

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Virginia Duncan
Flower Hill Hose Company No. 1

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

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pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: This is an interview with Virginia M. Duncan. Today is October 4, 2004. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library. My name is Sally Olds. Can you please say your name?

VMD: Virginia Duncan.

Q: Which fire company have you been affiliated with?

VMD: Flower Hill Hose Company.

Q: In the Company itself, or as....

VMD: Oh, no. As an Auxiliary member.

Q: Can you tell me what it was like growing up in Port Washington?

VMD: It was wonderful. It was our town then, which meant it was a very young town. It hadn't grown to anywhere near the size it is now. I've lived here all my life and I was born on Pleasant Avenue. After that, my family moved to Mill Pond Road. And almost everyone on the block was a relative and, if they weren't, you called them "aunt" and "uncle" anyway, because we didn't call grownups by their first name in those days. I do

remember when we got electricity. The City had it, but of course the country, that's what we were called, did not have electricity. So it was a big thing when they put on the lights and all the neighbors ran to each other and said, "Isn't it wonderful," and that sort of thing. That sticks in my mind pretty...

Q: Do you remember when that was?

VMD: When I started school, I went to the "Schoolhouse on the Hill," they called it. It was Sands Point School, but it was right off Mill Pond Road and up the hill. But anyway, I started school in 1925, so it had to be in that area. Before I started school, I don't think it was there. I think it was after I had started, but not very long. And then I remember, sliced bread was the big thing. Everybody said, "Oh, we can slice our own bread," because housewives, you know, took pride in baking and making their own bread and slicing it. So then we heard about people who bought sliced bread. It's the silly things that stick in your mind.

Q: Do you have any childhood memories about fires or firefighting?

VMD: Yes, I do, because my mother's brothers were in Protection Engine Company and I didn't have any relatives in Flower Hill Hose Company that I know of.. Let's see. Big fires. I remember big fires in Sands Point, but only because everybody talked about it. One of the big estates burned, but it was down near wherever they had... They had a ferry one

time down there that brought people across by Westchester, possibly -- Connecticut, I'm not sure. I remember them talking about the estates down there being on fire. And I do remember them saying the firemen had to pull a hand-drawn cart to those fires from Protection, I imagine, to Sands Point. That kind of thing sticks in your mind. I'm trying to think of another fire.

Q: Did your uncles tell you anything? Do you remember any stories they might have told about their experiences?

VMD: My uncle, Alfred Hooper, my mother's brother, talked about the bad fire on, I think it might have been Herbert Avenue. It was a night when it was, say like February or something. Fire hydrants were frozen and they couldn't get water to the fire itself. They did lose some people, but I don't know much more than that, except that everybody was just devastated by it, the firemen included. Probably knew some people there. It was the corner of Herbert and Main Street, right across from the railroad station.

Q: When did you, yourself join the Auxiliary?

VMD: When did I go into the Auxiliary? After I married John. My husband John was already a fireman. And that's one of the rules, so to speak, of the Auxiliary. You have to be the wife of a fireman, the mother or a sister, in order to get in. So, as soon as we got married, I was invited to join. I should really say *told* [laughs], because they were proud of their

membership. In those days, the men depended on us, believe it or not. We gave fundraisers like card parties, bake/cake sales. It's funny, one of the younger members said, "What's a card party?"

Q: Well, what is a card party?

VMD: Oh, people play cards. But we brought our own bridge tables. In those days, they were not these lightweight things. We could hardly lug them up the stairs, but we each brought whatever bridge table we had. I still have mine, because it's sturdy and heavy. It's not like the flimsy ones they have now. And we brought those and it was always a sell-out. The fire departments were pretty much the social part of the town. If there was a dance, it was always sold out. If there was a cake sale, everything went. Almost every affair they gave, was sold out.

Q: What would you charge for the card parties?

VMD: Oh my Lord. In those days, that was the Depression, the big depression. Probably a dollar or two a ticket or something. And there would be prizes, but the merchants in town were very generous. They would always give. I can't think of a higher price than that. Our dues were only fifteen cents a month. But then, whatever the profits were, we would give to the men. Maybe they needed a new piece of equipment for the fire truck, in the line of, say a tool or something. We certainly didn't make that much money.

Q: What kinds of card games did they play?

VMD: Whatever you wanted. Most of us played pinochle or poker. Not for money, that wasn't allowed. And sometimes we'd have a Bingo game if they allowed us. We had to get permission for that. Let me think. But everything we did, like I said, was sold out because there wasn't that much to do in this town. I remember there was no area known as, off Middle Neck Road there. The Terrace, that wasn't even there. The Daly School used to be our old Sands Point School and they moved us up there -- I was in about fifth or sixth grade then, and that's when they moved us up there. And it still was called the Sands Point School, but then it got to be the Daly School because Mr. Daly was our principal and we all loved him. He was just a fine man.

Q: Can we go back when you said you were told to join? Who told you to join?

VMD: To do what?

Q: To join the Ladies' Auxiliary.

VMD: The members. It was just like you were expected to do it because they enjoyed having a lot of people. Because the women, they really depended on us. When there were bad fires or anything, we would come, whether it was two o'clock in the morning or

whatever, and make coffee and sandwiches, so the firemen would have something at the scene of the fire. And then one of the firemen would bring it to them. Hot soup, or whatever. It always seemed the bad fires were in the winter. Of course, because people had heat. But that would be coal furnaces. Do you know what coal is? [laughs] Somebody said to me, "What's coal?" C-O-A-L, coal.

Q: How would you know to go to a fire?

VMD: When the whistles blew.

Q: And then would you go with your husband when he went?

VMD: Oh, no no. They had to get there. Period. Quick as they could.

Q: So, can you tell what would be a typical procedure, once you know there was a fire?

VMD: Someone from the Fire Department would call. The president of the Auxiliary. And she would call those of us that could go. Some of us had small children and sometimes we couldn't. Other times it was not hard to do. But..

Q: And so then you would drive in your own car or would you go with a group?

VMD: To the firehouse? Oh, there'd be quite a few of us. Yeah. A lot of the ladies were more than willing to help. [laughs] You know, it's one of the things you did.

Q: And then in terms of preparing the food, did you bring food from home?

VMD: Sometimes. But then the men got so they would stock some stuff there. Sometimes it was canned soup, but it would be food. A lot of places, you know, the delis didn't make a lot of money in those days, so they stayed open pretty late. We were able to get bread, or even the storekeepers were very generous if they called. Flower Hill had a deli next door. If we called -- Bill Becker, I think his name was. If we called him, they would open up and make sure you got whatever you needed. They were very good.

Q: Was he a member of the Department?

VMD: Yes, he was. Flower Hill. Long since gone, but everybody I know is. I'm going to be 84 next month, so that's not unusual.

Q: How old were you when you joined the Auxiliary?

VMD: Let's see, I got married when I was 21, but soon to be 22, so I was probably 22. I got married in July and I was 22 in November.

Q: And that was what year?

VMD: '42. And then soon after that, John was in the Navy, World War Two. We did an awful lot for the war effort too. A lady from the Red Cross came and taught us how to roll bandages, knit watch caps, argyle socks. I picked argyle socks, not knowing, all those bobbins and -- I thought, "My God, I'll never finish this." But I did do it, because you were determined to do what you promised to do. That was a sad, but exciting time, if you know what I mean.

Q: And would you do that as a group?

VMD: Oh yeah. All the Auxiliaries were involved in that -- at Atlantics, Protection and Flower Hill, but we met at Flower Hill. Bill Mullen, who was a member of Flower Hill, would write to the boys in the service and get letters back. Of course, you never knew where they were because they weren't allowed to say. You know, everything was censored. Half the time, my husband's letter had as much cut out as revealed and he wasn't trying to give away where he was. I knew he was in the South Pacific just from the San Francisco APO address, but that was about it. And then after everybody came home and the war was over, Bill Mullen ceased to write the paper. And then along came the Korean War, but I don't think any member of Flower Hill was in that war. But then, Viet Nam, and by that time, a lot of the sons of the members were in that war, including my son, Jim. Then I took over writing the paper.

Q: Were you involved with the paper during World War Two?

VMD: Only when Bill would say, "Did you hear from John?" I would show him. They would print it and then send the copies; send the little paper to the boys in the service. They were so pleased to get it. Just like the boys in Viet Nam when I started to write -- *The Hose Line*, we called it. I would get nice letters. I still have them from them. They were so happy to keep in touch and find out what was going on. That was a dreadful war.

Q: So the paper, it was called *The Hose Line*?

VMD: Yeah.

Q: Then what was *Sparks*?

VMD: That was before. That was what Bill Mullen did.

Q: So that was when?

VMD: During World War Two.

Q: Were they basically the same?

VMD: Pretty much, yes, yeah.

Q: What did they consist of besides the letters from the servicemen?

VMD: Mostly about what was going on in town. We'd say, hey we had a big fire the other day.

This happened or that happened. Almost like a little gossip thing. It was only about, let's see, the thickness of this – three pages or so. But -- they liked it because it was home.

Q: And did you say you have copies of that?

VMD: I should have some. It takes a little hunting.

Q: It would be wonderful to have. We can copy them and return the originals to you.

VMD: At this point, I don't care because I don't know what will happen to them, unless my son wants them. He may. But all those things that were so important to us are not that important, these days, to a lot of people. I don't mean my son. He's a good kid. I have two sons, but the other one lives in Denver, so I see Jim a lot more.

Q: How did your family feel about your being involved with the Auxiliary?

VMD: You mean my mother and father and sisters?

Q: No, your husband and your children.

VMD: Oh, it's the thing you do. Like I said, expected. The boys didn't mind. They were glad to get rid of Momma so they could eat chocolate cookies at night, or something. But I knew John was more than happy that I did it. Most of the members' wives were happy they were there. It didn't take a lot of our time. We only met once a month, and then except when there were big fires, like Bradley's fire. Oh, that was our place, our meeting place when we were all young. We all met at Bradley's. What was another -- Berg fire, when that blew up. Of course, I was not an Auxiliary member then. I was still in junior high, I think, when that happened. Across the street, we felt the boom. That's how bad it was. But now I was a member when the house blew up in New Salem. They were building. They had a gas line. Thankfully, no one was in the house and no one was hurt. It's unbelievable. But we lived on Evergreen Avenue then and my house shook. I blamed it on my boys because they were always into something. And the youngest was always on the dining room table. He loved to climb. I said, "That kid is part monkey." But anyway, I said, "Now what did you do?" And then we heard the fire whistles going. The poor kids, they didn't do anything. They probably wondered what it was too.

Q: When did the Auxiliary stop going to the firehouse to prepare food?

VMD: It's got to be more recent years. The young ones won't do it. They don't have the same kind of thoughts about it that we did. We felt that it was our duty. Like the housewives' role. That's where *my* generation comes from. I'm trying to think. Because the men did decide, I think, it was a lot. The women had to get out at night and had to do everything. Let's see, we were there when Bobby Dayton lost his life up here on Main Street. That wasn't, it could have been ten years ago I guess. See, time gets different when you get old. Because I'll say to my son, "Oh, I don't have to replace that, it's practically new." He said, "Mom, you've had it for ten years." But we were there for his funeral because they needed us to help. Because a lot of City firemen, he was a City fireman, came out for the funeral and they had to be fed, lunch and stuff like that. So we prepared stuff at the firehouse. Of course, it was easy then to get stuff. There were so many stores in town by that time that it was easy for them to pick up food.

Q: When you provided the food at the beginning, did you pay for the food yourself or did the Fire Department pay for it?

VMD: The men did and, if they couldn't, our Auxiliary did.

Q: From your fifteen cent dues?

VMD: I don't mean they couldn't because they didn't have that much money. I mean, they just didn't. [laughs] We did it.

Q: How much money would you raise, say at the card parties or the other events?

VMD: Oh, sometimes as much as three hundred dollars. But three hundred dollars then was a lot of money. Three hundred dollars would pay a lot of bills.

Q: Can you tell me what the dances were like? You mentioned dances.

VMD: Oh, they were always a lot of fun. We had costume dances. We had almost every holiday: Saint Patrick's Day, Christmas parties. Any excuse. Valentine's Day and, of course, for Halloween, we all came in costume. I remember the fellows went out to the Island and got corn stalks to decorate the hall. We had a little jail that they'd put people in. Just grab them off the dance floor and put them in there. But we had good music. We were in the era of good music. So it wasn't the stuff they have now, I don't even call it music.

Q: And how was the music played? Were there live musicians?

VMD: Oh yeah. And you could get a pretty nice little band for very little money in those days.

Probably a hundred dollars or less. And then there would be young groups from the High School that played and someone would pick up on that. They were glad to come.

Q: And what kind of dances would you do?

VMD: Fox trot. Oh, that was the swing era too, so we would do the Lindy. Mrs. Powers had a dance floor, Polly Powers, I mean a dance studio. She came and taught us how to tango, which most of us didn't get. Different things like that. The Polish Hop, whatever they call it. A lot of the members knew that because quite a few were Polish. They did that. I don't know if this is proper today, but they called it the "Polack Hop." [laughs] There was no -- no one was insulted or anything else. We didn't have all this nonsense, but we did have a good time.

Q: Did the people from the different ethnic backgrounds get along well together? The Polish, and..

VMD: Oh yes.

Q: What other groups were represented in the Department?

VMD: Italian, Polish-- Mel Chadow was our Jewish member. He was a lot of fun. We just had --We didn't think about it in those days. I didn't say, "Well, she's Polish and I'm not," or "She's Jewish and I'm not," or Italian, whatever. We didn't really pay much attention to it....

Because I know, across the street from my house is Temple Beth El. Rabbi Toni Shy is a lovely woman who came down when she saw the ambulance come for my husband, John, every time he got sick, and believe me it was a lot of times. They have been good neighbors, and we got along. No reason not to. To me it's ridiculous. I'm trying to think of some other things. Of course, you probably know John is -- John passed away. It'll be four years this month. We were married 58 years. You can't suddenly -- Everybody said, "You should be over that by now." I said, "This is something you don't get over quickly after 58 years." I don't mean I sit home and cry all day or anything. But you're lonesome. It's not that person that we'd get up early on a Sunday morning and the day would be nice. He'd say, "Ooo, where should we go?" You know -- something. And we both hopped out of bed, got our clothes on and went. It didn't have to be planned for months in advance or anything. We just did it. So those are the things you miss.

Q: In terms of the Auxiliary, were they a good support system at times like that, when you would lose a family member or someone would be sick? What would you do for each other?

VMD: Someone would either call or stop by, fix food. I just try to remember all the good things, because they were good and they did do a lot. But the membership has fallen off. Now, at my age, I'm the oldest so it's kind of tough. Because it's hard for me to realize the things they do, but we never did it that way. And I'm sure we probably said that to the older members when we were young too. "Oh, but we never did it that way," I remember them saying.

Q: Are you still active with the Auxiliary?

VMD: Oh yes. I don't go that much. Of course, not in the bad winter months. I've had a couple of falls and quadruple bypass surgery. So -- I'm a high risk. [laughs]

Q: But you do to the meetings?

VMD: Once in a while, not often.

Q: How do they do things now that's different from the way you did it?

VMD: Let's see. All the members supplied refreshments. We'd have a team of two or three ladies for each month. And one would bake a cake, one would make tea sandwiches, that kind of thing. Now, everything is bought, or if *they* buy it, they are reimbursed, even as much as a quart of milk. And I'm going [laughs] because I know it's time to keep my mouth shut. But no, we did do that. We supplied it. Everything was homemade in those days. You just did it.

Q: Did you have any special recipes that were popular?

VMD: We would trade recipes.

Q: Did you ever put out a cookbook?

VMD: I don't think so. Not to my knowledge.

Q: What was one of your specialties that you would make?

VMD: They loved my homemade potato salad, which I was silly enough to volunteer for because, for my own family it was easy. But, five pounds of potato salad, you peel forever, but it always went. They enjoyed that. And a pineapple upside-down cake with real whipped cream. Once I made a gingerbread and one of the men said, "She must be a genius." The gingerbread was a cake mix. A Betty Crocker. I don't know what else.

Those were my things. Then we had one girl that made kielbasa with sauerkraut and that kind of thing, which I loved because I didn't have it at home. The different ethnic things would come in and it was wonderful. We had great food. More than enough for, say, the meeting night. But then we had a membership of forty women. A large group. We met in a hall, of course. We had a lot of people.

Q: What was the age span among the members?

VMD: You had to be eighteen to become a member with the girls. I guess maybe the men, too. I don't know that much about that. But then we went from eighteen up into the sixties – sixty-year-old group. At the moment, I'm not the oldest living member, but we do have two members that are living that are older. The poor things don't even know they're living. One has been in a coma for five years. Nobody knows how's she's living, and the other one is in a nursing home. So, at the moment, I'm the oldest.

Q: So you're the oldest active member?

VMD: Right.

Q: To get into the Auxiliary, did you have to be voted in? Did you have to pass some kind of acceptance program?

VMD: You have to be sponsored.

Q: You have to be sponsored? By whom?

VMD: Another Auxiliary member. I don't really remember who sponsored me. But they liked my husband. My husband, John, was pretty popular. I guess since I was John's wife, I had to be okay.

Q: What was it like for you being married to a firefighter? His having to leave the house, say, if you just put dinner on the table. What kinds of things came up?

VMD: Loneliness, forever, loneliness. Every girl will tell you that. I don't know these days because the young ones won't put up with it, but we did. So you really were alone a lot of the time because seven days a week, 24 hours a day, they always would be on call. And if it wasn't that, it was meeting or a this or that. So, we spent a lot of lonely time. But then there were good times interspersed so that you forgot about the bad times.

Q: Did a lot of your social life revolve around the Fire Department?

VMD: Almost all of it. Almost all of it.

Q: Did you make good friends among the other women?

VMD: Oh yes, wonderful friends.

Q: What kinds of things would you do together?

VMD: Just as friends, or Fire Department?

Q: Both.

VMD: We would just attend all the Fire Department functions. Dinners and dances. Trips up to Albany -- Hudson, New York, rather, where the Firemen's Home is. We would all go up there the first or second week in September. We'd go like a caravan. And then later years, they hired a bus. By then, the members like my husband and the other men his age, were getting too old for that drive. And we would bring things up. The Auxiliary would, every meeting, we'd collect. Make a little collection. Sometimes somebody put a dime in or a quarter or something. It was never, say, a whole dollar bill. And we'd do that every meeting until it was time to go up to Hudson. Whatever was collected we would bring. If there was a member up there from Port Washington, and at that time there were a couple, we would bring him money. Because they needed money for cigarettes or whatever. Smoking was allowed then. [laughs]

Q: When would you say the membership started to decline in the Auxiliary?

VMD: It was gradual, so it's a little bit hard to really determine. It's nowhere near the size now.

The other two Auxiliaries, Protection and Atlantics, have been dissolved. They're not even going. We're the only ones that are.

Q: Do you have any members whose relatives are with Protection and Atlantics?

VMD: No, we did have one, but Rose Prudenti was one. Her -- who did she have? I'm trying to think. It was someone in her family, but they got so the membership was declining, like all volunteer organizations are, and they would take in someone like that. I'm trying to think. I don't know how she could be considered. I think her husband belonged to one company, but her brother, Mike Chester, belonged to Flower Hill. I don't know why they -- Maybe at one time it was only wives and mothers. It could have been. So then it got to be sisters and that kind of thing.

Q: I know Flower Hill Ladies' Auxiliary recently had a fund-raiser tag sale. Did you go?

VMD: No, I didn't go to that and I didn't go to the fashion show last Friday night. My daughter-in-law was the emcee for that. Elaine. She's very good. She used to teach high school so that was not a hard job for her and she liked it. I heard it was a big success and everyone enjoyed it, dinner included.

Q: How did you feel about your sons joining the Department?

VMD: I was happy because I knew that made their father proud. They both joined. But then when John went away to college, he did resign. When Jimmy went to college, he didn't because he went to SUNY [State University of New York] out in Farmingdale. But John did resign, John Junior. My mother said I named them backwards. When John was in the service, I had Jim. While he was gone overseas, his father died and his name was James. So he said, "If it's a girl, name it anything." Imagine somebody saying that. But if it's a boy, I want him named after my father. That's how Jimmy got to be James, and John Jr. got to be John Jr. We lived right over here on Locust Avenue, 46. I might have said 48 or 49, but it was 46. And the people that live there, we meet him once in a while. I forget his name now, but anyway, he said, "I told those people to stop calling it the Duncan House. I own this house, it's my house." But that's the way it was in those days. Wherever you once lived, that was the name of the house.

Q: How did you get the nickname Dottie?

VMD: Well, this I hate to tell because it's kind of a silly little story, but I'll tell it anyway.

When I was little, I *was* little. When I was five, I was probably about that big. So they would say, "Oh she's a little dot." And I got to be Little Dot. And finally, I got to be just plain Dot. So when I went to school, my mother and father told me, I don't remember

this part, when they enrolled me in school, “If the teacher says Virginia, that’s your real name. You have to answer to that.” So that’s how that came about.

Q: But everybody has always called you Dottie, except in school?

VMD: Pretty much, but not the people I go to school with, I’ll still -- There’s a couple that I’ll meet in King Kullen: “Virginia, how are you?” So I know it’s somebody I went to school with. Everybody else calls me Dottie.

Q: What other kinds of things did you do in the Auxiliary? Did you march in parades?

VMD: Oh yes. Hated it. [laughs]

Q: Why?

VMD: It was hard. We walked a lot of miles.

Q: How far would you say?

VMD: Probably two miles, back and forth. Because when we paraded, where did we start? We started about the railroad station, down to the town dock and then all the way back up. We’d walk through the cemetery and then it ended up, probably where -- I want to say

Port Washington High School, but it's not anymore. Carrie Weber Junior High, that was our high school. And we came out that way. But I also did that as a Girl Scout but, hey, when you're a kid, it's fun.

Q: Did you wear a uniform?

VMD: Oh yes.

Q: What did the uniform look like?

VMD: We started out with a fairly nice uniform with white skirts, and what color our jackets were then. But then, at the end, we called ourselves Port Washington Fire Department Auxiliary. And we had lavender jackets and white skirts. We wore --I'm trying to think --it's almost like a cap-type thing that a nurse might wear. If I could remember my Scotch part, I would remember what the Scotch call it. I can't. They were fairly nice uniforms until one time we got caught in the rain and the purple dye ran down on us, and the "natural blondes," quote/unquote, all had purple hair. So I think that might have been the last time we used them. They voted them out. And then that disbanded, the Auxiliary, the Department Auxiliary disbanded. It just didn't work. It was too much for everybody.

Q: What was that? Was that composed of the Auxiliaries from all the different companies?

VMD: Yes. And that didn't last too long. A couple of years maybe.

Q: And then did you get new uniforms?

VMD: No. We just -- I guess they gave up parading. I don't know. Isn't that funny, how that should stick in my mind. Maybe because I didn't like it. But I did it. I did a lot of things I didn't like.

Q: Did you wear those uniforms for any other occasions?

VMD: No. Like the firemen at a funeral or something, they do. But no, we didn't do that. In fact, someone in the Auxiliary stored them until it was time for Memorial Day, a tournament. That was it.

Q: I understand that in the Department itself, there are a lot of practical jokes that the men play on each other.

VMD: Oh, the men do it, yes.

Q: Did the women do anything like that?

VMD: No, not that I know of. We had to be ladies. Whether we liked it or not. If it happened, I wasn't privy to that information.

Q: How did you happen to write the essay in the 75th Anniversary booklet?

VMD: I don't remember who it was that asked me. Someone in the company asked me, not my husband.

Q: *[Excuse me, I have to turn over the tape]*

SIDE B

VMD: I know how it came about. When I sent *The Hose Line*, that I called it. The little paper to the boys in the service that were in Viet Nam. Bill Mullen asked me if I'd be interested in doing the Company history since I liked to write. I said, "Well, I could try it." I had no idea what I was getting into. I spent three months at this library going through all the old tapes and stuff. It's blinding to the eyes. Then I'd get waylaid: Oh, I remember that. It was hard to stay on the subject you were looking for. It took a while, but I did finish it.

Q: And now the Company's going to celebrate its 100th anniversary. Are you at all involved in the planning?

VMD: Not to my knowledge. I think they know. I can't type anymore. Before it was easy. I could write stuff and if anybody praised anything, I'd be embarrassed because it seemed like it just came from here to my fingertips on the typewriter. But that was when I could write little stories and stuff, but now it doesn't work anymore. A lot of the parts give out.
[laughs]

Q: When you were younger, did you ever want to be a firefighter yourself?

VMD: Oh no, no. You just didn't consider it if you were a female. No, no never.

Q: How do you feel about the entry of women into the Department?

VMD: Well, I'm neither for or against it. I think it's a man's job, let's put it that way. The gear alone would stagger any woman. I don't even know how they cope with it, but that's not for me to say. I'm not of the generation. I figure it's a man's job. That includes City Fire Departments and everything. The police is different because I don't think they assign their women to terrible things. I don't know about the City. The smaller towns, that's something different. We need crossing guards, but [inaudible] to my mind.

Q: Have you been involved much with the Fire Medics Company?

VMD: Only when they carted me out of the house. They are wonderful. We are lucky to have them in this town.

Q: What happened in your case?

VMD: I got sick. I thought I was just sick. I didn't know I had a problem with my heart. But then, the doctors there suggested I come in for a catheterization and the doctor that did the catheterization said, "Mrs. Duncan, I'm admitting you. You have about 24 hours to live." I said, "Oh." Not another word. I didn't scream or cry or anything else because it was so unreal, and I didn't even have a headache that day. I'm a doctor's worst nightmare because I don't have symptoms.

Q: What made you call the fire medics if you didn't have symptoms?

VMD: When I've been sick other times. I broke my ribs once, because that was before. Let's see -- that was a wintertime -- it was cold weather, I know. So it would have to be around maybe November or something. I went to the bathroom thinking I just had to get up and go to the bathroom. And while I was in there I keeled over on the bathroom floor and broke my ribs. I'll take the bypass. The worst thing. You can't sit up, stand up, lay down or anything else. But -- I did go to St. Francis and they couldn't find anything that would have made me pass out, so I was sent home. By that following February of the next year, that's when I had the bypass.

Q: When you called the fire medics, did you call them yourself?

VMD: Oh, no, my husband did. Yeah.

Q: How long did it take for them to come?

VMD: Like seconds. They respond so quickly. It was wonderful. They were gentle with me because they started to move me and I yelled. It's a yelling kind of thing. "Wait a minute, wait a minute!" I remember an Oriental boy that was a member. I don't know whether he still is or not, but he was so kind. He said, "Mrs. Duncan, put your arm around like you're gonna hug me, my neck and then your other arm like that." And he guided me to the stretcher and then put me in the ambulance. They were so kind, they really were.

Q: Did you feel that the community appreciated the work you did in the Auxiliary?

VMD: Well, I don't think we ever expected anybody to appreciate things. We just did it. It was something you did.

Q: What were the rewards to you?

VMD: Knowing I had done it. That was about it.

Q: What would you say was your best experience in the Auxiliary?

VMD: Writing this history was a fun thing. It took me a while to go back and read it myself and, "God, that's a terrible sentence," or so forth, but writing that history was wonderful. And then also, maybe it made me relive all the time when I was young once. [laughs] A lot of things. A lot of good memories. That was my most rewarding. I was awarded a 25-year pin and a 50-year member dinner. And they gave me a bouquet of flowers and an Auxiliary check for fifty dollars, but I returned that. I did not want money. Everybody likes money, but I didn't want it. So anyway --

Q: Why didn't you want it?

VMD: I just didn't. The Auxiliary is not that rich, so I returned the check. I told them not to be insulted because I just didn't want it. I could have used it, but I didn't want it. They pay for your dinner too. So having a dinner and a beautiful bouquet of flowers was more than enough for me. And that was it. They had my daughter-in-law present the flowers to me, which made it even nicer. And now I guess I'm a 60-year member, I don't know. I don't even keep track anymore.

Q: What regular ceremonies do you have with the Auxiliary?

VMD: You mean in somebody's honor?

Q: Well you just said that you were presented with a pin at a dinner. So do you have regular dinners?

VMD: Oh yeah, and in a restaurant.

Q: How often?

VMD: Whenever a 25-year member came up. And for a while there, it seemed like quite a few. There are not that many 50-year members. Only one other living that I know of. That's Ethel. What was her name? Ethel Hults. She was a Kurz, Donny Kurz's aunt. Also my Aunt May's sister. She's in this picture here, and she's a 50-year member, but she's in a nursing home. Let's see. I don't remember any 60-year members. I don't mean they weren't there, I just don't remember ever anybody being --

Q: But otherwise, you don't have the dinners if there's nobody being honored?

VMD: That's right. No. Only on that occasion. We do have a Christmas dinner and at the end of -- We don't meet in the summertime, so at the end of the summer, then we have a dinner, usually at Finn McCool's.

Q: You used to have Christmas parties for the children. Does the Auxiliary still do that?

VMD: As far as I know. For many years I worked on that.

Q: What was that like?

VMD: Oh, that was fun.

Q: What did you do?

VMD: We wrapped the gifts and we were allowed fifty cents a child. In those days, you could buy something for that.

Q: What could you buy?

VMD: We bought hand puppets. And the kids liked them. And then we had ice cream and cookies. And the women would all bake the cookies. So that would have to be about 1945 or so. After the war was over. Then we were allowed to get back into motion. During the war, we didn't do -- We did Auxiliary stuff like cooking and helping the men with whatever we could do, wrapping the bandages -- but we didn't have affairs. The children's party was always a lot of fun, because oftentimes, one of the member's

children were at the party and the father was the Santa Claus. We picked the fattest fellow.

Q: When you first joined, was there somebody who kind of took under her wing to show you what to do?

VMD: No, you got the rule books and those were the rules, and stick by them, or out you went.

Q: What kinds of rules did you have?

VMD: Bylaws, like any organization would have.

Q: Now I read that for membership, women had to be United States citizens.

VMD: That's right.

Q: Is that still true?

VMD: I think so.

Q: Why? Do you know?

VMD: I don't know. No. It may not be true anymore. I don't know. But one time we did have a girl that liked the Auxiliary and wanted to join because her husband was a fireman. And she tried to get in and then they asked her if she was a citizen and she wasn't. She was Canadian. And they couldn't let her join because it was against the rules. Every organization has rules. People were annoyed. But that time, it was after World War Two. People were still -- you know, this way, like they are now with all this stuff going on. We can't let this happen. I think they might have dropped that rule, but I could not say that for certain.

Q: What would you say was your worst experience in the Auxiliary?

VMD: As an Auxiliary member or just --?

Q: As an Auxiliary member.

VMD: I can't really remember anything very bad. Most of it is if a member died or something that you knew was so much younger. Like recently June Lang died. And she was only 60 years old. I could have been her mother. I figure, in my mind, you should go in the order of your appearance, not when you're 60 or younger. And we did have a few young members die. That would only be a bad experience.

Q: Did you ever work at a fire or other emergency when one of the firefighters died?

VMD: Bobby Dayton. [pause] We didn't lose a lot of men in fires in those days. I didn't work at it, but I knew they – no, they didn't lose any men at Berg's. I'm pointing that way because that's where Berg's place blew up. But my husband lost a good friend there. You felt involved. At that time I wasn't, because I wasn't even married then.

Q: What are you proudest of in your work?

VMD: Frankly, I'm more proud of my husband and sons than I am of myself. Like I said, it was just like something you did. It was expected of you. And you did it. But the boys and the men -- they -- they really worked hard.

Q: Did you work outside the home at any time?

VMD: Oh yeah.

Q: And how did you fit your paid work in with your Auxiliary demands?

VMD: It really never interfered because it was just once a month. A meeting once a month or if it was something going on, it was always evening, so it didn't interfere with anything. I worked for the phone company for thirteen years. Hated every minute of it.

Q: What did you do?

VMD: I was a telephone operator. They told you what to say, what not to say, and no matter what the person said to you on the phone, you could not be annoyed or say anything back. And hey, if you wanted your job, that's what you did. Jobs were not easy to come by in those days.

Q: Which close friendships did you form?

VMD: Oh dear. In fact, most of our friends were -- Jean Fairlie, Marge Croll -- of course, they had different names then. Jean was never an Auxiliary member but Marge was. I'm thinking of our first little circle, but since so many people have moved away, it's hard to put it together. We'd go to an affair and all sit at the same table. So it would be the Duncans, and the Tobins, and the Crolls, the Johnstons. I said, the Tobins. There were at least twenty of us. The Izzos. I'm trying to think of --I should look at this [referring to a photo of Auxiliary members], it would be easier.

Q: What would you say was the most important lesson that you learned in the Auxiliary?

VMD: You have to be tolerant. You have to respect other people's views which, when you're younger, sometimes you don't because you're so sure you're right. You have to be kind to people even if you don't like them.

Q: Can you think of times when it was hard to do those things?

VMD: It was almost impossible sometimes.

Q: Can you give a specific example?

VMD: Joan Rivers would say you bite your tongue until the blood runs down. But you do.

Sometimes, now that I'm older, it was so unimportant. It wasn't worth getting annoyed about it. But when you're young, everything is very important.

Q: But can you remember a specific time when something came up?

VMD: Say, when we had elections or something. There were two people running for Ladies' Auxiliary president – now we have to beg somebody to take it. [laughs] Anyway, whoever you were for. This side was for the ones you were for and that side was for the other group. You'd get so mad, really. Angry is the right word, but I think mad is what we used. I don't think we had a lot of verbal exchange about it. It was a more inner kind of thing.

Q: Did you serve as an officer yourself?

VMD: Oh yeah, right up to being president.

Q: What other offices did you hold?

VMD: Recording secretary is, I think, about the lowest one. And then secretary, corresponding secretary, and then treasurer. I hated that. I was not good with figures. Then vice president and president.

Q: What were the commitments, the responsibilities that you had?

VMD: A lot of responsibility, a lot more than what we expected of a volunteer organization. You were the one that had to get these groups together for things like to help the firemen, mostly when there were bad fires. They didn't need us otherwise. In fact, I think they would have loved to have gotten rid of us.

Q: Why?

VMD: I don't know. I just don't know. There were some men that resented us being there.

Q: What did they resent?

VMD: I think because they were old school. Say my husband's age bracket. Women belonged in the house, in the kitchen. We stuck it out just to be hateful, I guess, I don't know.

[laughs]

Q: You mean even when you were helping the firemen? That there were some of them --

VMD: Yes, yes. Yes, there were very few of them. Maybe three or four. Nobody liked them, including the men anyway, but it wasn't sad when they left and went wherever they went, I don't know. It was a very congenial group. We had a good group.

Q: Around those elections, was there a lot of "politicking"? People trying get each other --?

VMD: Oh yeah, but word of mouth. Nothing written in the papers or anything like that. It was word of mouth.

Q: Like telephoning?

VMD: Exactly. Like women do. It became a gossipy thing. But it all worked out, even if the one you didn't want, won. You accepted it. It was one of those things.

Q: And now your daughter-in-law is active in the Auxiliary?

VMD: Yeah. She's active.

Q: Do you help her? Do you give her the benefits of your experience?

VMD: Not really because it's almost like a different organization now -- to *me* -- not to her, because she's new. She's young. She might even become a 25-year member soon. I'm not sure. She's pretty well-schooled in it because my son has been a volunteer fireman all these years too. In fact, most of us benefit now from them because a lot of them are all college graduates, which we weren't privy to in the Depression days.

Q: You mean the women?

VMD: Yes, yeah. So we have quite a few schoolteachers, nurses, professionals. Like my granddaughter's an attorney, my oldest granddaughter. And the younger one is into industrial psychology. My grandson, who still hasn't finished with his career, he's going to be an emergency room -- he's graduated from Delaware. He wanted to be a doctor. Then he got into this emergency room stuff as a helper at North Shore [Hospital] and he liked that. He thinks that's what he wants to do. You almost have to go as long as the doctors.

Q: So you did not go to college yourself?

VMD: I did, but by choice, when I was 50. Because when I'd start to write, I knew I needed some kind of guidance. I got it in high school from Mr. Scherer, who was my favorite teacher. Saul Scherer. He wanted me to be a writer, so he wrote in my yearbook something nice. And then he said, "For all the torture I put you through in English" -- and so forth. Because he thought I had something as far as being a writer. Then you get married and forget about all that stuff. Not forget it, but don't do it as much. He was a big guidance. So I decided to go to college because I went to one of the teachers and I said, "I know I'm doing something wrong," but you can't do it yourself. Somebody else can pick up your mistakes. Like I can, other people's. But it was a male teacher and he said, "You go from the present to the past in the same paragraph." That was the best clue anyone could have given me, and it worked.

Q: So where did you go to college?

VMD: Out in Westbury there. It's got a long title. New York Institute of Technology [NYIT]. It's across from St. Francis. The extra place they have out there.

Q: Polytech? I've passed it a million times.

VMD: I'm picturing the campus and everything else. I just took subjects that I wanted, which is nice when you're 50. I didn't want math or any of that stuff because I hated it. I was able to pick subjects I wanted and the professors were very nice. They printed a couple

of things that I wrote. But that was fiction. Fiction is easy if you're [inaudible] to write. I don't mean I could write a book. But – of course you could make it up. This stuff has to be right.

Q: What do you think the value is of this oral history project?

VMD: I think it is very valuable to the volunteers and it's valuable to the town because I've met people who do not believe these men do all this stuff and don't get paid. "They've got to get something." No they don't. They get an annual dinner once a year that the Company pays for and, like I said, the Auxiliary picked up on all those little in-between things, with baking or cooking or that kind of thing in the old days. And now, they don't really have a lot of in-between things. The town, it would be nice for them to know.

Q: How did you recruit new members?

VMD: As soon as a new member joined Flower Hill, then they have a letter that they send to the wife, or sister, or mother. That's how they come in. Some aren't interested. A lot more were interested in the old days than are now.

Q: They still send the letter out?

VMD: Oh, it goes anyway. Yeah. But -- everybody has a career now. It's hard for young people. We used to have 40 people at a meeting. Now, if they have 20, that's considered big. It's going the way of all volunteer organizations.

Q: How do you think the community itself has changed?

VMD: First of all, it's grown tremendously. Even I can't believe it and I'm living through it. We all called ourselves clam-diggers in those days.

Q: Why?

VMD: Because a lot of people earned their living from Manhasset Bay. You know, jobs were hard to come by. Men fed their families from digging clams.

Q: In your memory? When you were a child?

VMD: Oh yeah. I know when we get sick, when my grandfather lived with us, and my mother would say, "Oh, she's got a cold" or "I hope she doesn't get pneumonia" or whatever. There were five girls in my family. Not then, there were only three. The others we call "my mother's kids." But anyway, my grandfather said, "Well, I guess have to go clamming." This would be February where he'd go down to the bay, chop the ice to dig underneath it to get clams. My mother would make clam broth. We got better. We

didn't have penicillin. We didn't have all these things. Even when I went to the hospital to have a sonogram, heart thing. I said to the nurse, "What is this? I never had one." She said, "You had two children and you didn't have a sonogram?" I said, "That wasn't even invented then." She was so embarrassed. I said, "No doll, that's okay. I don't expect you to know that." But that was an interesting time. And it was so nice because there was so much family. Now pretty much, I have one cousin now who is still alive from our old days. He belongs to Protection, Harry Hooper, and that's it. My sisters are, but the two of them -- one lives up in Schenectady, New York. The other lives in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and one lives in Savannah, Georgia. And my pet, I called her, my sister, Evelyn, she passed away on St. Patrick's Day. We're not Irish, but it seems odd to die on a holiday for anybody. That was the year before John did.

Q: Is there anything we have not talked about that we have not talked about that you think we should?

VMD: Not that I can think of. I'm amazed I remember all that stuff. I read a lot so my brain doesn't go dead, but--

Q: If you think of anything, you can call.

VMD: Okay.

Q: Thank you very much. It was a wonderful interview.

VMD: Thank you. It's kind of an experience to go back.