we have for implementing the fire alarm system to the station; the red button activates the bell which is known as the Gaimwell system. It is pretty common in fire departments throughout the country. It is automatic, or as we have here, a manual tripping switch. The tape recorder records incoming street boxes that are full, or any activity on the Gaimwell fire alarm system will be recorded on this recorder, it's a master tape. The red button is the one we used to alert

all the stations in the city at one time when we want to dispatch for a fire.

Immediately next to it we have a radio paging system, this is a supplemental system which we use primarily at night. It allows us the opportunity to dispatch individual stations or groups of stations without alerting all the stations of the city. The way we do that is by putting a number code on the console here and just pressing the button. The radio signal turns on the fire alarm system in the station. It turns on the lights in the station and it turns on their speaker system. And then we talk to them either over the one I referred to as the Gaimwell or over a radio out through the air over the wire, either way, once we have turned the system on.

On the other side of the room we have, on the top, the recording and alarm system of the American District Telegraph, a national company which provides local protection to industrial plants. If they receive a signal in their central office it indicates a need for the fire department, and that would be a smoke sensing signal or one of their automatic sprinkler system signals. They will relay one in here; they use a number code that we have a file on and we can dispatch. We also have a direct line to them. Generally, their telephone call accompanies their automatic signal because frequently their signals are false. The other recorders are supplemental to the main recorder we have here on the console. We have it broken down so that street boxes and fire department station signals are separated into three different banks there. What it amounts to is a backup system. If one fails to work the others are available. The left bank primarily handles all of the fire boxes in the city. I'll qualify that. Those are individual circuits and there are from two to ten fire boxes on each one of those circuits. After you have been here for awhile and you become accustomed with the different sections of the city you can just about tell what fire box has been pulled. The next two on the right bank are called tie lines. Tie line one controls fire boxes on the east side and tie line two controls fire boxes on the south side. Basically, what we did there was we just saved some wire and we have a cabinet like this one on the east side fire station and one on the south side. All of these signals come into these two locations and then they travel down here over two wires. The remaining keys on the console have to do with the voice communications and the fire alarm signal into the fire station.

Next to that we have a file which includes all of the streets in the city alphabetically with the fire response already on it. You call and give us your street address

and your house number and all we do is look for it alphabetically and tell the operator on duty which fire station to dispatch. In addition to that we have a numerical file for all of the fire boxes and the ones just referred to, all the street boxes, again to pre-determine who goes. The schools are covered, the hospitals and nursing homes.

We have what we call fire clause contracts, a few areas outside the city, specifically a couple areas in Liberty Township around North Side Hospital are the responsibility of our department. Several county buildings, two or three on Kirk Road, we take care of.

That covers the portions of the room that deal with the fire department. In addition, we have on the wall over there a telephone device which has keys one, two, three, four, and that rings the countywide siren, which rings every Saturday at 6:00 p.m. Recently, I had some changes in the makeup of that organization they are referring now to as the Mahoning County Disaster Agency. And in the event of severe weather we will probably be using the siren to alert people of tornadoes and things of this nature. We have transferred from the philosophy of purely civil defense and they are working on it now.

K: How long could it take you to track down a signal coming from one of the boxes in the city?

Z: The impulses are approximately one second each and I can have the truck in motion in less than thirty seconds. It is possible that while we are sitting here that one will come in as you saw earlier. Usually less than a minute, but it is a good idea with these boxes to wait until they ring the second time. When someone pulls a box on the street it will ring four times and you get four number series, the first one maybe off sequence and you may not be getting it correctly so you should wait till the second one. They should be on the road in less than a minute from the time it comes in here. Now those are almost all telephone dispatches; if the box is in the downtown area it would start with a one rather than some other number and we might send three or four trucks on that. Schools start with seven and we generally make a full response on those with one or two exceptions that are known false.

K: What do you do as a dispatcher if an outlying area needs assistance from the Youngstown Fire Department, for example, assistance to Boardman Township, Austintown, Liberty, or one of the volunteer fire departments?

A: We have an agreement which they refer to as Chief-Chief,

and to define that it very simply means that a chief of one department requests to speak to our chief and we dispatch it. We have had several incidents just recently. For example, Struthers had an occasion to call us and the chief said he wanted us and all we do is verify that it is legitimate and everything. On occasion, when other fire departments require our assistance, in my memory, we have gone to Struthers two or three times, Austintown one or two occasions, we have some contract work in Austintown with industrial plants but even these are becoming fewer. So it is a rather rare occurrence.

K: Have alarm systems changed greatly over the years?

Z: Yes, they have changed and yes, they have similar setups over the country. The change has occurred in this fashion, there is no longer a real dependence on the street boxes as there once was. Originally, we had what was called a repeater; a fire box would be pulled and it would ring here in the central office and the operator or dispatcher on duty would repeat this alarm to the station. Each station had their own book, and they responded without any actual contact from central office. We didn't even use the phone to check them. This was a long time ago, twenty-five years or perhaps longer. With the increasing number of telephones, we find now that here and in other cities, the fire box arrangement that we have is used, but not to the extent that it was before. Generally, if you get a fire you will get a street box that will be accompanied by a telephone call except in the wee hours of the morning. And now they changed this to a telephone company provided box, where you just pull a lever and you have voice contact with the dispatcher. I think Campbell has this, but I'm not sure. We are thinking, particularly on the freeway system and high evaluation areas where people might not be in the downtown area at night, there should be phone service or a street box.

K: Could you take us through a dry run of an alarm, say up on Wick Avenue, there up by the university? What would happen from me pulling the alarm on the pole until the trucks or an individual station got there?

Z: If you would pull an alarm in the university area, the recorder in front of you would indicate that a box is coming in, the little bell that you heard before. This is just a street box with no telephone call. I would look it up and it would tell me that it would be in Wick and Bryson, or the area that I know as the university. That would not be a one truck response. If we get an alarm in the university area, we send three or four units and a ladder truck. As soon as I was assured that the number was correct, I would turn around here and check the file. The file would tell me it was the university

area and which truck to send, then I would turn back to the console here and press that red button. This turns on the alarm system in the stations that we would dispatch in less than a minute. As soon as they leave the station, we ring the telephone in the station, put a cord in the extension and ring it. If they don't answer the phone, then I know they have gone. Then we make radio contact with them and find out if they are definitely going to the right place. When they arrive they inform us, as you heard, with the ambulance.

K: How much of a nuisance are false alarms? And how prevalent are they?

Z: How prevalent, it's 99 and 3 or 4 decimal places a nuisance. We don't mind so much, but there is a tendency to relax your guard and that is the real hazard of it. Other than the traffic hazards involved in the almost certain knowledge that you are responding to a false alarm, throughout the country you hesitate to remove them, but we have removed some of the more troublesome ones. Just on the outside chance that if they are available once, they have served their purpose. We occasionally move them across the street or under a street light. With a false alarm it is difficult to prosecute; most offenders are children and the court is lenient. I'm not even sure what the fine is if we catch them.

K: You were a fireman before becoming chief alarm operator, what goes through a fireman's mind when the alarm goes off?

Z: It has a tendency to excite you. I don't know if this is a conditioned response that you acquire, but my own recollection here is that it does excite me. It's the unknown and the unexpected. In addition to sounding that alarm, working in here we have to work at not adding to that excitement. I have been here for awhile and people judge my voice tone. On some occasions I get excited but I try not to. But when I do, those who know me know that they are in for something. The bell itself has a tendency to excite you and this is why we went to the radio paging system. This is not as severe. I think the circuits open up in association with the bell but it excites you just as much when the lights go on and a crack of electricity associated with the mechanism working, it all tends to excite you. One of the bad things about it is that you know you are going to a fire and you could be exposed to some hazard, if this does excite you too much.

K: Talking to firemen they say it all depends on the individual. Some never get over the anxiety of when the bell hits. I was thinking, couldn't this system they use

at night be adopted full time, or another system instead of the alarm system?

Z: This one is a little better; we could adapt it by just one more row of keys to get a group response. That is the reason we don't use it in the daytime because the bell is a little faster; it's one button, and you get the attention of all the stations at one time. There are two schools of thought on that: One is that everyone should know that there is a fire in progress and the other is only those that are going should be excited. I think we should get away from it, unless we can change the attitude of the fellows coming on now. If they are conditioned by the older members to get extremely excited then we are going to have a continuing problem. But I think, in general, it's almost like a little cut, it gets you going, it gets the adrenaline moving.

K: Could you describe a typical day on duty of the alarm operator, Mr. Zamary?

Z: If I'm on day-turn--on day-turn that is working just eight hours a day, every day, five days a week--it becomes somewhat a routine. The first thing I do in the morning would be to take care of any repairs that need to be made such as radios and so on. I pick up the fire reports from the previous day and record all these in the book and file them. When I work the position I am in today, filling in on vacation period and still doing the duties that I have as chief alarm operator, it becomes a little more hectic as you have seen people come in with questions because I haven't been here every day as I would be normally on a twenty-four hour shift. And I have to sandwich in, normally, what I would do, such as the filing, along with the repairs, just about any of the little items that come up here. Sometimes hydrants out of service and fire trucks out of service, I sandwich them in with the time here at the board and it just becomes a little more hectic than it would be otherwise.

K: Is there a daily log kept of these activities?

Z: The men on duty, when I'm not here, maintain a daily log and it includes fire responses, ambulance responses, or anything out of the ordinary that occurs. I take all of the fire activity and I record that in the permanent ledger and file these things away. We have a regular filing system that we follow that makes it easy for someone to locate them. When I have the time I daily accumulate the statistics that I put down each month. If I don't do it one day I have to come the next day. Basically, most of the year, because of the somewhat shortage of manpower, I find myself on the twenty-four hour

shift. It's almost hard to remember what the daily routine is. I am rarely here on a five day basis. It is usually the twenty-four hour shift and then off like the regular men.

K: How active is the ambulance service?

Z: In terms of numbers, it is running more responses than the rest of the fire department. This is the end of September, and we have had 2,235 fire alarms for the year; that is of all types now, false alarms and so on. And the ambulance has run 3,766, roughly 500 more responses than the department. Those are not really two good numbers to try to compare because three, four, or five fire trucks respond to some fire calls and in many cases just one. The ambulance is more a problem than the fire work right now. These people are generally more excited and you get more calls for an accident and things of that nature. And they happen while you are here; this board frequently lights up in response to an accident and only rarely does that occur with a fire. Most of the time somebody thinks everyone else calls the fire department, but everyone wants to call for the ambulance.

K: What are the types of emergencies you dispatch trucks to other than fire fighting?

Z: One that we get frequently anymore is on the freeway system we are required to send out our rescue squad. People get caught in a wreck and we have equipment on there to burn them out, cut them out, and so on. Another type of emergency is when children get themselves into all sorts of circumstances with bars and railings and things of that nature. You wouldn't call this an emergency, but we do get a lot of calls for people locked out. It's a problem to them at the moment, but we refer to them in the broad general sense as emergencies. It is really just a matter of going out to their home, finding a window open, forcing a door open, et cetera. Any number of wires down, it's hard to think this rapidly when we have had electrical storms. Other things are automobile accidents, flushing streets after auto accidents, getting all the oil, water, or gas off. This pretty much covers the types of responses other than fires. Of course, there are a lot of fires associated with auto accidents, too.

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

Z: Here, for firefighting?

K: Yes.

Z: At the time I came on we were assigned immediately to a station. It wasn't the formal type of training that they have now. They go into a 160 hour program now. But when I came on we didn't have this, we had a training chief who visited the station regularly as we do now. But, primarily, it was more on the job in 1959. The emphasis at that time was go out and do the actual fire fighting work and learn. Some training was provided by your captain in the station and some through the training chief on his visit, but it was more on the job.

K: What type of training does a dispatcher receive?

Z: When I get someone new, we are fortunate that the telephone company will provide us with a couple days of training to familiarize someone new with the switchboard. It's not difficult, but it's a thing that you have to acquire a knowledge of. You should have a basic understanding of how it functions and then just gain confidence. When I get someone new in here I usually send him off to the telephone company. Then, if I'm here working a day-turn schedule, I spend some time with him and we get him to observe another operator working for awhile.

The only problem here is that when you are new you are tense and if you get that excited caller that says my house is on fire and hangs up then you need someone with a little experience to try to hold that person on the line. We can't always do it, but we do stay with him a couple weeks, three weeks, depending on how the individual develops. There is a fear of this job because you are dealing with people in extremely acute situations and they are highly excited when they do call you. Sometimes we listen calmly, sometimes we shout back; you can't determine in advance what you are going to do, it is just sort of a feel of the situation. Probably one of the hardest things for someone new to pick up is just this, you have to just wait them out. The most important thing to find out is where they are and what's wrong. Most of the time they will tell you everything but that.

K: What injuries have you incurred in your years on the fire department?

Z: Just in fire fighting itself nothing more than a few minor burns which are just part of the work. The accident that occurred that eventually put me here was when I was working as an attendant on the ambulance. That included some back and neck injuries. It is a different type of work that you are involved in and an auto accident is an auto accident whether you are on your job or not. But what was so severe about this one is that you are not seated and it was more violent because there was

a large number of vehicles involved. Generally, the injuries of fire fighters are limited to burns or falling, breaking a leg, and so on.

K: How much risk do you believe is involved in fire fighting?

Z: Today the risk is an unknown factor. There are several reasons for that, one is that new material that they are using for clothing called polyvinyl chloride. It is a lot of trouble. They use it for plastic types and simulated leather jackets. When this substance burns it is sending off fumes that are classified, or are class A type gasses, which are kind of deadly. That is one of the hazards of the new exotic-type materials that they are using. The synthetics that are being used in furniture and clothing are a big hazard. The other is arsonists, which you probably have heard of. You really don't know what you are running into when you go into a building that has been set afire by an arsonist. A normal fire you can just about calculate the hazards that you will encounter. Today everything has been changed; you go up to a building that has been vacant, there is a good possibility that it has been set afire. If it was occupied there is a good possibility that you will require a mask to protect you from the synthetic fabrics and so on. The nature of the job is that it's changing and it is going to require more of an education, I think, than sheer nerve. We don't attempt to eat smoke anymore because the smoke will kill you. Before it just used to make you uncomfortable, now it will kill you.

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

Z: There is rapidly developing a more scientific approach to fire fighting. As I mentioned earlier, we never thought too much of the smoke before. It used to be you would run in and do what the non-fire fighters called the water squirter. Just go in and put a fire out with water.

The changes that are occurring are mostly our equipment. We changed our equipment so that we can provide limited but adequate supplies of water immediately to the fire. The way we have done this is we have increased the size of the water tanks on the truck. The men entering the burning building are putting on what we use here in the Youngstown department, the Scott Air Pact. What it is is a self-contained breathing apparatus, it's not oxygen but it is air. So, with the combination of these two, you go in with a limited but adequate supply of water and you go in protected so that you can reach the scene of the fire, and you put it out with less water damage. The man is protected so there is no physical damage to him, so we are doing a more professional job. The changes

- in equipment in the department are that we are going to diesel operation. Here you have more powerful equipment for the same size power plant. Our big problem is to get there as rapidly as possible and if necessary, if we are in a pumping situation, with a troublefree operation.
- K: Do you believe that the salary and benefits of firemen have improved satisfactorily with the other occupations?
- Z: Not with other occupations, but just in my time on the department we have increased salary schedule. We are now members of the AFL-CIO, so we pattern our bargaining pretty much along the line of industry. We have a reasonably good insurance program. We have a good hospitalization program as most of the industries in the area. But we are lacking in dental and eye service that some of them are providing. When we compare fire fighter salary schedules in Youngstown with those in larger cities then we are behind. We are behind in two areas, both in pay and in hours, as some of the the larger cities are on a shorter work week. There is as much as a five thousand dollar spread between what a first-class fire fighter in Youngstown makes and one in Los Angeles. Both men respond to similar fires every day. But we are working towards a higher schedule, and with the problems of the city as they are I don't know how we are going to increase as rapidly as we might like. Some of the solutions to it might be perhaps fewer personnel in order to get the higher salaries, and this has already been successful. At the present time we can't see using fewer personnel to provide the coverage we have, and we are going to be faced with technological innovation here too in order to reduce the number of people to raise the salary.
- K: What is your reaction to the public's view of the fireman as a person sitting or lying in bed or sitting at the card table with his feet propped up?
- Z: Well, I would say that is our fault. As I mentioned before, I'm involved with the public relations end of it. We are not going to deny that, that is a part of the fireman. They do play cards and do have their feet up, but it's very expensive to maintain a fire department. And the people who administer the major cities of the country are aware of how much money they spend. If they felt that they didn't need it they wouldn't provide the protection that is here. You are always going to encounter the proposition that there are volunteers, and that is true, and volunteers are good fire fighters, but the thing is that they are not readily available as we are. It is a matter of education with us; we go out and do an adequate job, and all the public sees is the other side. It's a hard one to overcome; people have a preconceived notion of a fire fighter, and it will change over a period

of time. It's changing now with television shows such as "Emergency" and so on. They are informing the public that we do other things besides taking cats out of trees, which we do not do in Youngstown.

K: Do you have any final comments or observations you would like to make?

Z: No, Mike, I don't think so, not right now. Perhaps when I see the transcript of this I'll recall something of value or importance that I wanted to say that I haven't said so far.

END OF INTERVIEW