THE FIREHOUSE

RECOLLECTIONS OF
BILL BERGIN

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A chapbook from the "Vanishing Hoboken" series of the Hoboken Oral History Project

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Contemporary photo of Bill Bergin by Robert Foster, 2012.

From day one, I didn't anticipate going to college. The big part of my younger career was chasing fire engines on a bicycle. I think that was something that was in me from a kid. Well, I grew up on Jefferson Street, 1st and Jefferson, in the middle of the block. The firehouse was on the corner of 2nd and Jefferson. At that time it was an engine company, Engine No. 3. [I started going there when I was in grammar school.] I got to hang out, go to the store for the firemen, help them wash their cars, a million different things. I got to know them personally. They gave me a cut-off from a rubber coat so I had my own coat. I guess it started then.

—Bill Bergin, February 12, 2012

sleep shop
A Werhahn
B Bergin
Assemblyman Cooper
Mayor Cappiello
Miss N.J. 1985
Director Ed Chius
CAPT Stankiewicz
CAPT Bergin
CAPT Monacelli
R. Laguardia
P. Colombera
Public Safety

INTRODUCTION

When members of the Hoboken Oral History Project sat down with Bill Bergin to record his recollections, he told us about his two extended families. The first includes his parents, William H. and Virginia [nee Callandriello] Bergin; older sisters Audrey, Adelaide, and Grace; his wife Margie [nee Glaser] Bergin, daughters Corinne and Allison, granddaughters Alexandria and Zoie, and many in-laws. The second comprises the ranks of the Hoboken Fire Department, past and present.

Over the years, Bill has had lots of different jobs—including officiating high-school football and running a painting business—but above all, his working life has been dedicated to the Hoboken fire service. Born in 1939, he was still in grade school when he began serving coffee and soup to firefighters after they'd combated a blaze. He joined the department in 1960. "I was on thirty-one years," he recalled. "In my career I probably worked in every house, but I was mostly in a truck company, the hook-and-ladder company." He served for 16 years as union president and rose to the rank of Deputy Chief before retiring in 1991.

Since 1979, Bill has volunteered with fellow firefighters to establish the Hoboken Fire Department Museum in a renovated 1881 firehouse. And along with members of the city's police department, Bill and his fellow firefighters (retired and active) have continued a Hoboken tradition, the Public Safety Department Communion Breakfast, which raises funds for the Sisters of the Poor. "I would venture to say, that's the longest-running communion breakfast in the state," Bill said, noting that the breakfast was initiated in 1948. "Most don't even have them anymore. At first it was just [the department members]. But about fifteen years ago

we began inviting our families. So now the wives and some of the kids come, as well"—a merging of two extended families, on a grand scale.

Bill Bergin was interviewed by Holly Metz, with assistance by Robert Foster, on February 18, 2012 and August 4, 2012, at the Fire Department Museum, 213 Bloomfield Street in Hoboken. Copies of the transcripts from which this chapbook was derived have been deposited in the Historical Collection of the Hoboken Public Library and in the archives of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

Bill Bergin (right) in captain's uniform, with his father, after a Hoboken parade, ca. 1970s.

GROWING UP ON JEFFERSON STREET

We lived at 116 Jefferson Street. The house is still down there, three stories high. On the upper two floors, people were living there. Downstairs, at one point, there was a lunchroom. In the earlier days, when I was younger, an Italian family lived above us in the house. [They rented from our family.] That was the Amato family. There was a son, and I think they had two daughters. There would be a certain time of the year [when] they would make their wine, and we loved it because that was the time when they put out the empty boxes. We would make scooters out of the grape cases. You'd get one piece of 2" X 4", one skate, you'd split the skate in half so you had a front wheel and a back wheel, and that was your scooter. You tried to make them fancy. We made them with little handlebars on them.

The biggest thing was that we always entertained ourselves. We were always the last ones to go up [when playing outside.] Your mother used to just call to you out the window, and you just kept going and going until she got louder and louder, and then you went up to eat. But we were always doing something… Everything you'd use was usually homemade. If you were playing touch football, it was a rolled-up newspaper with black tape around it. Kick-the-can was a big game. [We were] creative… It wasn't formal, as we know it today. It wasn't formal leagues and stuff like that.

Most of the kids we played with were from the same block, or around the corner, not too far away. You had your group of friends, and that was it. You were outside, done with school, until nighttime. And, like I said, until your mom or dad would call you up to eat.

The West New Yorks, 1931, posing with Babe Ruth (2nd row, l to r, fifth person) and Lou Gehrig (2nd row, 7th person.) Tony Calland is in the back row, l to r, 5th person; "Bad Bill" Bergin is in the 2nd row, 10th person. Courtesy of the West New York Public Library.

MY FATHER PLAYED BALL

[WHAT DID THE MEN ON THE BLOCK do for work?] There were a group of men on the street who were longshoremen. My father worked for First National City Bank in New York. He actually got his job because he was a good basketball player.

Back in those days, baseball and basketball in Hoboken were big-time. They [played] any place they could get a game. And they always seemed to be tied in with a dance after the game.

[Well,] they had all these organizational teams—the Oxfords, the Union City Reds. [My father was playing] on [some of] these club teams, and somebody in the First National City Bank [saw him and] got him a job. Then he played for National City Bank on *their* teams.

And my Uncle Tony Calland—he was actually Tony Callandriello; he shortened his name up—he was very active in the same way, with sports and that, both basketball

and baseball. (He worked for the recreation department at Hoboken for many years.)

[My father and my uncle would] tell stories about when they used to play baseball down at the [Hoboken] field, down at the back [the western edge of Hoboken]. They actually used to send a guy up into the hills and pass the hat around. People would sit up in the hills [in Jersey City Heights] to watch the games. There were no bleachers down there.

[My father and Uncle Tony] were both involved with the team the West New Yorks, and [they played a game with] Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. The funniest part is I always felt bad that I didn't have a good memory of that time, until I saw a photograph of my father and my Uncle Tony [dated] *1931*. That's why I didn't have a good memory of my father playing! Because I was only born in '39.

HALLS OF FAME

My uncle and father both were inducted into the [Hudson County] Hall of Fame. My father was up in years; he couldn't even attend the dinner. January 1996. [But] he was also inducted into the Old Timers Hall of Fame [for basketball.] They used to have an Old Timers dinner in Brooklyn. The night he was inducted as an Old Timer, Willis Reed was inducted as a professional player, in the same Hall of Fame. My father was six-feet tall, but Willis Reed made him look like a midget. Willis was big, and he was solid.

My father's nickname, [as an athlete,] was "Bad Bill." [How did he get that name?] Well I guess, in those days, six feet was pretty tall for a basketball player, and he was put in under the boards where it was a little hectic. I think it was

"Bad Bill" Bergin (right), National City Bank ballplayer, ca. 1940. Willis Reed (left) and William Bergin at a Hall of Fame Dinner, Brooklyn, New York, ca. 1970s.

his reputation, the hard work he did under the boards. I'm putting it politely, I guess.

[Off the courts, he was known for his strength of character.] My father never finished high school; yet he was well respected through the town. They used to keep the time by him going up First Street, going to work, going to catch the train to go to New York City. They used to tell that.

CHASING FIRE ENGINES ON A BICYCLE

From day one, I didn't anticipate going to college. The big part of my younger career was chasing fire engines on a bicycle. I think that was something that was in me from a kid. Well, I grew up on Jefferson Street, 1st and Jefferson, in the middle of the block. The firehouse was on the corner of 2nd and Jefferson. At that time it was an engine company, Engine No. 3. [I started going there when I was in grammar school.] I got to hang out, go to the store for the firemen,

help them wash their cars, a million different things. I got to know them personally. They gave me a cut-off from a rubber coat so I had my own coat. I guess it started then.

I had a big phase. Most times, if the fire engines went out, [the kids in the neighborhood] went down to the firehouse and slid down the poles. Of course, back in those days, when [firefighters] were coming back from an alarm, they rang the bell. We'd hear the bell coming, and we'd take off before they got back. A couple times it got close, where we almost got booted in the rear end.

But one thing I can say—regardless of what was laid out, we never touched anything. It was slide down the pole and get out of there. There was never anything missing, or anything like that. The same with the active [firefighters]—and I'm sure it's the same way [now]. A guy's wallet could be out somewhere, and money could be left out—nothing gets taken. Don't dare leave your flashlight batteries around, or your gloves—you might lose *them*, but [never] money and stuff. Because it's like a family. God forbid, if that ever happened—we always used to say, "We're going to show that guy how to work a chain saw by holding onto the blade." But it never happened.

HELPING THE GUYS

Another thing I got involved in [as a kid] was tied in with the fire department. The Salvation Army was very big in Hoboken in those days. Any large fire, they would show up and serve coffee and soup to the firemen. A husband and wife team. The one who was in charge was called the "captain" and her name was Eleanor—a big, heavy-set woman. My sister would remember—a lot of people in

Hoboken would remember the family, because they *were* the Salvation Army.

I got to go there, and I stayed with them at fires, to help serve the guys. Again, I think it was embedded in me that that's what I should be doing when I got older. At times my mother would be concerned, because some of [the fires] lasted a long time. But she knew where I was.

The ones I remember most are the pier fires, where they would go days. So I would do my thing. If it was school time, I would attend school, and then go back up there to help out. Because a couple of them lasted three or four days before they got off the piers completely.

THE REC

I WAS AT PUBLIC SCHOOL #9, down on Second and Monroe [Streets] and then I went to Demarest High School. After school, you just did everything within the neighborhood.

[Our house was] right across from the Recreation Center. I boxed [there] for a while. They had a ring in the middle of the gym, and the fellow who was in charge of the boxing was named "Champ" Sica. He ran the boxing program with the Recreation Department. I always remember trying to box the kids from [what] we called the "the projects" at the time. They would come in, and I would wind up getting beat up. I would always hurt my thumbs because I didn't know how to punch the proper way with the gloves. [But] we became friendly with a couple of [the kids]. To this day, I see them. And we always kid about it; I tell them about how they used to beat me up in there.

But it was all just fun. It wasn't to go on to be a boxer or anything like that.

FOOTBALL AND THE FRENCH HORN

[My sport was football.] This was the funny part. My father was big in baseball and basketball, never touched a football, and I was the reverse. In high school I played football, and never got heavily involved in baseball or basketball.

I'm sure my father would have liked to have gotten me to play those sports, but when I got to be that age, he was up there in age, so it was difficult for him to take me out, to have a catch, and stuff like that. Not that he neglected me. [Mostly it was that] I liked the activity. I liked the roughness of the football game, I guess. Baseball, at times, could be very boring. I enjoyed football.

[And I joined a band.] The GI Joes. I was learning how to play the French horn. We were a marching band—Memorial Day parades, anything like that. I remember one trip, going to Atlantic City. We had a big bus. It was just down there, spend a couple hours, and come back home. But after the parade, we went to ride horses on the beach. I'll never forget it. And we were in the band uniforms.

KEANSBURG...AND MEETING MARGE

[Our family spent the summers in Keansburg, New Jersey. We did that] almost every year. That was the place to go to. All the Hoboken people were down in Keansburg in those days. We started [out] renting. Later, one of my brother-in-laws, Eddie Radigan, had the idea that we should buy. So they chipped in, my three sisters and their husbands, and my mother and father, and they bought this pretty, big place that belonged to a doctor. We all lived in

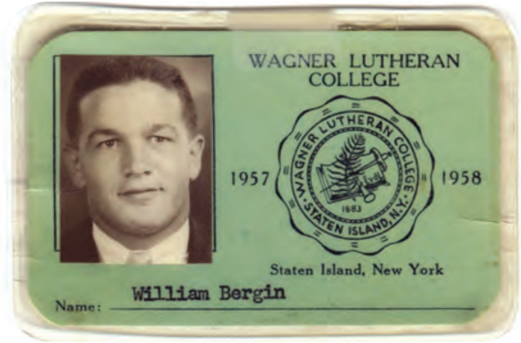
With the cousins in Keansburg, New Jersey, ca. 1950s (l to r): Georgie Von Berenewitz, Bill Bergin, Maureen (Dargan) Maher, Joseph Callandriello, and James Sullivan.

this one house for the summer months. All the kids wound up on the front porch. We slept on the front porch, because there were so many visitors down for the weekends.

[We would drive down from Hoboken.] And that was back in the old days, no air-conditioners, no turnpike. You used to get as far as the Skyway—it used to be bumper-to-bumper traffic, coming back into Hoboken, and the other areas.

[My wife, Marge—who was then Marge Glaser—] grew up at 709 Willow Avenue [but] I actually met her in Keansburg. I had to fight off all her old boyfriends. She always wore this sweater—ASH—and I was chasing her around for about a week, not realizing that ASH stood for Academy of Sacred Heart. She was actually from Hoboken! I didn't realize that in the beginning.

So we started to get serious down at Keansburg, and then [kept seeing each other] when we both came back in September, for school. She lived up on the top floor of 709—it was a four-story walkup—so, to make an impression, of



(Left) Marge Glaser, ca. 1950s.
Above: Bill Bergin's college I.D.

course, on her mother, you help with the groceries, four stories up and that. It was a very difficult courtship. [*Laughs.*]

FOOTBALL SCHOLARSHIP

[I STARTED PLAYING FOOTBALL AGAIN in my senior year.] My junior year, I didn't get enough marks so I couldn't play. But in my senior year, I wound up getting scholarship offers from a couple of the colleges. I only bring this up because I'm still amazed: I had one for Villanova, and I had one for Wagner College, on Staten Island. Wagner College was mainly, at that time, a basketball school. They were big in basketball, so they were building up their football program. They gave out a lot of scholarships that year—a dozen scholarships, and I think ten of us were from New Jersey. At that time Wagner was called Wagner Lutheran College and I think eight of us were Catholics. We [got] full scholarships. At that time Wagner was $2,750 for four years. I think today it's probably up over $40,000 a year.

I commuted to Wagner. But I broke my arm in the first year, toward the end of the season. At that time you couldn't

play with a cast, even if the cast was well padded. If there was a hard substance underneath that padding, you weren't allowed to play. [I would have wanted to play with a broken arm.] Today, they do it. [But I didn't have that choice.] I couldn't play the final three games of the freshman year.

[And then] I left Wagner College. Not because I broke the arm, and not because they took the scholarship away—I still had the scholarship. [It was because I wanted to join the fire department.] If you ask me—because I still pal out with a lot of guys from that team, from Wagner, and everybody went on to do different things—I don't think I would change my life with any of them, as far as the [fire] department and my career. I think that was something that was in me from a kid.

THE BATTLE OF ROUTE 35

[I DIDN'T JOIN THE fire DEPARTMENT right away, though. After I left Wagner,] I went into Uncle Sam's army. I signed up for three years.

I went in through a recruiting sergeant, a fellow by the name of Eddie Shroback, who was a very good friend of my father's, and was a good ballplayer who played in the same time period as my father, although he was a lot younger. He advised that I go into a class down at Fort Monmouth—a class that lasted fifty-four weeks! General cryptographic equipment repair. Fifty-four weeks. I served in the Battle of Route 35. [*Laughs.*]

Somewhere along the line there, I took the test for the fire department. I passed, and it came time—they were going to make some firemen. But I was still in the service. Well, they have what they call an "early out" in the service.

[One] of the reasons you can get out is to meet a job that you might lose if you didn't get out in time. So I put in for the early out, and I'll never forget it—the company sergeant there said to me, "You'll never get this." Maybe he figured it wasn't legit or something. But it was. And I did get it. I got out on a Friday, and I went to work on a Monday, in the firehouse. That was 1960.

ROOKIE

[What firehouse was I assigned to at first?] Oh—we got some good stories with that! Oh, God, what they didn't do to me. Observer Highway. I started at Observer Highway. [Later we gave that firehouse the nickname "The Island,"] because of the way it's situated, on that little triangle. It was out by itself like that.

Well, the first thing, when you're a rookie, when you come in, somebody there has to be detailed out to make room for you. So you had to get over that first—you were the stranger in the house. But they were good about it. I guess I should've said in the beginning, it was like having a second family.

The first time I was [on house watch, I had to] stay on the apparatus floor. Basically, you're in charge. If somebody were to come in and report a fire, or when the alarms come in, you had to let them know what the alarm was, when they started to come down the pole holes.

You could sleep down there. They had cots set up. And I'm on watch. Maybe 1:00 in the morning I hear, "Bing." Then it would stop. A half hour later, "Bing." Again. I'm a rookie, I'm scared. What's going on? Is it haunted, this house?

So I go upstairs. I go up quiet. Everybody's in the bunkroom, the lights are out. They're not movin' or nothin'. I say okay. I go back down again. "Bing." I hear this thing, "Bing." Finally, I realize something was going on. What they did was—they were in bed, and they had a cord going from one guy's bed, down the pole hole, attached to the fire engine. They were laying there, pulling the bell every so often. Yeah. They were characters.

Then another time, I started at 6:00 at night. I was having a cup of coffee. One guy comes out, "Hey, Cap, Happy Birthday," and gives the captain a nice, beautiful gift. The next guy comes out, "Hey, Cap, Happy Birthday." They all do it. Now I'm feeling this big [*gestures about with his fingers about an inch high*], because nobody told me about the birthday party, right? There wasn't a birthday party. They just did it to bust me.

[Another story:] Walter Schlicker was one of the guys [in the firehouse]. In those days, when you were in the truck, which was the hook and ladder, you rode on the side, no covering, no nothing. By the time you got to the fire, in the winter, your eyes were watering from the cold and everything. So Walter says to me, "Come here, Bill. You stay in front of me, and I'll watch and make sure you're okay; that you don't slip off this thing." It took me about two months to realize that I was buffering the wind for Walter. [He was behind me.] Walter was taking advantage of my big head, and his eyes weren't tearing.

[But I did some funny things, too.] Me wanting to have the job, when I finally got it, then I was—what's the word? Overzealous, I guess. I always used to be doing something. I used to like to paint, and every company had a different color, that showed that those tools belonged to that particular company. Of course, they had to be freshened up every

so often. You should only do a couple at a time, so they have a chance to dry and that. But I would go overboard. Sure enough, we got a working fire—and I was using silver. Everybody had silver paint all over their gloves!

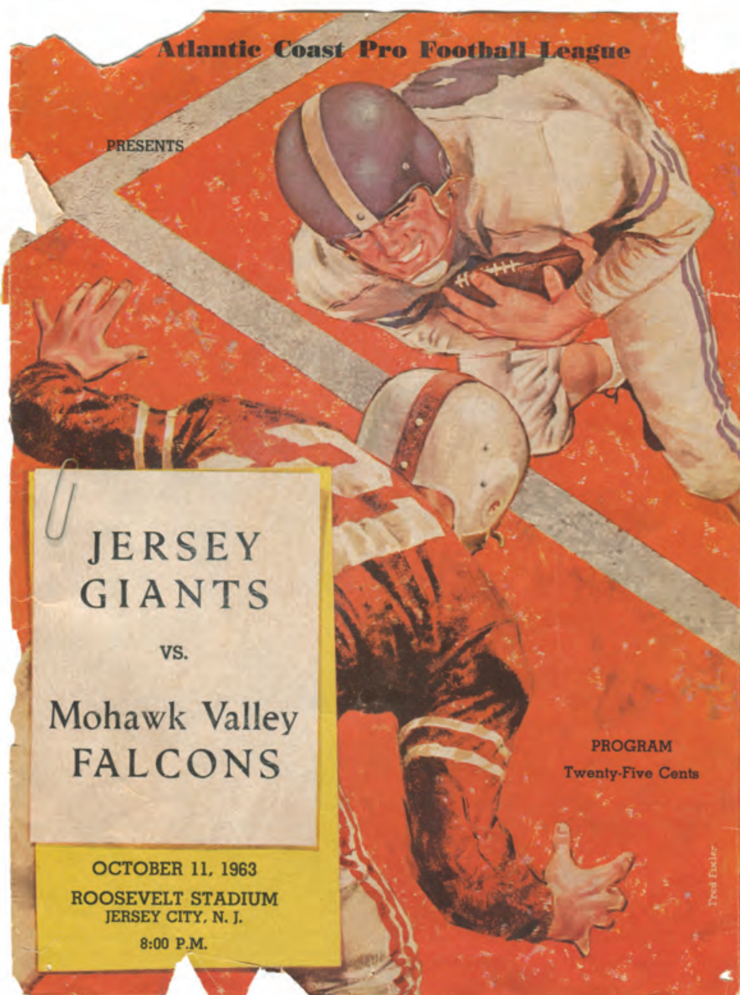
[That was a busy firehouse.] In fact, the uptown firehouse, at one time, got the nickname of "Hollywood," because they ran a little bit less. [But the Observer Highway firehouse wasn't the busiest.] There were three truck companies (hook and ladders) and one was in the center of the town—Clinton Street—and that rode on everything. It rode with the downtown companies and it rode with the uptown companies. They would have the most runs of anyone, back in those days.

SEMI-PRO BALL/FIRST FLIGHT

You really weren't supposed to have part-time jobs [when you were on the fire department. But in 1963, I played football on] a semi-pro team. I think we got $50 a game, [though] it was a big-time league on the Atlantic coast.

The furthest we went was Pittsburgh. [For that game] we took a chartered flight. It was just the team, the members and coaches, of course. It was a twin-engine plane out of Newark. [My] first flight—it was exciting. A lot of the guys were excited about going.

As we were flying to Pittsburgh, the co-pilot and the pilot asked if anybody would like to come up and sit in the cockpit, and they would explain the different things to you. A lot of the guys went up, one at a time. In those times they used to use radio frequencies when they'd get their positions and different things. [They showed me] a couple of the



Above and right: Atlantic Coast Pro Football League Program, October 11, 1963.

dials and what they were for. I sat there, and I was amazed. The pilot said to me, "Would you like to stay up during the landing?" They don't know it's my first flight. I don't mention it. So I said, "Sure. I'd love to." That was something. That's what really stood out in my mind—to play football, but to go on your first flight and be sitting up there [during] the landing. It was amazing. You're up in the nose, and you

MEET THE JERSEY GIANTS

RON SEGAL—End—One of the most versatile players on the Giants' squad. He is listed as an end on the roster but can play practically any position just as well. Recently he filled in at quarterback. Is a graduate of St. Mary's High, Rutherford and later starred in baseball and football at Ithaca College. Was voted a berth on the Small College All-American Football team. Is 25 and makes his home in Lyndhurst.

BILL BERGIN—Guard—A graduate of Demarest High, Hoboken and later starred at Wagner College before entering the Army Is one of the speediest and best blockers on the squad. His father was one of the outstanding professional basketball players in the country Bergin is a member of Hoboken's Fire Department. Weighs 215, stands 6:1 and is 23 years of age.

could feel the thing going to the side a little bit. It was some feeling.

Then the coach said to me, after we landed, "Go back and ask the pilot if they'd like to go to a pre-game meal." Sure, they wanted to come. So we had to wait for them in the lobby of the airport, for them to hand in their flight plans and stuff. It took a while. But I'll never forget—when they came out, one guy said—who didn't go up front—"*They* flew us here?" They were so young. It was amazing how young they were. The guys on the team, these big, tough football players, are saying, "*They* flew us here?"

Well, we went into Pittsburgh seven wins and no losses. They were the worst team in the league, and we lost that game! Everybody was excited about the trip, and the plane ride and everything.

[I only played on the team for one year.] I hurt my back, and my wife put the bull on me and said, "That's it."

THE WORST FIRES

I think maybe just a general statement up front—because a lot of people ask what were the worst fires that you had. Some of the larger fires were not the worst. The worst fire and the toughest to be extinguished—in my opinion—is the one that's in a one-room bedroom, in an apartment house that's tightly sealed by its construction. You don't get the normal means to ventilate a fire like that. So, in a lot of respects, it's more difficult to put that out.

The big ones that you see, with all the flame coming out through the roof, that kind of restricts you to the outside, so you're using larger streams, larger instruments to produce the massive streams. In most cases, those larger ones, you get [fewer] injuries.

But the worst one, of course, is where you find a victim. That's something that nobody on the job will ever forget, as long as they live. That's the one you remember. Again, most times it was an inside fire, where it was difficult to get at it.

In the downtown area, you were busier because [of] the type of home that was here. [Frame houses burn] much faster. In the early days they had kerosene stoves, and kerosene stoves were like a bomb. It would start in the person's apartment. They'd get nervous, and they might throw the tank—or, actually, the stove itself—out in the hallway. Then that would help start the rest of the house on fire.

PIER FIRES

It's rare that you could stop a pier fire from the land side. [We had to get] help from the New York Fire De-

partment. In those times the river was unbelievable, crowded with tugboats and that. And the tugboats, traditionally, they would come in—not even being asked—when they saw a pier on fire. Each tugboat, at the very top, had a turret gun, just like you see on a fireboat. There was no hose involved; the water [from the river] was sucked up and directed up into this gun. Same principle as a fireboat, but the fireboat had maybe seven or eight of these turrets on them. These people would come in and use their turret guns, besides the New York Fire Department.

After the pier fire was down and the crowds went away, the toughest part was getting underneath the pier, to extinguish the fire. [By the time I was on the job,] we used to go up to Todd's Shipyard and borrow a rowboat, just to get underneath. Back in those days, you didn't have any boats.

The fireboats from New York were good, but they were too big. They couldn't go under the pier. They would do as much as they could. Eventually, you had to go underneath. Some of [the piers] had the concrete floors, but they were held up by the wooden supports. And you didn't go underneath with a big hose, you went underneath with the smaller hose, that you could get maneuverability in that. But that was the only way you could put them completely out.

Most pier fires would destroy completely. They would start in a remote location, be out on the end, with the wind blowing the right direction it would come onto the pier. The timbers were treated with creosote, which would help the fire increase in size and speed. And depending upon the wind—as you can see, the waterfront, they're all gone up there. The waterfront [is] as empty as it is now because [the piers mostly] burned down.

St. May 6, 1978 Gr. C

Weehawken 60th St. Pier

Mt. Olive Baptist Church Oct. 26, 1977

812 Willow Ave. 5/28/77

Penn Railroad Shops 10th River Road Sept. 14, 1975

AN ACCIDENT AT THE MAXWELL HOUSE FACTORY

[The accident at Maxwell House] was tragic, and an unusual thing, too. This was when I was stationed up at 14th Street. We'd stand outside. We got to know the neighbors. This one Spanish fellow was going to work one night, it was like 3:00 in the afternoon, and we were kidding him about taking the fire department job. He said something like, "Nah, that job is too dangerous. I don't want that job." So he goes on to work. By his attire, we knew he worked at Maxwell House.

I guess it was 1:00 in the morning, we get a special call. A special call meant it could be a water leak, it could be a non-fire emergency. But we get a special call to Maxwell House, second floor: Man fell in the tank.

On the way around, we get from the radio, "Make sure you come in with your breathing apparatus." Now, instead of it being just a tank, where you had to pull somebody out, now you're taking breathing apparatuses. There's gas or something leaking. We didn't know until we got there.

But when we went in—and I'll describe it to you, just to give you the picture—we got up to the third floor, and there were these big tanks, almost as big as this table. [Eight feet in diameter.] In the center, about here, there was almost like a porthole, and that was open. This had something to do with the instant coffee procedure. The tank was here, but then it went through the floor, and was maybe twenty feet long down on the next floor. They had propellers in the bottom that caused these things to mix. Then they would drain it out down below, to go somewhere else.

They had a little cup on a chain, and [periodically] they would drop this cup in there, [and] take out samples to test. What happened was that this cup got caught on one of the propellers, and the chain wrapped around. It winds up that this guy, that we [talked to when he was going] to work, he wound up being asked to work overtime. So instead of coming home at 12:00, he was on the second shift.

I guess this cup got hung up, and he wanted to get this cup off without getting in trouble, or whatever the case was. In this hole was a ladder going down, and evidently he went down a couple of steps on that ladder. It was very hot, and [there was a] lack of air. He went into the tank. The foreman, a much bigger guy, saw this happen. He came running over. He went down the ladder to try to get the guy, and he went in.

So when we got there—the time involved and that—they're saying, "Cap, there's two guys down in there." You looked down in the hole, and all you saw was like beer foam. They had shut the machinery off, and this heat and everything and this foam—you couldn't even see them at this point. They were down at the bottom of this tank. So it got to the point where you knew you weren't dealing with a victim, you were dealing with somebody who was dead already.

[But we had to retrieve the bodies.] The hole was small that you had to go [into]. You knew you had to go down with some kind of protective breathing apparatus on. The ones we had on the trucks were too big to get down into that hole. They were too awkward to work with. But we did have smaller bottles, that you would throw over quicker, and they were good for like fifteen minutes. So those were the ones we used to go down. Basically, what we did was tie them up and bring them out through the hole, one at a time. It was a shame, because of the circumstances—it was a lousy cup with a piece of chain that caused them to lose their lives.

The next time we went up to Maxwell House, of course, they had welded three pipes over those holes, so that could never happen again. Was the guy right in what he did? No, he should have never done it. And the poor foreman. Now here's a foreman who wants to help out, and he lost his life. Same thing: over the cup.

CONDO CONVERSIONS AND FIRES

[There was the period when there were lots of fires, in the 1980s.] A load of large fires that were started, and it seemed to be in the buildings that eventually became condos. We found out that it was easier to convert to condos when the buildings were empty. But arson is an extremely difficult thing to prove, and as much as you talked about it—during that time period, I don't think anybody was convicted of arson.

It was tough for us. But it was tough for these people who lived in these buildings. When you first pull up, you don't even think of who started the fire or why it's burning; you've just got to do the same thing. We fought the fire. And for the most part, Hoboken and the surrounding towns—we were inside firefighters, where you went in to fight the fire. You actually tried to get at the seat of the fire. When you get in trouble and you don't do it properly, you set up your lines and you work from outside, shooting in windows—that's when the fire gets ahead of you.

So you're inside doing your job. And I'd say that 80% of the time you pulled up, somebody was yelling, "There's somebody in the building! There's somebody in the building!" And a lot of times you found out, later on, they were out. You had to attack the fire, and you had to listen to what

they were yelling to you—that there was possibly somebody in there.

A few times the accelerant was found before it was actually used. Somebody would report that they smelled gasoline, and sure enough, you'd get there, and the hallway would be loaded with this accelerant; but, for whatever reason, it was never lit.

[How did the firefighters feel about what was going on?] I'm sure, in my case or anybody's case, you'd like to have the individual who set it; you'd like to have your hands around his neck—at least to make sure you got a hold of him so he could be put in a proper place. But when you pulled up to the house, there was just too much to think about, to do, without worrying about who started it. You had to react the same way, whether it would be for arson or whatever, because, usually, there were civilians involved. So your job was the same. Then, after, it would be, "Yeah, that smelled funny," or the flames, sometimes, would be a different color. If you did suspect anything like that, you didn't touch anything. You tried to keep everything where it was, in case there was evidence.

We had our own inspection bureau that investigated. Some of them would go to special classes, to give them a more in-depth study of what to look for. [They'd] take photographs; they'd try to get what they could from it; maintain the evidence; not touch anything, and then bring somebody else in, to look at it again. You had your county [investigators] come in, [and the] state association had to investigate it, as well. They would all take part in it. They did get to a point where they could tell where something started. They could tell by the depth of the burn, maybe, what type of material was used to start it. But, still, who started it? When did he start it? That's a tough thing to prove.

[If it happened now, it would probably be handled differently.] I think they've put more emphasis on it now, because everything has changed. The same way with a bomb scare—they're doing them properly now. They're bringing in dogs—because everything is changing. Years ago, you wouldn't even think of that. You'd make the kids go out on the sidewalk. We would do a fast walk-through and that would be it.

UNION PRESIDENT... AND RESCUING CATS

I COULD DO A WHOLE CHAPTER on [former mayor] Stevie Capiello and myself—because I was the union president for fire officers. In sixteen years [as union president] there were a load of battles. In negotiations, I kissed the saint in his office and everything. He was a character, and I was a character, I guess. One of my best friends, Captain Lou Muraca, was always there to make sure I didn't go too far. But we did

Bill Bergin at Deputy Chief swearing-in, Hoboken City Hall, 1987.

Eddie Scharneck (left), who helped Bill (right) study for his Deputy Chief test, ca. 1980s. Courtesy Hoboken Fire Department Museum.

a lot. Again, that's something—we picketed, we did different things to make the job what it is today. Those were interesting times. For the most part I enjoyed the support of the members and I was kept in line by a great friend of mine, Deputy Chief Bobby Moore. And others.

My approach—we kept in mind that we worked for the people of Hoboken. [So we did lots of things, then, that we wouldn't do today, for safety reasons.] We would get flooded crawl spaces that you used to have to crawl through, with human waste flowing in and everything, and you would go into this stuff to try to reach an electrical meter. [Or when we used to work on the water tank on top of] Geismar's [Department Store]. It had a leak in it, and every winter the leak would still drip to the point that it built up icicles 6-8 inches in diameter, and maybe 20 feet high, along the metal supports. We used to have to go up, periodically, and chop these icicles away, and make sure they didn't come down on the street and kill anybody.

Then the big one always was the cat up in a tree. In all the years, any time a fireman ever went up for the cat in a

tree, I don't think we ever got the cat down. The cat always jumped by himself, and always hit [the ground], got up, ran away, and was fine.

[And, of course, there was] my mother-in-law, at 709 Willow Avenue. Because I was on the job, whenever her clothesline broke, I would have to go four-stories up in the air to put a new clothesline up for her. The top of that pole was like two inches in diameter, and it was shaky. But I'm a fireman. "You should go up and fix my pole." Which I did. [*Laughs.*]

FIREHOUSE COOKS

SOME OF THE COOKS ARE EXCELLENT. Some of the cooks are better than some of the wives' cooking, but you can't say that. [And I can't say who was the best.] Again, mention that name and you can get in trouble—because everybody thought they [were great cooks]. Like Angelo Migliaccio—he thought he was the best cook in the world. He used to cook for our officers' meetings. He was a captain at the time. But then we realized that he's doing all this cooking, and me and poor Captain Paddy Green, we'd be back here washing the dishes, and miss the whole event because we were busy washing up after this guy. So then we went to a caterer. It's a lot easier.

[But I can tell you about] one cook we had—a good story. His name was Joe Davis. Joe was a good [cook,] but he had a short temper. A temperamental cook. On a holiday meal, you went a little bit overboard. Like if you were working Christmas Day, you tried to make the meal as nice as it was at home, or the best way you could do it.

So Joe was cooking. I think it was Christmas time, and he was cooking up the whole thing—appetizers, main course, everything. He started making Swedish meatballs. I was captain, and Captain Mike Green was with me, and we're sneaking over, and stealing some of the Swedish meatballs as Joe was preparing them. Mike said, or I said to Mike, "They're good, but they're a little dry." He says, "Shhh. Don't say nothing. Don't get Joe mad," right?

So we ate the Swedish meatballs, we ate the rest of the meal, [and] the next morning a guy comes walking in. Each group had its own food locker. The one guy, Freddy Christians, comes in and he says, "Okay, who's got my Plaster of Paris?" He had these plastic containers, the flour was in one, and his Plaster of Paris was in the other one. Instead of rolling [the meatballs] in flour, Joe was rolling them in Plaster of Paris! We ate every one, and nobody got sick or nothing. But can you imagine? Well, we laughed. And we ate everything. Ah. God. Stories.

Firehouse cooks and cook's helpers (l to r): Angelo Migliaccio, Joe Kennedy, Bill Bergin, and Bobby Moore, ca. 1990s. Courtesy Hoboken Fire Department Museum.

FIRESHOUSE SYMBOLS PAST: DALMATIANS AND FIRE POLES

[We don't really have dogs anymore. At different times we had mutts and we had a lot of Dalmatians.] Some of the guys were really attached to them. Most of the dogs were heavy, because all the different shifts would bring in something from home to feed them. The one that was really [popular] was Taps. When Taps passed away, they had a big ceremony, and Channel 7 Eyewitness News came over to cover it. He was actually buried below the statue in the park, at 4th Street, across from OLG [Our Lady of Grace Church]. That statue was put up in 1891 for the members of the volunteer department. They put up a statue honoring the members who were volunteers.

[The other symbol of the firehouse that you don't really see much anymore is the fire pole.] There are a couple of them still in use. But for the most part—I think because of the crowded conditions in the buildings now, with the exercise apparatus and that—it got a little too crowded, and most of them have been removed. When the firehouse uptown, at 14th Street, was rebuilt after the fire, that pole was removed. They put in nice staircases, so that you didn't lose that much time.

In a lot of respects—you notice it more in New York City—it doesn't pay to come down from the bunk room, down to the apparatus and get down there that quick. Sometimes it's better to walk down that flight of stairs, to get your bearings. It's no good to get on an apparatus with that adrenaline going too fast. Because that could be dangerous. You want to settle down, and walk down the steps. For the little time that's lost, it's not going to hurt. I think it

would help. There's a little more attention to your safety. I think that's why many of the newer firehouses don't have them installed anymore.

The same thing is important when you get off the apparatus, at the fire scene. You don't want to be running, helter-skelter. That calming effect is good. Sometimes, years ago, it was, "Get in there and put that out!" Some of the older deputy chiefs at the time, one of their expressions, was "gumps." "Get in there you gumps, and let's get this out." They would yell, "Get in there! Get this done! Get that done!" We had guys, when I was a young rookie, the macho image was still in effect. Guys were reluctant to wear protective breathing masks. We had guys who could stand in a roaring fire, smoke and everything, and they just had the ability to withstand that. The bad part of that is, a lot of them didn't live that long into retirement because they took that beating during their young careers. Today, thank God, it's changed to a point where they're not allowed to enter a building unless they're properly equipped. The safety factors are much more important.

FIRE DEPARTMENT MUSEUM

[Around 1979] there were a few fellows who were interested in maintaining the history of the department. We got started in a very small way. The last outfit that was in this building [213 Bloomfield] was the city's water department. They parked their trucks [downstairs]. When they went out—I think they left because the central garage was completed—that's how we got to get the whole building.

Everything that was done in here was done by the members themselves. [And lot of our pictures were donated by

members. Some were rescued before they were tossed out, like the many pictures donated by] Fred Stanewitz, Sr. Fred was assigned—because he was injured—to be a dispatcher up on Hudson Street, which was fire headquarters in those days. They were starting to get ready to rip down that firehouse. He noticed that there were a load of photographs in the dumpster, outside the place. He actually got in this dumpster, and saved a lot of the photos that are on display here. Without him, a lot of the history of the job would have been lost. He's since retired, but he was very helpful, and critical to keeping [the Museum] the way it is now. And my assistant curator, firefighter Joe Kennedy, has been extremely helpful over the years.

There are so many. As far as who did what in here—somebody said we should put up a plaque with all the names on it, but it would be enormous. You start mentioning names, and I know I'd forget somebody. The guys who did something know it, and the guys who didn't do anything know it, too. [*Laughs.*]

But the guys were good. [They worked hard, without pay, to fix this place up.] We started ripping out downstairs. We painted the whole place. What made you feel good was that you'd see the end result.

[At first there were very few pictures on the walls.] But people were good. All over town, the people would come in and say, "I just bought a house. I found this picture in the closet." You'd be surprised how many people helped out that way. Now that we're here, we're getting a lot of great-great grandchildren coming in and looking for their [ancestors]. We have the books that go back to 1846, when the fire department started, with volunteers. One book goes from 1846 up until 1891. That's when it became a paid department. Then [another book, starting in] 1891, contains the

names of everybody up until the present day. Everybody who comes on is in that book; [it lists the firefighter's] age when he came on; what he did before he came on; and [in] some places [it lists the] companies he was detailed to and from. It's some book.

Hoboken Fire Department Museum, 213 Bloomfield Street, Hoboken, 2004. Photo courtesy Hoboken Historical Museum.

The Hoboken Oral History Project

"Vanishing Hoboken," an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to the consequent "vanishing" of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; and factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken's industrial base relocated over the 1970s and '80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992. In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, where affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recent construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern buildings are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, "Vanishing Hoboken"—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Hoboken Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of

"Vanishing Hoboken" chapbooks. Since 2002, twenty-five chapbooks have been published in the series, with the support of the Historical Commission, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and, more recently, John Wiley & Sons, Inc..

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets "chapbooks," a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, is a

> …small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapmen, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the Vanishing Hoboken series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the "manners and morals" of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

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