

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Charles D. Cella
Atlantic Hook & Ladder Company No. 1

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

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pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: This is November 22, 2004. This is an interview with Charles D. Cella. My name is Sally Olds. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library. Can you tell me your name?

Charles Cella: Yes. My name is Charles Cella.

Q: And which fire company are you a member?

CC: Atlantic Hook and Ladder.

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

CC: What it was like? It was great, as far as I'm concerned. Small town. Had all my relations here. And I can really say I'm related to a lot of people that have businesses in town that were in the Fire Department. And I thought it was kind of nice. I lived here my whole life and plan on staying here.

Q: Well, what are your early memories of firefighting or fire engines?

CC: You're talking about way back?

Q: Way back.

CC: Okay.

Q: You know, when you were a child.

CC: And I can tell you that in 1943, when I was four years old, there was a fire on Mackey Avenue, and my grandparents lived on Davis and Mackey on the corner, and my grandfather was a fireman. He went to the fire, and he dropped dead of a heart attack at the scene of the fire. So I remember that well.

Q: Oh, yeah, but you didn't see him, did you?

CC: I did not see him, no. Well, actually, it was right down the street, you know. We were looking down the street, and there was a big commotion. And we were told that that was (laughs)--I mean, I was only four, but I remember it like it was yesterday.

Q: Sure. Was that your earliest memory?

CC: Yeah, yeah. Of course, then they had the funeral right in the house, and I remember that because I was a little kid--to see somebody that's (laughs), you know, dead, that's a big thing when you're that young.

Q: Were there other members of your family who were in the Fire Department?

CC: Yes, my father, my uncle, and cousin--there were three cousins.

Q: And what kinds of things did they tell you about being in the Department?

CC: Well, it was like a family organization. It was very close-knit in those days, you know. Actually, my father was in for only twenty-four years. He passed away of cancer when he was forty-nine. So, you know, he didn't--wasn't in as long as I am now. But ...

Q: Did they talk about the fires that they went to, or--or the conditions in the Department?

CC: Well, they may have, but I really don't--I don't remember, about fires.

Q: And at what point did you decide that you wanted to become a firefighter?

CC: Well, I'd say I was very interested in it when I was nineteen, but I went into the Army. And when--as soon as I came out I went into business, got married, and had a couple of kids. And, so I waited till I was twenty-six years old before I really had the time, because there is a lot of training. Not quite as much then as there is now. But that would--that was when I got in, when I was twenty-six.

Q: Was it a plus or a minus for you that you had so many relatives in the Department?

CC: Oh, I think it was a plus. I had, you know, a little experience--people to talk to. And they enjoyed it.

Q: Did you have to wait a long time before you got into the Department?

CC: No. No. I had one advantage. I own a service station in Port Washington, and I did at that time, and I used to service the fire trucks. I did a lot of work on the fire trucks. So I was around most of the members all the time, so I had no problem getting in. And they just had--you know, in those days, the books were pretty well full. There just happened to be an open spot, and I got in right away.

Q: And do you remember how you felt when you were first a member?

CC: Oh, I felt pretty proud. Yeah, so ...

Q: What made you pick Atlantic?

CC: Because my father was in there (laughs), my grandfather, and my uncle--it was a family thing.

Q: Do you remember when you first joined who the Captain of Atlantic was?

CC: When I first joined, the Captain was Joseph Santoli.

Q: And do you remember who the Chief of the Department was? I know we're going back a few years (laughs).

CC: We're going back--because you go through so many Chiefs. Oh, I would have to say it was for Protection, Seifts--Chief Seifts.

Q: Now, I have heard some interesting stories about Atlantic, that it was haunted at one time. Did you ever hear that?

CC: I've heard of it. I never--never thought it was (laughs). But I've heard people talk about them being there late at night on standby's and stuff and heard strange noises, and (laughs) that kind of stuff. I never heard it ...

Q: Was there ever ...

CC: ... or believed in it (laughs).

Q: Was there ever a kind of story about how it was haunted or who it was haunted by?

CC: No. There probably was, but I don't remember. You know, they come up with all kinds of names of who was in the building (laughs), you know. I really couldn't tell you any names.

Q: And a little more reality-based, I've heard that there's a gym in the basement.

CC: Yes.

Q: Is there still?

CC: Yes.

Q: And ...

CC: I mean, it's not--not old. The gym has only been, I'd say, the last six years, you know.

Q: And do the members use it pretty regularly?

CC: Oh, a lot of them. A lot of them do.

Q: What kind of equipment does it have?

CC: Exercise bikes, weight-lifting equipment--you know, you've got to stay in shape when you're a fireman (laughs).

Q: Can you go there any time, or are there certain hours for use?

CC: No, any time.

Q: Do you have to sign up ahead of time?

CC: Yeah, there's a book to sign in, yes. It's not overcrowded. You might be there working out with three or four other fellows, but that's about it.

Q: And, I've also heard that there's a place to play basketball in Atlantic's ...

CC: No.

Q: Is there? No.

CC: No, that's not true. I haven't seen it (laughs).

Q: And there never was, as far as you know?

CC: There might have been an outdoor basketball, you know, a hoop ...

Q: Yeah.

CC: ... years ago. And somebody got hurt--I remember, hurt their arm, and they did away with that. So, that's as far as basketball goes, that I know of.

Q: Yes. What do you remember about your first days in the Department?

CC: My first days?

Q: Yeah.

CC: Oh, we had some pretty severe fires back in those days, you know. There's the--on Haven Avenue. The Leroy Upholstery Shop there. That's probably one of my biggest fires that I've ever seen, you know. And then you had the Port Washington Lumber Company burn, and lots of boat yards, after that.

Q: Well, on the Haven Avenue fire, was that one of the first fires you worked?

CC: Not the first one I worked, but the first major fire, let's say. It was ...

Q: Can you tell me what it was like?

CC: Well, do you want to know the truth? I thought Main Street was going to about burn down (laughs). The flames were so big, and it was a windy night. It looked like the Plaza Building was going to go. The flames were shooting right over it. And ...

Q: And what--what did you do with that fire?

CC: Actually, we--a lot of the other buildings surrounded it, to protect the other--to protect the other buildings. Because there was nothing--it was blazing so hard, just poured water on the fire and protected the exposures.

Q: And so that building--the Haven Avenue building, was that the Leroy Upholstery Company?

CC: Yeah.

Q: And that was totally lost?

CC: Oh, sure.

Q: Yeah.

CC: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. Was anyone injured?

CC: No, I don't believe so. Maybe a couple of scratches on firemen. Nobody--nobody was in the building at the time; it was vacant.

Q: Well, what was the hardest fire you worked?

CC: (Laughs). The hardest fire? They're all hard.

Q: Hard in what way?

CC: No, you're saying hard. You talk about hard work (laughs).

Q: Scary?

CC: They're all hard work.

Q: Yeah.

CC: And they're all a bit scary, too. You're going into the unknown situations a lot of times. So, I mean that Port Washington Lumber Company was--that was a pretty severe fire. A lot of heat. And it lasted a long time. I was a Lieutenant in the company then, and I remember I had a hundred and two fever when I left the house. Because, in fire schools, they always told you how severe lumber fires--lumber companies would be. And I just had to go to just see. And it was (laughs)! So ...

Q: And still, with the fever, you had to stay out there?

CC: I stayed the whole night.

Q: And it was in the winter, was it, or ...

CC: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was cold. That's for sure. But, you do those things.

Q: And what happened afterwards? Were you sicker?

CC: No, no. Probably got better (laughs). But--of course, the saddest fire I was ever at was when Bobby Dayton died there on Main Street.

Q: You worked that fire?

CC: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

CC: Yeah. It was devastating to the whole Department.

Q: What was your special job, you know, with--early in the Department. Like did you have a special set of skills? When you went to a fire, what would you do?

CC: Really we--well, Atlantic Hook and Ladder was, you know, for search and rescue. A lot of the buildings, as soon as we got there, that's the first thing we did was put ladders on the buildings, in case somebody was inside, they could get out. Or if the other firemen were in, you know, attacking the fire and something happened, they could get out. So you made sure you had ladders on all sides of the buildings. That was our primary job.

Q: And how many people would it take to put the ladder up?

CC: One ladder? Like two people, most ladders; some take four, you know. And I'm talking about ground ladders. I'm not talking about, you know, automatic aerial ladders, you know, where you just push buttons or (laughs) ...

Q: Do you use those, too?

CC: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Q: But did you then when you ...

CC: I did, I did.

Q: You say you did. You don't ...

CC: Today? The newest trucks we have today? No, I'm not trained on them. Just haven't had time. Maybe I'll go back to it when I retire (laughs).

Q: So, let's see. You were an engineer, right?

CC: Yes.

Q: And what, by definition, does an engineer do?

CC: Well, you maintain the equipment. After a fire, you make sure everything is put back on the trucks and in working order. Work nights on Thursday nights, you get--get the trucks

cleaned. Make sure to check the oil and make sure everything's in proper order. And it's basically you're in charge of the trucks and equipment.

Q: And what are the biggest challenges in that job?

CC: Well, I don't know what you mean (laughs) by biggest, you know. It's just--it's a job, and you do it. You have to take care of the equipment, because somebody's going to depend on it for their life, so you make sure it's in working order.

Q: And then, after that, you became an officer ...

CC: Yes.

Q: ... right? And so what were your main responsibilities as a Lieutenant?

CC: Well, you're underneath the Captain. Take orders from him and issue orders to the men, you know. You got to the fire, you made sure, like I said--with the ladders--you made sure the ladders were put up in the proper spots, and anything the Chief asked you to do, you had to relay the information down. You had to go in and make the searches, you know, with the men; it was--that's about it.

Q: And what were some of the hardest things you had to do as Lieutenant?

CC: (Laughs) Issue orders.

Q: Did you ever have anybody not want to obey an order?

CC: No, not really. No. Everybody's pretty conscientious about that.

Q: You said that you had served in the Army. Where--where did you serve?

CC: I was in the United States here--Massachusetts was where I was stationed.

Q: And did you feel that your military service helped you in your firefighting career?

CC: I think so.

Q: In what way?

CC: Well, you--actually you, in the service, you know, you learn to take orders. And when I got into the fire service, it was run sort of semi-military. And when somebody gave you an order, you did it, and it was whether you liked it or not. If you thought it was wrong, you still did it, and you answered--you know, asked questions later. And I thought that's the way it should be. Today, it's a little more lax, you know. And I'm not saying they

don't take orders. But it's not as stern the way the orders are given.

Q: You think in the way the officers talk to the other firefighters, that that's the difference, or what?

CC: Well, I don't know. Just a lot more relaxed environment now. And maybe it has to be to keep the firemen happy (laughs).

Q: They didn't worry about keeping the firemen happy ...

CC: Well, in one way, there was some abundance of people who wanted to get into the Fire Department before, and, you know, there was waiting lists, and so you watched what you did, to stay in. Today, you know, fifteen people could show up at the door, and you could take them in. So, I think that's one of the main things. But I think, you--probably the military helped out the fire service in lots of ways.

Q: Can you think of some other ways?

CC: Well, just, you know, when you're in the service (laughs), you learn to take orders. So, when you got into the Fire Department, somebody gave you an order, you did it.

Q: Okay, and then you got to a point when you were giving orders ...

CC: Yeah.

Q: ... as a Lieutenant and then as a Captain.

CC: Uh huh.

Q: So, did you feel comfortable doing that?

CC: Yeah, yeah. Very comfortable, and I think..my term was like, when I was Lieutenant and Captain, I think the men respected me and did whatever I--I told them to do, and had to do. And so ...

Q: What were the most challenging aspects when you were Captain?

CC: It's not much different than being a Lieutenant. Although, you know, in--when I was Captain, I'll say I think I was probably pretty close to the last Captain in Atlantic's where they didn't have a President. So you had to run both the administrative stuff and the fire grounds, too. So it was a lot bigger job than it is today. Now they have President, Vice President, you know, to take care of the administrative work, and the Captain just takes care of the men and the trucks. But we used to have to pay the bills and watch out for every penny they spent, and so ...

Q: So that must have taken a lot of time.

CC: Yeah, it did. I think it was a bigger challenge then than it is today, to be Captain.

Q: Do you think that the system that they have now is better, is worse?

CC: I think it's a lot better. Yeah. It takes a lot of pressure off the Captains. You don't have to worry about doing a lot of paperwork, plus watch your men on the fire grounds, and (laughs), you know.

Q: Yeah. The fire grounds? What is that?

CC: Well, when you go to the scene of a fire, you know.

Q: Okay. Then, you also became a Trustee, right?

CC: Yes.

Q: So what kinds of issues ...

CC: Well, then you were in administrative. Check the bills. Pay the bills. Go out for bids.

Any equipment that had to be purchased, you go out and get the bids and ...

Q: Did any controversial issues come up while you were a Trustee ...

CC: No (laughs).

Q: ... that you had to deal with? No?

CC: No (laughs). Just every day. No. It's just a matter of, you know, you go over the bills. If there's something in question, you go and find out from the Captain what's this purchase about or for what.

Q: Were there any purchases that, you know, didn't seem ...

CC: No ...

Q: ... right?

CC: ... never. Never. No. Of course, there's--in Atlantic, there's five Trustees, and, you know, everybody watches one another, and not like the school district where they could steal the money (laughs).

Q: And you were involved in the work for the new building, right?

CC: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me about that? I mean, how--at what point did you decide that you needed a new building?

CC: Probably when I first got in the company, but it was a long time after that before ...

Q: Why? What was wrong with the old building?

CC: Well, just, it was way too small. You couldn't house the trucks. Everything was antiquated, breaking down--the heating system, the bathrooms. It wasn't one thing. The building was a hundred years old, you know. I know there was many changes made in the building, you know, from when it was first built, but the basic shell was very old, and it was time. These trucks we have today, they couldn't possibly fit in the old firehouse. Wouldn't fit through the doors.

Q: Well, how did you keep up the operations while you were in the process of putting up the new building?

CC: The trucks were stored in other firehouses in Port Washington. Squeezed in here and

there, wherever they could.

Q: And then, where would the firefighters go? Or you could still--I mean, you could still go there while it was under construction?

CC: No. No.

Q: No. So ...

CC: We had our meetings in other firehouses, and gatherings--whatever we had to do. The Trustees met in other places, other firehouses. We do have an annex on Avenue A, and we did a lot of work out of there. So ...

Q: So how was ...

CC: ... it was pretty comfortable, while we were under construction.

Q: How long did it take under construction?

CC: Two years. So ...

Q: Did you run into any obstacles ...

CC: No.

Q: ... along the way?

CC: No. You know (laughs), I was co-chairman on the building committee, and I think we went over-budget by about four percent, which was nothing. And that was--there were a few changes. There was a couple of walls that weren't anticipated--retaining walls on the property. And it was--it was hardly anything. We worked pretty tight on it.

Q: Did you have a celebration when the new building was finished?

CC: Yes. There was a wet-down on the building.

Q: A wet-down? What's that?

CC: Well, we called it a wet-down, when --you know, in the fire service, even when somebody buys a new--a truck gets bought, the other companies come and they squirt water up in the air on it, and you call it a wet-down party.

Q: Do you squirt it on each other?

CC: No, no. No. Just over the equipment. Just a good luck gesture.

Q: Yeah. Did you do anything personally for good luck? Did you carry anything with you or ...

CC: No.

Q: ... think about anything?

CC: No. No rabbit tails or--no.

Q: Well, on the wet-down, now I've heard stories of, you know, the firefighters getting into water fights. Did you ever ...

CC: No.

Q: ... get into one of those?

CC: No. No I didn't.

Q: What kind of humorous things would go on in the firehouse?

CC: (Laughs). Humorous things. I really can't tell--I don't know, can't remember humorous. Not too many humorous things go on, you know. A lot of talk goes on, but not about humorous things.

Q: Good talk?

CC: Yeah, very good talk. So ...

Q: How important to you are the social aspects of being in the Department?

CC: How important. Well, from what I can say, it's probably one thing that holds the people pretty close together. By having the Christmas party, you know, and things like that. I mean, Atlantic--we do most of the cooking ourselves for parties, and there's a crew--say a crew of guys of ten, you know, to do the cooking. And it's very enjoyable.

Q: Do you cook, yourself?

CC: Yes, I do. And I enjoy it.

Q: What are your specialties?

CC: Oh, Italian food, yeah.

Q: Like what? (Laughs).

CC: Pastas. (Laughs) I can make almost anything in Italian food, if you want specialties. But I do a lot of cooking at home.

Q: Do you?

CC: Yeah, I enjoy it as a hobby.

Q: How did you learn?

CC: Just fooling around. (laughs)

Q: Did your mother teach you or your ...

CC: No, not really. No. Actually, my father-in-law had a restaurant years ago--not that I was involved in it.

Q: Here in town?

CC: No, no. In the City. And when they moved to Port Washington and I started going out

with my wife, and I went to his house, and I used to watch what he was doing. He was-- he was a pretty good cook, so that's where I picked up a lot of secrets. So ...

Q: So, how often would you say you have parties at the firehouse?

CC: You usually try and have a Christmas party. And -- parties (laughs). We have a Communion Breakfast, which we cook for. I'm trying to think of any other social events. We just had this fund raiser for Ashley--did a lot of cooking for that.

Q: You had a lot of people there, right?

CC: Yeah. We fed about six hundred and fifty people. And it worked out well. It ran very smooth.

Q: Yeah, I wanted to go that night, but I couldn't. I had already made other commitments.

CC: Yeah.

Q: It sounded like a good menu.

CC: Yeah. A lot of pasta.

Q: Well, with all the commitments of time, how did that affect your family life?

CC: I really don't think it affected my family life too much, you know. It was a couple of nights a week you're out. But, no, I tried to do what I had to do at home, too. Made sure I kept the peace. I know there are some firemen that spend more time at the firehouse than home, but I tried not to do that. So ...

Q: Now, you said you had--you have two children or ...

CC: Three.

Q: ... three. And would you want them to become firefighters?

CC: Well, I have two daughters, and I don't think they would be (laughs) firefighters, and, you know, my son is not living here. He's in the City, so I can't really entice him to being a firefighter. I do have a grandson that's thirteen now, and I'm going to try and get him into the junior firefighters there. If not, if he doesn't become a firefighter, it's a good experience.

Q: You mean the Explorer Group?

CC: Yes, the Explorer Program.

Q: Have you worked with that program yourself?

CC: No, I haven't. No. Of course, they're always in the firehouse on Thursday nights and all. I'll see them there. And I really think it's a good program for Port Washington. And for the kids.

Q: Uh huh.

CC: It's good experience for them.

Q: Which committees have you worked on?

CC: Besides the building committee?

Q: Uh huh.

CC: Numerous dinner committees for the Port Washington Fire Department. Budget Allocation Committee for the Fire Department. And I remember years ago, the way the Department was run, it was run differently. We had a Board of Directors for the Fire Department. I was on that for many years.

Q: And you don't have that anymore?

CC: No, it's a little different now. They never had a President and Board of Directors at the Fire Department. And the Chief used to do all the work. And now they--just like I'd mentioned with the President in Atlantic's, when they split it up, that makes it a lot easier. Makes it easier for the Chiefs now.

Q: So, when you're on the Dinner Committee, what specifically would you have to deal with?

CC: Oh, you'd go out to caterers, get prices, you know. Work up the menus and, you know, try and get the best price. And that's about it on the Dinner Committee.

Q: And the Dinner--was that an annual dinner, or did you have them more often?

CC: No, semi-annually--every two years on the bigger dinners.

Q: And did you have a ceremony?

CC: Yes. They have swearing in ceremonies, yeah.

Q: At the dinners?

CC: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

CC: Actually, it's Inspection Dinner. The members come in uniform, and the Chief gives them a little inspection, makes sure everybody's got their uniforms fit and that's what it's for.

Q: And then the Budget Allocation Committee. What would you do with that?

CC: Well, you know, there's four fire companies in town, and you actually go over the four budgets of the four companies, you know, and make sure everybody's in line with one another and make sure that they're not going out trying to spend money unwisely.

Q: So then that was a committee of the Department, not the company.

CC: That's the Department.

Q: Yeah.

CC: Two company members. You know, two members from each company.

Q: And so, would people from the different companies kind of fight for what they wanted to spend the money on?

CC: Yeah, they do sometimes. That's what it's there for -- to iron it out.

Q: Do you remember a particular instance?

CC: No, no particular instance. But you're always hassling something.

Q: Yeah.

CC: You know. Like when Atlantic's wanted to put up their new building, they had to get, you know, permission actually from the rest of the companies to do it. Because it whacks your budget way up. You know, getting a mortgage. So that was--that was a big fight. The first time anybody ever spent in the millions (laughs).

Q: And the people from the other companies, did they say, "Oh, what do you need a new building for?"

CC: Well, they really realized it. Everybody realized it. When the next company comes along and wants to do something, you have to realize it, you know.

Q: And, let's see, were there any other committees? Oh, the Track Committee. Were you involved with that?

CC: No.

Q: No? Did you ever go out for the competitions?

CC: Yes.

Q: Yeah?

CC: Yeah.

Q: What kinds of--what kinds of ...

CC: Well, nothing heavy. I just went there to support the team.

Q: But you didn't race, yourself?

CC: I did a little bit on the bucket brigade. And most--I was a mechanic for the Rowdies racing team, you know, for quite a few years. That's why I went along with them most of

the time.

Q: So you said a bucket brigade. Do they still have that, even though they don't--they don't do that at fires anymore. Do they ...

CC: No, but they--it's in competition. They fill five-gallon buckets and carry them up a ladder and see who could fill up a fifty-five gallon drum the fastest, you know.

Q: Would they do it as a relay?

CC: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

CC: Yeah, there's three people on the ladder and ...

Q: So is the competition pretty intense?

CC: It's--yeah, yeah.

Q: And between individuals, or between teams?

CC: No, between teams. Yeah. I'm sure you've heard that before from some of the other members.

Q: Yeah. So, you said you were the mechanic for the Rowdies and you often serviced the truck. That was at your service station?

CC: Yeah.

Q: What was the name of your service--what is the name of it.

CC: Triangle. Triangle Service Station.

Q: And was that a family business? You know, had it been passed down from your father?

CC: No. No.

Q: How did you happen to get into that business?

CC: Because I've been a mechanic my whole life (laughs). When I was like fourteen, fifteen, I had my first cars, working on them. And I went into the service. I was in the maintenance department there, working on the trucks and tanks and whatever. So the day I got out of the service, I owned the gas station already. I bought it while I was in the

service.

Q: Well, how did it work out with your being a volunteer firefighter and running a business?

CC: Well, it wasn't easy. We lost plenty of hours during the day. But I have a partner who's also a fireman.

Q: Who's your partner?

CC: Joseph Pennetti. And--because he was in the Fire Department probably eight years before I was, because he got in when he was eighteen. And so, he used to go to fires when we first started in business, and then I got in, then we used to share. I'd go to one; he'd go to one. And when I became Captain and there was a little more pressure on me, I had to go to most of them during the day, and he just let me go.

Q: So, he would ... [stay] ... at the service station.

CC: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Yeah. Were you both in the same company?

CC: Yes, yeah.

Q: So that made it a little easier, I guess.

CC: Yeah. We were in high school together. We went into basic training in the Army together. And then we split up. I went to Massachusetts. Actually, he got hurt in basic training. He stayed right in Fort Dix. And we were home on leave, found out about this gas station being for sale. And we bought it. Had somebody run it for thirty days, and then came back out and been there ever since--forty-four years.

Q: So--wait, did he go--he went in before you did, right?

CC: Into the fire service?

Q: Yeah.

CC: Yes.

Q: Yeah. How many of the people who went in when you did are still in the Department?

CC: When I got into the company? A lot (laughs). I have a brother that got in the year after me, and he's still in and very active. And there's probably at least--tons of people.

Q: What's your brother's name?

CC: Daniel Cella.

Q: Do you remember the *Readers Digest* used to have a feature called "My Most Unforgettable Character"?

CC: No (laughs).

Q: Yeah, well, they did. And, you know, people would write about somebody who made a big impression on them for one reason or another. And I just wondered, would you say anybody in the Department would fit that description?

CC: No. No, I can't really single out one person.

Q: What do you think the effect of 9/11 was on your own personal feelings and on the Department?

CC: I could say, I think it brought people really back to reality of the fire service. I could see there was a bigger response, because there was starting to be a slack-off. And I say slack-off, because -- when you don't have major fires for a long time, it seems like the guys get--start falling away a little bit. And when something happens, see, with a big

fire, but now you're talking about 9/11, and we had guys coming out the (laughs)--you couldn't keep them away from the firehouse. You know, everybody wanted to do something to help out. And that's how it was (laughs).

Q: And have most of them stayed ...

Q: ... in the Department?

CC: Yeah. Oh sure.

Q: Uh huh.

CC: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. Do you think that, you know, after that happened, that the techniques in the Department changed? Or the attitudes? Or, you know, the procedures? Do you think anything changed?

CC: Well, I don't know if it changed. I know we have different orders that the doors on the firehouse stay closed now, you know, even when you're in the building. They used to have the doors open all the time. Now, you've got to worry about somebody stealing the fire truck and using it to do damage somewhere. So it's pretty close security right now.

We had to put cameras in, and we've got to make sure something doesn't happen. And probably really will somewhere. We're not all safe right now (laughs).

Q: You don't feel safe out here? You think there's a likelihood ...

CC: I feel safe. But there's every likelihood that something can happen and probably will in the future.

Q: Yeah. So, with the doors being closed--I mean, it used to be that teachers or parents could take their kids over to the firehouse and have them look at the fire engines. Can they still come?

CC: Oh, they can still come. They can still come. Most of the time, the teachers make arrangements with somebody ...

Q: Yeah.

CC: ... you know, to be there to show them around.

Q: So you still have school groups come in.

CC: Oh, sure.

Q: Yeah.

CC: Sure. And lots of them.

Q: What would you say are the major changes in the Department during the years that you've been a member, besides the ones you talked about? You know, in terms of splitting the administrative ...

Q: ... and the firematic aspect?

CC: I don't really think there's a lot of big changes. I really don't. Most people who--you get into the fire service, you're in there because you want to help out the community. Do a little something. And, you know, that if you weren't in the fire service, you wouldn't have a chance to do.

Q: Excuse me ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ... Okay. Could you give me the dates for your service?

CC: Yeah, well, I got in in 1966, June 2nd, and I became Assistant Engineer in 1970, and then Engineer '71 and '72. And then Second Lieutenant in 1975, and First Lieutenant '76 and '77, and Captain in '78 and '79. And then, in 1980, I became a Trustee, and I'm still a

Trustee -- to 2004.

Q: That's great. And you continue to be a Trustee? Is that something that you get elected to?

CC: Yes, you get elected every year, but ...

Q: Do you have to campaign for it?

CC: No, not really. I've had opposition against me, but I got voted in every year.

Q: You mean somebody running against you?

CC: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

CC: And I think I'll stay, if I can, as Trustee. It's a nice responsibility.

Q: What kinds of things are you dealing with now as a Trustee?

CC: Paying the bills and (laughs), like I say, going out for a bid. If anything has to be bought,

you bid it.

Q: Do you feel that you get enough funds from the community?

CC: Yes. Usually what we budget for, we usually get. Because you work off of them, like anybody else. Work off last year's budget and see if you can drop it a little somewhere or add it a little somewhere.

Q: How do you think the community has changed over the years?

CC: (Laughs). It's gotten a lot bigger population-wise -- and, I don't know (laughs), you know, it used to be kind of a close-knit community. You knew everybody. Now, you go down Main Street, you don't know anybody. So, that's one way it changed. Traffic sure has changed.

Q: Oh, yes. And that's affected the Department, right, in terms of getting to fires?

CC: Oh, response time? Sure.

Q: Yeah.

CC: Sure. You know, there's not one street that you can go on now that there isn't a traffic

jam around here.

Q: Do you have, you know, problems cutting--getting past the cars or ...

CC: Oh, sometimes you do. Some people hesitate from moving over. They--they just don't respect the fire truck, the red lights, and the sirens. And maybe it's not that they don't respect them. Some people just (laughs) aren't smart enough to (laughs)--maybe they don't know the law.

Q: And what--well, what do you think is going to happen when that new apartment complex is finished, in terms of the traffic situation?

CC: Which one?

Q: In the forty-one acres. You know, back there on Pleasant Avenue.

CC: I know where you mean. My service station is at the same area. It's going to be a lot of traffic. I'm not sure at what times of the day it's going to--going to really be tougher. But I don't think that--I don't think that's going to affect--you get two hundred and forty homes, that's two hundred and forty cars. I don't think it'll be too--not too bad.

Q: What does the term "clamdigger" mean to you?

CC: Oldtimers.

Q: Uh huh. Would you--would you consider yourself a clamdigger?

CC: Well, pretty close. My family might have been (laughs).

Q: Did they actually go out digging clams?

CC: Yeah, some relations did, yes. Yeah.

Q: So, is it considered a positive term or ...

CC: I would say it's a positive term, yeah.

Q: So, like the clamdiggers in town, you kind of know each other?

CC: Yeah, that would probably be it. Hang around down on the shore.

Q: What would you say was your worst day as a firefighter?

CC: Well, probably the day Bobby Dayton died, I would have to say. Couldn't be any worse

than that.

Q: And you were right there.

CC: Yeah.

Q: Were you inside the building also?

CC: No, I was running the aerial ladder; I was outside. I drove the aerial ladder to the fire. I was with the aerial ladder.

Q: And at what point ...

CC: Of course, they brought his body down the ladder and ...

Q: And you were in charge of the ladder that they brought it down?

CC: Yeah, yeah.

Q: And did you know right away that he had died?

CC: Probably within minutes, you know. It was certainly a sad thing, but -- I guess any time

that happens to anybody ...

Q: What was your best day as a firefighter?

CC: (Laughs). Oh, probably the best day was when--the day I got elected into the fire service. And then it was all uphill from there (laughs).

Q: What would you say you're proudest of?

CC: I guess the proudest -- of becoming a fireman, because I had quite a few family relatives in the fire service. It was nice to fill their shoes. Of course, now I don't have anybody to fill mine (laughs).

Q: Maybe that grandson.

CC: Yeah, maybe the grandson. You're right.

Q: What would you say makes a good firefighter?

CC: Just being there a hundred percent when they're needed. And they usually are. So, that's about it (laughs).

Q: And how do you think the entry of women changed the Department?

CC: I don't really think it changed the Department. There were a lot of members against it in the past. Now, you don't think twice about it. Because change, you know, from when there were no women, and then all of a sudden, they bring the women in -- so of course, everybody was saying, "Uh oh, what's going on?" Now, it's second nature (laughs).

Q: Do you remember the kinds of objections they had to women?

CC: No. Not really. No.

Q: What about members of different ethnic groups?

CC: Well, I don't feel myself (laughs) anything against that. As far as somebody can come there and put the equipment on and die a fire out, doesn't matter who they are. You know, we can take all the help we can get right now (laughs).

Q: Do you have minority group members in Atlantic?

CC: Yes, we do. Yeah.

Q: And there's harmony in the company?

CC: Oh, yeah. Like I say, as long as you can come there and do your job, we're glad to take you.

Q: Have you ever been injured on the job?

CC: No. No. Thank God.

Q: Yeah. Have you ever had a narrow escape?

CC: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me about it?

CC: Well, I had a floor collapse underneath me, and good thing there was a beam that just that my legs just happened to straddle. Otherwise, I would have went down three stories right into the basement.

Q: Was that in a house fire?

CC: No. It was a building on Main Street.

Q: Do you remember what ...

CC: I can't think of the num--the name of the building even right now. But, yeah, that was pretty scary.

Q: Yeah (laughs).

CC: Because I had another firefighter standing right next to me, and he happened to just grab onto my coat and pulled me out of the--out of the hole.

Q: Did you ever ...

CC: That was--that was at the Village Tavern, by the way. I just remembered ...

Q: Oh, yes. Yes (laughs).

CC: ... the building.

Q: Did the whole building burn down?

CC: It didn't burn right down, but it was severely damaged. Yeah.

Q: Did you ever rescue someone else?

CC: No.

Q: One of your fellow firefighters?

CC: No.

Q: What would you say goes through your mind when you're heading to a fire?

CC: What goes through your mind? Well, you know, when you lived in Port Washington your whole life and you hear a certain address, you can sort of size up what you're going to be getting into. Which is a good thing for firemen who live in the town. Not like if you lived in New York City and you came to Port Washington to fight a fire. At least, you can think about, what you're going [to], what would be there. Is it a bookstore, is it the hardware store. And when you're on the way to a fire you think about these things sometimes.

Q: What were some of the surprises that waited for you? You know, like in the training and then being in the Fire Department?

CC: Oh, I can't really think of any surprises. No.

Q: And what would you say is the most important piece of advice you'd give to people to avoid home fires?

CC: To avoid home fires?

Q: Yes.

CC: It's hard to avoid a home fire, because most of them you probably can't see--electrical in the wall or-- I know one good piece of advice: Make sure you have a smoke detector that's working. And, of course, nowadays, a CO Detector for carbon monoxide. Very important.

Q: That might not avoid the fire, but it would get you out of there.

CC: Get you out.

Q: Yeah. Did you ever think about leaving the Department?

CC: No, never.

Q: Would you say there are people that you've influenced in firefighting?

CC: No, I really can't say (laughs). I probably did, but I ...

Q: Yeah. Who would you say was the biggest influence on you?

CC: I can't say that either (laughs).

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

CC: I don't know. I haven't figured that out yet (laughs). If it's going to be of any value or--
Maybe you could tell me.

Q: We'll see. Was there anything else that you think would be important to talk about, to
have--to have as part of history of the Fire Department?

CC: No. You've covered everything pretty well.

Q: Well, we've talked about history, but what about the future. Do you think it's going to
continue to be an all-volunteer Department?

CC: Let's say I hope--I hope it does. But I don't think it will. Unless we have something
happen really, really bad in this country. And I know that'll bring the volunteers out

more. But, I mean, it's tough on the younger generation -- to go to a day fire and, you know, they've got to put in a lot of time. A lot of time. There's OSHA [Occupational Safety & Health Administration] regulations and all this training. I don't know if I could do it today. I probably--I probably couldn't, owning my own business and then you're out almost every night of the week going to school now. You know, it's very tough.

Q: How long do they have to go like every night of the week? You know, how long?

CC: Well, I'm not saying every night of the week, but it might be two nights a week for, you know, a couple of hours. Still, it's a lot of time.

Q: Oh, sure. How do you think the community perceives the Port Washington Fire Department?

CC: I think they--very well. Very well.

Q: Like when you say that you're a volunteer with the Department, what kind of response do you get from people?

CC: I don't--I don't know if--they might say, "That's nice" (laughs), but--but I happen to feel that, as a whole, you know, I don't think the community could do without the Port Washington Fire Department.

Q: But do they know that?

CC: Does who know?

Q: Does the community know that (laughs), you know?

CC: I don't know. Just a feeling I get, you know.

Q: So you feel that the town appreciates that the volunteers serve.

CC: I think so. Yeah. Yeah. You know, we don't only die out fires. Look at all the automobile accidents we respond to. There was a collapse over here at the Shields Building, you know, somebody got buried. And, you know, the Fire Department has to know all that--all that stuff, all the training. So, you know ...

Q: Did you go over there that time, to Shields?

CC: No, I didn't. Not on that collapse, no.

Q: Did you go to the Shields fire?

CC: Yes. Yes. But, you know, what do we do? We do water rescues, ice rescues (laughs).
So it's just not dying out fires. If something happens in this town, they call the Fire
Department.

Q: Well, what are some of the emergencies that were particularly noteworthy to you, you
know, that you were involved with?

CC: We've had so many automobile accidents through the years. No, I didn't--I--There was a
car that went off the town dock there with a couple of women in it. I really didn't go on
that call either.

Q: When was that?

CC: Gee, you're testing me now.

Q: Oh, you mean a long time ago?

CC: Oh, yeah, it's been a while.

Q: Yeah.

CC: Yeah.

Q: Did they--were they able to save the women?

CC: Yes. You know, just so many things happen, it just becomes automatic (laughs). You just can't remember all the things.

Q: Well, when you know what you're doing, it becomes automatic (laughs) okay?

CC: Yeah.

Q: All right. Well, thank you very much.

CC: Okay.

Q: It's been a wonderful interview.

CC: Thank you.