

Narrator's name: Paul Bruggeman & Louis Gunther
Tape number: 1
Date of interview: 7/1/59
Place of interview: Oak Lawn Public Library
Interviewer's name: Mrs. Clifford (Winifred) Reynolds and an unidentified gentleman
For: Oak Lawn Public Library
Moraine Valley Oral History Association

MR: Would you give your name and address, please?

PB: Paul Bruggeman, 9429 Tulley Avenue.

MR: And how long have you lived in Oak Lawn?

PB: Thirty-six years.

MR: Lou Gunther, how long have you lived in Oak Lawn?

LG: Forty-three years.

MR: Where you live right now is about the same address that you always lived?

PB: Same place.

MR: And Lou?

LG: No, 9618 Cook Avenue. Before that, the last house on Cook Avenue, 97th Street.

MR: Would you give us some of the particulars about the forming of the fire department, Paul, some of the original members and how it was formed?

PB: Well, it was started by a house-to-house canvass by several men picking up collections anywhere from \$5 up. The village paid the balance towards the fire truck. We organized with about 15 men, I imagine, near's I can remember. We ran a dance, A halloween dance, to buy some boots and helmets

PB: and coats. I don't believe we had quite enough money for all of them to start with, but we ran different affairs to keep thing a-going.

MR: At the time that you started the fire department, what was the population of Oak Lawn?

PB: About 2,400.

MR: What was the first piece of equipment you had; what kind of . . .

PB: A reel.

MR: It was a reel what?

PB: They called it a reel speed wagon.

MR: Was it a pumper or did it hold water?

PB: A pumper with two chemical tanks on it and ladders.

MR: But it held no water.

PB: It held no water.

UG: Do you remember when that was when you decided to form the fire department, Paul?

PB: Well, it started in 1923.

UG: You gentlemen got together and decided that . . .

PB: That's right. The truck was delivered in April of 1924. That's when we really got movin' more rapidly--after we had the truck.

MR: Was it a new truck?

PB: This was a brand new truck.

UG: How much did you pay for it? Do you recall?

PB: That I don't recall. I know it was nowhere near the price we pay today.
(laughter)

MR: Then from there, what was the next equipment? Or what was the next thing that you did?

PB: I don't quite remember, do you?

MR: Do you recall, Lou?

LG: We were stationed where the police department is now. I don't recall who the village board members were, but at the time, I believe you remember, Paul, they was two of the fellas that were kicked off because they didn't answer calls.

PB: That's right.

EG: And one of their relation was on the board. They had the fire equipment impounded and guarded by one of the constables of Worth Township because they figured we were going to take the equipment. They kicked us all off.

UG: How did that finally turn out?

LG: We called the state fire marshall's office. And we called Blue Island to find out what the procedure was in a case like that.

UG: They wouldn't let you in your own firehouse, huh?

LG: The state fire marshall told us just to sit tight. If we had a call, to go get the equipment. The next day, the fire equipment was released to us.

UG: You didn't have any calls at that time, though.

LG: No. We didn't have any calls.

PB: And there was no more trouble after that.

MR: What was the next piece of equipment that you got. Do you recall, Paul?

PB: I believe the next was the _____, another pumper.

MR: Another pumper. What if you had calls beyond where the sewer was in and the fireplugs. What would you do then?

PB: Well, at that time we used to go out there (fast so) that we would put it out before it went too far. It was all right. Otherwise, it would burn down because we were the only equipment from here to Orland Park or Blue Island was (which were) the nearest to us. And by the time they would get here, why it would be gone.

LG: Do you recall Preston's fire? We pumped all the water out of the creek and then finished up by pumping mud onto the house.

PB: Yeah.

UG: When was that fire, do you recall?

PB: That was about, oh I would say, around '31 or '32.

LG: Somewhere in there.

UG: Where was that home located? Was that the Preston home?

PB: Preston was at Oak Street; that's 94th Street.

MR: Between 52nd and Raymond, right?

PB: 52nd and Raymond, that's right.

MR: Paul, how would they call you when they would have a fire call or an emergency?

PB: We had a siren right away. To start with, they had the siren on the fire truck. They would run that outside and blow that siren and call it over the telephone. Otherwise, they had no other way.

MR: Well, how did they get the first person to roll the rig out? Who would take that call, the very first call?

PB: Well, the operator would call somebody.

MR: Oh, call a fireman.

PB: They would call the chief of police, and he would do the calling in.

LG: I recall when the building next to Grants, I believe it was, stored wood and bales of hay. Remember when that burned Paul? Didn't they toll the church bells to get everybody out?

PB: I don't remember that too well--if they tolled the bells. I imagine, probably, they did. We had no other way of notifying anybody.

MR: Do you recall the stockyard fire. What year was that? What happened when you folks were called with your little rig?

PB: Well, it was 1934. We didn't even have an electric siren. We had a hand crank siren on there and the people were laughing at us going down Ashland Avenue. But we hooked on to a hydrant with a city rig. Our pump had just been overhauled, and we were sucking the water away from

PB: them because the pressure was low. They were shooting a stream about 20 feet. We had a stream of about 70 feet.

MR: How many of you went on that rig.

PB: I think there were about 12 of us, 12 at least, that were there.

MR: What happened when you got back? Well, first, how long were you there, Paul?

PB: We were there. . . We left here about 4:30 and got back about one o'clock in the morning.

MR: 4:30 in the afternoon?

PB: That's right.

MR: And what happened when you got back?

PB: Well, I didn't stay with the rig when I got back because I had another place to go. You were with them weren't you Lou?

LG: That's right.

PB: Well, you tell them about that because I wasn't there so I . . .

MR: What happened, Lou?

LG: On our way back, our radiator boiled over. We came back, and we didn't have any water in the radiator. The motor was all red hot. We got back, and the Mayor, Frank Harnew, was pacing up and down the street. We asked him what the trouble was, and he says, "Is everybody back all right? Nobody get hurt?" And we told him yes. He says, "Thank the Lord for that. You know, I was worried to death. Nobody had a dime's

LG: worth of insurance on him." The insurance had lapsed. (laughter)

MR: That's around in the early '30's.

PB: 1934.

MR: What was the progress of the fire department after that?

PB: I believe after that we bought a panel truck for an ambulance.

LG: Incidentally, that was the first ambulance that was put on the streets by any fire department in the State of Illinois. We operated on all types of emergencies and accidents.

UG: Do you remember when that was?

PB: I think that was 1936, wasn't it Lou?

LG: Well, we got it in '35, and we worked on it during that winter repaneling the inside. How we happened to get it. Arty Eickler and Ronny Harper . . .

MR: Is this Arty Eickler senior or junior?

LG: Junior. I forget, I think it was Andy Wolf, I believe the three of them went over to the bank and signed a note for \$365. Isn't that right, Paul?

PB: A personal note, yeah.

LG: A personal note. We didn't have the money, and they didn't have any.

PB: The village didn't have any better.

LG: Their credit (the Village's) was no good. That's how we got the truck. That same year the Legion invited us to have a booth at the carnival, which we did. We went downtown looking for some type of a money-making booth. We couldn't find any wheels because they wouldn't let us have a money wheel that would work against theirs. We run into a "Over and Under 7" board at Miller's Amusement. We were told that we couldn't rent it because it was rented out. So we came back to Oak Lawn and we went over to Beatly's and ordered the lumber to make this board, and, of course, put this on the cuff. We started this board at the carnival, "Over and Under 7". It was the first time it was introduced to Oak Lawn. We took \$30 that we had in our treasury for our bank. The first night we were taken by some slickers. We run out of the \$30. They took us for the 30 bucks we had. I borrowed \$10 from my wife. She happened to come along. Well, we got \$10 from Dorothy; we were back in the game. We finally came out on top. For the three days we were at the carnival, we made enough money for the department to clear that note. In fact, we made more money than the whole Legion made on their carnival.

UG: Did you mention when that was?

LG: I believe Paul mentioned that.

MR: 1936. Is that you got the start of your carnivals? Having your annual carnivals?

PB: Well, I don't know if that was the start of that. It was shortly after that when we did start. First carnival we run, the carnival man paid us \$150, and he split all the profits with us. So, after the carnival was over, we figured out that he got the biggest part of the share. From then on, we rented the booths direct from him and kept all the profits

PB: that we made. We seemed to do about five times' as well as we did the first one. Right Lou?

LG: That's right.

MR: And what did you use this money for?

PB: Well, we bought boots, helmets, raincoats, whatever we needed for new men. We helped pay for the equipment, paid for our own ambulance, trucks, and a truck that we used for an ambulance. Later on, of course, we got a bigger ambulance. We helped pay on every piece of equipment that the fire department owned. If we didn't pay it all, we paid part.

MR: How many pieces of equipment, to date, have you had?

PB: Ten, I believe it is.

UG: What equipment do you have today, Paul?

PB: Well, we have the aerial ladder, which is the latest piece of equipment, and the quad which was purchased a year or two ago.

UG: Quad, what is that?

PB: That's a combination pumper and ladder truck. And we have another Segred pumper, a 750 gallon. We have the Ford 500-gallon pump on there with a 500-gallon water tank on it. We have the ambulance and a jeep.

UG: What would you say, off hand, how much money has gone into the equipment that you have right now? How much would it be worth?

PB: How much would it be worth? Well, let's see now. To purchase it new would cost about \$150,000.

UG: How many men do you have? Ah, go ahead. How many men do you have on the fire department today?

PB: I believe we have 44 men right now.

UG: All volunteers.

PB: Right.

UG: Do you recall any of the, either one of you gentleman, any of the early fires you were called out to fight after the fire department was formed or some of the bigger fires through the years?

PB: Well, I remember one. It was around 103rd and Central. There were two children burned while we were trying to get a new fire truck. The government wouldn't hold still for it. After that fire, they gave us the "OK" on it, that we could buy one.

UG: Was that during the war?

PB: During the war, yeah.

LG: That was after they threatened to throw the chief in jail.

PB: Yeah, for the remarks he made. (laughter)

LG: In the Tribune.

PB: They wouldn't give us no priority on the truck.

LG: We had an order for that truck, and our order was cancelled. The chief was always writing to . . .

UG: Who was the chief; do you remember?

PB: (CAN'T MAKE OUT THE NAME PAUL SAYS. LOU SPEAKS AT THE SAME TIME AS WELL AS THE UNIDENTIFIED GENTLEMAN)

LG: What was the name of the outfit he had to write to, Paul, do you recall?

PB: Do you mean at the Tribune?

LG: No. All those alphabets they had in the government. I forget they had so many of them.

PB: Oh, for the priority, yeah.

UG: Probably the National Priority Board or something.

LG: Yeah. Well, we were refused. When we had this fire and lost these two children, (if) we would have had the pumper and had equipment with it (that was) originally to be purchased, we could have got in there with the water, and we could have at least saved one at the time. So, the Tribune came out. They got pictures and everything. And, of course, the chief told them what it was all about. He got a telegram.

PB: They didn't hesitate to print it.

LG: They were going to stop him. They wanted to shut that up in a hurry. Then after several letters back and forth, they decided to release the truck. When they went down to get the truck, that was . . . whereabouts in Ohio?

PB: Columbus, Ohio.

LG: That's right. They saw so many trucks laying out in that prairie there that it was pitiful.

UG: Do you recall any other fires, Paul or Lou?

LG: The Whiting fire was a good one.

PB: Yeah.

UG: Where was that one?

LG: The Standard Oil plant in Whiting.

UG: You were called out to fight that one too? And how long were you out on that?

PB: Well, some of them were there 'till midnight. I had to go to work at midnight. I left there a little before midnight. What time did we go? Around three in the afternoon, was it?

LG: We were called out about three in the afternoon.

PB: And some stayed there all night until the next day at noon.

LG: I came back at six o'clock in the morning on the next day. Then it was . . . I think they came back Sunday afternoon.

PB: Yeah, they come back Sunday afternoon about one o'clock, I guess.

MR: What do you recall one of the outstanding feats of the fire department, outside of fighting fires, that you have done?

PB: Well, I would say pumping the water from Evergreen Park to Oak Lawn through the fire hose with five units we had set up for relay.

MR: Why did you have to do that?

PB: Well, because the (village) well went dry. It was down for about five or six weeks. We pumped water into the main, our main, so the people

PB: here would have water.

UG: And when was this? What year? Do you know?

PB: Let's see now.

LG: That was about . . .

PB: '46 or '47, I would say, because we were . . . I am sure it was after the war because we got the O.C.D. units from the government warehouse where they stored all this stuff. This was some they had in storage already.

UG: Do you remember who the fire chiefs were?

PB: You mean all the different fire chiefs that we've had.

UG: There haven't been too many have there since the fire department was formed?

PB: Well, ___ Mullen was the first fire chief. And after _____ Mullen was Francis O'Brien, and Art Eichler.

MR: Is this Art Eichler junior or senior?

PB: Senior.

EG: Bill Buen, Bill Fenton . . .

PB: Bill Fention and Ollie Harker . . .

UG: How long has Ollie been . . .

PB: On the fire department?

UG: As chief.

PB: Oh, as chief. Well, let's see. He must be on there close to 20 years.

LG: All total, he's been chief 20 years, I would say.

UG: Was the fire department ever called out to handle disturbances on Halloween or rectify anything that might have been done in the course of a Halloween celebration?

PB: No, we've never been called out on anything like that.

LG: The fire department was called on one time, I know, to give a horse an enema. (laughter) We used the water tank.

UG: Why did they call out the fire department?

LG: Well, the fire department gets all kinds of queer calls. They got a call not too long ago, the woman's baby wasn't breathing. When they got over there, here the baby was a little pooch. (laughter)

UG: A little dog, huh?

LG: I think there is one thing that we should bring out. I believe it was in 1930, in the early 30's, Paul, wasn't it, when we started with the Santa Claus?

PB: Early thirties, during depression years. We were repairing toys and delivering toys.

LG: We repaired toys. We had the Christmas trees that they had in the classrooms of the school. We got the addresses of different ones that . . .

PB: Needy families.

LG: Really needed it. We got John Schultz and Louis Watercup and Andy Wolf and they contributed money towards it. We made up baskets, and delivered baskets of food along with the repaired toys to the different families. One family didn't have any coal. We went over on a Saturday night over to Al Brandt's coal yard and got coal and put it on the back of the firetruck and took it over to the house.

LG: And ever since then we've been playing Santa Claus to the kids of Oak Lawn.

UG: So every year since the 30's you've been doing it, since the depression days?

LG: That's right.

MR: What was the original amount of bags that you packed?

PB: About 500.

LG: The number of bags we packed was 500 to start.

MR: And what was the last count last Christmas?

PB: I think it was 4,000, wasn't it?

LG: No more than that.

PB: 5,000.

MR: It was close to ten, wasn't it? It was close to 10,000 bags, wasn't it?

LG: It was close to 10,000 bags we packed last year, Paul. Because you recall

LG: the candy bill. We went way in the hole on it, and we didn't get the support financially. The year before, we went \$500 in the hole. The last year we were more due to the fact of the increase of children under twelve that we passed the candy.

PB: The reason I didn't remember the last one because that was right after I got out of the hospital. I wasn't up there see when they packed the candy.

MR: In what time of the year did you have to pump this water backwards to the well?

LG: This was in the winter time. It was cold. We started out with the two pumpers that we had. One, stationed at Crawford Avenue at the hydrant, pumped to the other pumper which was stationed at Kostner Avenue. Then the hose was relayed from there to the hydrant in Oak Lawn at Cicero Avenue.

MR: Did the constant pumping keep these hoses from freezing, or did you have any trouble, or did you have to bury them, or what did you do?

LG: We, at first, had trouble with the hose bursting. We had to find out the hard way that the one pumper had to be idled down enough so that you didn't put too much pressure. The other one wasn't pumping enough to collapse the hose. After we got that straightened out, they got these engineers out from Chicago. We wanted to get several of these O.C.D. portable pumps that they had. They said that it couldn't be done. Well, we got five units and hooked them parallel to one another. We pumped water. We had to set the governors on the ends so that you wouldn't collapse the hose from one pumper to the other and

LG: one pumping more water than the one ahead of it was pumping. The auxiliary at that time took turns delivering coffee, sandwiches, and cake. We got a shanty that was a real estate shanty. I believe it belonged to, uh . . .

PB: Macerwany, wasn't it?

LG: Wasn't it Finetso?

PB: Finetso, you're right.

LG: Finetso, it was. Where was that sitting, up on 93rd Street, wasn't it Paul?..

PB: Yeah, we dragged it over there.

LG: We dragged it over there on 95th Street. He was even going to sue us because we stole his shanty. We were all going to get arrested.
(laughter) The different groups that found out what we were doing, they used to come around with coffee and eats for us. Three o'clock in the morning, they would even come out. We thought they were real good to us.

MR: How do you make the money for your current pieces of equipment and the upkeep of your equipment and stations? You have two stations now, right?

PB & LG: Right.

UG: Where are they located?

PB: One at 95th near at James and Cook. The other one 103rd and 52nd Avenue.

MR: When did you get the second station and why?

PB: Five years now or four?

LG: Four years ago. The reason for the second station is due to the fact that the railroad running through Oak Lawn is dead. In case we had a call on the south end of town, we would have equipment stationed on the opposite side of the tracks so that we would be able to get through in case the freight train should block the advance of the equipment from the north end of town. The erection of that station was requested by . . .

PB: That was the Board of Underwriters, wasn't it?

MR: The insurance company or someone like that?

LG: The Cook County Inspection Bureau requested one. One of the recommendations that they made to the village was to build a station at the south end of town, with equipment to handle fire calls, in order to bring the rates down. At the same time, they recommended the other reservoir which had already been installed.

MR: How did you get your second station? How did you get the money for it?

LG: We contacted the different organizations in Oak Lawn. We had a meeting in our fire station. We decided to go house to house and ask for \$5 contributions from each homeowner rather than have it put on the taxes. The building was built. I believe the cost was \$17,000.

PB: That's right.

LG: We fell short a little bit. The fire department put the balance in.

PB: One thing that I forgot is that we started spraying DDT. We started that down here too. The fire department did.

MR: Will you bring us up to date now. How you raise your money now for your equipment, the upkeep of your equipment?

PB: Well, we run one dance a year and one carnival every year. That's where we derive our money for our upkeep of everything.

LG: That's how our ambulance was purchased, through that monies also. The village does not purchase the ambulance or the equipment in the ambulance. That is purchased solely by the fire department funds that are made by the dances and carnivals.

PB: Our fund is split in half. Half goes into the ambulance fund and the other half into our general fund.

MR: I understand the fire department auxiliary is the one that keeps the linen supply for the ambulance. What do they drive in?

LG: If it wasn't for the fire department auxiliary, we wouldn't have any linens in the ambulance.

END OF TAPE

Shirley A. Miller -- Transcriptionist