

Answering The Call:  
The History Of The  
Port Washington Volunteer Fire Department

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Gerry Crooker  
Protection Engine Company No. 1

conducted in association with the  
Port Washington Public Library Local History Center

©2006



Text enclosed in a blue box is linked to graphics  
pertaining to the subject being discussed

Interview with Gerry Crooker  
pk

by Peter Zwerlein  
February 18, 1984

Q: ... Crooker, conducted on Saturday, February 18th at Protection Headquarters. Interview conducted by Peter Zwerlein.

Gerry Crooker: ... just one like that.

Q: Okay. All right. Maybe you can start by telling--telling us what year you joined.

GC: That was 1932.

Q: Which month was that?

GC: October.

Q: October '32.

GC: Yes, October '32.

Q: And you remember who the officers were when you joined?

GC: Well, I'll tell you. When I joined, they were blackballing everybody who came in.

Q: Is that..what for?

GC: They had two factions.

Q: They each had a group? Like a clique, or whatever?

GC: Yeah, there were two cliques. And for two years, nobody got in this company. No matter who it was--blackballed. I got two blackballs. I got several blackballs, twice. Two, three times before I got in the company. Yeah. I know one guy that blackballed me, too. One time a guy came in half drunk one night and pissed on the wheel to one of the trucks there, and he was brought up on charges. He was rolled out of the company for two or three months.

Q: That long?

GC: Yeah.

Q: Wow.

GC: Yeah. Georgie Wood and Stanley Wood. Lived on Adam Street over here. Both members here. During the night, they thought they heard the whistle. Monk took a truck and rode all over the goddamned town. No fire. Brought them up on charges; suspended

them for a couple of months.

Q: So, really, this guy was hardnosed ...

GC: Too official, you know. Yeah.

Q: They followed the rules to the letter.

GC: Sometimes, you know, I met a guy, he was the ex-chief of Mineola Fire Department. He told me one time he went to a fire. Wasn't much of a fire ... [was very close] ... "Hey, so-and-so's driving the truck, and he's drunk. Take him off the goddamned truck." Said, "Well, I'll think about it." Went up to the guy and said, "You know," he said, "you look pretty tired. Maybe so-and-so should take the truck back." "Yeah, I don't mind." And that was the diplomatic way of doing it.

Q: Yeah.

GC: Instead of saying, "Hey, you get off the truck. You're suspended." I mean, he had a good way of doing it that way. Yeah.

Q: Were most of the officers like that back then, or ...

GC: I would say very lenient, years ago. Yes. Yes. Yes, we'd go to a tournament way out the end of the Island someplace, goddamned place, Riverhead or somewheres. On the way back, we'd stop and we'd have a few, have our dinner and whatever, and then we'd get home maybe two or three o'clock next morning. Nobody said a word.

Q: And you had all the equipment with you?

GC: What?

Q: You'd have all the trucks with you, right?

GC: Oh, yeah.

Q: ... [?] ... and trucks.

GC: All on the truck, yes. Yes. Yeah. Yeah, the good old days. Plus, those days there was no money, during the Depression. And we spent our days and nights in here. In a night fire, you couldn't get on a truck. And one time ... [?] ... came up and carousin' around and already Arnold Hall was taking a shower. We're supposed--and Nitty Carpenter and I took off with the truck, left him in the shower (laughs).

Q: Probably didn't know it was happening.

GC: Or didn't care, I guess.

Q: Now, when you joined the company, did you--did you join because your friends were members of the company, or did you just ...

GC: Well I worked for Old Man George Wood, and his sons, George and Stanley were firemen. And I worked Saturdays--all day Saturday. Had to go out to a tournament somewhere, and I felt kind of mad about it. And I advised them I'd like to join. So, that's the reason I joined. I wanted to be one of the boys. Yeah. And I was for a while. Yeah.

Q: How did your family feel about when you joined? Were they--you know, was it a good thing to do?

GC: My wife was very happy about it, because I had had her to several dinners--I mean after I joined, of course. And she was quite pleased with it. Now this has been our main night life, at the Fire Department, through my over fifty years. Yeah. It's been a lot of fun. I'm quite grateful to the company for what they've done for me and a lot of pleasant memories, really.

Q: Ever cause any friction with you and Kay when there was a--you had to run out to a fire or ...

GC: No, it never did. Now, I can remember sometimes after Sunday dinner or something, and the whistle'd blow. I'd take off, and she'd have my dinner warmed up and waiting for me. Yeah, plus, meantime, she had three kids to worry about, so she didn't have too much time to fight with me.

Q: (Laughs). Other things to keep her occupied.

GC: Of course. She was busy--busy as hell.

Q: Do you remember what equipment the Company had when you--when you joined? You know, the trucks?

GC: Well, we didn't have a hell of a lot, really. There was very little money around, those days. I remember taking the racing team ladder and taking it down to Baxter's pond and throw it in the pond and soaking it for a few days.

Q: Just to ...

GC: Other than buy a new ladder. Yeah.

Q: What positions did you run on the racing team?

GC: I ran most every--most everything--pump and fast ladder, slow ladder; efficiency, of course, which we were very good at for a number of years. Funny thing, during efficiency, Wilbur Carpenter was a big help; he was a plumber. Artie Olson worked in New York in the office. Nitty Carpenter pulled the hose for Artie Olson. And Artie never missed that son of a bitch. He got it right on the button. Yeah. Plus, Kelly, nozzleman. And--lot of fun.

Q: Do you--was this, the building that's here now, was the building--the building was here when you joined in '32?

GC: The old building, yeah.

Q: And that had the one big bay door on it? Well, actually it got two doors and opened out.

GC: Yes. Right, yes. Yes. Old slop sinks out, this wall here. Yeah.

Q: Was there a room where the guys could sit, rather than just sitting in the truck room? Was there like a TV room? Oh, well, you didn't have TV back then. Did you have a radio room, maybe (laughs)?

GC: Had a radio. There was an old radio there. Played a lot of cards those days, you know.

Q: Canasta or poker?

GC: Rummy. And, oh, that thing with the pegs, game.

Q: Oh, I don't know the name, but I ...

GC: I forget the name myself. That was very popular those days. I remember Walt Crooker and those guys right along were sitting around playing them. Yeah. Can't think of the name of the goddamned thing. Play it with pegs. Holes in the floor boards, you know.

Q: How about like for, when you'd spend an evening out--you said most of your social life was around the firehouse. Would you go to dances locally, or did the firehouse hold any dances back then or ...

GC: I don't remember too many dances, but we, as a group, we went to different dances, different towns. Like Manhasset-Lakeville had one, or Great Neck, or Locust Valley would ... [congregate and go out] ... maybe three or four couples. Johnnie O'Neill and his wife--different ones. Nitty Carpenter. You know, Bert Carpenter.

Q: Yeah. Do you remember any of the--I guess when you got in, the older members, I guess, would be like Wag Larkin and guys like that. Were they pretty well up in service

years when you got in?

GC: They were much older, yeah, I would say they were, yeah.

Q: Did they ever relate any stories about the early years before you got in--like early 1900s--that you can remember?

GC: Not to my knowledge, no. No, not really, no. Now Tom Mahoney speaks about a truck they pushed over to..dumped it somewheres out ... [?] ... but I didn't remember that.

Q: Yeah, he was telling us about that.

GC: But Tom's in a couple of years ahead of me. Might have been before my time. Yeah.

Q: How about any fires that you can--that come to your memory. Any big fires that stand out in your mind?

GC: I remember one very big fire was out at Emersons down at Sands Point.

Q: Where would that be now? Today. Where would you say? Around the--up by the Methodist church or down by the synagogue.

GC: Way down below the--right down--almost down to Hearst--on where you make the turn down there, you know, toward the water--toward the Sound?

Q: Uh huh.

GC: I think that'd be about three houses up. That road cuts through there.

Q: Down by the lighthouse, then, you said.

GC: Maybe a mile or so before the lighthouse on the lefthand side. And we fought that thing for a while. But it got away, and hell, it burned that thing right out. And they brought in the Coast Guard, and they brought in lines from the Sound for--to help us. Yeah, it was quite a fire.

Q: And there weren't very many hydrants back then, I guess.

GC: I don't--there might have been one or two there, yeah. We were ... [??? the Sound ???] ... a boat being equipped enough. I remember somebody found a--the liquor closet in the basement.

Q: In the Emerson fire?

GC: Yes. And somebody took an axe and broke the door, and the booze came out. We all had quite a few drinks. I wouldn't say anybody got out of order, but we had quite a few drinks. And a superintendent there reported to Mrs. Emerson a lot of the booze was stolen. She says, "I would care less." Said, "It's all insured. I wouldn't give a goddamn if they took it all." So, I felt kinda good about that.

Q: Yeah. He was trying to turn you in.

GC: Yeah. And with the Bradley fire down here ...

Q: On Main Street?

GC: Yeah. The old Bradley Hotel there, when that went? That was in the goddamn wintertime, and it was cold as hell down there. I remember being in the bar area, the water--all of a sudden you'd feel like goddamn booze bottles slopping around your feet, you know.

Q: Floating?

GC: ... [?] ... floating through. Yeah.

Q: What year--that was, what? The early '60s, do you think?

GC: Let's see. I'd say '59 or '60, in that area, yes. Now, Curly, I think Curly was--no, was it Curly? No, Curly was--yeah, I think maybe Curly was Chief at that time. No, it was way after that. I forget who was Chief at that time.

Q: Michalek, or somebody like that?

GC: Might've been Michalek or somebody. I don't recall who it was. But there was some damn fire, hit a gas line there. They couldn't shut the gas off and that goddamned thing kept flushing out, you know. Finally got the gas company to find the valve, shut it off. Yeah.

Q: When you had a--you used to have annual picnics?

GC: Oh, yes. We'd have that down at Thayer's or down at Ms. Emerson--Ms. Emerson's estate, there, toward the Sound or the Bay--Sound, I believe, yes. Yeah. We used to have some nice parties out to Thayer's. In fact, we had some Rhode Island clambakes there.

Q: What's a Rhode Island clambake?

GC: Well, that's where we hired these colored guys from Flushing, I believe. ... [??] ... putting

on a Rhode Island clambake.

Q: Is that different from a regular clambake?

GC: They would--they'd heat these--they would take these pile of rocks, put on seaweed--sea grass. And then let it dry out and set fire to it and get the hot--the rocks good and hot. And put your food in that. They put in like burlap bags. There would be fish, chicken, potatoes all in one sack. And it would--all the juice would want to run to the other. And they'd have maybe lobsters and things. Quite a party.

Q: Did everybody pitch in and help in that kind of a thing?

GC: That was a Department affair.

Q: Department?

GC: Yes, the whole Department, yes. And one year, why they found one of the chiefs--I know his name; I wouldn't mention his name--but they caught him stealing some lobsters, so they didn't have any more Rhode Island clambakes.

Q: Oh, that was the end of it.

GC: (Laughs). ... [Well, we had to steal ???] ... chief, he had to steal. High mucky-muck, you know. All in all, it's been a lifetime of fun to me. I really enjoyed it.

Q: When the company had their own picnics, I guess they were mostly all down in Sands Point somewhere.

GC: I would think a lot of them are, yeah. Well, we had an amount of affairs there. We'd play softball; the kids would all be there and the women. And it was always quite a nice affair. But the night before, we dig holes to set up toilets. Set the tents up and quite an affair.

Q: Would everybody--did everybody help?

GC: ... [Oh, yeah] ...

Q: Were there a few guys that wouldn't do anything and they'd come anyway and ...

GC: And they'd come criticize: "You should have done this," and "You should have done ..." That's always the way, right? Yeah.

Q: Even then, it was like that?

GC: Oh, yes. Never changed.

Q: (Laughs)

GC: "Should've done it this way," or "You could've done it that way." And Old Man Booster was always there. Good worker. Hall-ie [Arnold Hall] and Nitty'd come. All the--most of the oldtimer. Wasn't too many of the guys that reneged, really. You had guys like Hall-ie, Arnold Hall. That was Bert Carpenter's brother-in-law. You know, he'd get drunk, get in trouble, and Bert would throw him the hell out. And, yeah.

Q: Bert was Captain, I guess, then. The foreman?

GC: Yes, he's a foreman. Captain. Foreman at the time, yes. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Q: Did the guys used to play practical jokes on each other?

GC: Well, I tell you, during the summer, if you'd walk out alongside in front of the house, somebody'd drop a goddamn bucket of water on your head, or a sponge or a wet towel on top of your head. And, of course, you'd wait to get him another day, you know. Oh, yeah. A lot of that stuff goin' on. You[d] go out to your car and have your goddamn back wheels of your car jacked up and your goddamn car wouldn't move. You'd have to--and we'd catch a guy drunk sometimes, we'd tie his shoelaces. He'd be up and we'd have to

have someone catch him before he got hurt. All in all, there's a lot of practical jokes played, yeah. Right.

Q: Over the years, you know, when, I guess when you were a younger member, you'd have a group of people, I guess, what? that you'd be friendly with, or everybody was friendly to one another. Have you seen changes over the years, where the member that would come in, you know, maybe they have other things they want to do rather than stick around the firehouse, or has everybody been friendly and cooperative?

GC: Oh, yeah. This was a hangout. I mean, as I said, there was no money, and the other place we could afford to go was here, because it didn't cost anything. And we'd chip in maybe a quarter a week and have a softball game and buy a keg of beer, a small keg of beer, and have a party.

Q: Who'd you used to play softball against?

GC: Huh?

Q: Who did you play softball against? Just the guys in ...

GC: Yeah, mostly ourselves. Or we'd play one of the other ...

Q: Atlantic's?

GC: Like Atlantic or Protection or something. I mean Flower Hill. Yes. Yeah. We had some donkey games. We had guys with donkeys--softball.

Q: You'd ride on the donkeys?

GC: Yeah. They'd throw you on your ass.

Q: Got to watch where you land with the donkeys (laughs).

GC: Had to be careful, yes. You had--don't step in it.

Q: Did you have any competition between the companies? I mean, as far as firefighting went?

GC: Yes, we did. Yes.

Q: Tried to beat the other company out and all that?

GC: Yes, yes. Those who get there first would get the best position at the fire. And one time--I'm trying to think what his name is--captain of Flower Hill at the time. And we washed

him off the ladder with the hose.

Q: With a hose (laughs).

GC: Yes, sir.

Q: On purpose?

GC: Yes. On purpose, yes. He was one of these know-it-all bastards (laughs). Took him down a peg for that ... [??] ... yeah.

Q: ... [??] ...

GC: Uh huh. Yeah. You had no insurance or anything in those days, you know. I broke my goddamn arm on the racing team. They gave me two hundred and fifty dollars.

Q: The company did or the ...

GC: Yeah. In all. We had no insurance. Yeah, if I wanted to sue my own company, I wouldn't think of it, unless I was on my back; I had no choice. Yeah. But I'm sure now we have plenty of coverage, right?

Q: Uh huh.

GC: Now, at the Exempts meeting ... [?] ... insurance for the softball team. Well, that's not firematics, right? And that is why they can't get insurance.

Q: The problem they're having with that is that there's so many little injuries that the insurance company doesn't want to cover it, because there's too many claims.

GC: Yeah, a sprained thumb.

Q: Right, right. Exactly.

GC: Yeah. And Old Ray Driscoll and those guys, they were--Ray said to me one time, ... [?] ... I could have belonged to the Elks, Knights of Columbus--any of those organizations. But I just wanted this one organization here. That was enough for me. Took up all my time and ... [??] ... yes.

Q: Did you used to hang around with them on Sunday mornings down in the bar?

GC: Oh, yes. We'd come down here and have breakfast. Sit down, get some eggs and cook up breakfast--ham and eggs, potatoes, whatever--toast. Yeah. Yeah, we practically lived in the firehouse years ago.

Q: I can remember, as a kid, coming down, and everybody would be down one end of the bar--Ray, I guess you were there, Morrison, and a lot of the guys. And they'd spend the whole day here. Sunday go-to-church, as they said.

GC: Yeah, that was our church--going to church. Early Mass, we called it (laughs), yeah. Doggie Kimmerly would always be there, as a rule. Yes.

Q: Ray Driscoll was a nice guy.

GC: Oh, Ray, yes. He was a leader. Yeah, Ray was a lot of fun. Yeah.

Q: He was a trustee for quite a while.

GC: Yes, he was. Yes. Yeah.

Q: Did you ever hold any offices in the company?

GC: I never did, because in those days you--you couldn't hold office. You had to be there ten, twenty years before you could be a rookie. I mean, before you could get engineer or anything. And to be a delegate, my God! You had to be there thirty years. I was delegate once to Albany many, many years ago. I thought that was wonderful. Yes.

Well, I had three kids to support, bringing up, and I didn't have too much time to, you know, be an officer. Yeah.

Q: It is time consuming.

GC: As the kids got a little bigger, you know, the expenses got a little bigger, and it wasn't easy to be an officer. I mean, you--you had to be selected, and just hard to get. I see now, it probably takes these kids in a year to ...

Q: There's not that much interest anymore. They don't want to spend the time on that.

GC: Well, so in those days, I say we got nothing home--no television, radio, nothing in those days. No ... [there to support it] ...

Q: You said that there's a period of time when everybody was getting blackballed.

GC: Yeah.

Q: What was the reason for that? What was the ...

GC: Well, just different sides of the fence. No reason. And meetings. The day before a meeting, why Irv Foster and ... [??] ... up to Hewitt's garage and hash the meeting the

following night. They'd have it all cut and dried before they got here. And Bert Carpenter, with Mac, Simmie and all that bunch, and it was quite interesting to hear them go, you know. One night, Hewitt and Bert Carpenter and Old Man ... [Bert?] ... got into one hell of a--I thought they were going to have a fist fight. Boy, they were really screaming at each other.

Q: Was that a meeting?

GC: Yeah, it was the meeting, man. They was really thrashing it out, tell it as it was, you know. Yeah. But nobody could get in. I don't give a damn if you were--if you were the son of one of the firemen, you wouldn't get in, till they finally made up and opened up the gates and let the guys in. Yeah.

Q: It's amazing.

GC: Now, you can't get the guys in the company.

Q: Right.

GC: You can't buy a fireman anymore.

Q: That's right. There used to be a long waiting list.

GC: Yeah. But that--we had bowling teams and all, too.

Q: Where did you bowl?

GC: Well, we bowled down at the old Bay Bowl there, there at the Plaza Building. Not the Bay; that wasn't around yet. Then, we'd go to Manhasset maybe Glen Cove. And we had a lot of fun.

Q: But just amongst the members in the company?

GC: Yes. Oh, we would play maybe the Police Department or a different company in town. Yeah, it was quite a lot of fun. Yeah. Remember George Mahoney and Nitty Carpenter-- Nitty could always beat George. Always. But George would get him drunk and beat him. When Nitty had a few drinks, why he couldn't take much booze, you know. And all in all, it was a lot of fun.

Q: Who were some of the other guys that used to bowl?

GC: Georgie Wood, Al Gross, George Mahoney, as I mentioned before. Yeah. We had-- always had a good time. You had enough for a couple of teams, you know.

Q: This is when they had a guy set up the pins every time, right?

GC: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Q: You had your pin setters.

GC: Arnold Foster was another guy. Arnold was a steam fitter. ... [But he was a world am and that was going. You'd get] ... to jump out of the goddamned ...

Q: Exploding or something.

GC: Yeah. When you hit those pin heads, they'd go all over the goddamned place. Yeah, the kid's really moving when he threw that ball. We used to call him Farmer. Yeah. He was a good fireman, too. He was Captain one time.

Q: Arnold Foster?

GC: He was that, yes. Yeah.

Q: How about nicknames? Were there a lot of nicknames? You guys have a any--do you have a nickname? Now, like, for instance, I call you Gerry. Some people call you Geddy.

GC: Some people call me Gerald, which I never liked. I always classified that with Geraldine.  
Yeah, we had nicknames, too. Like Crooked Arm ...

Q: Curtin?

GC: ... Curtin--Donnie Curtin. When I was a kid, we had a kid going to school--getting away from firematics--poor kid, his eyes were cross-eyed. We called him Johnnie Cockeye. I mean, kids are crude.

Q: Yeah, that's true. You pick a physical ailment and then your name sticks with you.

GC: Another guy was--had a club foot; we used to call him Gimpy. Yeah.

Q: I guess racing was a big part of the ...

GC: I remember one year with the old Pierce Arrow, we went up to Geneva. Nitty Carpenter and I took the old Pierce Arrow up, which was two wheel--two wheel brakes, no windshield. And on the way up, the men, right, would go at night. And the bugs hittin' your eyes. You had to stop, wipe the goddamned bugs out. And ... [the old Laraby] ... Of course, then, we bought the Buick, which was the fastest thing on the course for racing. And Mike Henderson, too, was one of the old racing team members. ... [Elly] ... Nitty

Carpenter, myself, Sammy Fruen, which is ...

Q: I never heard that name.

GC: Yeah. His aunt married old Buck Hyde in town.

Q: Oh.

GC: Yes. Yeah, Sam was with us a number of years. Then, he moved out to ... [Quinnepy Island] ... somewheres. Yeah, he was a nice guy and good fireman. Yeah.

Q: Did just about everybody race, back then? I mean, you got in the company, you were expected to race?

GC: Used to have Jake Mahoney, and he was on the team. We used to call him Rubber Legs.

Q: He used to fall a lot?

GC: ... [Pack] ... used to drive. Nitty Carpenter used to drive. Yeah. Those days, you'd be on the starting line. They'd drop the flag, and even the guy driving would have to push the car till you got ...

Q: To start it?

GC: Yes. Then, he'd jump in the truck and race it. Yeah.

Q: Did they expect everybody to race?

GC: Not if you didn't want to. But they--they kind of wished that you would. Yeah.

Q: It's more like, "You don't have to race, but if you don't ..."

GC: You might hear some sly remarks about it, you know. Shithead or whatever.

Q: How about when something--when a guy did something. You know, say--I don't know--he broke a rule or he just did something that you weren't supposed to do. Was there a lot of suspensions, or did the men just take care of it themselves? Would they say like put on pressure on the guy?

GC: I remember one time, we had a back room similar to this. Had small wooden chairs. It was Fat Crooker--Warren Crooker came. He was a second cousin of mine. He pushed a chair over. Didn't break the chair or nothing. They brought him up on charges. And one time when Mac McCarthy was Chief, big fire up Beacon Hill. And during the fire, some woman--she drove the ambulance for years during the war--and her husband invited us in

for a drink during the fire. Went in and had a few--quite a few. During the middle of winter, my God, it was cold as hell. Ice all over the place--wherever the water hit, it froze, you know. So, Mac got pretty well loaded. He went in a number of times. Had to piss alongside the truck. And that was kind of bad, being a Chief, you know. Real bad advertising for the fire department. Anyway, Johnnie Demar brought him up on charges.

Q: Who was he?

GC: He was a member of Flower Hill. Because we never got along too well with Flower Hill. They were just waiting for a chance to get back at us, you know. So, Nitty and I said we'd be Mac's witnesses. So, they asked how come Nitty and I was holding Mac on each arm on the way down? I said, "Well, it was icy. He had fallen and hurt his leg," which he never did. So, they dismissed the charges.

Q: How did the bad blood get started between Flower Hill and Protection?

GC: I guess it was--it was born that way, I guess. We always thought they were the cheapest goddamned company in town. They never built an annex or anything. We had one, Atlantic's had one; but not Flower Hill.

Q: Did it ever escalate into punches?

GC: Fighting?

Q: Yeah.

GC: No, no. Not to my knowledge.

Q: Fights or anything like that?

GC: I'm sure if we met each other in a bar or something, it was--oh, there'd be some words.

Q: You just knocked guys off the ladder with hose ... [?] ... (laughs)

GC: I was trying to think of the guy's name. They had a place down at--down where the ferry used to come in.

Q: At Bowman's Point? Down in Manorhaven?

GC: Manorhaven, yes. We had--the gin mill was there. Harbor Inn?

Q: Yeah, Bill's Harbor Inn, yeah. That's Bowman's Point.

GC: Yeah, yeah. He had--not ... [Marklem] ... Benny. Benny Morgan. Benny Morgan.

Benny--that's the guy I washed off the goddamned ladder--Benny Morgan, yes. Yeah. Benny Morgan, that's the guy, yeah. And as far as the racing's concerned, I always felt that they should race the equipment they take to fires. All these ... [diddlebobs] ... I mean, to me, that's ridiculous. Take them down once; they blow up. And two or three thousand dollars ...

Q: Big bucks.

GC: Yeah. That's the racing team's association, that's the way they want it, and that's the way it'll be till they change.

Q: How did you used to pick guys to run for Chief, from the company? Just anybody who want--you know, who was Captain and wanted to run, ran, or ...

GC: I would say popularity, one thing, and being a good fireman, you know. Hard worker, big firehouse and all that stuff. Going to all fires, yes. I remember Nitty Carpenter and Artie Olson was running for Chief. And Artie was never much of a fireman. I liked Artie, he wasn't a hell of a fireman. Nitty was always a good fireman. We were voting over Atlantic's firehouse; it was a tie. And, of course, Nitty--Artie Olson--I think some of his elders belonged to Flower Hill, and they were all for Artie Olson. There was a tie. They figured they'd vote another month and they went home. But Johnnie Waley ruled that we would have another re-vote--vote again. And Nitty beat him out, which I thought

was the best thing to do, yeah.

Q: Was there any--I remember someone saying there was a nominating committee at one time. Do you remember anything like that?

GC: To nominate a Chief?

Q: The Chief Officers.

GC: Might've been, but I don't--I don't recall. There very well may have been, yeah. But you almost knew, yourself, who would be the next Chief by the guys that are, you know, busy ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ... always worry you. Yeah, New York City would--Little Neck, gobble us all up. Not too far away, Little Neck, you know.

Q: Did you have any kind of formal training back then?

GC: No. Nothing at all. No. Like getting a license for your car. Don't remember even taking a test for my license for my car. They just gave you a license, whether you could drive or not.

Q: How about as far as driving or the equipment? Did you have to pass a test to pump the truck?

GC: Yeah, yeah. But not too much, though. If you remember Artie Olson there. He didn't have a driver's license, and he never had a car. And, man, when he got in that truck to drive, nobody would ride in the goddamned truck with him. He had to go alone to a fire (laughs). One man fire department.

Q: How about the neighbors around here? Did they give you any trouble? No. Now, they're complaining about the horns and ...

GC: Of course. Yes, yes. The complained in those days. Yes. Yes.

Q: How was that handled? Did they say, "Well, we'll try to quiet it down?" or did they ...

GC: Well, I guess we just ignored it.

Q: Did anything like that ever really happen? You know, somebody had a bad reputation or something, and if there was a fire there, you just wouldn't ...

GC: Not to my knowledge, no. I mean ...

Q: ... try or something?

GC: ... I don't think they'd go for that. No. House on fire, why they'd put it out to the best of their ability. I remember one time we had a couple of fire bugs in the company.

Q: Oh, really?

GC: Yeah.

Q: When was that?

GC: Oh, that goes back, oh, I'd say maybe early '40s or so. Had a couple of homes that weren't rented in the Terrace and one or two firehouses, and they put it for somebody to watch, and just a couple of--one or two of our guys were setting the fires. Yeah. They were suspended for six months. And I don't want to mention their names.

Q: No, no. But they--they were just suspended, though. They weren't kicked out of the company?

GC: They weren't kicked out. No.

Q: How about the police? Did they ever do anything about that? Were they arrested or anything?

GC: No, I don't think they even reported it to the police. Just kept it--yeah.

Q: If you were to have a fight on the meeting room floor, how would the arguing against each other ...

GC: Go downstairs and drink with each other.

Q: Forget about it?

GC: ... be buddy buddies. Yeah, no hard feelings, really. Now, like I say, with Mac and Hewitt, there was bad blood there for quite a while. Hewitt was a guy that didn't smoke and drink, and the only thing he liked was firematics. Nothing else. That was his whole life, yeah.

Q: He went up through County and was a County official and stuff, wasn't he? Firemen's Association and all that stuff?

GC: Yeah. I think he was, yeah. He didn't get very far, really. No. Didn't get too far. But he was very--all fireman. All fireman. You know, once or twice there, I didn't belong to the State Association, there--the New York State Firemen's Association. He would loan me his card so I could vote, you know. If we had somebody we wanted to push up the ladder. Loaned me his card, and I would return it. No, Bill had his good points. Yeah.

Q: I know--and you always hear his name and Irv Foster's name mentioned a lot.

GC: They were buddy buddies, too. They were ...

Q: Yeah. Prominent people in the company then.

GC: They were both very strict. Didn't take any foolin'. Weren't a bit lenient. If they thought you're doing something, man, they'd bring you up on charges. They wouldn't give a goddamn if it was their own son.

Q: They were really tough trustees, I understand.

GC: Yes, yes. I remember another time, Pete, be no booze in the firehouse--no beer, nothing. And Nitty Carpenter and I worked for the same boss. I'm in there one afternoon, and we stopped in and had two bottles of beer. Had our lunch, come in, sitting in the back room here having a beer with our lunch. And Walt Crooker was like a second uncle to me. Walked in. He was trustee. He says, "Out! Out of this goddamn firehouse. You know the rule." Chased us out of the firehouse. Didn't suspend us; bring up charges. We're sat in the truck and had our lunch. The goddamn cold truck.

Q: Strict. Very strict.

GC: Yeah. They lived by the rules. The trustees. Which they're there for. I mean, it's the only way to do it. And Jimmy Bedell, too, was on the racing team.

Q: Now, you say Jimmy Bedell. You mean ...

GC: Jimmy.

Q: No, that's ...

GC: Reggie. Reggie Bedell. Reggie, yeah. Jimmy and Reggie's the same guy.

Q: His name is really Jimmy--James? Or is it Reggie?

GC: I think it's Reginald. And who likes that name?

Q: (laughs)

GC: Worse than Gerald. Worse than Gerald, for chrissakes. Yeah. Probably lived on Park Avenue or Madison Avenue.. Little Lord Faultneroy. Yeah.

Q: How do you compare the firehouse today as compared to when you got in?

GC: Well, I'm sure we got lucky. We were better off financially when I retired, why they would damn good to me. And I'll tell you now, some of the boys are worried that when they get their fiftieth year in the company, you guys'll have your hundred year party, you'll have no goddamn money left for 'em. But I'm sure you'll find something.

Q: No, yeah, that's ...

GC: Have to take out a loan, right?

Q: That's why we're saving. We have--we're saving money on the side. So, yeah, when it comes to ...

GC: You'll take out a loan if things get rough. Your credit's pretty good.

Q: We will always look after our members.

GC: I'm sure you do, yes. Yes. Yes.

Q: It's a big honor--fifty years. That's a long time.

GC: Yes. Yeah. And not too many of 'em make it, you know, really. I never thought I'd

make it.

Q: How long are you in now? Fifty-what? Three?

GC: Be fifty-one, October.

Q: Fifty-one?

GC: October, yeah. But I'd rather be a rookie myself. Be around twenty-two, twenty-three years old.

Q: You're young at heart.

GC: Look at all the fun you could have with the girls. Yeah. Now, what does--what does like Flower Hill do? I know Atlantic's, they give them five hundred dollars--they did for a while--a fifty year man.

Q: Flower Hill ...

GC: Give 'em five hundred dollars ... [the money] ... But I wouldn't want that.

Q: Flower Hill gives a separate party--just the members. No wives or guests ...

GC: I see, yeah.

Q: ... for the guy.

GC: Yeah.

Q: And as far as a gift, I don't know what they do for a gift.

GC: Nah, nah, nah. And what sort of a gift do they give them? Just a dinner?

Q: I don't know Geddy. I don't know about that.

GC: Yeah.

Q: And we--we give a guy a TV set, right?

GC: Yes.

Q: Now, I guess if he wanted something else, it would be--you know, we'd give him something else.

GC: I wouldn't want a--like a five hundred dollar gift.

Q: It's not what you spend; it's ...

GC: It's kind of cold, you know. A gift like a TV, why, if you get--the company gave it to you, it's sort of warm, you know.

Q: Nice plaque.

GC: Oh, I enjoyed my TV. Got the RCA. Man, it's a beautiful set. Beautiful set. Yes.

Q: I understand, I believe Wag Larkin was the first guy that they recognized for fifty years of service. They had it out in the truck room here in the old building.

GC: I believe so. I believe so, yes. I don't recall too much, really. But I kind of think that's true. That's Walt Crooker.

Q: Walt Crooker. That's right.

GC: Yeah. Abe. Abe Crooker, he's called.

Q: Which one? Irv Foster.

GC: Irv Foster, yeah. Yeah.

Q: How about Mount Carey? I hear a lot about Mount Carey.

GC: I went to school with Mount Carey. And I knew him well.

Q: Yeah. Nice guy. I've never heard a bad thing about him.

GC: He's a nice guy. At one time, him and Mac ran for Chief. And ... [something came out  
??? Mac may know it] ... Yeah. But Mac was a bachelor, you know. Is that old G.B.  
Scott there?

Q: Yeah, yeah. ... [INTERRUPTION] ... He was a member here--G.B. Scott?

GC: I believe he was, yeah. We always decorate his grave on the ... [?] ... committee. He had  
the paper store down by Shields. Yes. ... [This was all right before] ... Cleve Poole.

Q: Yeah. And that's Sassy's father.

GC: Yes. Roy Kinsey.

Q: Is that who that is?

GC: Yeah. He was President of the State, too--the FASNY [Firemen's Association, State of New York].

Q: Oh.

GC: Yeah. He's a big wheel, yeah.

Q: Is he a local guy?

GC: Oh, no, he lived in Westbury someplace. ... [A great fireman to work with] ... for the County. It's hard to convince Cleve to make a speech; he never said much, you know. Yeah. Yeah, this guy was ...

Q: Irv. But he was in a long time, wasn't he?

GC: He would rule with an iron fist. Yes. Billy Crooker, huh.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

GC: And good ole One-Eye [Arnold Kelly]. They were the assistant stewards, right?

Q: So, that's Dirty Harry and Gene Camerden.

GC: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Little Booster--Young Booster.

GC: ... [??] ... I mean, Freddy Urban

Q: Freddy Urban.

GC: And Booster.

Q: Tony Caparella.

GC: Yeah ... [?] ... Ole' One-Eye. His eye was bad then, see?

Q: Yeah.

GC: Yeah.

Q: Now, when they--when they got in, like Harry--Dirty Harry and Sassy and Gene

Camerden--they were young--considered young guys, I guess, right? You must have been in a good ten or fifteen years when they got in in the mid-'40s?

GC: Well, now, yes, I mean, I was in probably a good fifteen years ahead of them, yeah.

Q: They must have been full of hell ... [INAUDIBLE] ...

GC: And old Nick Dell.

Q: That's Nick Laucella?

GC: Yes. Old Nick Laucella. What else did I see here. Yeah. Doc Smith. ... [??] ... Hell is this with his mouth open?

Q: That's Tom Mahoney.

GC: Naw, that isn't Tom. I doubt it. Yeah. That's Reginald Bedell.

Q: That is Reginald Bedell.

GC: Reginald. Alec Alakna. Nitty Carpenter. Eddie Baker.

Q: Oh, yeah. Boy, he looks a lot--young Eddie looks a lot like him.

GC: He was a lot younger--forty-one, right?

Q: Yeah, yeah.

GC: Yeah, George Mahoney.

Q: Yeah, it is.

GC: Who is this?

Q: Who is it? Which one? The--standing? Let me see.

GC: I can't recognize that boy.

Q: I don't know. Looks like a Carpenter. Now, would it be a Carpenter? Like Butch Carpenter's father, maybe.

GC: He looks like a Carpenter.

Q: Yeah.

GC: Yeah, that's probably one of the Carpenters. Eddie Poole, I believe.

Q: Uh huh. That's Porky [Harold Poole] next to him, right? Right here?

GC: Porky, right. Mackey. I forget his first name--Mackey. Old Kelly again. Yeah.

Gaffney's [Bar and Grill], right? That was after election. They would--we'd go down to Gaffney's, and we would have some sort of a dinner. It was all set up, you know. And Pete would generally bring out a bottle of Irish whiskey for later, on the house. It was quite a deal. Yeah.

Q: Did you used to have anything at the firehouse after a meeting? You know, like we do now? Come down and sit at the bar and have some booze?

GC: ... [INAUDIBLE] ... Well, you'd have maybe a keg of beer. If you had a keg of beer, you were lucky. Yeah, a lot of ... [?] ... It's a lot different now. I don't say it's a lot better, but it's ...

Q: A lot different, yeah.

GC: More--more plush.

Q: Uh huh.

GC: More everything, you know. More trucks, more building. Less firemen and ...

Q: How about like when the time when like, say, Dirty Harry and Sassy and Harold Poole and Eddie Poole came in? You said they were a lot younger than I guess you were then.

GC: Yeah.

Q: Were there any problems during that time--you know, because they were younger? The younger against the older members or ...

GC: Not to my knowledge, no.

Q: Any friction or anything like that? Didn't blend in?

GC: No. I think we got a bunch of nice kids in here--the young kids, today. I mean, they-- they have their ways, and we have ours. I mean, being older, why we're set in our ways, you know. But I think we've got a real nice bunch of kids here. We know that they got to take over. Matter of time, right? I think we're lucky to have a bunch of nice kids. Yeah. Yeah, to go back to Mount Carey, Mount was always a bachelor, you know.

Q: Never married?

GC: Never married, no. Yeah.

Q: He was very well liked, from what I understand.

GC: Very popular, yeah. Easy goin' guy. Easy goin' guy. Never got into arguments. Yeah. I went to school with him.

Q: I had said to somebody I never met him, and they were going through some old pictures upstairs ...

GC: He was tall--about six-foot-six.

Q: He looks tall; I see all the pictures of him.

GC: Yeah, we had a tournament one time over at ... [Lyndhurst] ... or somewhere, and went to the beer joint later after the race and everything was over. Parade. And they had a quarter slot machine--one-armed bandits. They had them around for a while in those days. I put a quarter in, and the goddamn quarters fell all over the floor--almost give out sixty dollars in quarters. Anyway, stayed for quite a while ... [??] ... Or we spent his money. Yeah. But it was different then. I mean, there's a different feeling, I think, with

the members, I mean. It wasn't--there wasn't too much--wasn't very strict, those days, let's say, as they are today.

Q: Not as many rules.

GC: Huh?

Q: Not as many rules.

GC: Yeah, that's right.

Q: More common sense.

GC: I think sometimes you have too many goddamn rules. I think fire school is good, but I don't think all these work nights are necessary for some of these guys. I think maybe discourages some of the kids from joining the department.

Q: Takes a lot of time.

GC: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And none of that when I came in. Yeah. Well, I'm sure, some of these days, it'll change.

Q: Everything does.

GC: Go back to the old ...

Q: Everything does.

GC: Yeah.

Q: Everything seemed to be so much simpler back then.

GC: Yes, it was, really. Really, I mean, had the horns blowing. Now you got the ... [?] ... Plectron and ... [??] ... Plectron, why you wouldn't know where the fire was. You'd stop at the telephone--some of the booths on the road--and ask where the fire was. I'm sure they had reasons for doing away with that. But I'd say things were much simpler in those days. Yeah.

Q: How was the cooperation with the police? Did you ever have any trouble--firemen and police? Or did they all--everybody was friendly and got along?

GC: I think we got along very well with them. We bowled with them, yeah. I think it's a good association, yeah. Yeah. We stopped in one night up the gin mill up on the boulevard. And Mac was Chief then. No, Mac was Captain, Mount Carey was Chief.

And somebody put some newspaper in a phone booth and set fire to it. One of our firemen. They called--they called Protection down here, and Mac came up. And one of the guys--one of the guys in our company was a policeman then. And he read the riot act to us. Mac--I mean Mount and also the cop. But we didn't set it. It was a guy from Flower Hill. And we--quite a number of years before we really told them who the guy was. And we weren't squealers. We have broad shoulders. Let us blame ourselves. Yeah.

Q: How were your relationships with Atlantic's? They were always cordial?

GC: I would think it's been much better than Flower Hill district ... [INAUDIBLE] ... or with Atlantic. I know Big John Salerno there. The Fire Marshal now. We had a meeting night. ... [?] ... and me were having a few drinks there. And one of the firemen said, "I don't know how you pass the ... [?] ... You have more goddamn fun at an annual meeting down here at the bar than we have at our annual dinner." That's because we were a bunch of nice guys.

Q: Always seemed to get along.

GC: Yeah, yeah. Now, for a number of years, you know, in Atlantic's, they had the men-- Duke Salerno, "Guinea Pete" [Pete Biscaro]. These guys, they would cook the dinners.

Q: They'd have them open at the firehouse?

GC: Yes. That's it, yeah, right at the firehouse. And the women would be sitting there. Music would be playing. They would be dancing. And their husbands would be out cookin'. They got a little pissed off. Yeah. So, that's the way it goes. But we always-- we always got along well, and I always thought we built one firehouse for the Atlantic's, that's one firehouse, drive right through it like they do over in Syosset, we'd be much better off. Yeah. I'm sure it would have worked out. Much better than a fourth company, at times. Yeah.

Q: That must have been a big change during your fifty years to see another company come into the Department?

GC: Yeah, it was. Yeah. Nothing you can do about it either, now. They're in, and they ain't getting out. Yeah. I did approve of the--on the ambulance and things like that. But not--not becoming another company. And Pete..we had the Benevolent Association. I remember one night ... [Julio?] ... was in charge, committeeman or President, whatever you want to call him. And Smitty [Frank Smith] got up and said, "Mr. Captain, we ought to have something new, maybe have a little beer and a sandwich." And ... [Julio] ... said, "Nothing doing. This is firematics. It's not the goddamn gin mill ... [??] ... meetings we have any refreshments. I think it brings the guys out, you know.

Q: Yeah, it does. You have to have something to draw them.

GC: Yes. Those days, not even--not even a glass of water, unless you want to help yourself or the guys would drink out of a faucet. I think it's much better this way, really. Yeah.  
More rewarding for the rookies.

Q: Uh huh.

GC: To help bring them in. Yeah. So ...

Q: Anything else you think you might want to add to it?

GC: Add to it? I'm trying to think, which is quite a problem.

Q: (Laughs). We can cut it off here, and then if you think of anything, we can ...

GC: I know at parades, we used to have ...

Q: Oh, yeah.

GC: ... one hell of a turn in parades. Every year. And many years, it would rain. In Hicksville. Labor Day. Every goddamn year. Yeah.

Q: Would you have to keep on guys to come out to parade, or they--it's something they wanted to do?

GC: Nah, we had pretty good turnouts through the years, I'd say. Very good, yes. Yeah. Remember one year, we had the dress uniform was a white shirt and, of course, your uniform, black tie, black shoes. And I didn't have a--no, it's a white shirt.

Q: White shirt.

GC: I didn't have a blue shirt at the time. Have a blue shirt. So, I got in line. I kind of keep my collar like this. And Mac was--he was our Captain then, you know. They got somebody taller to check ... [??] ... how to dress. "What the hell are you--get on line. Goddamn, you're not--you'll ruin the goddamn parade. You're out of line." I walked down the street, and I felt bad about it ... [knowing that I might] ... not be able to parade. See a guy on the porch--a local guy on the porch. "Hey buddy. You got a white shirt?" "Yeah, come on in." Left my blue shirt. Took his white shirt. Put my tie back on. Sneaked back in line, kind of like this in the back. "Get out! Out!" "What the hell do you mean? Get out?" He was a son of a bitch. He gave me ulcers.

Q: (Laughs) Is that the old uniform that used to button at the neck?

GC: Yeah.

Q: Is that the kind of uniform you had?

GC: Yes. They were hot. Oh, my Christ! They're hot in the summertime. I remember ... [??]  
... The goddamn ... [red one. The cap] ... would now streak on your face--the sides of  
your face.

Q: The red band around the forehead?

GC: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

GC: Around the forehead, yeah.

Q: The dye would come down?

GC: Yeah, yeah.

Q: I guess it was like this picture here. Tight like this. Is that the uniform?

GC: ... [INAUDIBLE] ... Yeah.

Q: It must have been that. Did you--you didn't have to wear--you had to wear a tie with that, too?

GC: I don't think so.

Q: No, yeah. But a shirt underneath that kind of buttoned up to the neck.

GC: They changed the uniform.

Q: Right.

GC: I didn't have this uniform ... [??] ... at that time.

Q: No?

GC: ... [Wasn't] ... like the uniform we have today. Yeah. I can never quite figure this guy out--this guy right here. Dickie Wood ... [??] ... Doesn't look like the old man to me. ... [INAUDIBLE] ...

Q: That's George Wood, there.

GC: That's George Wood. That's George Wood right there. That's not George Wood.  
Dickie--that's Drusby Hooper-- ... [Dickie's] ... father.

Q: Oh, yeah?

GC: Yeah ... [Harry. His father's Drusby ?????] ... Mount Carey there. That's ... [with Ed  
Numack] ... and Bill Reumans. Danny Cocks. Chicky Lewis. Remember Chicky--John  
Lewis. Chicky?

Q: Uh huh.

GC: Chicky Lewis. Old Dink Brant--Louis Brant's father. Here we have--here's Irv Foster  
again. Jim Hegeman. Can't place that guy ... [??] ... here. Oh, Mike Golinski. ... [Dave  
Lewis] ...

Q: Is that what the firehouse looked like when you got in?

GC: Yes. That's the old firehouse. Yeah. That's Old Man Gunn's house there on the corner.  
Horace Bedell.

Q: Reggie's father?

GC: No.

Q: No relation?

GC: He worked for Lewis many years ... [before ??] ... No relation, I don't believe, no. Joe Hoffa, Phil Nofi. Who is this kid here? I can't place this kid. They had the old courthouse upstairs, you know. ... [??] ... Turned out pretty well. Arnold Foster--Irv's--Irv's brother, they're here, and that's Georgie Woods, yes. I think they stand up pretty well.

Q: Yeah, a very good picture.

GC: What year is that, Pete?

Q: I'm not sure.

GC: Yeah.

Q: Is that the old Garford and the Cadillac.

GC: Yeah.

Q: Is that Laraby?

GC: I remember the Cadillac. Used to store it out on Avenue B--Old Man Henderson's garage. When there was a fire, Carley and I--Carley Olson and Artie--lived right across the street from me on Henderson Avenue. We'd cut through the yard, grab the old Cadillac and go to the firehouse. Had our own transportation. Worked out very well. The old Cadillac, yeah.

Q: Did it have equipment on it, or it's just for riding. You have any hose on it?

GC: Oh, there was, I guess, fire extinguisher, little hoses and stuff. There wasn't a hell of a lot on it, really. More for racing, I think, you know. Yeah. Of course, we had--of course, we had Smoky the dog at one time.

Q: Oh, yeah. Yeah, that was in the what? '40s? '50s?

GC: I'd say in the '40s--'45, '46, maybe around there. He got to be quite a--quite a pet. Wouldn't let Nitty get in the goddamn truck (laughs).

Q: Did everybody take care of him, or it's just one ...

GC: I would walk in and somebody'd take him for a walk, and do his business, give him water. We'd bring him food. Yeah.

Q: And did he actually ride on the trucks when you went to fires?

GC: Oh, yes, yes. Yes. Get in the hose bed or on the seat, and he wouldn't move either. You couldn't move him.

Q: I remember him. I just--you know.

GC: He added color to it, you know. Yeah.

Q: It was a big to-do when you got rid of him. I remember that.

GC: Oh, yes. Sold the truck. And he wouldn't let the guys get in the truck, or else you had to get him out of the truck, take him for a walk. Yeah.

Q: You had a lot of people write letters to the company, didn't they, when you got rid of the dog?

GC: Oh, yes. A lot of people were really hurt--the dog lovers. Yes, they thought we were pretty cruel. We had no choice. He ... [??] ... kid walk along, get up--get on the leg and--

you know, foolin' around. It got embarrassing, a little bit too much--especially a little girl went by, you know. It wasn't the thing to do. ... [??] ... That's about all I can think of, unless you have some more questions.

Q: No, not right now. But if I think of some more, or if something else comes up I want to ask you about ...

GC: Ask.

Q: ... why, we'll ...

GC: I'll be glad to ...

Q: ... do it again.

GC: ... do what I can to help you.

Q: Okay. Thank you, sir.

GC: All right. My pleasure.