

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Joseph Pennetti  
Atlantic Hook & Ladder Company No. 1

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

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

Q: Today is October the 4th, 2004. My name is Margaret Dildilian. I'm interviewing Joseph Pennetti from the Port Washington Fire Department's Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company. We are interviewing at 50 Crescent Road in Port Washington. Mr. Pennetti, would you pronounce your full name for me.

Joseph Pennetti: Joseph Anthony Pennetti.

Q: Have you a nickname?

JP: No. "Joe." That's all. They just call me Joe.

Q: Who in your family was in the Fire Department?

JP: Well, my uncle [Sal Defeo] first influenced me into joining the Fire Department. My older brother [Albert Pennetti] was a member of this Department also for a number of years, but they're both deceased.

Q: And when did you join Atlantic Hook, I believe, and Ladder?

JP: March of—the 6th, 1958.

Q: What was the company like back then in 1958?

JP: What was it like? It was an organization that we joined to help out the community. It was—you know, it was what everybody seemed to have been doing at that time, more or less, in the young, you know, younger people who were interested in fire service and helping out.

Q: Why were the young people interested back then, do you think, in the fire service?

JP: Well, it was set up to do something for the community, more or less, and everybody--it's somewhat like a family, in a sense, because it's handed down through the generations of people. Their grandchildren have joined and--it goes way back.

Q: Was there a certain ethnic basically in your company?

JP: No, not really. We've had every nationality in the Department.

Q: Can you remember your first feelings about firefighting, as a child?

JP: (Laughs). Not really. Like I said, I was brought around the firehouse as a child, because my older brother and I had my uncles, so there was different occasions that did, you

know, well, a meeting, what have you, so we always were around the firehouse, and you got interested. You know, everybody wanted to ride a fire truck. And, you know ...

Q: So, what were your first experiences riding a fire truck? How old were you?

JP: Oh (laughs), maybe twelve. Ten or twelve years old, something like that. Even maybe younger, from what I can remember. You're going back a little too far (laughs).

Q: When, you know, when you joined in 1958, when you stood on the back of that fire truck going to a fire ...

JP: Well ...

Q: ... what was that like?

JP: ... when you go to a fire, your adrenalin is speeded up naturally, because you're anticipating both the fire and it's exciting, you know. And you hear the sirens going and everything, so it's gets your adrenalin going.

Q: But what went through your head when you were doing that. You were--did you think you were going into danger?

JP: Well, there was always danger.

Q: And how did you deal with that?

JP: The best we could. I mean, you know you're going to be in danger, no matter what, because any--every situation's different. You don't know what you're going into.

Q: What images do you have of your brothers and uncles doing this? Any, in particular, stand out?

JP: No, not really. I mean, we all did the same thing from the truck to fighting a fire. Everybody did his job.

Q: Now, when you were a rookie in 1958, what was--what was that like?

JP: Well, you had schooling. You had to go to school, and you learned all the apparatus, you know, the equipment. You had to go to school and learn how to use everything, how to handle yourself. And, you just couldn't go right out the first thing. You just don't go off to a fire; you have to have schooling first.

Q: And how long was that, then?

JP: Well, it's a period of time and different schooling you go through. You have to go to Bethpage for schooling. You have to--your local schools that you have in your own firehouse. You learned how to handle the equipment. You learned how to put ladders and everything that's pertinent. That's what our job is, more or less.

Q: What was your particular skill that you were good at?

JP: Well, when I'm at a fire, I always hit the roof. Went up on the roof and opened up ...

Q: And how--can you explain how you open up a roof?

JP: At that time, you opened it with an ax, chop 'em open and now--now, things have changed, and actually we'd have all kinds of saws.

Q: What are the changes now?

JP: Well, you still have the ax, but they also have these chains--the chain saws, and they have the K-12 saws, which cut through--they cut through metal; they cut through the roofing, to open up and ventilate, so that you get the heat and smoke out of the house.

Q: So when you first get to the scene of the fire, when you were a rookie, you immediately went to the roof? That was your position on ...

JP: In most cases--most cases, yes. Then, you came down, and you'd have to open all inside the building also, open up walls and check for fire behind the walls, pulling the ceilings down.

Q: How did you check for fires behind the wall?

JP: Well, first of all, you could feel the heat, where today it's a lot different. They have heat detectors.

Q: How do those work?

JP: Well, they can tell you the heat that's behind the--you know, if there's hot spots in a wall or behind it, then you have to open 'em up to get into the fire.

Q: Now, how did the old-timers treat you when you were a rookie? I mean, how did they--how did you gain knowledge from them?

JP: Well, like I said, we had schooling. We had schooling every Thursday night. And you had schools--you went to Bethpage for schooling, and you learned as you went along. When you first start out, they know you're a rookie, so then they're not going to put you into something right away. They're going to wait until you learn a little bit before they

put you into a scene, or you go in with a person. Well, you never go into a fire alone.

We always had a buddy system. You'd always go with somebody.

Q: Did you have a mentor, some--a mentor. Somebody that was, you know, always standing by you like your--maybe your uncle or ...

JP: No.

Q: ... your brother ...

JP: No. Just somebody that happens to be near you. You know, everybody worked together, you know, as a team. So it didn't make any difference who stood next to you, you always had somebody to go with you.

Q: Can you remember major fires that you were in that ...

JP: (Laughs).

Q: Can you give us some examples ...

JP: Well, I ...



Q: ... of some of the major fires you were in that you experienced?

JP: There was, well, quite a few when you come back--when I go back to when I first joined and the first one I was into a person, we--we did have an individual who lost their life. It was Connie Francis's manager's daughter. Seven years old.

Q: Connie Francis, you said?

JP: Yes. I believe it was her manager's daughter. I think it was on Reni Road. She was about seven years old. We found her upstairs in the hallway. She had been out of the house, went back in the house. The father went in after her and I think he had a heart attack at the bottom of the stairs, because she went back in to get her doll. I think we found her upstairs in the hallway.

Q: What fire was that called?

JP: Well, it was just a general alarm. Like I said, it happened to be Reni Road.

Q: Oh, on Reni--Reni Road?

JP: I believe that's where it was. Then there was others there at the Manhattan Food Store. You had the Port Washington Lumber Yard, you had Brandan Brothers--both fires that

they had. One on the Boulevard and the other one on Haven Avenue. You had the Riviera. You had the Bradley's. There were a lot of them (laughs). I can't remember them all. There's quite a few through the years.

Q: Tell me about your ascent from rookie up to what you do now. How did you ascend the ladder of ...

JP: Well, from rookie, I went to Assistant Engineer. From Assistant Engineer, I went to Trustee for a number of years. Then, from Trustee, I became Vice President. Then, I became--actually they changed from, then they incorporated a presidency into the structure of the Department, company. Then, they started with a President, and the first one was Bob Cocks. and then I was Vice President, I was the second President. And it's still the way it's been all along. After that, I'm just running several different, you know, kitchen committees or like the entertainment committee. Through the time it was Trustees, I was on different committees for purchasing equipment and trucks. That's the jobs of the Trustees of the Company.

Q: Which position did you enjoy the most or ...

JP: Which ...

Q: ... rather ...

JP: No special. I liked all of them (laughs).

Q: As a Trustee, what were the changes from becoming from a firefighter to a Trustee, what were the major changes for you in the job?

JP: Well, you still fought fires as a--you know, as a fireman. Just trustee was in charge of the--the purchasing of the company equipment, when you know, you need fire trucks or whatever you need for the company. It's the purchasing agent of the company.

Q: So, if you go into administration, you still fight fires.

JP: Oh, yes. That's just another job (laughs); that's all.

Q: And how do you juggle that? The trusteeship with being a firefighter?

JP: You have different--it's different jobs, actually, then, you have to still do the same--as a firefighter, you're still a firefighter, no matter what, whether you're a Trustee or you're President, you're Captain, or whatever you are, you're still a firefighter.

Q: Are you an active firefighter today?

JP: I'm active to a degree. I cannot go into the scene of a fire.

Q: And why is that?

JP: Because of asthma. And the doctor said, "I'd recommend that you didn't go into a scene."

You can go back and be on the truck, or I can go stand by the trucks and do anything outside. You have to be Scott qualified to go into the scene of a fire, now. And times have change through the years.

Q: Did you have asthma when you were younger?

JP: No.

Q: Do you think this was fire-related?

JP: No.

Q: As Vice President and President, what are the duties?

JP: Administrative. You're in charge of the, you know, administration of the company.

Q: And what do you administer? What do you do? What do you buy? What do you ...

JP: President?

Q: Trustee or President.

JP: Well, the Trustees are purchasing agents for the company. Whatever the company recommends that they need or they want, they put it out to the Trustees to go out and purchase whatever they need. It takes--you know, there's five Trustees. It takes five Trustees to go and do the job.

Q: And what have you purchased under your--when you were Trustee?

JP: All kinds of equipment (laughs). I can't remember it all now. You're talking hoses, you know, and axes, and tools--hand tools and different things. Trucks that we bought all through the years at the time. Different committees--you know, you'd have a committee, not just one individual.

Q: How do you--how do you decide what equipment you're going to buy and where do you buy it?

JP: Well, the decision is made by the Company membership. And it's usually a new piece of equipment that's coming out on the market that's used in the fire service. And if they feel that we need it, they bring it up to the Company; the Company votes on it, whether they want to purchase it or not. If they say yes, then it goes to the Trustees to go out and buy it.

Q: What is your value to the Fire Department to be in administration, do you think?

JP: I'm not in administration anymore.

Q: What are you in now?

JP: I'm just a fireman. That's all, right now. And then just on the entertainment committee.  
That's all.

Q: Did you have a part in building Atlantic's new building?

JP: No. No, I didn't.

Q: So what are the problems or the frustrations of being a Trustee or as in administration versus firefighting? What are the problems versus the other side of the coin?

JP: Well, they're both in--both in conjunction. I mean, it's not really a problem. It's just that you're doing the administrative end of it or with the--in the firefighting service.

Q: When you were a firefighter, what pranks did you all play on each other (laughs)? I understand that it ...

JP: Well, once in a while on a Thursday night, you might have a little fun with the hose company, you know, squirting water all over everyone, something like that. But nothing ...

Q: Nothing major?

JP: Nah.

Q: No big pranks?

JP: Not that I can remember, no.

Q: How do you handle stress on the job?

JP: I don't seem to have any problem.

Q: Can you recall any--any stories from way back in the Fire Department, that would--any humorous incidents?

JP: Not really (laughs). I'd have to sit and really think about that one.

Q: Is there a burn-out factor to being a firefighter?

JP: Not that I know of. You always had the urge to go and do whatever you can do.

Q: What is important for you to pass on to the younger firefighters?

JP: Well, if you have any sort of feeling that you'd like to do something for your community and your fellow person, you know, then you get involved. It's the--it's like--it's like an organization, like everybody would like to belong to some organization and what have you. It's just that we're doing a service for the community that, you know, is no expense. It's a volunteer organization. Nobody's breaking your back that you have to do it, you know, or holding you down to it. You just do it on your own.

Q: What, in your mind, makes a good firefighter? What makes a good firefighter? What qualities do you think you have to have?

JP: Well, first of all, you've got to have the attitude that you want to be a firefighter. Then, you get into it, and then you show your initiative. And then, you know, you learn through your schooling and everything, and you're there when you're needed. The alarm rings, you have to go.

Q: Were you ever in the service?

JP: Yes.



Q: Can you tell us when and where?

JP: Well, I was in the Army. I joined, what was it? July 1958. And then I came out in June 1960. Then, I spent three or four months in Fort Dix, New Jersey (laughs).

Q: Now, was that before you joined the Fire Department or after?

JP: After. I joined in March of '58 and went into the Army in June.

Q: And what propelled you to go to the Army? Why did you go?

JP: Well, at that time, you had the draft. So, before I got settled in whatever way I wanted to go, well, I pushed the draft and I went in to get the Army out of the way. And then, from there, then I went into business.

Q: And when you came back, you went back into the Fire Department?

JP: Oh, yes.

Q: And ...

JP: It's just a leave of absence when you're in the service. It's all automatic. Military leave is automatic.

Q: And what did you learn in the service that was helpful to you in the Fire Department?

JP: In the service? Nothing, as far as fireman goes (laughs). I was a mechanic in the service (laughs).

Q: So how did that help you with your career?

JP: Being a mechanic in the Army? I'm still a mechanic (laughs).

Q: What do you do for a living?

JP: I'm a mechanic. I run a gas station.

Q: Where is your gas station?

JP: Here in Port Washington.

Q: On what street?

JP: On Harbor Road and Valley Road.

Q: And how long have you had your gas station?

JP: Forty-four years.

Q: Now, how do you leave your gas station when the horn blows for firefighting?

JP: Well, you go when you can. It's not--you know, you can't make them all. So if you tied up business or what have you, you just can't do it. So there's plenty of firemen.

Q: To you, what is the best part of being a firefighter? What do you feel is the best thing, for you?

JP: Just helping the community. Something--well, you have other organizations that help out the community also, just as the one I belong to.

Q: And what do you feel are--besides helping--what do you think are the motivations for the young people to join today?

JP: Just as I've said before, you have to have it in you that you want to join and you want to be a fireman. There's kids that, you know, all through the years, they grow up wanting to

be a fireman or policeman or whatever have you, and so they just automatically motivate themselves into it.

Q: Going back to your childhood, now, you were motivated as a young boy.

JP: Yeah.

Q: Have you lived your entire life in Port?

JP: Oh, yes.

Q: And when did your family come to Port?

JP: My family? My mother was born in Port Washington ninety-seven years ago (laughs).  
She's still alive.

Q: And has she ever talked to you about the changes?

JP: With Port Washington? Oh, yeah. Trolley cars up and down Main Street and what have you.

Q: And what was the Fire Department like in her day, do you know?

JP: Not really, no.

Q: Would you want your children to be firefighters?

JP: If they wished to be, yeah.

Q: Have they wished to be?

JP: They don't live in town.

Q: What was that?

JP: They don't live in Port Washington (laughs).

Q: Where do they live?

JP: Dix Hills.

Q: Have they joined the Fire Department there?

JP: No, no.

Q: Have you been in any traditional ceremonies of the Fire Department? Like for the parades and ...

JP: Through the years, yes.

Q: Well, how do you feel when you march in those parades?

JP: Well, what gives you a sense of, you know, the satisfaction is when we hear the--well, we're parading in the Memorial Day parade, and the people applauding. That gives you a sense of satisfaction that you aren't doing something for nothing. That you're really helping out the community. By them showing their appreciation by applauding you, it makes you feel good.

Q: Do you feel the Port community shows its appreciation to you firefighters?

JP: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Q: What happens at the traditional funerals for firefighters? What is the ritual?

JP: Well, we have the service. You know, we have our own chaplain. And everybody's in uniform, naturally. And they have the prayer--prayer service. And whoever can go at the funeral, they go to the funeral, men go on the truck in uniform.

Q: Are there fire boats in Port Washington?

JP: No.

Q: And do--does the community or the firefighters feel they're necessary, now that we have our, you know, 9/11?

JP: I really don't know what they're thinking about, as far as if there's talk about that or anything about it just yet.

Q: How do your skills in the firefighting help you in your business--your daily business--in any way? Your garage?

JP: Well, just to be cautious because of the gasoline and everything that I'm dealing with all the time, naturally. And, you're always watching to make sure you don't have any dangerous conditions that you're dealing with.

Q: How do you provide for that safety in your garage?

JP: How do you provide for it?

Q: What are the things you do to make it safe?

JP: Well, you have fire extinguishers all around the place. You're careful that you don't handle gasoline under any condition where it could either spark or anything would set it off. You make sure that people don't walk up and smoke a cigarette while you're pumping gas--or the, you know, different things like that, you know, you've got to watch out for.

Q: Has any of that ever happened where, you know, a cigarette ...

JP: A cigarette? Oh, sure.

Q: And what do you do?

JP: You tell them, "Get it out" (laughs) in plain English. "Move!" you know. You just don't play around with gasoline.

Q: How are you all recruiting members now compared to years ago? How do you recruit new members in the Port Washington Fire Department?

JP: Well, we have the junior firefighters, now, that they--they come in and they learn, and then, when they're old enough, they join.

Q: Were you part of that as a junior?



JP: No. They didn't have that when I joined.

Q: When did that come into being?

JP: I don't know when. It was within the last ten years or so, I guess. Ten, twenty years.

Q: Do you believe that there is a future for the Port Washington Fire Department?

JP: I hope there is. because I wouldn't want to try and put a paid fire department in here, and it would be expensive, it would be, for us.

Q: How expensive would that be?

JP: I imagine it would be quite expensive. I know taxes have gone out of sight. They're out of sight now.

Q: Then how do you recruit new members if you're having difficulty recruiting them?

JP: They have that LOSAP [Length Of Service [Awards Program](#)] that they instituted now that has an incentive to get new members to come in. Young members. But they can get this LOSAP program.

Q: What's that? What ...

JP: It's a retirement program that they've instituted into the fire service. So a young person comes in and through the years it accumulates. So there's the money, you get to forty years or whatever it is, I think, then you get this retirement.

Q: So you have to be in for forty years to get it?

JP: To get the full benefit of it, yeah.

Q: So that is the--the one perk that you can ...

JP: Well, that's what they instituted, you know, in the last few years, trying--an incentive for the young people to join. That is an incentive. You know, besides the fact, like I said, you've got to have it in yourself that you want to be.

Q: Has it worked? Has the incentive worked?

JP: So far as I know, yeah.

Q: What do you miss the most about the old days in the Fire Department compared to now?

JP: What do I miss the most? Well, the old members that are now on the other side of that fence. That's what I miss the most. The ones that used to say, you know, "Then what the heck do you know? You're an old fart." You know, now I'm the old fart and the young kids are telling me that (laughs).

Q: What other nice things did they used to say?

JP: Oh, that was just a little joke, more or less.

Q: Yeah, what other nice jokes? There must be many?

JP: Oh, I can't remember now (laughs). Well, there's one, you see it every day, because now I'm the old person. And all the older people that were ahead of me, there's not many left. That's it anyway.

Q: Is there the same level of camaraderie now as there was back then?

JP: I would imagine so.

Q: What traditions do you value the most in the Fire Department, that they do? Like ceremonies that they have?

JP: What traditions? Just about all of them, I guess (laughs). Any ones that they have. Like I say, it's part of what you want to be. If you belong, you belong; if you don't, move on.

Q: What impact did 9/11 have on you?

JP: What impact? Well, the same, I guess, as everybody has right now. We're living in fear. That's exactly what they want. They've got the United States living in fear. It can happen at any time any place. We just never experienced it in this country before.

Q: What happened in the Fire Department during that time?

JP: Well a number of fellows have gone to the different stations that they set up for us to go in and cover for other towns that went into the City. Some of the fellows went right into the City. Went into, on 9/11, and helped out.

Q: Did you go into the City?

JP: No. No, I didn't

Q: How has it impacted your family?

JP: Well, it--my wife worked in the City, and she was in there that day, and my son worked in the City. He's in there. And my daughter worked in the City. So ...

Q: Tell us what happened? How did they handle it at that time?

JP: Well, my son called me on the phone, and he said, "They blew up the building." He didn't know it was a plane, at that time. My daughter was on 14th Street. She saw the second plane go into the building. My wife was, naturally, upset. She didn't know where they were. Couldn't get in touch with me. You know, back and forth, and finally things did work out and we found out where everybody was.

Q: How did they get out of the City?

JP: How did they get out of the City? I really don't remember now. I don't remember, because we were in all different places. My son worked down on Houston Street, which, from where he was, he could look right down the road and see it.

Q: And ...

JP: Well, they're still--they're still there.

Q: Are they still under the trauma?

JP: To a certain degree.

Q: Are they getting any trauma help?

JP: No. No, they're not that bad. But they--you know it shook everybody. I think the whole United States, it shook them up.

Q: Did you know any of the firemen personally in the City?

JP: That were lost in the fire? No. No, I had one of my customers, her husband was lost in the building.

Q: What do you think the Fire Department has to do to bolster the safety of the community in case something like this happens again, in our territory?

JP: It's hard to say, because you don't know what the situation is going to be.

Q: So, how do you prepare for that?

JP: Do the best you can right now, because you don't know when it's going to be. You know, you're preparing all the time for any kind of emergency, but under the circumstances at the time, it has to be decided then. You know, the answer to it is going to be different.

Q: Does the Fire Department deal with its members in teaching them about how to deal with fear?

JP: Not really. Like I say, if you have an incident, then you have organizations that do, that come in and, you know, have schooling and they sit down and talk to people about your fears and your experiences that you've had.

Q: Did you ever think you--were you ever afraid that you would be injured or die when you were going to a fire?

JP: There's always a certain amount of fear, because, like I say, you don't know what you're going into. Your life's on the line every time you go.

Q: And what makes ...

JP: But you don't really think about it, because you're interested in what you're doing.

Q: Have you been injured at any time?

JP: Not really. Nothing more than maybe a scratch or something or you step on a nail or something like that. But that--not really.

Q: How do you feel about the uniforms that the firefighters have? They used to have ...

JP: Talking about the gear? The equipment that we use, or the dress uniforms?

Q: The dress uniforms.

JP: Oh, it's nice.

Q: But it was different many years ago.

JP: Well, we had a different uniform. We had a red and white uniform at that time at Atlantic Hook and Ladder then.

Q: And what did you think about that uniform?

JP: Well, it's a sharp--sharp looking uniform, naturally. But the ones we have today are really very nice also.

Q: What made the Department change?

JP: Well, they called them Davy Crockett (laughs), when they went to parades, because you didn't have that many people show up in these red and white uniforms. But when you had them show up in their uniform, it was--it was outstanding.



Q: Why didn't they show up in their uniform?

JP: They just didn't have that many people to show up that's all in the parade.

Q: Because of the uniform?

JP: No. Just that they didn't--weren't able to show up. I guess they just had other things they had to do. So, now with all the uniforms, they're all the same color.

Q: I don't understand. You mean, it was--they didn't--they had the--what? What color and what compared to now?

JP: They had the red shirt, white pants. Now, everything is blue.

Q: So is that better for the men or ...

JP: Well, it makes them more uniform, you know, with all--with the whole Department. Many years ago way back then when they had uniforms to distinguish one company from the other. Atlantic's was red and white. The other ones had the, you know, blue. And that's why they decided to make it all one.

Q: How does your being a fireman impact your family relationships? Your wife has the dinner ready, and you were off to a fire, how does that impact your family?

JP: She understood. She still understands, you know. You just get up and you go. That's it.

Q: How about your children? What did they feel about ...

JP: My children are grown now. They're forty years old (laughs).

Q: No, in the beginning.

JP: Oh, in the beginning? No, they understood, you know.

Q: Do you think they didn't get to see too much of you?

JP: No, I wasn't gone that many times (laughs). Not that often. You know, today, there's a lot more calls than we had years ago.

Q: Really?

JP: Today, a whole lot of them are just alarm systems going off today, but there's still different calls, you have to respond. You really didn't have all that before, because we didn't have all the alarm systems in the houses and everything.

Q: Who were the real cut-ups in your fire company? Who were the real funny guys?

JP: I don't remember to be honest with you.

Q: You had no pranksters?

JP: You had them, but I don't remember any of them right this moment (laughs). Someone's always going to play a game on somebody.

Q: You can't remember any of the ...

JP: No.

Q: ... games that they played? What type of bonding--what bonding occurs between the firefighters? I mean ...

JP: You're more of a family, really. Because you operate, like I say, like either your brothers or your sisters--whatever it is. They're all--all out working together doing the same job.

Q: Are there any resentments between firefighters, for any reason?

JP: No.

Q: When you were in the Fire Department back in the '50s, what was the voting procedure like to vote in new members?

JP: When I joined?

Q: Yes.

JP: You had the black-ball system.

Q: Could you explain that? How did it work?

JP: Well, they had some black balls, and if you had three black balls, you were out. But that's since been dispensed. Now it takes the voting.

Q: The what?

JP: Takes the voting, from the membership.

Q: Was it three black balls or one?

JP: What? Three to knock you out.

Q: Three? What if you had one?

JP: That's all right.

Q: You would still be accepted?

JP: Yes. Yeah, sometimes you get somebody that wants to play a game would put one in.

Q: And then what happens?

JP: Just for the heck of it.

Q: That's the jest?

JP: Yeah. Just for the heck of it.

Q: Some prankster?

JP: Oh, yeah, you always had one (laughs) that would do that.

Q: And then how do you know it's a joke?

JP: They just accept it as being one vote. That's all. You'd have to have three to get knocked out. That's all old.

Q: When did that change over?

JP: Oh, quite a few years ago. Long time ago.

Q: Can you guess--hazard how long ago? Twenty? Thirty? Ten?

JP: I don't know exactly. You'd have to go back in the minutes of the Department to see. The Company, rather.

Q: Do you have any photographs of any of the firefighting scenes that you have ...

JP: No. There's scenes in the firehouse that they have in there that I think one of the fellows is collecting right now.

Q: If you would give one advice to people about avoiding home fires, what would it be?

JP: What would it be? Well, make sure that your smoke detectors are working and change the batteries every year like you're supposed to. And get rid of the clutter. Check your wiring. Make sure your electrical wiring in your house is sufficient and your lamps are not frayed--you know, the wiring. And be careful mainly.

Q: Now, do you have any daughters?

JP: Yes.

Q: How would you feel if they were firefighters?

JP: How would I feel? Fine, if they could do the job. No problem.

Q: And how do you feel that the women firefighters are doing in the Fire Department now?

JP: Fine. Like I said, as long as you can do the job, I don't care who you are so long as you're ... if you're going to save my life. I'm going to save yours.

Q: What were the changes that were necessary to be done when the women came into the Fire Department? And the structure of the building--I mean, did you have to build separate bathrooms? Did you have to have ...

JP: Well, they have separate bedrooms that were already in the buildings.

Q: There were no big changes in the structures of the buildings or ...

JP: No. You had that, so we had separate bathrooms. They always had separate bathrooms.

Q: What about changing rooms or anything like that?

JP: Changing rooms?

Q: I mean, I don't know if you're changing into your fire--you know, into your equipment.

JP: Well, you just get into the equipment with your clothes on. There's no changing. If you want to change, you go to the men's room or you go to the ladies' room and change.

Q: How has the equipment changed over the years?

JP: How has it changed?

Q: Yeah. What's the difference ...



JP: It's modernized, naturally. Oh, big difference. Big difference because ...

Q: When you wore your firefighting outfit in 1958, how does that compare to now?

JP: Well, we had the rain--your jacket--coat actually was rubberized, whereas today it's material, and it's all OSHA approved, the equipment. Otherwise, you can't have it.

Q: And how heavy was the material back then compared to now?

JP: Heavy (laughs).

Q: How many pounds did your equipment weigh?

JP: Oh, I really don't know the exact poundage, but it was heavy. And it's changed through the years, and, you know, different gear all the way along. It kept changing. Now, today, naturally, the Scott Air Packs are a lot lighter and a lot of the material is a lot--is made a lot lighter. And when I first joined, you didn't have the Scott Air Pack.. You had an MSA mask.

Q: And what's an MSA mask?

JP: Just a canister that filtered the air, but it didn't give you any fresh air or anything, like these do. These Scott bottles give you—continuous air.

Q: How long is the Scott Air Pack good for? How many minutes?

JP: They vary. A lot of them are thirty minutes; some of them are a lot less. Depends on the size of the bottle.

Q: Has the Nomex Hood helped save lives, or ...

JP: Well, protection, yeah. It's protecting against the fire, yeah. To actually say it saved lives, like I said, we only really lost one individual in a fire.

Q: Do you feel that being a firefighter in Port is better than being one in any other community on Long Island?

JP: No, they're all the same.

Q: You don't see any differences in the fire departments?

JP: Not really. Basically, you're doing the same work. All the volunteers in the whole state of New York. Whether you're upstate or you're on the Island, or wherever you are, they're all doing the same job.

Q: Is one community doing a better job than another community?

JP: Not that I know of.

Q: In the early years of your training, was fire medics part of that training or not?

JP: No. Fire Medics didn't come into the picture till, I think it was, mid '76 or '79.

Q: But you weren't taught ...

JP: You had--you were taught, you know, CPR and you were taught first aid at that time. We ran an ambulance at that time, but you just--you didn't have the medical ability that they have today and knowledge that they have today. And all you did was you--you took a patient and you put them in the ambulance, and you took them to the hospital. You didn't administer any drugs or any, you know, thing that AMTs or EMTs what they do today. We didn't have that.

Q: Have you any minority groups in your company from--compared to the beginning, are there more minorities now than there were then in your ...

JP: Well, there is now. Years ago, there really wasn't any. They never wanted to join. They were asked. But now, everybody's joining, you know. You know, all nationalities; it doesn't make any difference. Like I say, so long as they do the job, doesn't make any

difference who you are. I don't think anybody has any, you know, feelings toward a nationality or what have you. Just, like I say, it's just we're a big--one big family.

Q: Why is it difficult, do you think, now to recruit firefighters? ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ... Side B, and to continue ... Why do you think it is hard for people to be recruited today?

JP: Well, first of all, it requires too much of a person today to have their job, whereas, years ago, a lot of the people in town and local merchants used to let the firemen go. The school used to let them go--the people who worked for the schools. People worked for the water district, the sewer district. People who worked for different offices and everything within the town Lewis Oil used to let the people go, and now they don't. So it makes it tough. And people have to have an education. A lot of kids, you know, go on to college and they get an education, whereas it wasn't--too many people weren't worried about education in those days. They were just worried about going out, getting a job. And so it's tough today.

Q: What did you advise your own children?

JP: What did I advise my own children? I advised them to do what they want. If they wanted to go to college, they went to college. If they wanted to work, go out and get a

job, they went out and got a job. If they wanted to join any organization, that's up to them. I, you know, wasn't pushing them either way.

Q: What do you think could be done with the companies in order for them to be more lenient to letting volunteers attend fires? The companies don't let their employees go as easily as they used to.

JP: (Laughs). They don't let them go, because you're not going to pay people to go out and fight fires. They're paying them a salary for doing their job, and this is what it's--what's really stopping them from letting the people, you know, go out and do these things, because there's so much involved in their own job. And that's just times have changed.

Q: What would you like to be remembered the most for, in terms of with the Fire Department? What legacy would you like to leave?

JP: Just being a member, doing my job, and that was all.

Q: What do you think of this oral history project that the Fire Department and the Library are doing?

JP: Well, I think it'd be interesting for people to sit and look back on the fire service and how it originated and how it progressed through the years. And then look for the future.

Q: What do you think is in the future for Port's firefighters?

JP: A lot, I hope (laughs).

Q: A lot of what?

JP: A lot of--a lot more people and a lot more of their time.

Q: Do you think the volunteerism is going to hold up, or is it going to turn into a paid Department?

JP: Personally, I hope it holds up. Whether it ever changes, I don't know. Because your talking about volunteer services throughout the whole state of New York. It's not just Port Washington.

Q: Is New York City volunteer?

JP: No. In upstate New York and Long Island, you get to other towns in other states, the same thing--Pennsylvania, Jersey. They're all volunteers. But there's still some paid departments for some of the--there are a lot of volunteers that are paid firemen in the City. They're volunteers out here, but they're paid firemen in the City. Both.

Q: How do they handle both?

JP: They had a job to do in the City, and when they're home here, the volunteers, they go, too.

Q: Is the experience in the City vastly different than it is here?

JP: I couldn't tell you. I haven't experienced it myself, so I couldn't tell you.

Q: With the high-rise buildings coming up in Port Washington--three, four, five stories--how is that going to impact the firefighters in Port?

JP: They'll learn to cope with it. We have equipment that can reach em. And then they'll learn like through the schools, like I said. You learn how to go into the buildings, climb those stairs (laughs).

Q: Were you ever part of the drill teams ...

JP: Yeah.

Q: ... the sports teams? Tell us how those operate.

JP: I was only in for a very short time, but it's a drill, a fire drill. It's, you know, men are competing, one against another, in different aspects of it. The drill service.

Q: And how do you practice for those drill teams? I mean, the competition, how do you-- how do you learn to do what you're supposed to do? Do you learn at the point of where you're doing it, or before?

JP: Oh, you learn at the same time that you're doing it. They're teaching you as you go along.

Q: And who were the teachers?

JP: Prior people on the ser--on the fire service, that are in the drill teams.

Q: And have you been a teacher for the drill team?

JP: No. No, I just--just sat and watched, and I just assisted on certain things, but not teaching them.

Q: What did you enjoy the most about the drill teams?

JP: Just the excitement and the competition. Just go watch.



Q: What do they do? The ...

JP: Motorized events. You'll go down, and you hook up--you get off the truck and you hook up the hydrant, and then you shoot the target, or you climb--you all have to climb ladders. And bucket brigade. You could, you know, different events that they had. It's all timed--electrically timed. It's all in competitions against other departments.

Q: Has your company won these drills against ...

JP: Through the years. The different trophies, yes.

Q: Have you received any kinds of trophies or commendations?

JP: Individually? No. No, just as a team.

Q: The company.

JP: The team is--they go in competition as a team. They're not individuals. You have to ask a member that's actually on the drill teams actively. They could tell you more about it.

Q: You're not active on the drill team?

JP: No.

Q: So, how many hours now a week do you put in at the Fire Department?

JP: Hourly? No set time. I go when I can, that's all. Just like everybody.

Q: So, are you--you're still active?

JP: Yes.

Q: And you go to fires?

JP: I'll attend a fire, yes. I just won't go into a scene.

Q: And what do you do when you drive the truck?

JP: I haven't been driving in the last year or so.

Q: Is there anything you would like to say that you haven't talked about?

JP: No, not really. I think we've more or less covered a lot of it.

Q: Any areas that you can think of that you would really like to cover or talk about?

JP: No (laughs).

Q: Thank you, Mr. Pennetti.

JP: All right.