

Today is April 7, 2010, and this is Adam Groves from the Illinois Fire Service Institute talking to David Clark, who is retired from the Brimfield Community Fire Protection District. We are discussing Assistant Chief Melvin Waldron, who died in the line of duty in 1966.

AG: Can you tell me about the history of the Brimfield Community Fire Protection District?

DC: First, it was not originally the Brimfield Community Fire Protection District, it was just a village fire department: the Brimfield Fire Department, which served basically the village of Brimfield, which is west of Peoria, eighteen- twenty miles. The fire department actually started in 1899. It was the village fire department from then up until the late 1930s, early 1940s, when a fire protection district was formed to serve several communities in the Brimfield area. Prior to that, there was just a fire station in Brimfield and it served the village, but they did on occasion run out into the country and to other towns when called, but it was financed and funded by the people of the Village of Brimfield, and eventually they started complaining that they were paying for the fire department that was also serving surrounding areas and the people outside weren't paying anything for it. So a movement was started to form a fire protection district, and at that time there was quite a bit of controversy because the Village of Brimfield was originally not going to be included in the fire protection district, and so they were going to actually, in essence, start another fire department in another community. Well, there was some maneuvering and work done behind the scenes to actually incorporate the Village of Brimfield within the fire protection district, and to construct a new fire station in Brimfield to house the apparatus that the district would be buying, to kind of keep Brimfield in control of things, and so that was done.

All the time during my lifetime and experience over there it was a fire protection district, but it didn't start out that way. It was actually, the district served over 120 square miles, basically the northwest quarter of Peoria County is in that fire protection district, serves several villages: Brimfield, Laura, Edwards, Kickapoo, and a lot of rural farm ground, plus now a dozen or so subdivisions that have grown up out in the country.

The department at the time of Mel's death probably had 27 to 30 volunteer firefighters. They were volunteers, but they did receive five dollars a call. The department at that time probably ran 35 to 50 runs a year; had two engines, one tanker, and a pickup truck for a little rescue-type vehicle.

AG: Can you describe your career with the Brimfield Community Fire Protection District: when you started, when you joined the department, and how you served?

DC: Well, I started a long time before I joined. I started chasing fires as a kid. I can remember being in first grade and being frustrated when the fire siren would blow and I couldn't leave school to go to fires. But actually I have a picture of myself on a hoseline at a barn fire and I was ten years old, and I'd been chasing fires all my life. Firemen would pick me up and take me in their cars because I wasn't old enough to ride on the fire engines, but actually I started, the first actual time I rode a fire engine to a fire was with Mel Waldron, and I was thirteen years old, and

we had a grass fire in Kickapoo at the baseball diamond, and I got down to the fire station and Mel had the engine on the ramp when I got there, and he said “climb in.” And so we took off and it was pretty thrilling for me, but it was also kind of embarrassing because as he pulled the engine out onto the highway, he realized the brakes weren’t in good shape. So we made about an eight mile run to this fire at twenty miles an hour with red lights and sirens and other fire apparatus passing us and civilian cars passing us. They had the fire out by the time we got there, but at least it was an experience that Mel and I had together.

AG: Can you tell me about Assistant Chief Waldron and his career?

DC: Mel had been a firefighter with the Richwoods Township Fire Department, which was a suburban fire department on the north side of Peoria, for several years before he moved to Brimfield. He’d been active in that fire department, and it was a busier fire department, so he had more fire fighting experience than most people in Brimfield. When he moved to Brimfield, he was made an assistant chief on the fire department because he lived half a block from the fire station, he had fire experience. He ran a tavern close to the fire station, lived upstairs actually, so he was available basically 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Mel was kind of a short, stocky guy, had a crew cut, very gravelly voice, I remember that. In the winter, he always wore a blue Navy pea coat. He’d had previous heart trouble, but he was always a steady player in the fire department. He was always there, he had a good head on his shoulders, had some experience. I remember that he normally drove the first engine out- he had a fire phone in his home and in the business so he was always right there- like I said, usually drove and pumped the first engine.

AG: Do you remember any other interesting or unique anecdotes about Assistant Chief Waldron?

DC: Well, in fire meetings, the fire department met typically once a month, once in a while they had some other training sessions, but typically at the monthly meetings Mel never said too much. But, when he did, it was always something important and pretty basic to fire fighting. He had a pretty good handle on that and was not a blow-hard. He just, if something needed to be said, he’d say it, but he was not impressed with himself. He was just a down-to-earth guy, did his business. He was all for the fire department, very dedicated, his life was the fire department. Kind of a unique individual, everybody respected him.

AG: Okay. Can you please describe the incident in which Assistant Chief Waldron died in the line of duty?

DC: Well, I was not there that day, I was actually away at college, but Murray Miller who was fire chief at the time, Murray had been chief for 25 years or so, and he was the chief prior to my becoming fire chief there, but Murray described the incident to me. It was a cold day, January 8, 1966, about noon-ish they got a call for a well pump house on fire at a farm out in the country

southeast of Brimfield. Mel ran, as he typically did, ran the half block from home to the fire station, and as usual, he drove the first engine. The engine was a 1952 International 500 GPM pumper carrying 500 gallons of water, and as was typical, he had it on the road within approximately two minutes of the alarm. The fire department normally turned out very fast.

Riding in the cab with Mel was Firefighter Raymond Mills and riding on the tailboard, crouched down to stay out of the wind, was Firefighter Jerry Stuckey. Jerry told me, also, that they were going about sixty miles an hour heading out of town, he was crouched down to stay out of the wind just because it was cold, so he really couldn't see what was going on. Behind the engine was Chief Murray Miller and Assistant Chief Jerry Heinz, both in Murray's car, and behind them was the fire department tanker with I don't know how many guys in it.

Just east of Brimfield on U.S. Route 150, Mel had a heart attack with his foot still on the gas pedal, and he slumped over unconscious onto Raymond Mills and was lying across the gear shift lever. It was a standard transmission truck, so he was lying across the gear shift lever. So Raymond was kind of pinned and unable to do much of anything for a while because Mel was a pretty good-sized guy. As Raymond was struggling to get out from under him and get his foot off the gas pedal, the engine ran off the road on the right side and down into a ditch. Then it came back up on the road and Jerry Stuckey who was riding the tailboard told me later his first thought was "hey, Mel, keep her on the road."

As the engine continued down the highway, Murray told me that he drove his car up alongside the driverless, out-of-control fire engine, and Jerry Heinz, who was riding in the passenger seat, had the passenger door open and he was going to jump or attempt to jump from the car onto the running board of the engine and climb in the cab and stop the rig. But before this was possible, the engine careened off the left side of the road, and, as it entered the ditch, Raymond Mills in the cab was able to get Mel off of him and stop the vehicle just before it went into the main curve just east of Brimfield.

So the engine remained upright, no one else was injured in the incident. The tanker stopped briefly to see what was going on and then continued on to the fire and extinguished the fire. Murray and Jerry tried unsuccessfully to revive Mel with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He was taken to Proctor Hospital in Peoria, where he was pronounced dead. So that's basically what happened that day.

AG: Okay. Do you know anything about the on-scene reaction of the other firefighters when Assistant Chief Waldron was stricken with this heart attack?

DC: The only thing I can really tell you, just from the few comments I've heard and can remember was that obviously they were just shocked and had a sense of loss, but it was more shock than anything because nobody would certainly expect anything like that to happen.

AG: Okay, and then you described that the tanker was able to bypass the accident and continue on to the original fire call, and that fire was extinguished successfully?

DC: Yes. It wasn't much, I don't think it was much of a fire, just a little pump house on fire.

AG: Okay. How did the line of duty death affect individuals within the organization and the community?

DC: Well, I think for the two guys that were on the engine with Mel it kind of shook them up, obviously, and same for Murray and Jerry Heinz. Not only was it kind of a unique and traumatic incident, but they were involved in it and they lost a good friend and a good member of the fire department. So they had, I guess, a double-whammy from just the incident itself, plus knowing and being close to the individual involved in it. And their lives, actually, were endangered, too, in trying to get the thing stopped, so there were four or five people who could have been in big trouble out of it. So it was traumatic for them in the short run and I think even afterwards, especially for Murray Miller and Jerry Heinz, it affected them. I mean, it didn't make them so they couldn't function, but it was something they never forgot, I'm sure.

AG: Okay. How did the organization or the community of Brimfield memorialize Assistant Chief Waldron? Can you describe the funeral?

DC: I did not attend the funeral, but I don't believe that it was a big, typical fire department-type funeral. I think it was more of a private funeral. I'm sure that there was some fire department recognition, but I don't think it was a big production-type funeral, like some fire department funerals are, more of a typical family funeral.

Later years, the fire department did put a plaque up in the fire station, I think even with a picture of Mel, so that the younger guys, particularly, would remember and realize that we did lose a firefighter and it could happen to you. There was, as far as I know, not a major, big production made out of it, either at the time or later. There's a memorial, but I don't recall and I'm not aware of anything really unusual that happened. I think if there had been a big fire department-type funeral, I probably would have been there, but I don't recall anything about what the funeral arrangements were.

AG: Can you describe any changes within the organization as a whole following this line of duty death?

DC: I don't know that there were really any procedural changes because it was just a fluky thing that happened. I know when I was chief we did try to remember Mel and make sure that all the firefighters, in particular new people coming on, knew something about him and the situation and realize that fire fighting's a dangerous business and something could happen to you at any time. We wanted the firefighters and their spouses and families to be aware of that, but again it

was not a big production-type thing. And I don't think there were any real procedural changes that came out of it.

AG: Is there anything from this incident that would be helpful to today's firefighters?

DC: I think a couple things. First thing, I guess, that comes to mind is just wear seatbelts. I mean, there's a big push in recent years for firefighters to wear seatbelts, but nobody in this incident was injured because they weren't wearing a seatbelt, but, obviously, if you're going to be on a fire engine that gets in a wreck of any kind, whether it's somebody has a heart attack and runs the thing off the road or somebody plows into you, you're probably generally safer to have seatbelts on. So I would suggest that that's one thing that could come out of that.

Another is the need for physical fitness, and if you have medical conditions- Mel had had previous heart problems- maybe you shouldn't be driving fire apparatus or participating in certain fire department activities. There's always things that people with physical disabilities or limitations can do to help the fire department, but it may not be doing something that's going to put other people at risk or put yourself at risk. So I think physical fitness, being aware of your medical conditions, if you have any, whatever that might be, are things that, lessons that could be learned out of this.

AG: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to share about Assistant Chief Waldron or the Brimfield Community Fire Protection District that we did not cover during this interview?

DC: One other thing that just comes to mind here. Several years before he died, Murray Miller, the fire chief, and Mel were involved in saving a salesman who had a heart attack and collapsed in one of the grocery stores in town. And Murray was telling me after the incident that they got there with a resuscitator and the guy was basically dead on the floor in the grocery store, and Murray said he thought back to what Doc Katay, a local physician in town, had told him. Doc Katay had been an Army physician during the Korean War and that was back before A.E.D.s and defibrillators and so forth. So what Doc said they used to do during the war was, if somebody's heart stopped they just hauled off and hit him in the chest. So basically that's what they did with this salesman. Mel actually picked the guy up and was holding him upright or partially upright, and Murray just hauled off and hit him right in the chest just as hard as he could hit him and the guy's heart started again. So I guess it's kind of a unique situation with the people in the store wondering "What in the world? Their beating up this poor guy that's just had a heart attack!" But they did get his heart started, whether it was by luck or by science, I don't know. Anyway, that's kind of a unique thing, I guess.

The fire protection district at that time only had one fire station in Brimfield, now they've got a second one in Kickapoo and they're running, I don't know how many, probably 150 or 200 or more runs a year now, so business has picked up somewhat. But it all kind of started from a few volunteers back in the late 1800s, and it's just grown since then. Equipment has improved quite a bit. At the time of this incident, the fire department had radios in the fire apparatus, but they

didn't have any portable radios. They had breathing apparatus, but nobody wore them. They had turnout gear, but nobody wore it unless it was raining. So there've been changes that way. A lot more training. In the years that I was chief, for ten years, we started very intensive training, hands-on training with requirements and so forth, that hadn't been there before. So there'd been improvements made over the years, but the heart of the organization is still the same as, like most fire departments, what it always was: just people in the community trying to serve their fellow citizens.