

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Frank Pavlak  
Protection Engine 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: Today is May 20th, 2004. This is an interview with Frank Pavlak. My name is Sally Olds. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library.

Can you please say your name.

Frank Pavlak: Frank Pavlak.

Q: And what company are you a member of?

FP: Protection Engine Company Number One.

Q: What was it like for you, when you first came to Port Washington?

FP: I was probably about seven years old. And I mainly remember the beach, and I used to spend a lot of time at the beach. Little League. Port Washington was growing at that point. I can remember the Soundview Shopping Center, when it was basically just woods. There used to be two radar towers up there. We used to go picking blackberries. And I can remember it coming down, with all the shrubbery and all the buildings going up. I spent a number of years working at Taste Freeze, which was owned by the Zwerlein family, at the entrance to Manhasset Isle. So that being right across the street, it afforded me a great opportunity to watch it go down and come up. So, we spent a lot of time with our bikes, riding all over town. I got to know the area.

Q: Did anything occur during your childhood, that made you want to become a firefighter?

FP: Not really. I had an uncle who was a member of the Roslyn Fire Department. But I was pretty young at that time. And I do remember going to the firehouse with him. My beginnings with the Fire Department really related to the Zwerlein family. Working for Bill Zwerlein Senior all those years, I was exposed constantly to the Fire Department. Eventually, his three sons all joined the Fire Department. So I was around all of that. But I didn't join right away.

Q: What do you mean you were exposed to the Fire Department?

FP: When we were at work, a lot of them would be going when the fire whistle would go off, they would leave the store and respond to the fire alarms. A lot of the members of the Fire Department would come down to the ice cream store. I can remember when the Fire Department or the Fire Company would have picnics, we had a great big walk-in refrigerator box at the ice cream store, and usually the day before it was loaded with all of the material and the food for the picnic. So, the people from the Fire Department were constantly in and out. And I got to know a lot of them. But, as I said, I did not join until much later. A lot of people my age, when we were seniors in high school, when you turned eighteen, there were a number of friends of mine who did join the Fire Department. But I knew that I was not going to be here after graduation. I was going to

go to college in California. So, I never really entertained the thought of joining. It wasn't until about five years after high school that, when I came back to town after college and the Army, and it was actually my wife who recommended that I join the Fire Department. Every now and then, I remind her of that fact. And so I didn't join the Fire Department till I was almost twenty-five. And it was just before I got married.

Q: So the wife suggested it, or you thought of it and she said "That's a great idea"?

FP: Yeah, I, basically, I remained very friendly with the Zwerlein family. Still am. I was almost like part of their family. So, even though I was away from here, I was still exposed to the Fire Department and its activities. And, so when I did come back to town on a permanent basis, my wife just, one day, thought it would be a good idea if I might join the Fire Department. I don't remember the exact reasoning behind that. I wasn't hanging out at the Fire House or going down here. I was actually working in Manhattan. But, shortly thereafter, I started working in Roslyn, which afforded me the opportunity to be in the general area on a regular basis.

Q: What made you decide to join Protection Engine Company?

FP: Most of, mainly because of the Zwerlein family. And I had three or four people that I was friendly with who belonged to Protection. And so it just seemed logical that I would. Actually, Bill Zwerlein, Senior's, brother, Robert "Zeke" Zwerlein, was the one who

sponsored me. And some of the connection had to do with playing softball. Zeke played a lot of softball, and so did I. And ...

Q: Do you remember who the captain was at the time that you joined?.

FP: Yes. Al Wyant.

Q: And the Chief of the Department?

FP: Was John Edmundson, who also happened to be from Protection.

Q: And how did you feel when you first joined. What was it like for you?

FP: It was a little different. It was difficult to get involved with all the activities, all the training requirements, and it took up a lot of time. Not as much time as it takes up now, when I look back. But it was just a whole new situation ...

Q: Well, why do you think you ...

FP: ... even though you see fire trucks, and so on and so forth, everybody thinks, well, you just on the fire truck. And that's not the case. So getting acclimated to all the members and---I don't want to use, I shouldn't use the word "accepted", but obviously, when you

join any organization, you have to get accepted and make new friends. So there was that learning period.

Q: How much time did you have to commit at the beginning?

FP: Well, we would have work nights every Thursday night and meeting nights, but there were various points during the year, like at this time of the year with Memorial Day, where you might be down at the fire house every night, cleaning the equipment, getting ready for the parade Saturdays and Sundays. There were just a lot of activities going on. On Saturdays, there were the tournament drills. Although I never took part in them, we would go to them. And usually following the tournament, there would be a parade. You'd take part in that. Sundays were devoted to playing softball on the Fire Department team.

Q: And what about the training? How much time did that take?

FP: We had a lot of internal training back then. We would go out to Bethpage in Nassau County to our training center, but that was usually only a couple of times a year. It's not like it is now. Back then, they really didn't offer that many programs, classes. We would go out to Bethpage for actual firefighting. But during the winters, we would have classroom instruction, and those usually lasted for maybe four or five weeks, six weeks. So ...

Q: And how many times a week?

FP: Once a week.

Q: Do you remember any of the specific things that you learned any of the specific things that you learned during training that left the biggest impression on you?

FP: Just being exposed to the actual fire situations out at Bethpage. They would actually light fires, and you would go into fire, live burn situations. Of course, they were all under a controlled atmosphere. There were people right standing behind you and guiding you. I think a lot of it at that time was geared to helping you overcome your fears and confinement and things of that nature. I remember one of my very first fires here in town was in the Port Washington News building right here on Lower Main Street. And I think I had probably been in the fire company for a few months. And it was a basement fire, and eventually the Captain suggested that myself and another guy, who was also new, come down into the basement. The fire was under control. We were overhauling, making sure that all sections of the fire were out. And it was pretty smokey. We, neither one of us—myself and the other new guy—neither one of us had breathing apparatus on. And when we got down in the basement, I vividly remember till this day the Captain standing there lighting up a cigarette (laughs).

Q: Did he do that on purpose?

FP: No, it was just a natural reaction. They were used to it. And, so it just kind of struck me as funny, because here we were in this smokey situation, and he was lighting up a cigarette. We still laugh about that till this day.

Q: Did you always wear your breathing apparatus after that?

FP: No, I wasn't actually ever really into wearing breathing apparatus. My glasses—I wear glasses. And it was usually the members who wore the breathing apparatus were the first ones at this fire. And people will jokingly say that I was never the first one at a fire.

Q: Were there other things you remember about the training? What were your instructors like?

FP: Most of the instructors were internal, from within the Department, company. They had anywhere from thirty years of experience to ten years of experience. But they were very good. Everything was by their experience.

Q: And then did you have to pass tests before you were fully a member of the company, in terms of the things that you learned during the training?

FP: Yeah. When you--the night that you get voted into the Fire Company, you're really not allowed to respond on any apparatus. We have to wait until the papers come back from Town Hall—the Town of North Hempstead, at which point the Workman's Compensation has been enacted. So that usually took about thirty days. So it was kind of a period, which was good, that you couldn't just jump on one of the engines. You could conceivably go to the fire, but you would remain outside and help out.

Q: Did anybody flunk out at this point?

FP: None that I ever remember. We would have to take written tests. There weren't any real tests that you had to pass of a physical nature. Eventually, you would discover what your capabilities were, and the officers would discover what your capabilities were.

Q: Like what?

FP: Like, for instance, if you didn't wear breathing apparatus or you were uncomfortable wearing it, they wouldn't necessarily grab you and throw you into the building. There were plenty of things to do outside.

Q: Like what?

FP: Looking after the hydrant. Stretching hose. Helping with the ladder operations, possibly.

Q: Do you remember what the firefighting equipment was like when you first started and how that changed during your years with the Department?

FP: Most of it really did not change. It pretty much remains the same, other than with the technical equipment. Of course, the breathing apparatus is greatly advanced. The engine operations and trucks themselves have greatly changed.

Q: What about the clothes you wore when you went to fight a fire?

FP: That's a lot, that was a lot different. Back then, we wore hip boots. We had the turn-out coats and the helmets and the gloves. To a very large degree, if it was a very hot day and we were up in the woods or whatever, you were allowed to take your coats off. Nowadays, they don't let you do that anymore.

Q: Turn-out coats?

FP: The fire coats. They were heavy, as they are today. Back then, we had liners that we would only put in during the winter. The equipment was...there have been great advances in the actual protective gear. But back then, it was more shielding you from the elements than anything else.

Q: Not so much shielding you from the fire?

FP: No. Well, it did to a degree. You know, possibly embers and so on and so forth falling down, or [parts of] ceilings falling down. More and more so to protect you from the elements.

Q: What other fires, besides that first one, particularly stand out in your mind?

FP: I would say most of the really big ones would be in the mid-'70s. Four or five years after I got in. Which was the period of time with the boatyard fires and the lumber yard fire. Those were experiences of being there all night and into the next morning. As I recall, some of them were during the wintertime. I remember when the Riviera in Manorhaven went on fire. And it was very cold, and some of the couplings weren't quite closed, so we had a spray coming out. And eventually, the hose just kind of froze right to the ground. Then, later on, we had several inches of snow on top of that. So those were the really big ones that I remember.

Q: What was the Riviera?

FP: It was a big nightclub and marina. I think it had its heyday in the '40s and in the '50s.

Q: So with that fire, did you have to stay out all night?

FP: Pretty much so. I was outside, I may have wound up inside at some point, but I basically remember being outside with the lines that we had stretched.

Q: Was it just your company fighting that fire ...

FP: No.

Q: ... or did the others ...

FP: No, certainly not. All the companies responded. These were all very major fires. Whether you stayed there all night or not depended upon whether a vehicle from your company was committed and couldn't pick up as easily as some of the other trucks that had gotten there afterwards. And it's difficult to remember what trucks were there first or last.

Q: Were you ever in a fire in which you saved a life?

FP: No.

Q: Did you ever receive an award ...

FP: No.

Q: ... for your work with the Fire Department?

FP: No. Most of my—after four or five years in the company, I really gravitated more to doing administrative things. Yes, I would continue going to fires, but it became less and less as I was spending more time in administrative functions.

Q: What was your best day with the Fire Department?

FP: In what respect?

Q: Maybe in the sense of satisfaction of a job well done.

FP: I really can't think of anything in particular off the top of my head.

Q: How about your worst day?

FP: Probably having been out at an all-night fire and going to work the next day. That wasn't necessarily the worst day. That was just something you coped with.

Q: Were you ever at a fire when not enough firefighters showed up?

FP: No. I never experienced that.

Q: Do you ever dream about fires?

FP: No.

Q: Or have you ever dreamed about fires?

FP: No. None that I recall.

Q: Was there anything special that you did for good luck?

FP: Not other than playing softball. No, I didn't have any superstitions.

Q: Now, I've read about some of the kind of funny calls that the Fire Department sometimes gets. Do you remember ever being called out on anything that fit that description?

FP: No, nothing off the top of my head. There were probably some strange calls as to why we were there, but I don't remember anything in particular. Chasing cats out of trees and things of that nature. I don't remember anything along those lines.

Q: Can you tell me about some of the offices that you held in the Department?

FP: After I'd been in the company for about five years, I was asked by our company Captain to take over the Secretary's position of the Fire Department. Back then, we had a Chief from each company, and then there were three additional posts. There was a Fire Marshal, Secretary, and Treasurer. The Treasurer basically always came from Flower Hill Hose Company; the Fire Marshal always came from Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company; and the Secretary came from Protection. There was a time, back in the—up until about 1940—where Protection had the Fire Marshal and Atlantic had the Secretary. And I guess they couldn't get somebody to fill one of the posts, and they swapped. So I became the Fire Department Secretary. And did that for about six years. About two years after, or actually about a year after I took over as Department Secretary, I was elected as a Trustee of Protection, a position I still hold.

Q: Okay, can we go back a minute? What did you do as secretary? What were your duties?

FP: Most of it was going through the mail everyday, dispersing whatever had to be dispersed to usually the Chiefs. Taking the minutes at the monthly Fire Board meetings, the annual Department meeting, any special Department meetings. Sending out all of the mailings that would have to go out, any notifications. Sending out the correspondence, usually either at the direction of the Board or at the direction of the Chief. You know, they're really to kind of assist the Chief. And ...

Q: And were there any major controversies that you were involved in as Secretary?

FP: None that I recall. It was a relatively quiet period. Towards the end of my being Secretary, my term, in the beginning of establishing the Fire Medic Company, which would take over all of the ambulance operations, but I was just involved in the very beginning of that.

Q: Okay, and then you became a trustee.

FP: Right. I was ...

Q: Tell me ...

FP: ... actually doing, actually being a trustee and Department Secretary at the same time. And when I became a trustee, I'd only been in the company for about four years, which was unheard of. Up until that point, most of the trustees have been either ex-foremen, which is the same as captain, or a captain. And most of them had been in the company for probably twenty, twenty-five years plus. There was a little reaction when I was nominated to run, from some of the older guys, that was not very well accepted. And they got one of the older guys to run against me, and they said, "Gee, you know, he's a pretty qualified guy. Do you want to maybe consider not running." And I just kind of,

there were enough people that said, "Go ahead." And so I wound up winning the election, and we have five trustees, and it was kind of interesting for about my first year where some of them wouldn't really talk to me. There were one or two that took me under their wing. But after about a year, I was accepted. They really didn't know what, you know, this young person was going to do or how he was going to react. Most of the other trustees had come from a long line of family members in the Fire Department, and I was never really exposed to that. So eventually they did accept me.

Q: So why do you think they proposed you for being a trustee, when you were so much younger and you'd had less time in the Department? What in your previous service do you think accounted for that?

FP: I would say with some of the work that I was doing on the Department level as Secretary. I've been always business oriented, and being a trustee is business oriented. Trustees are in charge of all Company property and equipment, finances, legal affairs. So it was really more of the middle-aged guys who were recommended, and I guess I got the backing from the younger people, as well. Although I must have gotten votes from some of the old-timers, because they really outnumbered the younger guys. And, so ...

Q: So what issues do you remember dealing with as a trustee?

FP: Well, we got thrown in, I got thrown into, immediately, our building. We were at the

beginning stages of doing a major restoration. The first one since the 1930s. And that took up a lot of time. And the more and more we got involved in it, the more I was dealing with the attorneys and the banks and financing. And I should point out that I was not alone; there were other people doing this as well. And that kind of evolved into dealing with the contractors. Here again, not by myself. We had chairpeople. And they both had construction backgrounds. So that was probably my first major, because that lasted for about two, three years. And then, after that, things just started flowing in.

Q: On that building project, was the firehouse at the same location where it is now?

FP: Yes. That's still on South Washington Street. There was a vacant lot next door to us. So we had bought the house and ripped it down. And our firehouse has been in the same location since 1910. And the only major thing that I remember is there was a lot of discussion back and forth as to whether we should keep the main firehouse on South Washington Street. We built an annex down on Channel Drive, Port Washington North, in the early '60s. And there were a group of people who said, "Well, maybe we should really expand down there." But after doing some exploration and statistics and so on, it was felt that that building was serving its purpose the way it was and that we should build up here. I remember one of the considerations was the bad weather. We get hurricanes and so on and so forth; at least on South Washington Street, we're on high ground. And we're more centrally located up here.

Q: So that was one of the decisions that you were involved with?

FP: Correct.

Q: Yes.

FP: We did have some opposition to us putting the building there, expanding it. Some of the neighbors didn't like the idea. And I can recall that they went out and got a petition saying that we shouldn't really build there. We, in turn, went out and got a petition countering that one.

Q: Now, when you say that, you mean on South Washington?

FP: Right. They weren't in favor of us expanding.

Q: What were their concerns?

FP: Well, that we were too close to the school and the traffic. But one of the things that we pointed out at the time was if we're that close to a school, there's a lot of exposure with all the children and so on, so we can get to the school that much quicker. And there were a group of people that thought, "Oh, my goodness. They're going to put in a big parking lot." And our original plans had a small parking lot on the side of the building, on the

Webster Avenue side. But the rest of it was going to be green grass and trees. And so we had these two factions. We had one group that wanted the green grass and trees, and by groups, I mean residents. And the other group that wanted off-street parking. Well, the green grass and trees won out. And we eventually, about ten years ago, bought the house directly behind us, which is on Webster and Carlton, where we eventually ripped the house down and put a parking lot in.

Q: So is there usually enough parking for all the firefighters who come to meetings, or has that been a problem?

FP: No, it's pretty much been okay with the parking lot, and then there's the whole stretch of street behind the landmark building has always been reserved for—it says, "Parking Firemen Only," so we're allowed to park there.

Q: And what are your relationships like with the neighbors now?

FP: They've been pretty good. Every now and then, we run into a problem. I usually make a habit of when I know that somebody has moved into the neighborhood in the immediate proximity, I will go up and introduce myself and give them my phone numbers and let them know if they have a problem or a question to feel free to give me a call. And ...

Q: And do they?

FP: Well, we had an incident a couple of months ago, where a couple had just moved in. And I guess it was about ten o'clock at night, and they're moving trucks around, and the garage door wasn't open, so they backed the truck up onto the ramp and started blowing on the air horn to alert the guys inside. Well, of course, it woke up the neighbors' children, and so... We do have a big air horn. I say a "big." It's a very small air horn actually, very loud air horn, on the roof of our building, which is part of the alerting system of our town, coupled with the sirens. And that air horn goes off. And, eventually, I guess, people get used to it. It's like living near the sirens, or I guess if you live in the city and ...

Q: So were there ever any ...

FP: ... by the old elevated subways, or whatever. They eventually get used to it. But, for the most part, we make a big attempt to get along with the neighbors, because we're all, you know, homeowners or live in a house. So we try and, you know, make sure that on work nights that the music isn't playing loud, and we try and confine our activities to a certain period of time during the day or night. And if we're having a party, we try and confine it to a reasonable ending point.

Q: Like what?

FP: Well, usually about one o'clock in the morning, which we feel is reasonable. Some of the neighbors may not feel it's reasonable, but we don't go much beyond that.

Q: And, now, you mentioned music on working nights. What kind of music?

FP: Well, we have a stereo system in the truck room, and the guys will put it on.

Q: Oh, so it's not for marching practice or anything like that.

FP: No, no, no.

Q: Okay. Yeah, so can we go back a little to when you were working as Secretary and Trustee. How much time were you putting in, say on a weekly basis?

FP: Not so much with the Department Secretary position. Most of the activities with that were directly related to the monthly meeting or the annual meeting. You know, you know, you got situations where something might come up, but it's well maybe a few hours per week. But it had its peaks and valleys.

Q: Now, you mentioned that you sometimes have reminded your wife that she was the one who suggested you join the Fire Department in the first place. How has your work with the Fire Department impacted your family life?

FP: Well, there's no question that it has an impact. We'd have to kind of try and juggle as the kids came along, activities. We used to plan our vacations around firehouse activities. If we had plans to go to Florida in January, February, or March, we'd have to make sure that we weren't gone during the period where we would have a company dinner. During the summers, it was in between softball games and that schedule. Family gets involved with the firehouse. My wife belonged to the Ladies' Auxiliary for a number of years. We no longer have a functioning Ladies' Auxiliary. I guess the members are just getting older, and a lot of the younger people coming in were not married, so the membership just steadily decreased. And our kids were always involved. I mean, they would come down to the firehouse for functions. Basically, any of the tournament drills, softball games, picnics, the families were always involved.

Q: How many children do you have?

FP: Three. They're all grown.

Q: And their names and ages?

FP: Bill is twenty-nine, and Christina is twenty-eight, and Barbara is twenty-two. My wife might correct me on that.

Q: Can you tell me about your involvement with the softball team?

FP: Well, I started playing. I had played a lot of softball before I got into the Fire Department, and baseball. And I joined the team the first summer that I was in, and I continued doing that for about twenty-five years. I was a player for a good portion of that time and basically took over managing the team, oh, about maybe two years after I had joined the team. And for all intents and purposes, managed the team throughout the twenty-five years. There were a couple of periods where I gave it up and let somebody else do it, but I was still playing. And that got increasingly active. When I started, we would play double-headers on Sundays within our own battalion, basically in the Town of Hempstead. And after the games, we would have hot dogs and hamburgers and so on, with the other Department. And then we started getting into softball tournaments, and that increased as years went by. I'm trying to remember. Yeah, there might have been one Fire Department softball tournament a year. And then, it eventually got up to about seven or eight. And those took up a lot of time, because they weren't around here. They were mainly on the South Shore, Glen Cove, Huntington, out on the Island. And to a large degree, you would leave home on a Friday night and go play a game and then come back after the game that night, then be gone early the next morning. And be gone all that day and that night and then into Sunday. And in between that, we had a big team. We had a lot of guys and ...

Q: How many?

FP: There were about twenty-five on the team. And I guess in the mid-'70s, we started playing in another, a local league, in addition to our Sunday Fire Department league. We started playing down at Manorhaven Beach one night a week, double-headers. And then we also started playing in the P.A.L. League down by the Sousa Band Shell. And it seems to me at one point we were actually playing in both of those leagues. And eventually, we kind of went back and forth. I know the P.A.L. League folded, and we went back to the Manorhaven League. So it became a very time-consuming thing, not to mention all the phone calls. Then in the mid-'80s, the New York State Firemen's Association started a State softball tournament, and we went to that, which is held in Hudson, New York, which is where the New York State Volunteer Firemen's Hall and the Museum is. So from '86 through '91, we won the tournament six years in a row. And that was—there were times where you might wind up playing six, seven games in one day. They were double-elimination tournaments, so you might win your first game on Friday and go back on Saturday and lose that game. Then once you fall into the losers bracket, you start playing multiple games, almost one right after the other to work your way back to the winners, to the finals of the losers' bracket. And then at the very end, the final team left in the losers' bracket plays the team that's left in the winner's bracket, a best two out of three. But those were a lot of fun. It was strictly a weekend of softball and nothing else.

Q: Did any of your kids play softball?

FP: Well, my son played baseball for a while. My daughter played softball in school, my older daughter. And I can remember going out, buying her a brand new glove, and, I think it was the following year, she came home from school very timidly one day and handed me the glove and said she wanted to play lacrosse (laughs), so ...

Q: What's the name of the softball team?

FP: We never had a nickname. The drill team always had a nickname. The current drill team, which is comprised of all the companies. But back, I think they started in the late '60s. Maybe around '68 or so. Prior to that, each of the firefighting companies—the Fire Medic Company wasn't in existence then. Each company had their own drill team, and they all had their own names.

Q: Excuse me, I have to turn the tape.

FP: Go ahead. ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: Are you still playing softball?

FP: No, I finally gave that up. Never thought it would happen. Neither did anybody else. But I guess about six years ago, I finally gave it up. I started getting away from it. There

would be times that the team would ask me to go like upstate and manage them upstate. And I basically would help them manage. At that point, some of the younger guys had kind of taken over. There's a lot more involved when you go to the tournaments than just physically managing the team on the field. There are line-ups that have to be made, and the logistics, and so they really didn't want to get involved in that. And I would have people that would help me. Some of the older guys (that I eventually became), would help out with getting food and if we were in between games and we were running low on water or ice, actually some of the wives, girlfriends would just hop in their cars and go off to the store and come back. So there was a joint effort.

Q: Has the season started this year?

FP: Yes it has. But we really don't have a team anymore. They don't play in many leagues. Our battalion league folded probably about ten years ago, and the group of guys that comprise the team now will really only go to about two or three tournaments a year. For the most part, they're playing on other teams. We started getting, even though we went for a period of time where we could have fielded two teams, that started decreasing and sometimes it was difficult to field one team. A lot of the younger guys were working two jobs. They were working shift work. They were either police, career firemen. So it got a little difficult. So there are a number of departments that have the same problem.

Q: So do you think that the problems that you had fielding the team, the softball team, were

the same as the ones that make it harder to recruit volunteers these days?

FP: Very definitely so. They go hand in hand.

Q: So what have you done to recruit volunteers? Are you actively involved in that?

FP: No, I'm not. That's really something that the Chiefs should respond to when you interview them. But the only way we kind of, quote, recruit within the company is try to talk friends, relatives, neighbors into joining. The overall recruitment is done via the Fire Department. Like I said, the Chiefs can react better to that than I can.

Q: Have you ever talked anybody into joining?

FP: Not really. The only two people that have joined, both my brother-in-laws—they're much younger than I am—they both also had friends in the Fire Department, but they both joined Protection. Growing up, they were somewhat exposed to Protection, as I was growing up. Both of my brother-in-laws would come to all the softball games in the younger years. My older brother-in-law, he actually used to keep score for us for a number of years, and my in-laws used to come to all of the softball games. So, they both joined. Both, neither one is in the Fire Department any longer. The younger brother-in-law is still an honorary member of Protection, but both of them moved out of town.

Q: Well, why do you think your wife suggested that you join the Fire Department?

FP: It was probably a weak moment. I don't really know (laughs). We had just—we were about to get married. My wife was teaching in town. I was about to start work in Roslyn. We were here. We have always been kind of community-oriented, and we had friends that were in the Fire Department. And so I guess she just thought that would be a good idea. As I said, sometimes I remind her of that when I've been at five meetings, you know, five nights in a row.

Q: I know you've served on some committees for the Department. Can you tell me about what you did in connection with them, and which committees they were?

FP: By being a trustee, trustees are automatically on any committee—I'm referring to Protection—that is going to be involved with finances. We'll take a truck committee. It's going to cost money. We have a regular base committee. There are some of the trustees historically are into mechanical things. They're into fire engines. I'm not. When they have committee meetings, I don't really go. I don't have anything to add to it ...

Q: Now the Truck Committee does what?

FP: They will gather all the specifications for a new truck and talk to manufacturers, solicit prices. All of that kind of thing. And the only time that I get involved with it is that

we—nowadays, we finance the vehicles. I don't know of anybody who goes out and pays cash for a fire truck. We're talking at least on the average four hundred thousand dollars. That's for a pumper. You get into aerial ladders, you're talking probably double that. So we finance them, and the manufacturer that we have been using has a financial arm, and I get all the paperwork together. I deal with that, and there are lawyers involved and there are public hearings involved. And so I gather all the paperwork together and submit all of that, with the assistance of some of the other trustees with the numbers. And that's basically what I do on that committee.

Q: Where does your money come from? Who actually pays the money for the truck?

FP: It comes out of contracts. We, the Fire Department Inc.[sic], contracts with the Town of North Hempstead and six incorporated villages on the peninsula. And that money, when it comes in, gets dispersed down to the companies for their operating budgets. We have what we call on the Department level, a budget allocation committee, which is comprised of two directors from each of the company corporations, plus the Fire Department Incorporated. And we will get together several times a year. We review the expenditures from the previous year. We, our own the internal company, comes up with a budget, once we come up with a budget, we have a meeting of the Allocation Committee. Everybody reviews everybody else's budgets. And then, eventually a bottom-line number is derived, and that total amount is broken out based upon assessed valuation of the villages in the town. We do watch over each other and we'll go through

things, like, for instance, if in 2003 Protection had budgeted for forty thousand dollars for hose and equipment, and at the end of the year, we only wound up spending twenty, we will say, "Well, what happened to the other twenty?" Or if you prepare your budget for the following year and you put another forty in, and they say, "Well, wait a minute. You know, you got forty last year and you didn't spend it. Why are you asking for another forty?" So we—there is a series of checks and balances. We try and anticipate needs. If one company is going to be having a major project, we'll take that into consideration and have the other companies consider reducing theirs so the impact is [less]. This system has been going on since 1914.

Q: And you say it's working well?

FP: For the most part, yes. No one's really come up with a better scheme. Some of the villages might not think it's fair that they're paying X-number of dollars when another village is paying Y. But we don't have any control over that, because that's based upon the assessed valuation.

Q: What other committees have you been involved with.

FP: Oh, you mean well, getting back to, as I said, the trustees basically serve on anything dealing with money. But I'm in charge. I've been chairman of Protection's History Committee for many years. And that's really kind of riding herd on ongoing history,

collecting artifacts. I was chairman of Protection's 100th Anniversary Committee. And we had a bunch of subcommittees.

Q: How did you become interested in the history of the Fire Department?

FP: Well, by nature, I've just always been interested in history. I supposed if I had to do it over again, I maybe would become a history teacher or something. But things just kind of fascinate me. You know, why? Why did you do this? Or why did we do that? And I just got deeper and deeper into the history of the fire company, and especially with the 100th Anniversary, at that time, that we had coming up. And I just started getting a hold of family members and asking them for any artifacts. Unfortunately, Protection lost a lot of things. Our minutes only go back to 1925, even though we were chartered in 1892. One of the little things that I found that interested me was that everybody kept saying that we were chartered in mid-April of 1892. And because that's the day that our fire engine arrived here. And I said, "Well, something had to happen before that. Who ordered it?" And the *Port News* didn't exist at that time, and I discovered that the *Roslyn News* carried a weekly column on Port Washington. And, as I worked in Roslyn, I, as often as I could, I would go to the Roslyn Library at lunch and start going through their microfilm. And I actually found that we were organized in September of 1891. And some of the old-timers didn't like that fact. Well, because it disputed the fact that we've used 1892 all these years. And we continue using 1892. And then it just kind of branched out into other areas, as well. Doing things, digging through the library files and going off on little

expeditions here and there.

Q: What were some of the expeditions?

FP: Well, I discovered there was a really big fire in 1902. *Port News* hadn't started yet, and the *Roslyn News* didn't have any copies. They had had a bad fire at some point, and there are no copies of the *Roslyn News* from, I guess, about 1900 to 1903. And I said well there had to be coverage of this thing somewhere. And I discovered that the old *Brooklyn Eagle*, which was a daily, ran a daily column on Long Island. So I made some phone calls, and I found that the archives for the *Brooklyn Eagle* are located at the Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza. And so I went in one day. I had an attache case full of quarters. I got a hundred and fifty dollars worth of quarters. And nobody really wanted to drive me in there. I didn't want to drive myself in there. So, I got a cab to drive me in, drop me off at nine o'clock and pick me up at three o'clock. And all I did—I didn't even read articles. They handed me, quote, “a shoe box”, with all these clippings. And I just stood there and Xeroxed. And, even though there were articles not related to the Fire Department, I said, why not? So, once I got back, I went through them, I made copies of what I wanted. I gave the rest to the library, or the Fire Department gave the rest, to the library. One other little interesting thing was, this publication here in the library called *Plain Talk*, which was started by a gentleman, Henry Landis. It was a rival to the *Port News*. It was in existence from around 1911 to about 1914. And Henry Landis was originally from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and my

being in the book publishing business, I used a plant in York, Pennsylvania, which was only about twenty miles from Lancaster. And as I was going through this *Plain Talk* magazine, there was something in the back of my head about all of this. And I made some phone calls and discovered that Henry Landis and his brother started the Landis Valley Museum outside of Lancaster, and I used to sit in the parking lot down there waiting to meet the guys from the plant to go to dinner on my way down. I made some phone calls, and I found out that all of the archives for the *Plain Talk* publications were down at the museum. I called my wife and said, "I'm on my way to Pennsylvania." And hopped in the car and off I went. And I spent about two days digging through boxes and finding tons of stuff on Port Washington. And Xeroxed portions, brought them back, showed them to people here at the library, and a few weeks later Janet West, from the library, and I went back down. And so, you know, she, from knowing the collections that she had here, and since then we've been trying to get the collection from the museum system in Pennsylvania, and they don't want to give it up, even though it's not on display and has nothing to do with their theme. So, I'm getting off track off here, I guess, but so those are like two of my major finds. And my only other one was that Protection had a 1937 American La France fire truck. And it was probably the most beloved engine that we had. The members used it for their tournament drills. It was usually one of the first trucks at the scene of a fire. Back in the—around 1968, they decided to get rid of it. Someone from Pennsylvania had come in and wanted a fire truck. They were starting this fire department in a rural community. So, the fire company sold them the truck for three hundred dollars. And everyone often wondered what ever happened to it. And I

went through the minutes, and I went through the receipt books. I could find nothing on this vehicle, other than one mention of it having gone to the Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania area. So I eventually made up flyers and took a weekend and drove around fire companies, fire houses, up in that area dropping flyers off. And someone found the vehicle. But ...

Q: Did you get any responses to the flyers?

FP: Some people saying, "Well, we know where this one is," or "We know where that one is." But yes, I found trucks that were the same as it, but not it. And ...

Q: How did you know, if they were the same?

FP: Well, there's a serial number with every single vehicle. American La France had a numbering system. And this one was L910. And somewhere on the vehicle is that—I forget where—but it's embedded in the truck somewhere. So it wouldn't be the same. I mean, sure, I could have found a 1937 American La France Scout and brought it back here, but, you know, it wouldn't have been the same as having the original one. And so I go through peaks and valleys with it. Sometimes I start hunting again. I pull out the file. And it's usually something like this: I'm having a conversation with someone, and I'll say, "well, you know, maybe I'll go look for it again." It's kind of like this ghost that's sitting there who keeps saying "I'm here. Keep looking." So this has been some of my

major fun things.

Q: Well, in line with your role keeping track of the history of the Fire Department, how did this project come about? The one that we're working on now, with the Fire Department and the library.

FP: Well, this was really Peter Zwerlein's idea. He had, back in the late '80s as we were approaching Protection's 100th, Peter had met with Elly [Shodell], and we had someone come out and explain to us about oral histories. Peter did a couple of interviews with some of our old members, and so he always had this in the back of his mind that maybe we should do this for the Fire Department's 100th. And, so he really started the ball rolling on it.

Q: And you came in with him because of your interest in history?

FP: Yeah. Mine...more of history than anything else.

Q: What are the major changes in the Fire Department since you've been a member that, would you say, affected you more personally?

FP: I would say that the way the situations with the membership. When I first got in to Protection, we were, we still are, chartered for a hundred members. And I got in right

away, because somebody had died. My application went in one month, and I got voted on the following month, which is the normal course. And I'd say within the next few years after that, our numbers started dropping, as did all the other companies.

Q: And this would have been when? Like about ...

FP: Well, I got in in 1971. So, I'd say, maybe mid-'70s. 1975 or so. It wasn't anything that you really paid attention to, because maybe, okay, maybe you didn't have a hundred members. You had ninety-eight, you had ninety-seven. But as the years started going on, it started dropping more and more. So that's been one of the biggest, most difficult situations. Members working two jobs. Members working shift work. There used to be a lot of situations where the members were at the firehouse, but in this day and age, it's just—like for even the monthly company meeting, we used to have maybe sixty or seventy people there. Now, we might have forty. Number one, because your membership is lower; number two, guys are working. Or they have something to do with their family. So, I'd say that's probably been the biggest thing, change that I have seen.

Q: In terms of your committee work, you were on other committees too. You mentioned Roslyn West Shore Road Committee. What ...

FP: Right, that's ...

Q: Can you tell me about that?

FP: ... that's a Fire Department committee. Back in, I'd say, the late '60s, early '70s, prior to my time, when there was a lot of talk with the town about developing the Roslyn West Shore Road area, members of the Department met with the Town of North Hempstead, and discussions were being held about the Fire Department getting a piece of property down there. And the Town kept doing up these master plans, and we would have a little box that would say "Fire Department," and a little box that'd say "Police Department," and so on. And one day in the mid-'70s, discovered that the next master plan they came out with didn't have any little boxes saying "Fire Department" on it. So, I got involved, really when I was Department Secretary, in discussions with the Town, and one thing led to another. I eventually became Chairman of this committee. And it was suggested to us that the County really had more land down there than the town. So the doors opened, and we started talking to the County. And this went on for years. There was a lot of politics involved. Eventually, we had selected an area, with the County's suggestion, and that worked out great for the Town of North Hempstead, because our property lies just north of the entrance of Fairway Drive. And all the property behind us and south of us was the old Morewood Property. So the Town only had a 500-foot opening from the road into the Morewood property. And the site that we were looking at had this skinny little tail on it that, on the north end, was about 125 feet deep, and it ran like 1400 feet south down to nothing. And it went right across the opening of the Morewood property. So, the Town really wanted that, to open up that whole area. So, as I said, politics were back and forth.

The Town Supervisor didn't get along with the County Executive, and vice versa. And so we really had to wait and play the political game, and then finally when all the sides were conversing with one another, the County deeded the property to the Department, and so we now have thirteen acres of land down there. We have been in numerous discussions as to what to do with it, and those are ongoing.

Q: What do you think should be done?

FP: I don't really have a personal opinion. Basically, we have been talking of the possibility of putting a fire station in down there. Putting some kind of training in down there, where the members can go. And we're kind of back and forth on all of this, and no conclusions. We're still going through the motions of what should we do down there. The Department is—we've been kind of looking at just the whole big picture of what will happen down there, and nobody really has a crystal ball. But by just recently the way the County Executive is talking that there may be a lot more development down there. Which would only add to what we might consider putting in. So it's a big undertaking. We just don't have the answers yet. So that's, you know, that consumed a lot of time over the years, trudging through woods and what-have-you. But, so hopefully, at some point, we'll come to some conclusion.

Q: And what about your work with the by-laws committees?

FP: Well, those are a—by-laws committees go hot and cold. They usually don't function unless somebody feels there's a need to change a by-law. Back, from say the '70s, we had a lot of revisions, simply by changing, you know, we've got to change the terminology, because the by-laws would say "he," "him," "her"—well, not "her"—but "he," "him," etc. So, a lot of that had to be changed. But it's usually a hot and cold situation. If the situation comes up and you need a by-law change, then you get it done.

Q: Are there any particular situations you remember?

FP: Not off the top of my head. Nothing I can really think of. You know, by-laws are really meant to solidify things, like for instance, somebody could get up at a company meeting and impulsively pass a motion where like the next minute, you say, "Why did we do that?" So by-laws are done so that you can't do that on a whim. It takes basically two months for us to change a by-law, so you can stop [and move] people and think about it.

Q: Are all the trustees on the by-laws committee?

FP: No. I happen to be the only one. But, and there's nothing stopping any of them. It's not an automatic thing, as it is with financial matters.

Q: Was there ever a by-law issue around length of hair or facial hair or anything during the '70s?

FP: There were numerous attempts back in the '70s, with the hair and beard issues. And there were attempts to change the by-laws. Nothing ever happened. Members would get up and try and make a motion. But here again, you know, they would kind of look around the room and say, "Well, let's see. Who's here? Let's have a vote in favor or against." And if they felt they had a shot of getting something passed, they would do that. But, then again, at the following meeting, the people who were against it would make sure that they showed up in force and they'd just pass another motion to do away with the previous motion.

Q: So were there ever any regulations on the books involving ...

FP: There were—I don't remember the exact, the exact situations. It was more of a firefighting situation, so it's more exposed. Well, let's face it. Hair and beard, this can catch fire. A lot of the talk back then was that having the beard would not give you a good seal around your face with the breathing apparatus. Having long hair hanging down under your helmet, it could catch on fire. So there, well, the rule was that your hair could not touch the bottom of your collar. I believe that that was a County parade rule, and that's what we adhere to.

Q: Did you ever have long hair yourself?

FP: No, no. Nor a beard. Never got into that. So, but that was something that just kind of came and went. It was a period of time that we were going through.

Q: And were there a lot of things like that that came and went?

FP: I can't think of—that was the major issue. I really can't think of anything off the top of my head.

Q: Can you tell me about your work life, your professional life? Like how you were able to integrate your firefighting career with your professional career?

FP: Well, after I got out of the Army and basically came back to town, I went through a series of quick, small management trainee type things. I was about to get married, and my father-in-law owned a book publishing company in Roslyn called Walter J. Black Incorporated. And it was a mail order place. And one day he asked me if I would like to go to work. And I went into the production department, and I eventually became a Vice President in charge of manufacturing and handled all of the printing and binding of the books, and the shipping of them to the customers. So I travelled a fair amount, which had an impact on my Fire Department things. I had said earlier about working things around schedules. So I used to do a lot of working around schedules. And working for him and in Roslyn, it allowed me to be here, you know, relatively close. You know, it'd take me ten minutes to get to work. So there were plenty of times where I could just

leave work and go do something at the firehouse. My father-in-law was very civic-minded and did a lot of civic things himself, and so he didn't mind at all, as long as I got my work done. And I did that for twenty-five years. And he passed away, and we decided to sell the business, and that was in the mid-'90s, and I decided I didn't want to go back to work in the City. I had done that for a short period of time in my life. So I just started doing a lot of computer work and research work for people, and tying in with my history.

Q: What kind of research?

FP: Historical mainly. People were working on books and projects, things of that nature.

Q: How did you find your clients?

FP: Most of them came to me. Elly. The library. Just kind of word of mouth. So that's what I've been doing.

Q: And your computer work? You say you do computer consulting work?

FP: Well, not necessarily consulting, but if people need—if they have handwritten manuscripts or just loosely typed, I will, you know, put them, you know, into some kind of shape for them on a computer. I go through the editing phases as they go along.

Q: But you mentioned military service. When and where did you serve?

FP: I was in the Army in January of '68 to December of '70, so basically three years. And, I was very fortunate, during the height of Vietnam, never to have gone to Vietnam. I went through eight weeks of basic training at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. Then I went through about five months of going through Army Intelligence School in Baltimore and came out of there as a military intelligence agent. And I got stationed for two and a half years in New Haven, Connecticut. We primarily, we were like the FBI within the Army, and we primarily did background investigations for people's security clearances. So I'm sure that some of my research ties in with digging in that respect.

Q: Are there any other respects in which you think your military experiences affected or influenced your life as a firefighter?

FP: Marching (laughs), although I really don't attend parades anymore. As time went on, when I got into the firehouse, the less and less members actually saw military service. So every now and then we would have to have a little parade class, because guys did not know how to march. In the years prior to that, basically, you know probably nine out of ten members through the decades had all been in the military, World War I, II, Korea, and so on. So, that's the main thing I can think of.

Q: Why did you stop going to the parades?

FP: It was just time-consuming. There were other things that I had to, you know, devote my time to. Just got, after a while, just got tired.

Q: Do you ever wear a uniform?

FP: When I do parade and for funerals, and that's about it. Well, and the fire company dinner, we require everybody to wear their uniform. That'd be about the only times.

Q: And that's what? Once a year?

FP: Yeah. Basically. Even when I was in the Army, I mean, after I got out of Army Intelligence [School], I never wore a uniform again. I wore a business suit.

Q: Now, you had talked about the impact on your family life and your work life, of the firefighting career, what about any other social and community involvements. Have you had time to do anything else?

FP: I coached Little League for a number of years back in the '70s, well before my son ever got on Little League. I've been involved with some minor projects here at the library. For the most part, it's been Fire Department.

Q: Is there anything else that you think we should talk about at this point?

FP: Nothing I can think of unless you have any more questions, for the moment. Or we can certainly pick up where we left off.

Q: One thing about your brother-in-law's involvement with the Fire Department and your involvement, did you talk? Did you talk about Fire Department work at home with the family?

FP: Well, they were always exposed to it. Because they lived in town. And we spend a lot of time at my in-laws, so I had my fire radio, and so they were always exposed to it. So, sure, there would be conversations about the fire, something of that nature.

Q: What's a fire radio?

FP: We have alerting radios. Years ago, they—well, we still have them. They're called Plectrons. That's just the manufacturer's name. They were a box. A radio box that was in your home. And when someone would call in for a fire, back then, the call would go into the Port Washington Police who dispatched for the Fire Department. They would set off the radios. There would be a loud tone that would come over—a beeping sound—and then they would tell you where the fire was and what kind of fire it was. You could

actually throw a switch on the radio and listen to the trucks talking to one another on the radio. We used those for decades. Then, I guess, there in the '80s, they started coming out with smaller units that would attach to your belt and would do the same thing. And we really stopped buying the home radios because these Motorola Minitors, as they called them, the portable ones, they snap right into an amplified system in your house. So you essentially have them with you twenty-four hours a day. And we recently got into, and the Chiefs can really explain this better than I can, we recently, a few years ago, got involved with telephone pagers. Not only advising you to call somebody, but they worked it out so that when the alarm goes off, it not only goes over your fire radio, but it will also go over your telephone pager.

Q: So do you still wear the fire radio ...

FP: Yeah.

Q: ... yourself all the time?

FP: Uh huh.

Q: But you don't go to fires?

FP: No.

Q: Then, why do you wear it?

FP: Just so I know what's going on. I will go to fires if they're bad, when you can tell, or I'll go down to the fire ...

Q: What was the last fire you went to?

FP: I can't remember, off the top of my head. Can't remember ... [END OF RECORDING] ...