

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

John R. Fico
Atlantic Hook & Ladder 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

Interview with John R. Fico
pk

by Margaret Dildilian
October 8, 2004

Q: Today is October the 8th, 2004. This is an interview with John Fico. My name is Margaret Dildilian. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library. Mr. Fico. Please pronounce your whole name.

John R. Fico: John R.--R stands for Richard--Fico. F-I-C-O.

Q: Which fire company are you associated with?

JRF: Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company Number One.

Q: And do you have a nickname?

JRF: No.

Q: Let me ask you first, when did your family come to Port?

JRF: Well, my grandfather is from Italy.

Q: Where--where from Italy?

JRF: In the Rome area. Nap--I think Rome. And my father was born here.

Q: Why did your father--do you know why your father chose Port?

JRF: He was born in Port Washington. I think my grandparents came from the Chicago area, I think. And then my father was born in Port Washington. My mother was born out on the East End, out in Southold, and she was Polish; my father was Italian.

Q: And were they--was he--was your father in the Fire Department?

JRF: Yes, he was. He was a twenty-five year member in Atlantic Hook and Ladder.

Q: Do you have any childhood memories of your dad in the Fire Department?

JRF: Yes. My father, he was in his own tree business. And he--he went to these fires. But mainly I remember him when he dressed up in his red shirt and white pants--uniform. And I remember him telling me that when they used to go out in parades, they used to win all the awards. And he was very proud of that, and he wore that uniform until--until they did away with it and then they went to--everybody went into, you know, dark blue uniforms.

Q: What were your feelings about your dad when he marched in the parade?

JRF: Oh, I was very happy to see him marching and was very proud of him. And I--I myself now, I march in every parade I can think of (laughs).

Q: What other members of your family were in the Fire Department?

JRF: My uncle--my father's brother--his name was Joe, Joseph A. Fico, and he was a Captain in Atlantic Hook and Ladder. But his nickname was "Chief." His nickname was "Chief." He--he got that nickname as a kid, because he always--I think it was because he liked the Fire Department and they nicknamed him "Chief." My father's name was "Doc," because he used to fix all the trees. They all had nicknames.

Q: But was he ever the real Chief in the Fire Department?

JRF: No, he never went for Chief, but he was a Captain in Atlantic Hook and Ladder.

Q: And his name was ...

JRF: Joseph A. Fico.

Q: You don't know why they called him Chief?

JRF: No, I don't know. His son probably knows. And you're probably going to get him here.

Q: What--there were basically Italians in Atlantic Hook and Ladder in the early days?

JRF: There was a lot of--there was a lot of Italian in there. When I went in? Yes, there was a lot of Italian people in there, yes.

Q: Why do you think that was?

JRF: I don't know. I have no idea. It just seems like only Italians went to Atlantic Hook and Ladder.

Q: Did you ever, when you became a firefighter, did you accompany your father to any fires?

JRF: No, my--when I--I went in in 1960, and by that time, my father was almost finished going to fires. I went to a few meetings when we had our monthly meetings, but I never really went to a fire with my father.

Q: What most surprised you when you joined the Fire Department?

JRF: Well, there wasn't too much that was a surprise, because growing up with my father in the Fire Department and going to like picnics and small affairs and stuff, you get to know

almost all the other people. And in Atlantic Hook and Ladder there were a lot of people that were related. I mean, it's like unbelievable with that. It's not like that anymore, but there's still a lot of people that are still related. And when I went into the Fire Department, it's just almost like being in with, or working with all the men with the Police Department that I belong to. And it was like that.

Q: We'll get to the police side in a moment.

JRF: Okay.

Q: Did you ever consider going to college?

JRF: No. When I got out of high school, I wanted to go into printing. But at that time, you had to know someone to get into the printers' union. I wanted to be--I wanted to get into lithographing. And I took extra print shop classes after high school from Mr. Young. And that's what I wanted to do, but if you didn't know anybody in that union--it was a father and son type of deal--you didn't get in. That's it. So, I worked for Republic Aviation down at--in Manhasset Isle where the--they knocked that building down now. I worked there for about eight or nine months when I got out of high school. And then I--I put my name in for the draft and then went into the Army.

Q: And how long were you in the military?

JRF: Two years. And I served--I went to a lot of places. And I went to Fort Dix where I started my basic training. From Fort Dix, they sent me to San Antonio, Texas to be an aid man, which is a medic. And, like we have now. And then, we had training--eight weeks of training there. And, from there, I went to Fort Benning, Georgia and drove an ambulance there for, oh, I don't know how many months. And then from Fort Benning, they sent me to Korea. But Korea had just ended. I was there from 1955, yeah, '55 to fifty--let's see, I was there nine months in Korea. But it was--there was still sporadic outbursts, and people would come in like over the mountains at night and steal--try to steal stuff. We used to call them "slicky" boys. But, I was in the medics, so it wasn't too bad. And then I had my own first aid station, and men used to come to me. And I would like given them pills (laughs), and, you know, try to treat them. And if not, I couldn't treat them, then I'd send them down the road to the hospital where the "MASH" unit was. Just like in "MASH," right now, on TV.

Q: It must have been ...

JRF: It was an experience. Then, from there, I--actually, when I went over to Korea, I stopped in Yokohama, Tokyo. I was there for a couple of days. Then got back on the ship, went to--went to Korea. And in Korea, there was--being I was already in the Army almost two years, they send you to have R&R, which is called rest and recuperation--rest and relaxation. So I went back to Tokyo. They sent me back to Tokyo. So I was there for a

week, in Tokyo. I went to see Mt. Fujiama. It was beautiful. I always wanted to go back to Tokyo, really. But then I came home. And then, from there, I was out of work for a year. I was on unemployment--the government gives you unemployment. And then, when that ran out, then I started looking for a job. My mother was yelling, "You've got to go to work." I went to work for a car dealer in Manhasset. And then, from there, there was an old sergeant--a Nassau County police guy. He was a school guard. I'm sorry. He wasn't a sergeant; he was a school guard. And he--he talked to me every day to tell me, "You don't want to be working on these cars. You don't want to be a grease monkey. Take the test for Nassau County Police Department." So I listened to him, and I did. And then, I--I got the--I passed the test. And the police Chief of the Port Washington Police Department was buddies with my father. His name was James Salerno. And he came down to my house, and he said, "We want you to be a police officer." And I said, "Well, I don't know if I want to be a police officer. I took the test to take it, but I don't know if ..." He said, "Well, come on up and talk to us." So I did and then ended up taking the job, and I stayed there twenty-eight years (laughs).

Q: Now, is this the James Salerno that was in Germany, that--during the Second World War?

JRF: No, James Salerno, he lived on Hilltop.

Q: Was he with the Fire Department?

JRF: No. He was just ...

Q: Oh, it's another James Salerno.

JRF: ... he was just--it was just the Police Department. Yeah. This--that was--that was John Salerno. John "Bubba." That was his uncle.

Q: Boy, this is really quite a family.

JRF: There's a lot of Salernos, and they're all related.

Q: They're all somehow related.

JRF: Yeah.

Q: And when you were saying you were in the printing business and you didn't know anybody, you know, you had to almost be related to get in ...

JRF: Right.

Q: It was somewhat like what the Atlantic Hook and Ladder, isn't it, at that time?

JRF: Yeah.

Q: You had to know someone to get in?

JRF: I--when I first got in, they had a--that was before I got in. I'm sorry. Before I got in, they had a system that they called it the blackball system.

Q: Could you tell me about that?

JRF: I don't really know too much about it. There was a box, and it had black balls and it had white balls in it. And then, as the guys voted on members coming in--this is what I was always told--is if there was a black ball in there, the guy didn't get in. But now, it's--when I got in, it was all different. It was paperwork--ballots. And you had to present yourself to them, show them who you are. You know, you had to go before the meeting, show them who you are, and then they would ...

Q: What meeting was it that you went before?

JRF: You went before a board of governors, and they would be like Captains and Trustees and Treasurer and Secretary, and stuff like that. You would go before them, and they would ask you questions, if they had any. Naturally, my father was already there, so they knew I was a police officer, so they asked me a few things. And they said, "Okay, come on

back, and then they'll vote on you at the next board--the next monthly meeting." And I did, and I got in right away. But the blackball system, I don't know too much about that.

Q: When you got in, what was your training like in 1960?

JRF: In the Fire Department?

Q: In the Fire Department first ...

JRF: Yes, okay.

Q: ... and then we'll get to ...

JRF: Training. It wasn't like it is today. You went by the company. The company members taught you different things what to do. They had ladder schools. They had different things to do in the fire. You didn't--today, it's many, many, many schools to go to. It's hard for a guy--young guy today. Then, it was just like once a week you went there and made sure--work night. Every work night was Thursday nights. If you needed points, they would have extra work nights for you. And you learned from the other guys that already knew what to do, you know.

Q: That's what I want to ask you. How did you get your knowledge then? Was it through a buddy? A mentor? A ...

JRF: Yes, you would go with somebody that knew what they were doing, and they would show you. Like we--we had--in our company, we had the lights. So we would have to take lights and fans into the--into the building. First of all, when we first got to the place, we had the ladder—we have the ladders, too. So we had to ladder the house or the building--whatever was on fire. We had to get the ladders off the trucks, and you worked with another person that knew what they were doing. And you learned on the job training; that's how you did it. And we ...

Q: So, when you first handled that ladder, what did you think of it?

JRF: You had to know what to do. So you had to watch what the other guys were doing. They'd tell you what to do. Because there's like three or four guys, or maybe more. Some of the ladders were really big, and you had to learn how to put them up and properly, you know, put them up so they wouldn't fall off and somebody'd get hurt. But ...

Q: Did that ever happen?

JRF: Not that I remember. No. The ladders--then we would take, from the truck, next thing then would be--you'd ladder the building first. That was first. So, the pumper guys could get up there and put holes--or our guys would go up and chop holes in the roof to get the-

-to vent, to get the smoke out. Then, we would have to run back to the truck and get the lights, and we had lights on reels, on wire. And you would bring the boxes in with the-- with the wire, and you would hook up lights for the work--guys working inside. And then we would hook up exhaust fans to get the smoke out. And then, the next thing we would have to do, when the fire was down, then we would have to go in and rip walls apart and stuff, with the pike poles and axes and we did this--we did the destruction part (laughs). That's how we--and you learned on the job. It's a lot of common sense.

Q: So did you have to sort of read your knowledge and what you learned by talking with your elders at the time, compared to what the young people today do....

JRF: You ...

Q: ... what they do in class?

JRF: Oh, yeah, well, today they go to fire school, and they learn from--where they have the masks on and they go to fire school. And they go through the smoke. They go through the real--it's like, you know, simulated, but it's ...

Q: And you didn't do any of that?

JRF: ... we didn't, no. I didn't do any of that. No. We just--we never even had masks. We had no masks.

Q: How did you ...

JRF: We had what they called M.S.--MSA masks. They were charcoal filtered masks that you could wear. And we had them in the police cars, too. And if you had a fire, you would put one of them on. Now, and then they had, it was like charcoal, but it turned a color, I think, that, when it was used up, then you would have to get rid of it or get new charcoal. But ...

Q: So that was a signal that it was all used up.

JRF: Yeah. It was just a--it was just a canister. That's all it was. With a mask. And most of the time, we went into the fires, we had nothing to--no breathing apparatus at all. So, if you had a smoky fire and you had a--the Styrofoam or the--or the, you know, that kind of a pillow would make black smoke, and when you came out, you would be, all around your face would be all black, or your nose, and you would be coughing and blowing your nose. There'd be all that--that color black would be coming out of you. And actually you were breathing all of this stuff.

Q: Were your lungs ever damaged?

JRF: Not that I know of. I'm still here (laughs).

Q: What was the hardest part of that training for you?

JRF: The hardest part of the training was--well, actually, you know, when you see a big fire, you know, your heart is pumping. I--I was also a driver on some of the big trucks, and naturally, your adrenalin, when you know there's a fire, and if it's a signal ten, you know you've got a working fire. You know, you want to get there, but you want to get there safely, of course. You've got a lot of guys on the truck, and when you get there and you see the--you see the--like, from down the road and you see the smoke, it was--your heart really starts pumping and racing. And you get there, and then you try to--try to like get everything straight and try to do what you're supposed to do. And then you--like, if you didn't really experience--you know, know too much about it, you know, there's always guys that are older than you that knew what to do. And you follow them.

Q: Why do you do such a dangerous job? What's inside of you? ...

JRF: I don't know. You just--just like being a police officer. I just go--I--I don't know. I just do it. I love doing it. I love being a fireman, and I love being a police officer. I--I go every night. I became a trustee in 1987. When I retired from the Police Department, I became a trustee, and I've been doing it ever since. And I can't wait to go--I go to the firehouse every day. I'm retired, so I can do that. And I check things out. And we're--

the trustees are in charge of all the company--everything that the company owns. We're in charge of that.

Q: We'll get to the trustee in a minute. Did you have any goals as a rookie, when you were a rookie in the Fire Department? Did you want to move up the line at all?

JRF: Not really. Because, being on the Police Department and working eight-to-fours, four-to-twelves, and twelve-to-eights, at that time, I had five children, too. I had five daughters. So, on my days off, I had to work extra jobs. There was no time off.

Q: What were the jobs that you did?

JRF: I worked--I worked for Mrs. Knowles--the funeral director--for--I worked there for thirty-five years.

Q: That must have been ...

JRF: That was tough. I mean, but it was a good job, but it was tough.

Q: What was tough about it?

JRF: Well, the tough part was the house removals, and that was tough. So I stopped doing that, and I just did pall bearing and driving.

Q: Why were the house removals so hard?

JRF: Because you have to deal with family, too. And it's--it's very sad, you know. The people are there, and you have to make the removal, and it's tough. It's really tough. You've got to be strong. I mean, I could do it, but I said, "You know what? I'm not going to do it."

(Laughs)

Q: And how would you compare that now with your police, because you deal with the same types of things?

JRF: Same thing. Same thing. Deaths. We dealt with a lot of accidents and death, and with the--it was the same--it's the same feeling, but you--the Police Department, you just do it. It's your job. You do it. And that--the funeral was a job also, but I could elect not to do it. And so I didn't, and I--I changed what I was doing.

Q: Did you join the Police Department at practically the same time you were in the Fire Department?

JRF: Yes, I joined the Police Department in 1959, and I had to get permission from the Police Department to join the Fire Department. Because there was rules there, at the time, that you couldn't belong. But ...

Q: Why was that?

JRF: Just some kind of rules that they had up there in the rules and regulations, that you couldn't belong to a volunteer company. But, I had special permission from Acting Chief Smith, his name. Percy Smith. And nobody said that I couldn't do it. So I went down, and I put my application in, and I got in. Because it was, at that time, there was other police officers that were firemen also, but nobody said nothing to them, too, so I used that as my crutch, saying, you know, if anybody said anything. But they didn't say--nobody said anything.

Q: Now, how was the police training different from the firefighting training?

JRF: At that time, we didn't have an Academy like they do now. I was a police officer one whole year before I went to Nassau County training.

Q: How could you be an officer ...

JRF: I was trained by--he was a Lieutenant at the time. His name was Jim Rankin, who became--later became the Chief of the Police--Port Washington Police Department. He taught me. I had to go to work every day at a table downstairs (laughs), and he read me the penal law word by word (laughs). And then I had to take notes and what I could do. Then, he gave me rules and regulations of the Police Department, and ...

Q: When you said that you read it ...

JRF: ... it was one-on-one training.

Q: So, how long did that take for him to read it?

JRF: Took a long time. Because the textbook is--the book has a lot of laws (laughs) in it. Finally, they turned me loose outside, but they didn't really turn me loose all the way. They made me go with a sergeant, John McKelsey. And I rode with him, because he was in charge of his squad. I was on his squad. And then, I stayed with him a while. In a couple of weeks, they said, "We want you to learn the people of Port Washington," even though I lived here. "Get used to the people in Port Washington; let them get used to you." I said, "Okay." So it was about--it was a long time. Maybe, oh, months after that before I got my first summons book.

Q: What's a summons book?

JRF: Parking summons book (laughs). They didn't give me a moving summons book yet. They gave me the parking summons book. They wanted to make sure (laughs) that I didn't go crazy out there, you know. And that's how--that's how I got started. But it was one year before I went to Nassau County training.

Q: How did you view that personal training versus when you went to the Academy? Which did you enjoy the most?

JRF: On-the-job training. Because everything they taught you in the Academy, naturally, they got, you know, people put everything together as to what to train the people for. I already knew what they were talking about, because I already had been through it for a whole year. You know, like accidents, aiding cases, or different cases like burglaries and stuff like that that we had to learn. And when you're on the job, you learn how to make out--you'd get your paperwork and you'd do it.

Q: So you were one up on the ...

JRF: On a lot of guys at the Academy that were just starting out? Yes, I was a year ahead of them, right.

Q: So how did you--do you value this type of training?

JRF: Well, the training today is much more elaborate, and on-the-job training is a real big thing. Like kids, these guys can go to all these academies and everything, but they really don't know what it's like to be out there until they're out on the road, and--or at a fire scene. You can go do all kinds of training, but when it's really serious and you have a lot of bodies inside or, you know, people to help, it's different. It's completely different.

Q: Do you--can you remember any experiences, either in the police side or the fire side, where ...

JRF: The first ...

Q: ... you had people that didn't know what they were doing that ...

JRF: No, I never saw that where people didn't know what they were doing. But the first serious case I was on, I was home eating my dinner and I got a call to come down to Covert Street. And there was a fire, at that time--a house fire. And they called me down there, and John McKelsey said, "Okay, you're going to help the Fire Department now," because I--I wasn't in the Fire Department yet. That was my first year there.

Q: You mean you got there as a policeman?

JRF: I was called there as a policeman. And he said, "You're going to remove the body." I said, "What body?" Upstairs. I had to go upstairs through the--where the fire had, you know, burned everything, and I had my first removal.

Q: So, what do you do? You have what? a bag? What's the procedure.

JRF: Yeah, we had to put him in a bag. But we had to wear rubber gloves, because, you know, it was a burn victim. It was--it was bad. And--and naturally, I knew the--I knew the

people. You know, they're related. I went to school with the guy's son. So, you know, that was my first experience ...

Q: So, how does that--well, how does that affect you?

JRF: ... as a police officer, working with the Fire Department. It makes you think, you know, how serious a fire is. And you think about it all the time. Because, I mean, that was a long time ago; I still could see it. I can still picture looking, you know, and carrying that man out, you know.

Q: How do you sleep at night after something like that?

JRF: You really don't. You don't sleep. You think--it keeps you--it keeps--even like with some of the--some of the fires, the smoke that you inhale, because we didn't wear the masks, you still could smell it. You smelled it. Even though everything is clear. I guess it's in the brain, and you keep--you still smell. You still feel like you smell, even with the--even--well, that's mainly what you do. I don't know why, but, you know, it's--you could be clear twenty-four hours, and all of a sudden (snifs), you smell. Like you think it's the fire again. Unless it's your clothes that, you know, you have to take your clothes and wash them.

Q: So the brain more or less ...

JRF: I'm thinking that. I'm not sure about--I'm not versed in that. But the brain does something to your sense of smell or something, and it makes you smell it again for some reason. I don't know why.

Q: Are there any similarities between the training at all in the Police and the Fire Department? Or differences?

JRF: Yeah, I think there's a difference, yeah.

Q: What is the emphasis of the Police Department?

JRF: Well, the Police Department is--is--well, you've got to--you know, you're carrying a gun, so you've got to be versed in--in going to the range. You've got to, you know, learn how to handle your gun, and you've got a--you have a night stick. You've got to learn how to do that. You had to check doors. And when you got a chance to get into the police car, you had to be very careful as to, you know, getting into accidents and etcetera. It's different than the Fire Department. Fire Department, you can go to the firehouse, get on a fire truck, someone drives you to there. Then you just go, and you work as a worker man at the fire. So, in the Police Department, you're like sort of, if you're in the car, you're in charge. You're a one-man police department. You know, when you go to the scene, unless other guys help you, you're there and you do the whole thing.

Q: Did you ever have a buddy with you in the police, at that time?

JRF: No, we never ...

Q: Is that the buddy system?

JRF: Oh, once in a while, we would pick somebody up, if we needed them. But most of the time I was on the Police Department, we were just a single driver, a single in the car. And they had other cars would back you up. But it was ...

Q: Do they do that today?

JRF: Yeah. Still today, yeah, they still have one person in a car. New York City has two in a car. They need them, you know. But over here, we're still one in a car.

Q: Have you ever been in a situation where you had to use your gun?

JRF: Once, I--we--I used the gun. And it was an assault and robbery at McCrory's down in the Soundview Shopping Center or where the King Kullen is now. There was a McCrory's. And the guy--guy hit the manager on the head. And we got the call at headquarters. I was at headquarters with the Sergeant, and they gave us a description of the car. And I looked out the window, and it was a rusty colored car, and I said, "There it goes." And

he said, "No." I said, "Yes, let's go." So I got the Sergeant to go, and we--we pulled the car over up by the expressway. But when we opened up, we had to--we knew it was assault and robbery, so when we asked the guy to get out of the car, we had our guns alongside of us, he had a gun under the seat. We saw the gun under the seat, and we got him out. Meantime, like fifteen or twenty minutes, our County police came. But then the bag of money was right there also. So, it was a good arrest. Assault and robbery. It was one--I actually was one of the first guys in the Police Department to get a commendation for that.

Q: What was that?

JRF: It was a bar. Red bar.

Q: A bar?

JRF: Yeah. It was a commendation that you did a good job, you know. It went in your file that you, you know, what you did.

Q: Versus the plaques they get in the Fire Department?

JRF: Well, yes. Something similar to that, right. That's right. They get a--when they do a good job, they get a--an award for that. They've got--they have bars now too, that they give out, the Police--the Fire Department.

Q: So you wear them as ribbons?

JRF: You can wear it as a ribbon. Like in the Army, yeah. You could wear them.

Q: What about certificates? They don't give those out.

JRF: Yes, they give out certificates for--well, actually, for--they give out certificates every month for different kind of training programs that the guys go through. And there'll be a nice certificate. That's--that's what they do now. In the Police Department, the only time you got an award was if you did something good. If you did something bad, you got a good award (laughs). You got ...

Q: What award did you get when you did something bad?

JRF: Well, if you did something--well, if you did something wrong, you would get a letter of reprimand, you know. That would go in your jacket--in your file jacket. But it wasn't too bad.

Q: They didn't give you kitchen duty?

JRF: No (laughs). No, that's like in the Army. If you do something bad, you go to K.P., you know.

Q: Which job do you enjoy--or did you enjoy the most? Police or fire?

JRF: Well, actually, at twenty-eight years on the Police Department, I couldn't wait to go to work every day.

Q: Why?

JRF: I loved to go there. I loved being with the guys. Really. I was a Lieutenant. I was a Sergeant first, then I was a Lieutenant. And I was in charge. I had seven or eight guys working for me. I was on the--on the desk. And every year, they changed different guys, and they'd give you different men, you know. And they would switch people around all the time. But I just couldn't wait to go. I loved being--I loved being a boss (laughs).

Q: And what would you tell the seven or eight men that were under you?

JRF: Well, everybody knew their jobs. Everybody had a sector to do. And if you--whatever you worked, whatever call you gave out, you know, you would send one and the other--

call the other guy to back them up. Or they would sometime back each other up without any, you know, and you went by rules and regulations. And that's how everything goes. And it's still the same today.

Q: Was your--was the office the same? That is, on Port Washington Boulevard?

JRF: Yes. Yes, it was the same. When I first went there as a--as a police officer, I learned how to work the old type switchboard. And that was the one, if you'll remember Lily Tomlin on "*Saturday Night Live*," remember the old switchboard with the old plug-ins? Well, I learned how to work that. And then, if there was a fire and somebody called in, if it was a brush fire, then you just--I had--I used to pull the alarm for the brush fire. Two handles.

Q: You mean on the switchboard?

JRF: It was like a side board. Side, next to the switchboard. And you pulled the alarm. And then you would give it to the police call, where the fire was. And then--on the radio. Well, then, the next thing you would know, the switchboard would light up like a--we used to call it like a Christmas tree. Because all the lights would light up. And you took all these--these plugs. What did they call them. Ex--you had to put--I can't think ...

Q: The phone lines?

JRF: Yeah, the plugs. You had to plug in every hole that was lit up ...

Q: The lines.

JRF: The lines. Yeah, the phone lines. And you plugged them all in, and there was handles here, like this, so you could flip them down. And you flipped them down, and you told everybody at the same time where the fire was. Now, what we were supposed to do, we were supposed to ask each individual, "Are you a fireman, and why do you want to know--if you're not a fireman, why do you want to know where the fire is?" Because some people would go to the fire. But people would pick up the call boxes all around town, or they would call on a regular phone, and they wanted to know where the fire was. Well, the rule was that you were supposed to ask them everything. But when there was a fire, it lit up every--every light lit up on that board. Every light. And ...

Q: You mean people would call in to find out about where the fire is?

JRF: Right. They would call. And what I did--you're not supposed to, but I did--I flipped them all over. I'd tell everybody at once and pull them all out. No sooner you pull out all those plugs, the light would lit all up again. And you just pulled them all there and tell them, "The fire's out at Avenue C," or wherever. And that would be it. And then, after a while, everything would calm down, and then it would be all right again. Because then

you have your regular lines coming in for people calling you for any kind of a call, you know. Like, you know, they need help for something else. And that was--that was--that was an experience the first time I ever did that, because the Sergeant says, "Take the switchboard. I'm going--I'm going to take a break. I'm going on my meal period. You can handle it." But he would be on the other side of the building. The first time I ever got a call, it was a fire, a general alarm. I started pulling all these handles and pushing buttons (laughs). Wow! You sweat. You really sweat, because you want to make sure you did it right (laughs). But it was fun. And you learn. You learn, like I said before, you learn from experience, and you teach the next guy what to do, you know.

Q: Are the police supposed to go to every fire? Are they called, along with the Fire Department?

JRF: Yeah, right now, they have a system where, it's called "firecom." When "firecom" puts out a fire, they have the speaker in the Police Department, and that tells where the fire is. And the dispatcher up there will tell the police car.

Q: And how many cars usually go to those?

JRF: Oh, well, usually one or two. See, the Police Department's on the road all the time. The Fire Department, you have to respond from your house or wherever and get to the

firehouse and get the truck out. By that time, the Police Department's already there.

Ninety-nine percent of the time, they're there.

Q: And what does the--what are you supposed to do as a police officer at a fire?

JRF: Try to save some lives (laughs).

Q: Do you go into the building ...

JRF: Yeah, we did.

Q: ... for a fire?

JRF: We used to go in. Sure, I used to ...

Q: To firefight?

JRF: Yeah. Yeah. We'd go in, try to get people out. Uh huh. Like I said, we had those--we had those fire masks. They call them MSAs. We had them in the police cars in the trunk. Every car had one. So that if you got a call, you're supposed to throw that on. But ninety-nine percent of the time, nobody bothered with that. We just ran in.

Q: And have you saved people like that?

JRF: Well, no, not really. I went on a few fire calls, but I never had to save anybody. People already were out, you know.

Q: So you weren't ...

JRF: And you try to keep them out, so they don't go back in.

Q: Well, how do you control all these people that call in and are at that fire?

JRF: It's pretty hard. Pretty hard to control them and tell them, you know, you don't know who you're talking to, because, unless you say, "Port Washington Police Department. What--what's the problem?" or something like that, they--they're not going to tell you. They just pull up to a call box; they get on the call box, and it rings. And then--I don't know if it's still like that now, because I'm not sure about it. But, you don't know who you're talking to out there. You don't know, unless you ask them. And you don't have time. You don't have time to ask.

Q: Were you in any of the major fires in the '60s, like the Renga Brothers fire or the Village Tavern or any of those or ...

JRF: Renga Brothers, I worked as a--as a fireman on, yeah. I worked on that one.

Q: What was that like?

JRF: Well, you just worked around, and it was--it was a big fire.

Q: What happened at that fire?

JRF: Well, it was--it was really burning. And them machines, like everything like collapsed inside, you know. But, mainly it was just outside the perimeter, just working. The ladders were up, putting the water on there, and ...

Q: Do you remember--was there a little girl involved in this fire?

JRF: Oh, I'm not sure about that. Not sure. We were at a--I'm not sure what year it was, but we were at a big fire where three kids died down in South Court? North Court, down in, where was it, off of Secor Drive down there, near the shore. There was--Busby, people by the name of Busby. And I was on that one.

Q: What happened at that fire?

JRF: There was a big fire there, and the three kids perished in that one.

Q: I have a list of some fires that might jog your memory.

JRF: I was at the Port Washington Yacht Club fire. I was there with the--working with the big--big aerial--with the truck there, pumping water. I was there on that one.

Q: As a fireman or a policeman?

JRF: Fireman. Port Washington Yacht Club and Busby. That's for Busby's. Oh, two boys. I'm sorry. I thought it was three. Okay, two.

Q: Well, it could have been three.

JRF: Renga Brothers, I was at that.

Q: Might not be accurate. But--but you have been in the major fires in the '60s as a firefighter?

JRF: Yes.

Q: Were you at Bobby Dayton's fire? At the Cat Lady fire?

JRF: Yes, I was at the--at the Dayton fire, as a fireman. I didn't go inside or anything. Just worked outside on the grounds. Worked around the truck. Get the lights and whatever we had to do on the outside part.

Q: What's been the worst experience for you in either the Fire Department or the Police Department? Can you remember?

JRF: The worst experience? I don't--no, I don't remember. There was the--the one, the Bobby Dayton one, the Cat Lady. There was a lady--yeah, yeah, I was there on that one. As a fireman also. Shields Hardware, I was there. We had a new truck. We had just got it. We hadn't even put it into service yet, and we were--I was at there that day, and we were filling up the Scott Air Pack bottles with that truck. It was brand new, and actually we just sold it.

Q: What did you sell?

JRF: The truck. 8522. We just sold that truck. And somebody from down south wanted it really bad, and we got a good--we got a, you know, we got a good price for it, because we're going to buy a new one, a shorter one. It'll be smaller than that one. But, yeah, I was on Shields. And Shields was a big fire. We had to get--Manhasset/ Lakeville had to come in and help us pump water into it. It was really, really burning. That, down there. He actually was yelling. He said the Fire Department made his house burn--his building burn down. He blamed us, because we didn't put it out fast enough.

Q: Do you get abuse from the people you're helping?

JRF: Most of the time, no. But that one at the Busby's down here, the Busby house down in South--North Court--the people around the area, it was a cold night, and they kept coming out, did anybody want anything--coffee. People--people are very good at the scene of fires. They always want to help, bring something to you. And we used to have like the Ladies' Auxiliary used to go to the firehouses, and they used to make coffee and hot soups and sandwiches and all that, if there was a big fire. But, most of the time that I--most of the fires that I went on, I remember all the people always--somebody always wants to give you something. You know, refreshments.

Q: Now, why was Shields upset at you? What was he saying? You say he was yelling at you.

JRF: (Laughs). He was--he was mad. He said the firemen should have put the fire out faster (laughs).

Q: Do you agree or disagree?

JRF: No. I don't know. We did--we had--like I said, we had to get Manhasset/Lakeville in there to pump water inside of it, so it was really burning. It was really burning. You

know, naturally, people get upset, because they feel that maybe you should have got it done faster. Well, I don't know. The man upstairs would know, right? if you could have done it faster. I don't know.

Q: And you mentioned the Ladies' Auxiliary. What were the men's feelings about the Ladies' Auxiliary?

JRF: Well, they have--well, right now, they don't have too many ladies now that are doing it anymore. But my mother was in Ladies' Auxiliary.

Q: And what did she do? What was the actual procedure?.

JRF: When there was a big fire, they would call them all. Actually, they knew, because they had from the general alarm, the "sirens" would blow and everything. And then they would know. Somebody would call them, like the President of the Ladies would call and say, "We need help up here." And then they all would go, get a ride up to the firehouse and start cooking and doing whatever they had to do.

Q: What did they usually make for you?

JRF: They made sandwiches and coffee and soup if it was wintertime. And a lot of refreshments, like soda, water, stuff like that, you know.

Q: Did they bring it to the site?

JRF: Yeah, they would get somebody to bring it. Somebody would go with a car or a truck or something and bring it down to the firemen at the site. Yes.

Q: And how would they transport soup, for instance, for how many ...

JRF: Well, they had those ...

Q: Big urns?

JRF: ... containers. Those big urns and stuff, you know. But when I--when I was in, my wife, she never joined the Ladies Auxiliary.

Q: Why?

JRF: Well, we have five daughters. And so she was taking care of the kids all the time.

Q: Did your daughters ever want to become firefighters?

JRF: No, no. No, they didn't. One daughter was thinking about going into the FBI, but she never did that.

Q: Would you have approved if she wanted to be a firefighter?

JRF: Well, it's a pretty tough job for a girl. But they, in the last ten or fifteen years, maybe twenty, they've actually proven themselves in New York City that they can do the job.

Q: In New York City?

JRF: Yeah. I mean, you know, because of the training. I mean, New York City is really tough. They have to carry those--those hoses on their backs and so some girls can do it; some girls can't. And, you know, it's tough. Some young guys can't even do it. But they train for the--like going all the way back to the Police Department in training, to get on the Police Department, you've got to carry a hundred and fifty pound dummy on your shoulder and go up the stairs and down without holding on. Well, I was only a hundred and forty-five pounds myself. But I did it. I did it. I trained, and I did it. And I was so proud that I was able to do that, you know. And you had to lift weights and everything like that. And, now, the training for today for the Fire Department, they do the same thing, you know, in New York City, I don't know. Out here, I don't think they do. But in New York they've got to do--they have to do a lot of strenuous stuff. And they do it; the girls do it. So, I've got to give them a lot of credit for that. If my daughter wanted to do that, I never stopped my daughters from doing anything that they wanted to do, but they all went into business (laughs). They all wanted to go to New York and make money.

Q: What did the old-timers say to you when the women wanted to come in the Department?

JRF: What did they say to me?

Q: Like what would they say? I mean what were their comments?

JRF: Oh (laughs), they're not--they weren't too happy about having girls come into the firehouse. It's a men's--they would call it a men's area, you know. But, there are a lot of girls in the Fire Department now, you know, in different companies here. We have the Fire Medics ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: Continuing now on Side B. John, you were saying that ...

JRF: There's a lot of girls in the Fire Department now. In our--in our companies and our Fire Medics. And when we have our parties, or we have our get-togethers, whatever, everybody gets along great. And it's really nice. It's--the hardest thing was to change. You know, nobody likes change apparently. It takes a while for things to smooth out, and that's what happened.

Q: I'd like to talk a little bit about what pranks were played in the Fire Department and what jokes are given out. I mean, it would be kind of nice to know what the inner--the firemen joked about, or pranked about.

JRF: Well, you know, a lot of--a lot of times when you buy a new truck, or there's guys working on cleaning the trucks, it used to be that--I haven't seen it in a long, long time--but one company would come around with their pumper and sneak up on the guys working real hard, cleaning their trucks all up, polishing them, and come around and just hose them down. And have their pump running, and then go like heck and get out of the area. And then the next company would--then they would do the same thing back to them when they'd catch them. You know, not right away, but that's the biggest thing that I've seen. It's more of a business, now, type of thing.

Q: What do you mean?

JRF: There's not too much fooling around anymore.

Q: Why is that?

JRF: Not that it--it's very--it's a serious type of thing. You can't fool around, because somebody could get hurt. And they know that. And there might be some fooling around a little bit, but not much. Not that I know of. I don't--I don't know. I haven't seen any, you know.

Q: What--do people--are people called by their nicknames at the firehouse, or their real names?

JRF: Yeah, some people have nicknames, like ex-Chief John Salerno. We call him "Bubba." I don't know how he got the name "Bubba," but yeah, there are some people with nicknames. And we have a--we have a Captain, they call him--well, he don't--he don't care, so I'll say it. He--his name is--they call him "Mad Dog" (laughs). But he's a good guy, you know. Do anything for you. He yells, though. He yells a lot. But, you put--you know, he--that's what he--that's how he got his nickname. He came from Great Neck. Actually from Great Neck. So, since he was a kid, they called him that name--that nickname. So, I don't call him--I don't call him that. I--I respect him. He's a Captain. I call him Tom. He gets mad at me if I call him anything else. But--and then they changed it for a while. They changed it to--it was funny. They call him "Pit Bull" (laughs).

Q: What was that?

JRF: "Pit Bull." (Laughs) He--he's such a good guy, though. He's really, really, one hundred and fifty percent fireman. He knows his stuff. He's going to run for Chief, I think. I think.

Q: And will they vote for him?

JRF: Yeah, they'll--I know it's going to be on tape. But, yeah, he's--I think so, yeah. He'll be the next Chief. No doubt. He really--he's really good. He used to be a Fire Marshal one time. And then he--he got out of that. And then, now he's the Captain of our company twice already. So, he--he really--he's really good. Really knows his stuff. As far--as far as anybody else fooling around, I don't know of anybody fooling around, you know. Pranks pulled. Pranks and stuff. They--we--in our company, in our firehouse, there were some pranks going on, but they weren't for fun. They were maybe the people that thought they were for fun were doing things, like putting things into people's boots and stuff, in their pockets, and all that stuff.

Q: What were they putting in?

JRF: Well, you know, like bottles or something you could put your boots on and stuff like that. Eventually, we had to put in a security system, though. ADT. We put in cameras, and then everything stopped. No fooling around anymore. So that's why, you know, they--there's not too much fooling around in our company. So (laughs) ...

Q: So you have a surveillance in your ...

JRF: Yes, we do. Yes, we do.

Q: Why? Because of 9/11?

JRF: Since 9/11, we put the surveillance camera in because we were having some pranks that we didn't think were funny.

Q: Can you tell me about them?

JRF: And so they kept on, over and over, the prank. Yeah, different pranks. And they could have become serious. Somebody could have got hurt. And so we decided to--we put the--put the camera system in, and now we have the video all over the whole building. And that's it. And everything stopped.

Q: How did 9/11 impact you? Were you ...

JRF: Oh, I was home watching it on TV that day. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe my eyes what was happening. I said, "Gee, is it really happening?" and then you realize how many--when they start showing you the videos, how many people died and how many firemen and policemen and civilians, and--and we knew a lot of people. I mean, I didn't know them personally. My daughters knew some of the kids that died over there. Some of them, they hung out with them. My one daughter, she was working in a building a couple of blocks away, and she saw--she saw the thing hit the building. And--and from that point on--she worked in marketing and she didn't get a good job after that, because all of, like magazines and stuff she worked for--Rupert Murdoch and all of them--they all went down the tubes. So, finally, it was like a lot of years before she even got a good job

back again. But it was--it was a very--it was very scary as to what the heck was happening.

Q: Were you called by the Fire Department for anything?

JRF: I--I didn't go. If I was younger, like the--we did have guys go into the City to help on the--on the clean-up, in that rubble. If I was younger, I would have went. But, you know, being as I was like--how old was I? I'm sixty-nine ...

Q: How ...

JRF: ... I was in my sixties. I wasn't going to go, you know. It's hard work, you know. Them guys worked hard over there to help try to get--to see if any--anybody was alive and I couldn't--I would like to have gone, but I didn't. Stayed back here.

Q: How do you deal with fear when you, obviously have--you're scared at fires or when you were called on the police. How do you deal with the fear inside of you?

JRF: You just keep on going, you know. You know, the fear is there; it's always there, you know. But, you know--you know you can get hurt, but you just do it. And you just keep on going. And it's possible that you could get hurt. Let's put it that way. But--but you don't even think about it, really; you just do it. I don't know--I don't know why (laughs).

Q: What makes you so giving to this community? What's inside of you?

JRF: I just love being a fireman, and I loved being a police officer. I--when I retired after twenty-eight years, I felt bad. I wasn't going to be with all the--see all my friends up there again. Because, you know, once you retire, you don't see those people all the time anymore. You know, I used to love going there. In the Fire Department, I--I dedicated the rest of my time to the Fire Department. That's why I stayed as a Trustee. And so I'm still doing it. And every day I go, they say, "John, this is--oh, this broke. That broke, this broke." I make a list. I have to call up--I'm always doing ...

Q: Well, tell me about your job, then, as Trustee now.

JRF: Well, we're in charge of all company property. What I do is, there's five--there's five Trustees. And what we do is we take care of the bills, and we oversee all the bills that come in. Check them out. Make sure they're right. Then we give them to the Treasurer. And what we do is, we have bank accounts, and we have to move money. Now, it takes three out of five signatures to move from the general account into the checking account. And then from the checking account, the Treasurer can--he can send out his checks. But his checks have to be signed two out of three--by the Treasurer, the Captain, or the President. So it's like checks and balances. So that's what we do, and then we move the

money. The Trustees move the money so the Treasurer can have money to spend to pay the bills.

Q: Well, what kinds of bills do you have, for instance?

JRF: Oh, we've got a lot of bills (laughs). Oh, you should see. Yeah, a lot of bills. Just a lot of them. Truck maintenance. Supplies. You know--the electrical, utilities, telephone and cable and every bill that you have in your house, and then we have plus, because we--there's always work being done on the trucks. There's always something being done. Or the building. Building maintenance. There's always something that has to be done, so supplies for the building and such are--there's--there's always a big stack of bills, every--every week, that we have to go over them. We go over them every Thursday night, and then we write them out. At one time, before we built the new building, ten--almost eleven years ago--we used to write the bills once a month. So we would have a--the night before--the night of the meeting, we would go over all these bills. It took so long, and then we changed our procedure and we started--because people would only get paid once a month at that time. Now, they get paid every week. If a bill comes in, within a week, they'll get their money, you know, so that nobody has to hang up on anything.

Q: You mentioned earlier about, you know, a truck that you sold.

JRF: Yeah.

Q: An ...older...truck. How do you know where to sell the older trucks?

JRF: Most of the time, we don't--we usually don't sell them. The last one that we sold prior to this one, because we had a new one coming in, so we got rid of this, it was an 8517. It was an old truck. It came from New York, that we had bought from New York. We refurbished it, and we had it a long time. We rebuilt it. It just went to Chile. It's in Chile right now. With Port Washington--Atlantic Hook and Ladder on it.

Q: Now, how cost effective is it to ship ...

JRF: Well, we didn't do that. The man who bought it shipped it.

Q: How--what would it cost him to ship a truck?

JRF: Well, I don't know. He paid five thousand for the truck. And he ...

Q: Probably paid ten to ship it (laughs).

JRF: They ship it on a cargo ship, and they--and they actually bought another truck from--from Flower Hill Hose Company--another old truck. These trucks are really old. Usually--usually what we try to do is, if nobody buys them, we--somebody upstate will buy them for a dollar or a hundred dollars or whatever. And they'll still use them. Of course, they

don't use them that much. But a lot of our trucks have gone upstate. And, but this last one went to Chile. And he shows us pictures every once in a while, where it's--it's working fires down there.

Q: Where--what city in Chile?

JRF: In Chile? Chilean--what is the ...

Q: No, not Peru, but Santiago, Chile?

JRF: No, it's ...

Q: I say it's Santiago, I think.

JRF: I'm not sure, exactly, what town. Because he's a fireman, too, but he did it. He--he's from Chile, but he--he needed it for his town.

Q: Now, when you buy ...

JRF: We ...

Q: Yeah?

JRF: We have what we call are truck funds. We put money on the side for these trucks. So that when you buy a big truck, you have to go through the bank. Like the last big one that we bought, you have to--you can't buy them all--you can't just buy them like for cash. You have to mortgage them. And that's what we do.

Q: So you secure a mortgage on them?

JRF: Well, they cost--they cost so much money. The last one that we--the last one that we bought was like almost eight hundred thousand dollars. And what we had to do was finance it through a bank, through the company that we bought it off, and the bank is out west. And then you pay them once a year for five or six years. And you give them their money.

Q: And where do you get the funds for that?

JRF: Well, it comes from the budget. And you budget for all of this, from the Town of North Hempstead. You do the budget once a year. I'm on the budget committee.

Q: And what are the headaches for that?

JRF: Trying to keep that budget down. We try, but every year we--this year, the Port Washington Fire Department kept the budget down. And, even though everything else is rising, you know--costs and everything--kept it down.

Q: How do they do that?

JRF: Cut back here, cut back there, you know. Do less here, and a little less there. Try to keep it so the Port Washington, you know, we're all tax payers, so try to keep it low as you can.

Q: You were saying that the building was built eleven years ago. Tell me how that was. Were you instrumental in that?

JRF: Yes, I was on the building committee. And it was about two and a half million dollars. But we knocked the old building down.

Q: What year was this? Eleven years ago.

JRF: Eleven years ago.

Q: So it's about ...

JRF: Ninety--

Q: '93, something like that.

JRF: Yeah. But we started a couple of years before that looking around. We went--we had a big building committee, a large group of guys. Had maybe fourteen or fifteen guys. And we went to every different fire department you could think of all around Long Island to see what they had and what our needs were. And then we put everything on our video camera, and we took pictures of other people's, what they had. Then, we gave it to our architect, and then he put it together for us. Incorporated everything that we wanted here and there and there. And then, of course, you try to figure for the future. And so far, so good. We did so far it's okay, you know, and it should be okay for the rest of the guys after me.

Q: So was there a nickname for this building?

JRF: Nickname? No, it's just Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company Number One. No nickname. I don't think there's a nickname.

Q: What did it cost to build it?

JRF: About two and a half. Two and a half million. And we financed all that through bonds and all that kind of stuff. We paid it off already. It's all paid off.

Q: In?

JRF: Yeah, the work. Like I say, I'm on the budget committee; I'm on the Trustees of Atlantic Hook and Ladder. We paid it off in--we had to pay it off in ten years, or there was a balloon at the end and we had to pay that. And we came up with that money, because, from saving it for the ten years, we put money on the side to pay that balloon. And then when we got all done, boom, we didn't have to go to another bank to refinance for another ten years. We got rid of it. We did it. But we--we put money on the side every year for ten years. We knew how much we had to put on the side to get that balloon, and we did it.

Q: How do you feel about that?

JRF: Well, I feel great, because I think--you know, I didn't know if we could do it, but we did it, you know.

Q: How do your fellow ...

JRF: And they said--well, the other, you know, a lot of people were kidding around, they'd say, "Ah, how're you guys doing down there." Say, "Oh, you better come see how we are up there, how we operate," you know. There was me--there's five of us on that.

Q: Well, who's on the Trustees.

JRF: Me. John--John Ross. Charles Cella. I think he's--you're supposed to be--he said he called you or something. Or he's waiting for his letter to come up here. He's ex-Captain. He has a lot of information. Daniel Cella, his brother. And Tom Petty. The Cella boys, they're for--they got a lot of history in Atlantic Hook and Ladder, so you got to get them up here. Yeah.

Q: I think someone else may be interviewing them. I don't know.

JRF: I don't know. He's waiting for somebody to call him, I know that.

Q: Really?

JRF: Yeah.

Q: I'll have to find out. (laughs).

JRF: I told him I'm going to tell them. He said, "No, no, no. Don't."

Q: (Laughs). You tell him that you did (laughs).

JRF: Yeah, he owns the service there, the Triangle Service Station down on Valley Road.

Q: What other--what other programs have you done as a Trustee that you're proudest of?

JRF: That's the biggest one. That's the biggest program I've ever been involved in my whole life. That two and a half million dollar project, right? And it came out right.

Q: Did you sleep at nights?

JRF: Yeah. It was--it was great. I mean, you know, I have pictures home--I have pictures home that I took myself, personally, of every step of the way. Knocking down the old building and building the new building. So I have a whole--I have a whole photo album. Photo album of the Atlantic Hook and Ladder.

Q: So, aside from ...

JRF: Actually, I kept it--I did it--I was going to put it up in--they're still actually trying to figure out what they want to do with the--with the display cases and stuff. So I might end

up giving it to them anyway. I have doubles. I had all kinds of double photos made at the time.

Q: Oh, so if we need some photos you have some for the--for this project, as well.

JRF: Yeah. That's the biggest project I ever was involved with, that I can think of. I--I mean, I built two houses on my own. My own. I mean, I contracted them myself. And--but this was big.

Q: Which contractors did you use to build this building?

JRF: I contracted out and then--and then my second house I used Joe Canigani. But I--I did that one, too. I mean, you know, I knew what to do. I mean, I was told--I learned from the first one. So ...

Q: You built your own house?

JRF: Well, I didn't--I didn't do it by my hand. I--I hired people. I did the contracting. You know, I called people to do the jobs.

Q: Have you ever lost control of your emotions at a scene--a fire scene, or a police scene, or ...

JRF: Oh, I don't know. That's pretty (laughs)--well, possibly at the Police Department, when you're writing a ticket sometimes you can lose your cool.

Q: Have you?

JRF: But I tried--I always try to be a gentleman about it and try to walk away. Sometimes it's hard to walk away, but I try. But ...

Q: What happens in some of these traffic situations? People ...

JRF: Well, you know, people--people have a million stories and a million excuses. And ninety-nine percent of the time, I knew if I was going to write the ticket before I got out of the car. But once you get out of the car, sometimes a person could change your mind the way they talk to you, and you can change your mind, just give them a warning. I--I never was really big on writing a lot of tickets.

Q: Did you have a quota that you had to write so many tickets?

JRF: Well, it wasn't a quota, no. But they have, like they would say, you know, "How come you don't write any more tickets than this?" I'd say, "Oh, I didn't see any" (laughs). And they would--yeah, they would check you out a lot. But I didn't do too bad. I didn't write that many.

Q: Were you ever involved in any domestic violence cases or arson?

JRF: Yes. I was involved in a lot of domestic violence.

Q: Can you tell me about it?

JRF: One time, it was--we were ready to go home. Me and another officer got the call. And (laughs) this one comes to mind very--all the time. I'm talking to her, and I'm talking to him. And she's yelling; he's yelling. And the telephone is off the wall; it's ripped off the wall. So, the next thing you know, I'm talking to her here, and then the other officer's talking to him. And they got close, and she--she got the phone, and she reached over me and whacked him in the head and opened up his head right in front of me. We were just going to try to, you know, let them go each--their own ways. And I had to lock her up. (Laughs) It was time to go home. It was time. So, oh, boy. But that's the--these things happen, you know. And that's--that was one.

Q: Is domestic violence on the increase?

JRF: Yeah, I think so. By reading the papers, it looks like it. Yeah. I don't know why. I don't know if it's drugs involved or alcohol. I don't--I don't know. I don't--I mean, you ...

Q: Have you been involved in the drug cases here in Port?

JRF: No, not really. No. I made--I made one of the first arrests in Port Washington for--it's not recorded anywhere, but I made an arrest for marijuana. A bunch of kids from the high school. I was chasing a car, and I saw them throwing stuff out of the window. And I pulled them over, and then I called. The Sergeant came and everything. We picked up all the stuff off the ground, took them all to headquarters. And then, we figured it was marijuana, and we had a little testing kit. We tested it. And I locked them all up. And then, they were kids that people knew. And it really didn't go too far. Everything got toned down after a while, and it, you know, that was about it.

Q: You mean, because they were children of somebody important, or ...

JRF: Yeah. And that was it, you know. Well, it was their first offenses and stuff. And they all made--I guess maybe--I don't know if they made plea bargains or whatever. But they all got out of it, so they didn't get in big trouble, you know. It didn't wreck their lives. Let's put it that way.

Q: How do you feel about plea bargaining in situations like that?

JRF: Oh, it's okay. Yeah. Sometimes, it's..it's good. It'll help out, and it'll ...

Q: What was your medical EMS training in the Police Department or the Fire Department or your background in that?

JRF: Medical? It--well, what we learned at the Academy. That was about all I learned from the Police Department. And with the Fire Department, we used to have a fellow called Eddy Piccardo. Eddy Piccardo. He used to teach us all first aid. And we had to go to classes with the Fire Department. We had to do that. I think once a year, he had his class. And he was very good. And he taught us everything you could--I mean, all about first aid. Because he used to run--he used to be one of the guys that took care of the ambulance in Port. We--you know, and so he used to teach us all first aid. That's how--that's how we learned all about that.

Q: That was before the Fire Medics.

JRF: That was before Fire Medics, yes.

Q: And did you--can you remember any incidents that you had to use your knowledge for the ambulance?

JRF: One time--one time, but not as a fireman--one time as a police officer, I saved a lady's life up in the Terrace. She as choking because her throat closed up because it was a reaction to medicine, but nobody knew that. And I got there, and I got oxygen on her right away,

and I helped her get breathing again. And her husband was so happy, he brought a bottle of whiskey up to headquarters for me.

Q: (Laughs).

JRF: Every once in a while, when I see the lady, she always tells me, "Oh, you saved my life."
I say, "Oh, I didn't do anything."

Q: How do you think you're appreciated by the community here in Port.

JRF: Well, I think--I think the people in Port Washington, they--I think they really love the Port Washington Police Department and the Fire Department. I mean, when we parade, I feel so great. I mean, like I like--I get like sometimes tears in my eyes when you're marching down Main Street and the people are clapping for you, yelling. And, you know, really it gets me. It really does. And I, actually, all--even all the years I was on the Police Department, I never marched with the Police Department. I always marched with the Fire Department. I got in trouble for it a few times. But I always marched as a fireman. Because, you know, I was in the Army, and we marched. And that's what you did, you know.

Q: And how do you--how did the police march versus the Fire Department?

JRF: Well, they were up in the front. And, yeah, I could have been there, but I would have had to wear a fireman--a policeman's uniform. And I liked--and I liked being a fireman, too. So, I went to the Fire Department, you know.

Q: Do you march better than the firefighters?

JRF: No. I don't think so? I mean, you mean the Police Department?

Q: At the parade. I mean, are you more disciplined?

JRF: Well, we--we try to keep in step and you'll yell at the guy along side of you and up in front of you, "Get in step. Get in step," you know. When you're going past the people, you want to be--everybody wants to be the same. Just like when you're in the Army, you know, when they call cadence. You know, you want to be right. So, we keep in time with the drum. It makes you feel good to see the people clapping for you.

Q: Besides the parades, what--what other events do you take pride in--in either department?

JRF: Well, anything--anything to help the public. I don't know any other events. They got one coming up now. It's Pride in Port. I try to go to that. But, you know, sometimes I have other things going on, too, with these--with my daughters and all their kids, there's always something going on.

Q: You have grandchildren?

JRF: Yes, I have six. Three and three.

Q: Three boys and three girls?

JRF: Yeah, three boys, three girls.

Q: And do you find that rewarding now?

JRF: Oh, yeah. You know, as soon as they see you, they jump all over you. "Poppie!"
(laughs). My wife passed away about two and a half years ago, so I'm for them, you know. Because I try to do--be for both, you know.

Q: Going back to the Fire Department a minute, what kind of tough, salty language did they use in the firehouse?

JRF: Oh! Tough! (Laughs). Sometimes a lot of swearing. Oh, yeah! Not all the time. But they try to be gentlemen, because, you know, you never know if somebody in the public is going to be there. You know what I mean? And you can't yell at the fires and stuff. They might yell a little bit, but in the firehouse, they do a little swearing. Not too much.

Q: Is it the same in the Police Department?

JRF: Yeah, yeah. In the back room, yeah. But that's about it. Or maybe out--out in the street. Two cars might be talking to each other. But not--not too much. Not too much.

Q: Is there some sort of macho element in that for the men?

JRF: Nah, I don't think so. I don't think so.

Q: What--what do you foresee for the future of Port for the firefighters, for the volunteer firefighters?

JRF: Well, it's getting tougher and tougher to get young men to come in. Because of all the training that they have to do. Most--most young guys today, they can't afford to live here in Port Washington. So, what they're doing is they're finding other places and they're going out like--and we're having recruitment problems as far as getting young guys to come in now. Last night, in our company, we elected three--three new men. One is a father. His son came in with him. And another young guy. But Atlantic, we're-- apparently, we seem to be getting a lot more guys than the other companies. They like ...

Q: Why is that?

JRF: They like to come to our company. I don't know. We're the--we're the leaders (laughs). We're in charge. But, I don't know. They like--they like Atlantics. And then, you know,

if you have a buddy that came to Atlantic, you're going to come here. You're not going to go to another company, because you're going to go where your friends are. And that's what happens. That's how they draw them in. Then, they have the Explorers that they have. They're trying to get recruitment through them. But that's tough, too, because there's not enough young guys that actually want to do it. And young guys today, even if they have one job, then maybe some of them have to have two jobs, just to pay rent wherever they are. So it's pretty hard.

Q: What do you think about the younger generation who wants to do away with the three companies and just have one big company?

JRF: I think, in the future--I don't know how far in the future--I think it's going to probably end up that way. We're going to be all one--we're going to be all one company. That's what I think.

Q: How do the old-timers feel about that?

JRF: Well, they're not happy about it, because everybody has their own company, and everybody's in--like we have Trustees. They have their Trustees. Everybody's like their own group. Each company is incorp--is a corporation. So, we--you know, you're not--no, they're not going to be happy about incorporating it all into one. It might end up like they might end up with maybe one big building, like where we are now. And they might

all have--stay in their own companies, but they would all have their own different meeting nights. So, but then, everybody would use the same building though. But that's what they're talking about way in the future. I don't know how--you know--and old-timers, they don't--well, they're not all really old-timers. They're all about my age. I'm not old (laughs). I'm only sixty-nine. But, you know, I don't think they're--I don't think they're going to go, you know, get mad about it. Things are going to just fall into place as they go. Because if you don't have enough guys, what do you do? You'll probably end up someday having--hiring some people just to work the day shifts or something, when everybody's working, maybe. I don't know. Like Great Neck and Garden City, I think. Glen Cove. They have paid guys now, too.

Q: Do you still go when you hear the fire horn or are you retired?

JRF: I haven't been going. No. I got--last night, I got an award--or I got a, not an award. I got a--how can I say it?--well, they praised me, because I've got forty-four years now.

Q: You had a commendation of some sort?

JRF: Well, it's not a commendation. It's just a--it's a piece of paper that says that I got forty--I got forty-four years. Now, next year--next year, forty-five--then I'll get a star. So you get a star every five years. But they just announced it last night that I've got forty-four years.

Q: So where do you place that star?

JRF: On the sleeve of your uniform. You're going to--they're talking about maybe having-- change the stars and it's a little star that you--you put it through the metal. You know, it's like brass. But now they're talking about having them sewed on to make--you know, so you don't have to have all these stars and gold all over the place.

Q: What do you really want to be remembered for?

JRF: Oh, that I was--well, that I was a good guy (laughs). And I helped--helped build the building. And, like I say, I love being a Trustee. The--you get--you get the feeling that, you know, you did something. Even stuff, like it breaks off, but then I have a lot of people I call and you get the feeling like, well, you did something and it came out good. So ...

Q: How did being a fireman, firefighter, or a police officer affect your family life in your, you know, when your children were young?

JRF: Oh, yeah. Well, when you--well, actually, when you're home eating dinner and that fire alarm goes off, you have to make points. You have to make--you have to make points. You just can't shrug it off and say, "Oh, I'll go to the next one." You don't even think

about that, really. You just go. And everybody's looking, "Well where are you going?" "I'm going to the fire. I'll be right back. Just keep my food warm, if you can," you know. And then you go. Usually, like in a half hour, you're back. But everybody got used to it. So, nobody--they never gave it a second thought that where am I going? what am I doing? you know.

Q: Did your wife ever complain?

JRF: No. No.

Q: Did your children feel that they never saw you?

JRF: No, they were happy that I was a fireman. They could tell their teachers in school that their father was a policeman and a fireman. Right? So, they were happy. Everybody was--yeah, they were proud that, you know, what I was doing.

Q: Was your social life mainly with firefighters and police officers?

JRF: Yes. Yeah, we--more so with the Fire Department, because you have your annual dinner. They'll have a--oh, friends get together at their houses and stuff like that. So, yeah, you--more social with the Fire Department?

Q: Why is the police less social, do you think?

JRF: Because the Police Department, like policemen come from all over. They don't--not only from Port Washington. They're from out of town. They're all over the place. So, it's pretty hard to get together and have social affairs, events with them, compared to everything's here in Port Washington. And so that's--that's, you know, I hung out with the guys with the Fire Department, you know.

Q: I just was--I'm wondering, does your faith have anything to do with what you do on your job?

JRF: My faith? I don't think so. I'm--you do say a prayer once in a while. That's for sure. If you get a--like, you see a big fire, you'll say a prayer to yourself, hope--you know, I hope everybody comes out okay. Nobody gets hurt. And that's--well, we were, all through school, and we're all, you know, going with the Police Department and all, you--you think about it. At the moment, sometimes, you don't think about it. But then, as you have a few minutes to calm down, you say, "Oh, thank God, nobody got hurt," you know? It really does, it helps.

Q: Do you carry a lucky charm?

JRF: No.

Q: Are you superstitious in any way?

JRF: No, but I think about Friday the 13th, a lot. You hope that nothing happens, you know. Never did. But, it's just that you were brought up with that superstition. It's like, well, what's going to happen today? You hope nothing.

Q: Did you skip the fire calls on Friday the 13th (laughs)?

JRF: No, no. No. No. Nope. And then, you know, a lot of times when you're working with the Police Department, we used to worry about the full moon. An old Sergeant, Andy Jessen, he, when I first came on, he said, "You're going to be working," but, he says, "when we have the full moon, one or two days before the full moon--one or two days--you're going to see--we're going to have a lot of loony, loony people." And I said, "Oh, come on." Well, he proved to me that he was right.

Q: Why? What happened?

JRF: Because people act funny. You don't realize it, you know, when you're working. But you get the calls, and it's funny how the luna, it really draws. It really does something. I notice it even with my cat. My cat. One day or two days before a moon and after, he will always--he'll always be very odd and crazy-like, doing different things that he never did, you'd never see. And I mean, that was the only way I was--I never believed it until

(laughs) I was shown it. So, I still say it. It has something to do with the moon. Really.

Has that draw (laughs).

Q: Are there any odd characters in the Department? Real cut-ups?

JRF: Well, I guess, maybe the younger guys, there's some, maybe there were, but I don't really--I don't see any really crazy stuff, really.

Q: Earlier days compared to now?

JRF: Yeah, earlier days, guys were fooling around a lot more. But now, I don't see anything too--like that anymore. But then I don't hang around with the young guys also. You know what I mean? All the older group is upstairs, we do our board work and stuff. The young guys are downstairs working on the trucks. So, I don't know what--how they operate and how they act.

Q: How does it work out that some of them have girlfriends that are in the Department and that they kind of work with them?

JRF: Yeah.

Q: Does that work out well?

JRF: Oh, I think so. Yeah. It seems to--it seems to help a lot. Because, then, you don't get the other people making comments as to "Well, we don't want a lady in here," you know, because you'll hurt somebody's feelings. So that's how everybody gets along together now. It's good (laughs).

Q: What do you think is the importance of this oral history project that we're doing with the Fire Department?

JRF: I don't really know. It's going to--it's going to--no doubt, it's going to make everybody in Port Washington realize how this Department started and its history. It's going to be for the future of people that are looking into this. And maybe coming into the town, they want to look at the future, or I'm sorry, of the history of what went on here. Because there's a lot of stuff that I don't remember that went on before me, and I look at old pictures and stuff, and then you see what was going on. You know, like, so that's how you learn, you learn about the Department.

Q: What do you think future generations should really remember the Port either firefighters or police for? What would you like them to really remember about the two?

JRF: The good job that we do, and that's about it. They're not--even if it was a paid fireman, they're going to--they're going to still get a good job. But we're all volunteers, and we're

doing it for free. We don't--you know, yeah, we have a dinner once a year, and, but that's about--that's the most compensation you get. Just being there and doing it.

Q: Do you have anything you'd like to add other than what you've said?

JRF: I think that that about covers everything.

Q: Thank you so much.

JRF: You're welcome.

Q: This is an addendum to the piece just before. John, have you ever been in the police line when there's been a demonstration?

JRF: Yes. We had one big demonstration at Thompson Industries. We had to sit down there in the police cars. We had--they had a lot of union people down there. And that was down on Channel Drive. And that's how I--actually from just sitting there in the car, studied for Sergeant.

Q: You what?

JRF: I studied for my Sergeant's test. And we had to be--had to be there 24/7, because these people were marching back and forth, and they wouldn't let any trucks or anybody into the--into the building to go to work. And they had these agitators there from New York City from the unions. And they--they would antagonize the people. They would antagonize the police officers. We had a lot of problems with these people down there. And then, it finally straightened out. But I was there a couple of weeks, I think, and we-- I studied. I studied while we sat in the car. The guys took turns working--working the line so they'd let the trucks and stuff in. Then we had another experience down at the incinerator once, when they were trying to--where the dump is right now, where they closed it up. We--people down there were marching. They wouldn't let the dump trucks in. And we all go called to go down there. And a guy got--started bothering, like yelling and screaming and got in my face. And I grabbed him. I threw him in the police car. Then, the future Chief--he was a Lieutenant then--came over there and got the guy and we straightened it out, and I let him go (laughs). And that was it. But, yeah, it--the demonstrations were scary because you never knew what was going to happen. Anything could happen. Could--the union people, they're trying to--they want to get in. And they'll do anything. They have guys that they call goons. And they do start the trouble. They'll call you anything. They'll just get you so mad that they want you to, you know, swing at them or do something. They want--they want to get people to notice them. And that's what happens. But, yeah, I was on a couple of those.

Q: Do you feel, at those times, that you're so powerful? How do you restrain yourself?

JRF: I still think I'm a police officer. I see things going wrong up on Main Street or anywhere in Port Washington, I would just--I would love to get out there and sometimes do the traffic or show the cop how to do the traffic. But I--I hold myself back, and I go down and I talk to myself (laughs). But, if I see something wrong and I don't like it, I get on the phone and I'll call. And I'll call headquarters and tell them that they have a problem somewhere and I think they better do something about it. And they're telling me, "Okay, Lieutenant. We'll be right on it." They still call me Lieutenant (laughs).

Q: And do they do anything?

JRF: Yeah, yeah. Sure. I'll call them right back, if they don't (laughs). I will. But, I know, you know, most of the guys up there that are all the bosses now. They were under me when I was there. So ...

Q: Are you ever taught anything about ethics, when you're in firefighting school or on the Police Academy, about what's right and what's wrong, from an ethical point of view?

JRF: Yeah, they teach you that. They have classes for that stuff. But it's up to the individual, too, to--it's a lot of common sense involved in all of this. And some people don't have the common sense. They don't have common sense. And that gets them in trouble, you know. You've got to know--you just--I don't know how you do it, but you just do it.

And, you know right away if you're doing something wrong. You know right away.

That's the way you're brought up, right? And they--they teach you--they can teach you a whole lot of things, but it's still up to the individual to sort it all out and try to do the right thing.

Q: And how do you instill that common sense into the individuals?

JRF: Well, you try to train them. You don't yell at them; you try to train them. If the person is doing something wrong, you try to explain to him what he did wrong and hope that he don't do it again. And that's--that's--it's like every time you teach somebody something, we used to call it training. It wasn't, you know, just to yell at him ... [END OF TAPE] ...