

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Walter J. Clark  
Atlantic Hook & Ladder Company No. 1

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

©2006



Text enclosed in a blue box is linked to graphics  
pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: Today is Monday, September 27th, 2004. This is an interview with Walter J. Clark. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library. My name is Sally Olds. Can you please say your name?

Walter Clark: Walter J. Clark.

Q: And which fire company are you a member of?

WC: I'm associated with the Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company.

Q: How did you happen to come to Port Washington? You were born ...

WC: I was out in Flushing, and my parents obviously moved out here, because they wanted to live—in those days—in the country (laughs).

Q: How old were you?

WC: I was five.

Q: So what was it like growing up here?

WC: Oh, it was great. I went to school at Salem Elementary School, and then I went to Weber. Graduated from Schreiber. And then, I started working for the Port Washington school district, and last year I attained twenty-five years of service there with them.

Q: That long?

WC: Yeah, yeah.

Q: You started right out ...

WC: Right out of high school. Yeah, yeah. So ...

Q: And what made you decide to join the Fire Department?

WC: I had a dear friend who, every time we would be pal-ing around together or doing something, the fire whistles would blow and off he would go and leave me just standing there (laughs), so I figured, you know, join him, or, you know, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. So I got involved in it, and last year I hit twenty-five years in the Fire Department, too, so ...

Q: What's his name?

WC: Kenny Rowe. He's since moved to Florida, now.

Q: Did anything ever happen in your childhood ...

WC: No.

Q: ... you know ...

WC: To trigger being a fireman? No.

Q: No?

WC: No.

Q: No. Do you remember the first time you ever heard a fire engine, or do you have any memories of ...

WC: As a kid? No.

Q: Yeah. Yeah.

WC: I wish I could make up a story, but no (laughs). No.

Q: And so, was he a member of Atlantic?

WC: Yes. Yes.

Q: And what was it like getting into the company?

WC: In those days, it was very strict. You know, you had to have short hair. It couldn't be above your—you know, below your ears. And it was a rigorous procedure to get in. You had to go through a physical, and you had to be sponsored by so many different people, and then your application went through the course of being approved by the Board of Directors. It was very exciting.

Q: So, did you have to cut your hair?

WC: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Yeah.

Q: Why? How long was it?

WC: Well, in those days, you know, I joined in 1980, so the thing in those days was to have long hair (laughs).

Q: Do you remember who the Captain of Atlantic's was?

WC: At the time, the Captain was Charles Cella.

Q: And do you remember who the Chief of the Department was?

WC: The Chief of the Department was Joseph Fico.

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

WC: Oh, very gung-ho. You know, excited. Couldn't wait for that first fire. And then that first fire came, and I almost made "number two" in my pants (laughs), okay? Because then I realized it wasn't a joke when we pulled around the corner and saw this—this building on Haven Avenue, it was like—fire was blowing out of all the second story windows. And they actually wanted me to do something (laughs). And I was brand new. I didn't know anything about the job.

Q: So how did—what happened?

WC: Well, you know, I had some more senior people taking me and leading me in to do different things. We were putting ladders up; we were breaking windows. We were venting the building, and it was just—it was very, very exciting. I almost quit. I almost quit. That's how bad of a fire it was. And it was literally my first fire.

Q: You went—you had to go inside ...

WC: Well, no, no. We didn't have to—I didn't have to go inside, because I wasn't trained on wearing an air pack or anything like that. But it was just overwhelming, pulling up to this thing. (Laughs) Holy Christmas! What the heck did I get myself involved in?

Q: What—what was your job with the company?

WC: Right then and there? I—no, I was just a fireman, a probationary fireman. And I was—I just did whatever I was told to do.

Q: Yeah.

WC: Help grab this ladder. Bring this ladder here. You know, pretty much a gofer.

Q: But after that, did you specialize in any particular aspect?

WC: Well, I mean, you know, I went up the ranks and obtained, finally, the position of Captain. But no, the—the specific goals that a truck company—which is what Atlantic's

is—is ladder the building, search and rescue. We extricate car accident victims. We have the Hurst tool on our rigs. We also have the—you know, when they use the term the "cherry-pickers" that everybody's familiar with, you know, the bucket trucks. So the truck company has a very wide range of responsibilities as versus an engine company or a pumper company. They distribute water and put water on the fire, whereas the truck company has so many other things to be doing at a fire scene. So ...

Q: What was the hardest thing?

WC: I think one of the toughest things to do is open up a roof, is to actually get up on a roof and open it up. Because in those days when I first joined, they didn't have power saws like they do now. So you had to pretty much open up the roof the old-fashioned way, with an ax. So—but now they've come up with these—these specialized chain saws that are set up for roofs and it's a lot easier now. But it's still—still rigorous.

Q: Well, when you were doing it then, can you just kind of go through the steps for me?

WC: Specifically?

Q: Yeah, like in opening up the roof. What ...

WC: You know, there's what's called a pike-head ax, and the ax has this very sharp point on it. And you have to drive that, literally, into the roof to start an opening, and then you have to peel away the tar paper, the shingles, and then eventually you get down to the wooden sheathing, and it was very exhausting to get a small hole open. And the reason why you'd want to do this is to get the hot, heated gases out of the house or the building that you're

operating in so that the interior teams could advance and could work under, you know, those heated conditions.

Q: And where are you standing while you're doing all this?

WC: Well, it depends on what kind of a building you're on. If you're in a commercial building, you're standing literally on the flat part of the roof, directly over the fire. If you're in a house with a pitched roof, you're on the ridge of the house. At the highest point, and usually directly over the fire.

Q: So, then, how do you protect yourself from having the roof cave in under you?

WC: Knowledge. And being schooled. You know, being educated.

Q: What do you need to know?

WC: Well, you know, you have to look for signs that the roof is now starting to deteriorate, and the heat might be getting—getting to it. You also have to figure out—try to guesstimate how long the fire has been burning prior to you getting there. You know, if you pull up and it's a free-burning fire and you're assuming that it's burning for quite some time, you may not even be able to go on the roof. So, those are—those are things, as an officer, and as more senior members would—that's called sizing up—sizing up the situation. And ...

Q: What's a free-burning fire?

WC: A fire that has already vented itself. The windows have broken out because of the heat. There's lots of oxygen. There's lots of fuel. And now the fire is free-burning, okay. If it were in the early stages of burning, you know, you'd pull up and the windows would be dark; there'd be puffs of smoke coming out. And that's called the incipient stage. But, in free-burning, it means that the fire has already busted through its windows, and it's now on—it's going. It's taking up everything in its path.

Q: Besides that first fire there on Haven Avenue, what was your most memorable experience fighting a fire?

WC: Just recently, in 1999, we went to a basement fire. And I pulled somebody out of a basement fire, who was trapped.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

WC: Yeah. It was—it was Sunday morning. It was about twelve o'clock. I believe it was in January or February. January, I think it was. And the radio activated, telling us that there was a house fire. I was Fire Marshal at the time. And it was a couple of blocks around the house from me. And the dispatcher indicated that there were people trapped. Confirmed people trapped. And as I pulled up, I had this woman greet me, screaming that her father was in the house. And I was met by a couple of other firemen who didn't have gear. And, you know, they made their best efforts to get upstairs and check the upstairs, but they didn't have a mask on, and I had all my stuff in my Fire Marshal's car, so I was able to go in and take a better look. And I searched the first floor the best I could. And then I proceeded to go in through a basement window and search the basement. And that's where I found her father. I was unable to get him out by myself.

Other—other guys, as the arriving units came in, had to come down and help me, because he was so big. So, that's—that was a pretty memorable day.

Q: And where was that fire?

WC: That fire was on 6 Kirkwood Road in Manorhaven.

Q: And did you win an award or ...

WC: Yeah, I received a Gold Medal of Valor for that.

Q: Were there any others that stand out in your memory?

WC: Yeah. There were some good ones. Not—not—I shouldn't say "good." That's a bad term. That's a fireman talking. Sorry (laughs).

Q: Yeah, I know. Well, I've heard ...

WC: No fire is good. No fire is good.

Q: ... a good fire. What does that mean?

WC: It means that it was—it was work. There was work involved. In other words, we pulled up, and we all had to go to work. And there have been a few of those. We had one on Morgan Place that an elderly couple had been killed in. And we could smell them, but we couldn't find them. And finally after, you know, sifting through all the debris and

stuff like that, we came across the woman. I'll take that back. The man—the man wasn't burned. He was actually found standing up near a closet door, like as if he were a mannequin. Like he just died standing up from the carbon monoxide. But she was—she was pretty badly burned, and we were—we were crawling right on top of her, not even knowing that she was there. So that was a pretty bad one.

Q: I hate to ask this, but you said you could smell ...

WC: Yeah.

Q: ... the smell. What ...

WC: The flesh and the—and the hair on human beings has a distinct odor when it's—when it's been burned. So, you know, you can—you can—it's a horrible smell, but you'll never forget it if you ever smell it. So ...

Q: Do you ever have dreams about these fires?

WC: I—I—the Kirkwood Road fire, I—I used to have like some dreams about it. Quick, flashy kind of dreams. Nothing that, you know, I could even talk really about, because there wasn't much to them. I went to the gentleman's funeral, and those were the—I wasn't dreaming about the fire. I would dream about his funeral. It was weird. Like I would see the casket and, you know—but it wasn't opened. You know, strange. Strange.

Q: But did you—did you ever see his daughter after that?

WC: Oh, yeah. She wrote me a beautiful letter. She sent me a picture of her father, you know.

And she wrote a beautiful letter in the *Port Washington News*. He passed away. But he lived for almost a week and a half. And so he got to see his family and talk to his family, and say goodbye, and, you know, all that kind of good stuff. And he was a very bad diabetic, and they said that if he hadn't been diabetic, he probably would have survived the fire. So—but, you know.

Q: You mean, because of how his body reacted to the ...

WC: Yeah, you know, the diabetes —let's face it. When you get burned, you're very susceptible to infection. And, you know, diabetes just—it's a score against you, to begin with, and your body can't fight off the infections. And so they, that's what they said, that if he hadn't been such a diabetic that he could have probably survived the fire, because we—I got him out quick, very quick. So ...

Q: About how long did it take?

WC: Oh, I was—I was at the house within minutes. And I was in the basement, I don't know—I know it sounds like a long time, but I would say within ten minutes of the call coming across my radio, we had gotten him out. That's pretty quick. It's pretty quick. So ...

Q: So, his daughter showed her appreciation. In general, what's your perception of how the community perceives the Fire Department?

WC: Well, always in an event like that, we're heroes.

Q: Yes.

WC: You know, it was like 9/11. We were heroes for a couple of months afterwards. You know, a year afterwards, and then, you know, people look upon us as being drunks, for the most part. Until they need us, they look upon us as being, you know, oh, those rowdy, drunken firemen. Because if you live next to a firehouse, the horn blows, we're loud at night. We're working on the trucks at night. So we have an image, and it's an unfortunate image. But, you know, there— that's the job and that's what kind of people you get to do the job. You—so ...

Q: What do you mean? What kind of people?

WC: It's a different breed. I'm not going to deny that. You know, you got to be a different breed to give up your time, be away from your family, and run into a burning building. You got to be an idiot. You really do. So, you know, that's the kind of people we get. They're good family people. Don't get me wrong. But there's something different about us than anybody else. And I don't know what it is. But, you know, can't really put my finger on it. But you can tell. Kids that come in and join, you can tell the kids that are going to grow up to be good firemen.

Q: How can you tell?

WC: You can just tell. I can't put my finger on it, but you can always—and you can always tell someone who's not going to make it, not going to do it. You know, they're just—they're going to get in; they're going to see something they don't like, and that's going to be it. Now, the one thing that we—when I was going through the ranks and became Captain, and, I would say, in my twenty-five year career, I've cut out a couple of hundred

people in automobile accidents, just on Roslyn West Shore Road alone. Not including Middleneck Road in Sands Point where we've had two or three dozen fatalities. But Roslyn West Shore Road, forget about it. And I know kids see that, and they're completely devastated. Because it's usually young kids in the car, because they've been speeding and drinking, or whatever. And here are these kids that are a couple of years different in age and have never seen anything like that. Two years, three years ago, we had a very bad automobile accident down there where a young boy died, and they were horse playing in the car. They weren't even drinking. It was on Thanksgiving night. Yes, it was Thanksgiving night. And they just—there wasn't a brake mark on the road. There were no skid marks on the road indicating that they put the brakes on. And they were driving a Lincoln Navigator. And there had to have been seven kids in the car, if I'm not mistaken. One of the young men lost his leg, and the other one was killed. Okay. And the Lincoln Navigator flipped over—nose over end over nose over end. The car was—I'd never seen anything like it, and I've been to a lot of pin jobs, and I just—you know, that was—that was a bad one. That was a bad one.

Q: What is it about Roslyn West Shore Road? Why ...

WC: It's dark ...

Q: ... why did they have a single car accident?

WC: It's dark. There's no traffic lights on 'em. On it. Well, they're used to be no traffic lights. And when you're coming home from the bars anywhere in Nassau County, you usually come up the Parkway or the Expressway, and that's like a shoot into town with no, you know, no traffic lights. So ...

Q: You talked about how you almost quit after that first fire.

WC: Oh, yeah.

Q: What kept you in the force?

WC: You know, I don't know. I don't know. But I went back to the firehouse afterwards, and things calmed down a little bit, you know. And, you know, you can't make these hasty decisions on something, so you sit on it a little bit. So maybe—I don't know, I was young. I was eighteen. I was like, "You know what? Frick this. I don't need this. This is bull shit." (Laughs) in plain English. I was gone for like four hours, too. You know, in those days, I'd come home for dinner with my parents or whatever. I didn't get home till like midnight. And then when the fire was over, we had to go back to the firehouse, clean everything, fill air packs, put the trucks back in service again. You know what I mean? It's—it's a job. It's a job. And, like I said, you've got to be a little touched in the head to do it.

Q: Well, how, though, do you get over that basic human fear of fire?

WC: You don't. Because if you do, you're going to get hurt.

Q: Have you ever been injured?

WC: The Kirkwood Road fire. I—I did damage to my discs and my back. And I did back injury to my back in a fire up in—oh, up in the Reni Road/Chestnut Road area. Flower

Hill—I couldn't think of the name of it—Flower Hill area. It was a stupid—it wasn't even a fire. It was a stupid thing. I was crawling up in an attic, and I went to lift myself up through an attic doorway, and I completely blew out my back. I was rushed to the hospital (laughs) in the ambulance. It was bad. Back injuries are big in the Fire Department. That was it, really the only two times, knock on wood.

Q: Does it bother you?

WC: Oh, yeah. Every time it rains, I can tell you when it's going to rain. I can tell you when it's going to snow. Yep.

Q: So, what happens when you get injured in the line of duty? Is there any kind of compensation?

WC: Well, if you're disabled, you know, the Department has a State Disability Fund, and you'd get disability. But, no, other than that, you're shit out of luck (laughs). So ...

Q: Can you tell me about your progression from being the basic firefighter, then to becoming an officer? What made you decide to stand for election?

WC: Well, you know, I'm the kind of person, when I see something being done, if I think it can be done better, I want to get involved in seeing it get done better. And really the only way to do that was to become an officer and go up the ranks, so that you can make ultimate decisions and set policies and standards. And in 1986, I lost my brother-in-law in a tragic accident here in town. He was crushed under a rock right in his own basement. And that like really kicked me in the ass as far as making us like one of the best rescue companies in Nassau County. So—and that would—that's what motivated me. Was to

really, you know—so, and then—then I went up the ranks and became Captain.

Q: Did you have special training to become a Lieutenant and then Captain?

WC: Yeah, you have to go to school. You have to go to Nassau County fire schools. You have to go to actual hands-on. And you have to go to classroom training. I forget—sorry—I don't remember the amount of hours, but it's quite rigorous, the classroom and the hands-on. So ...

Q: So, what were the most challenging aspects that you had to deal with as an officer?

WC: The politics and the B.S. of trying to fight some of the older, more set-in-the-ways, stubborn, you know, because, let's face it, some of these guys have been in the Department for thirty-five and forty years, at the time when I was coming up. And here's this kid full of piss and vinegar telling them that I'm going (laughs) to change things on them, you know. And they didn't really like that too much. So, that—that was more challenging than anything, was trying to educate them on why we should be changing and why things should be upgraded, and why things should be newer and, you know.

Q: What changes did you want to make?

WC: We had four pieces of equipment, and, for each call that we went out on, they would set two pieces of equipment up, and they usually would put out two light trucks for everything. Well, I changed that. When I became Captain, I changed that to one ladder and one light truck going out of the house. And then, you know, I got fought on that one. "Oh, you don't need a big ladder truck on the road!" "You don't need ... " this, you know

(laughs). It was—so here I was trying to be aggressive and proactive on—and my theory was, well, if you have a ladder truck on the road, and, God forbid, it *is* something, you don't have to send back for it. It's already there. Ladders save lives. Light trucks don't save lives. Light trucks illuminate the area, and it's a luxury. But, you know, we—we thought that -- young thinking, that it was critical to have a ladder truck on the road -- first due -- for every call. And, to this day, it's still—the Chief of the Department that's in now, he just recently set one of our ladder trucks up with rescue equipment on it, so that the ladder truck can go to ambulance— not ambulance calls -- the ladder trucks can go to vehicle accidents—motor vehicle accidents, so that, if, in the event that another call comes over at the same time, they can respond, because they're already out and on the road, which is, well, proactive. It's a good thing. So ...

Q: Now, you said a light truck. What is a light truck?

WC: The light truck is a truck with a built-on electrical generator, which illuminates like a football field. It's got special lighting on it, which makes the—you know, the dark work environment into almost a daytime atmosphere.

Q: But, does it have any other equipment?

WC: Oh, yeah, it's got the basics on it. But primarily it's—it's for lights. So ...

Q: Now, so you got up to Captain. Did you ever think about standing up to become Chief?

WC: Well, actually, the thought had crossed my mind, but I—I got myself—don't ask me how, because I don't remember—but I got myself involved in being the Fire Marshal. And eleven years later (laughs), I just recently got out. Actually, last year I got out, and that's

the best job in the world.

Q: Tell me about it.

WC: Well, you know, it's a position of educating the community, educating the children in fire prevention. You know, you've got a little bit of power. And when I say educating the community, in Port Washington, I mean, when you go in to do an inspection, or if you see something wrong and you want them to correct it, instead of just saying, "Do this," and "Here's your ticket," you know, and "Here's your violation order. Do it," you give them the violation to remedy, but you explain to them why. And that's what I mean.

Q: Can you give me an example?

WC: Well, like that fire extinguisher over there. The ticket probably is outdated. Maybe it isn't. I know that this is a pretty up-to-date place. But I would say to you, "Gee, your fire extinguisher ticket is outdated, and if you were here alone at night and a fire should break out in a trash basket and for some reason you became trapped in here and that extinguisher didn't work, you wouldn't be able to put the fire out to get yourself out of here." Simple stuff like that. I mean, that was a poor example. But people blocking exits. People storing stuff too close to sprinkler heads. People not maintaining their sprinkler systems. You know, big things, and you have to explain to them that, you know, if a fire did break out and your insurance company found out that there were these violations involved, they might give you a hard time on your payment, okay? So—and when you say that to somebody, it kind of says, "Oh, really?" you know, and then they, you know, it means a lot more than just saying, "Hey, go get it fixed." You know what I mean? So ...

Q: Do you do inspections on a regular basis and ...

WC: We used to. We used to. But we're limited with the manpower and the resources that we have here in town. Port Washington has grown—I don't have to tell you. So we primarily relied on people making anonymous complaints. When we go to fires, if we see something, we'll get it corrected. We do the critical areas in town—the schools, the hospitals, the movie theaters, places of public assembly. You know, those kind of places you have to stay on top of. I was very active with the Nassau County Fire Marshal's Office, doing the Port schools, and this building, as a matter of fact, every year. Because they're under the State Education Department.

Q: Is that a volunteer position, too?

WC: Yes.

Q: How much of a commitment ...

WC: Big time.

Q: ... do you have to make?

WC: Big time. It's a full-time job. It's another full-time job. There's a phone in your house. There's a computer in your house. They give you a car. You know, you're on call 24/7. And—and on top of being the Fire Marshal, you're also a fireman. So, I mean, you know, when you get to the scene, if they want you to work, or if they need you to work, you work. So -- it was a great job. Great job.

Q: What was great about it?

WC: Well, you know, it—you got to meet a lot, a lot of different people. I worked with so many different committees on the Gambol—you know, the senior high Gambol. People here—the babysitting workshop. She just escorted me down here. I can't even think of her name. Who's the girl who just escorted me down here? She runs the young adult program. I do the babysitter workshop here every year.

Q: What does that involve?

WC: Teaching the kids about, if and when they become babysitters, when they get older, just to be on the aware of the heads-up of when you're in different people's homes, to make sure that there are smoke detectors and, you know, to stay away from the ovens and to note two ways out. And stuff like that. And you get to touch a lot of people's lives in that job. You really—in eleven years, I still can walk through this town, and people go, "Oh, Walter ..." you know. And it's not because I lived next to them; it's because I was the Fire Marshal for eleven years, you know. It's a good job. It's a very good job. Very interesting.

Q: What would you say is the most important thing people should know, in terms of avoiding fires? Home fires?

WC: Knowing two ways out. And being protected by a smoke detector. They're equally as important. Yep.

Q: So, in your twenty-five years, you got to know a lot of people in the Department also.

WC: Oh, yeah.

Q: Yeah. Who would you say are some of the colorful characters in the Department?

WC: Well, I think one of the most colorful Department (laughs) members that stands out in my eyes is Geoff Cole. You're nodding your head, because you've probably heard his name before. He's a freak. Okay? He is—he is the best. He was like one of the best chiefs we ever had. Twice. He went twice around the block. Normal term is six years. He did twelve. Everything Geoff did, Geoff did to the T, you know. He was a great fireman, great leader, great administrator. I don't think there's anybody in this department that didn't look up to him or doesn't, still to this day, look up to him. Just a great guy. But colorful (laughs). That's what I mean. He's at the firehouse more than he's home. And he's—Geoff's got, I think probably thirty years in, and he still goes like it's—like it's, you know, brand new to him.

Q: Well, how does this impact your family when you're away from home so much?

WC: You know, you have to do a balancing act. Some guys' wives can deal with it and handle it, and some guys' wives don't (laughs), you know. So that—that puts a bearing on how much you'll see that guy, okay? Geoff Cole's wife happens to be an angel. Or she hates him (laughs)—one of the two. So, you know—but her brother was in the Fire Department, so she's—she knew what she was getting into and—but, you know, Geoff is 24/7. He's there all the time.

Q: Did you ever do anything for good luck? Have any kind of good luck charm or anything?

WC: No, not really. No. Not that I can think of.

Q: In the twenty-five years that you've been in the Department, what are some of the biggest changes that you've seen?

WC: Well, you know, the federal government and OSHA, which is Occupational Safety and Health Administration, they—they really—the more and more fatalities in the volunteer fire service that became higher and higher, their standards became very strict, as far as training, having a certain amount of hours of training before you could do anything. Record keeping. Doing inspections on your masks—you know, your SCBAs [self-contained breathing apparatus]. We lost Bobby Dayton in 1986. Bobby was a Lieutenant here in town. And OSHA came in and tore us apart.

Q: What did they say?

WC: Well, you now, they said we had poor records and poor this and poor that. But, you know, Bobby was as professional as they come. He did what he had to do, and he died doing it. Okay? And whether or not we had records, or, you know, you couldn't have been any more trained than Bobby. But that's the job. And you know that when you're going up to a, you know, a two-story dwelling like that. And—and he got disorientated and he died. He got killed in the line of duty. But, OSHA doesn't see it that way. OSHA says, "Well, how could this accident have been prevented?" Well, you know, in those days, you'd go in and you'd crawl along the wall, trying to find somebody. Nowadays, you use a tag rope.

Q: A tag rope?

WC: A tag rope. So ...

Q: What is that?

WC: A rope that—it's called a search rope, tag rope. You would tie it off to an object at the door, okay?—a door knob, a banister, or even another fireman holding it. And you would go in and do your search. And not be so concerned about becoming lost and confused, because you could grab your tag rope and follow your way back out, you know, like the bread crumbs (laughs). But in those days, we didn't do that. Those days, you just went in. You went in, and you crawled along the wall, and that was your bearing point. Following, you know, following yourself along the wall, hitting windows—breaking windows with your tools. And that's how the job was done. And then, like I said, then more standards, more training, and more, you know, technical support came in and, like I said, a lot has changed on the job. So ...

Q: So you think the change is for the better?

WC: Oh, yeah. Yeah. To some extent. I think sometimes OSHA gets a little overboard, but OSHA was the one who—you no longer see the firemen riding on the back steps of the vehicles, okay? That's an example, which is a good thing. They're now all in an enclosed vehicle, okay? But that made the price of fire engines go ridiculous, all right? Now, that's just one small example. But, you know, they've—a lot of the firehouses—the older firehouses—used to have poles in them many, many moons ago. Port Washington never had them, but surrounding departments, you know, had them. And OSHA said, "No, get

rid of the poles" (laughs). So ...

Q: There are enough dangers on the job ...

WC: Yeah, you didn't need them in the firehouse.

Q: Yeah. Were you ever involved in an investigation for arson?

WC: Assisted. Assisted. See, in Port Washington, what we would do is we would do a process of elimination and try to determine what *didn't* cause the fire. And you rule out everything else, and, you know, and you can also determine by when you pull up to the fire what the fire is doing. Time of day, weather conditions, what kind of a building it was in. If the business was doing poorly, let's say, for an example. You know what I mean?

Q: I mean like what kinds of things would arouse your suspicions?

WC: Oh, like I said, time of day, what kind of business was it? Was it doing well?

Q: Like what time of day? What time of day would ...

WC: Well, you know, someone's not going to set a fire at twelve o'clock noon. They're going to get seen. It's three o'clock, four o'clock in the morning, all the security lights are burnt out on the side of the building. There's a garbage dumpster up against the door, making it hard for the Fire Department to get in there and put the fire out. The sprinkler system is vandalized. All these kinds of things lead up to saying "Holy shit! I think this building

was set on fire." And if you can rule out any source of ignition, like electricity or a pilot light, that— those are the kinds of things you try to determine whether or not they're a factor or not. So, what I would do is I'd report back to the Chief saying, "Listen, nothing for nothing, but you need to call the County in here, because this—this fire was definitely suspicious. And then they would come in. The police arson squad would come in. They'd take some pictures do some canvassing, some interviewing. They would talk to some of the guys that came up on the rigs first. You know, the trucks first. You know, because different color flames mean different color accelerants. Stuff like that.

Q: So, you said you would alert the police. Was that in conjunction with your job as Marshal or ...

WC: Yes.

Q: Yeah.

WC: Yep.

Q: And did—you know, was there ever a case that developed from that? Did you ever have to testify?

WC: No, I've never had to testify. I did have to—I did have to testify in a couple of lawsuit cases, where, for an example, we had a big, big bad fire in Sands Point. And I determined that it was either the TV or the DVD player. And, to make a long story short, it ended up being the TV, okay? But the insurance company, to get some of their money back, because it was a multi-million dollar loss, you know, the insurance company hires a

private arson team—a fire investigative team—and they say, "Okay, go prove to me that it was the TV." So this private firm pulls the TV apart, sends it to a lab, and they do all sorts of testing on the wiring, and they come up with a thing that says, "Yes, it was the TV." So, now JVC, the owner of the TV, and the insurance company, are now battling it out in court to see who's going to pay.

Q: That's JVC?

WC: JVC. That's a brand name for a TV or a stereo.

Q: Oh, yeah.

WC: And so I had to testify, and in a deposition I had to show the pictures that I took and because I was inside pretty quickly, where did I see the bulk of the fire. All that stuff. I've had to testify a couple of times at depositions, but no, not ever in court. And it was always what started the fire. Not that it was an arson case or anything like that, because arson convictions are very, very—very, very low. It's a very hard crime to prove. Not to prove. To catch the person who did it. It's very hard. Very low conviction rate.

Q: Do you take pictures at every fire?

WC: If it's a good fire and, yeah, and there's some questionable—yeah, but not every fire, no. No.

Q: But you would have your camera with you all the time ...

WC: Yeah, in the back of the car.

Q: ... as Marshal? Yeah.

WC: Goes in the back of the car.

Q: And when did you stop being Marshal?

WC: I got in as Fire Marshal in 1993, and I got out in—what are we in here? 2002?

Q: Four.

WC: Two thousand—yeah, I'm trying to think.

Q: Oh.

WC: 2003. 2003, I got out. So it'll be a year, March. Right, it'll be a year, March.

Q: Are you still active in the Department?

WC: No. I'm very burnt out. I hate to say it, but I'm very burnt out. After 9/11, that was a bad thing.

Q: I have to turn the tape over.

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

Q: What—how did 9/11 affect you?

WC: Oh, just, you know. Wasn't a good thing to see. You know, you want to go in there and do the right thing and help. And you want to just save the world and think that you can. And ...

Q: Did you go down?

WC: Yes, our department went in for, I think, like four or five nights. We went in the eleventh, the night of the eleventh. Twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth. And, you know, just to see it was just horrific. You know, bad enough seeing it on TV, but when you pull up to it, and you're like saying to myself, "This is—it looks like a movie set. It was fake. This can't be real." And the truck that I—I ended up meeting one of our light trucks, like I was explaining to you before, because there was no power in any of the areas. So they needed lights down there more than anything. And the truck that—I walked up to the guys sitting next to the truck that our Department had there, and there was a lady's arm laying next to the truck. So, it was like—it was like fake. It was like fake. I couldn't believe that this had happened to us. And I wasn't so upset for me; I was upset for my son. So ...

Q: Was your son there with you?

WC: No. No, my son—he was like thirteen months old at the time. But I could just—I was just thinking about how the world has changed, and he's, you know, going to live in this shitty world. So ...

Q: Yeah. Now, you had seen some pretty terrible things ...

WC: Nothing like that.

Q: ... before that.

WC: Nothing like that. So, I'm done (laughs). Just turn the tape off. I'm done (laughs).

[Tape turned off, then on again]

Q: Do you remember any kinds of pranks or practical jokes that went on in the Department?

WC: Oh, it's never ending. They used to put dog poop in your boots. I mean, you know.

Q: And how did you react to something like that?

WC: You didn't. You just—you went, "Oh, shit!" and you cleaned out your boots after the call was over, and, you know, because there's a rack with all your gear on it, and so when the tones go over and you get called out, you know, they—you know, they were always—they were always playing around. And God forbid you fall asleep in the firehouse, sitting there watching the TV ...

Q: What happens?

WC: ... you're done. You're done. They'd draw on you, you know, and hold your hand in water, hoping that you'd pee yourself (laughs), you know. Just immature, ridiculous, stupid stuff. Like I said (laughs), that's the caliber of people that come in to do this stupid job (laughs). You know.

Q: But, even if you're not an active firefighter now, you know, going to the fires, you're still

in the Department, right?

WC: Yeah, yeah. I'm actually out on medical leave. Because I had—I had surgery on my arm, and I'm going to probably have to have the other arm done, because I tore ligaments in both of them.

Q: Because of ...

WC: No, it has nothing to do with the Fire Department.

Q: Oh, your work?

WC: No, it had nothing to do with work either.

Q: What kind of work are you doing now?

WC: I'm in the school district. I do maintenance. Maintenance work.

Q: Which school, or all of them?

WC: Port Washington schools. I'm in the—actually Manorhaven School right now. So ...

Q: And how did you fit your work responsibilities in with your firefighting responsibilities?

WC: Well, the school district loved having the Fire Marshal working for them. Because it was to their total advantage to keep the building safe, to keep the kids safe. I did the

inspections. I could do them on the back of my hand. That's how well I knew the buildings. So it was to their advantage, and they were very, very liberal about me going to fires, going to emergencies, and just, they were very, very—very cooperative. But I can never say anything wrong about that. They were very good about that.

Q: What do you think the future is for Port Washington as a volunteer fire department?

WC: I don't know. I don't know. The economy's tough. A lot of men are working two jobs, like myself. That's another, you know, deterrent, keeping, you know—I mean, it's just, if you want to live in Port Washington and not rent for the rest of your life, there's not a lot of room to be running around chasing fires. But these idiots do it. I don't know how they do it. They do it.

Q: Like you, you did it.

WC: Yeah. After 9/11, a lot of people came to the firehouse to want to join. They just— they wanted to do something. So, we got quite a—quite an influx of people. Did they last? A handful of them did. You know, the rest of them kind of, you know ...

Q: How do you think the Port Washington Fire Department stacks up against the other departments on the Island?

WC: We're like one of the best in the State.

Q: And by what criteria?

WC: Well, first of all, we get rated every year. And we're rated like top four in the State.

Q: And what do you think accounts for that?

WC: Well, when I was Fire Marshal, we used to submit data to the State, as far as how many calls we had and how many structure fires we actually had, and the amount of dollar loss that you lose every year. And that's how they pro-rate you and they base your status.

Q: But like we cover a larger area than a lot of the other departments.

WC: Right. Like I said it's an ...

Q: Do they ...

WC: ... it's an average.

Q: They take that into account?

WC: Yeah. Yeah, it's an average. You know, they—I think they figure out, you know, structure fires, structure fires, and then they look at dollar loss, dollar loss. You know, for every ten structure fires in each department, they'll figure out the dollar loss. And then that's how you get rated. But—and we do good. We did well every year. Every year.

Q: I was reading about Centerport and the problems they've been having in the Fire Department there, that they want to buy ...

WC: Oh, they want to re-do their building and, yeah.

Q: Yeah, and the community keeps voting them down.

WC: That's eventually going to happen. That's eventually going to happen.

Q: Here too?

WC: Oh yeah. Without a doubt. With the school district the way they're going, with their taxes, and the County reassessment and, you know. Like I said, we have an image of being drunks and idiots. And until, you know, like I said, 9/11 came, and we were all heroes for about six, seven months. And then, "Oh, those drunken assholes just cut me off in their fire truck!" (laughs), you know. Or "Turn the horns down at night!" or, "You don't have to blow the sirens when you go by my house!" Believe me, I've heard it all. This lady used to write letters to us complaining about the whistles being next to her house, that she had a daughter that just, you know, woke up in the middle of the night screaming because the whistles were going off, the whistles were going off. "Lady, did you not know there was a fire whistle right in your back yard when you bought the house?" So, it's like the people who buy houses across the street from schools and then complain that there are school buses driving by their house. Hello! That's what this town has come to. So ...

Q: So, what are you proudest of in your career as a firefighter?

WC: What am I proud of?

Q: Proudest?

WC: I don't know. I think the medal that I got was pretty much up there, you know. That's what every fireman dreams of. That's really what it's—that's—I mean, yeah, they like to do good for the people, but to get that kind of a decoration and that kind of an honor is what the job is all about, you know. Because it makes you feel great about what you did.

Q: Where is that medal now?

WC: It's home. It's on my uniform.

Q: Hanging in your closet?

WC: Yeah.

Q: Would you want your son to be a firefighter?

WC: If he wanted to be. If my son wanted to be a ballerina, he could be a ballerina, you know.

Q: Is he your only child?

WC: Yeah, yeah. So ...

Q: So he's what now, about ...

WC: He's going to be four in February. So, I think right now, the way he's going, I think he's going to be a train conductor, because he's a Thomas the Engine freak right now. That's

his—that's his big thing. So, go into rides—I'm divorced, and I have him every other weekend, so when I have him, we go into Manhattan on the train all the time. It's the best thing in the world (laughs), to ride on that train. So ...

Q: Have you ever taken him over to the firehouse?

WC: Oh, yeah. Yeah. But he'd rather be on the train. So, I know that will come, that will change one day. Because Thomas the Tank Engine—he'll get too big for that. And then the firehouse will be the next thing. And that's probably the day I'll probably get re-active is when he starts taking an interest in it.

Q: Were you involved in the social life in the Department?

WC: Not really.

Q: Picnics ...

WC: No, not really.

Q: ... things like that.

WC: Got no use for it. I'm not—I'm not one into politics and, you know. I had a couple of good friends, couple of people that I associated with. And I went in there, like I said, with the attitude of business and trying to make the place better. So the picnics and the barbecues and the liquor didn't do much for me. Matter of fact ...

Q: Is there a—oh, I'm sorry.

WC: No, that's okay. Only when I was Captain, I removed all the beer and liquor out of the firehouses, and I thought they were going to kill me. I thought they were really going to hang me up and cut my throat.

Q: And did it get back in or ...

WC: Oh, after I got out. After I was out as Captain, it did, you know. My attitude is, the guys who are going to do the job are going to do the job, whether there's beer in the beer machine or beer behind the bar, or not. If you're serving sodas, the guys who are going to do the job are still going to be there and do the job. And, you know, like I—when I was Captain, I, you know, I—if you come into the firehouse, you've got to make your choice. You're going to sit and have a beer and watch TV, or you're going to be a fireman. Because once you have a beer and watch TV, if the horn blows, you can't go.

Q: You mean you wouldn't let them go if they—or that they ...

WC: They just wouldn't ...

Q: ... [?? stayed together] ...

WC: ... they wouldn't go. "Oh, I've had ... " you know, "I had a little ..." Sorry, I didn't buy that. I didn't buy that. So—but now pretty much all the firehouses are pretty much dry.

Q: They are?

WC: Yeah, yeah.

Q: So you set a precedent.

WC: OSHA. I set a precedent, but when I got out, they put it right back in. Remember, I was Captain in '93. '92, '91. I did three years as Captain. So, you know, the—it was out for a while, with me. Then it came back in for a short period. Don't write this down.

Q: No, I'm not. I'm just ... [??] ...

WC: It came back—came back for a—yeah, it came back for a short period of time, and then it was completely taken out. And it's only—it's only taken out for special occasions. You know, picnics, barbecues, like you said.

Q: But are there always a certain number who are like the equivalent of designated drivers who don't drink?

WC: No. You mean, like the equipment? Or ...

Q: People in the Department. So that if there should be a ...

WC: Oh ...

Q: ... call while you're having a barbecue ...

WC: Oh, yeah, what the Captains will do in each of the companies, when there is an affair like that, or a picnic or whatever, there's plenty of guys who don't drink. Plenty of guys who just don't drink. So they're usually appointed to the crews that will respond to calls. And

then there are other guys that just get asked. "Anybody want to be the third one, you know, on the rig? No drinking." So, they'll have those sober crews set up, ready to go. And, you know, let me tell you. When there's a party or something like that, you know, people don't get fall-down drunk. They have children; their wives are there (laughs), you know. So they have to be somewhat responsible. Will they throw a few back? Yeah, they'll throw a few back. But no one's ever been so bad that they were unable to drive their car home. You know, they have coffee. They have a little time they let it pass out of them, then they get in their car and they go home.

Q: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you think is important, in terms of your own personal experiences or the Department?

WC: I, like I said, you know I mean, twenty-five years is a long time. We could be here all night long.

Q: Yeah. What do you think the value of this Oral History project is?

WC: I think it's a good thing. I think it'll give the community a better understanding of what actually goes on and what's actually involved in—in the fire service. The time, the effort, the danger. Now, will this get printed up in the *Port News*? Is that what ...

Q: No.

WC: No?

Q: No ... [TAPE TURNED OFF] ...