

INTERVIEW WITH OAK LAWN FIRE CHIEF ELMORE HARKER,
JULY 6, 1984 A THE OAK LAWN FIREHOUSE, 103RD STREET
AND KOSTNER AVENUE, OAK LAWN, ILLINOIS.
INTERVIEWER: PEG NEVINS, LOCAL HISTORY ROOM, OAK
LAWN LIBRARY, OAK LAWN, ILLINOIS

Int.: Chief Harker, would you please give your name and home address?

Chief Harker: My name is Elmore Harker. I live at 9201 South Monitor in Oak Lawn.

Int.: Chief Harker, we have heard a lot about your father, Ollie Harker and how he contributed to the fire department. Can you tell me what it was like in your home with your father so involved with the fire department for so many years?

Chief Harker: Well, most of the time, it was a disaster. Not only was he the fire chief, I believe, for about twenty-six years, but he also was the police chief, I think, for four years. So, for four years, he was the police chief AND fire chief, and it was impossible to plan anything, even eat dinner in peace. He was on the go quite a bit, plus he was a glazier for Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company), so he was working a full-time job there and then coming home at night and being the police chief and fire chief. It was hectic.

Int.: Did he relate many of the instances of the fire department activities?

Chief Harker: Not always, just when certain things happened that get to you. About the same way it is today. If you lose some kids or something in a fire, it bothers you, and the only thing you can do is talk about it. Otherwise, it was just running on fire calls and ambulance calls and what-have-you, but he more or less left the job at the firehouse, for the most part.

Int.: How do you think the fire department during his tenure compares with the Oak Lawn Fire Department today? Can you make any distinctions:

Chief Harker: Well, there's no comparison actually, because it was a pure volunteer department then. They didn't have the

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funds or the manpower to do the things that we're doing today. When they needed a new fire engine, they held a dance or a carnival and raised money for it. The village never bought any equipment at all. The Fire Department Club actually purchased all the equipment up until the Fire Department was full-time. Then it was turned over to the village and then it was harder to get equipment, because you have to compete for budget money and everything else.

Int.: When did it become full-time and no longer a volunteer department?

Chief Harker: Well, it became full-time, I Believe it was September of 1961, August or September of 1961, right in that area. They were working on it for quite a while, to get all the necessary paperwork and everything done to go with a full-time department. They realized at the time that they were putting themselves out of a job, but they knew that was the trend for the future and it would be the way for the people to get better service from the fire department.

Int.: Are there, at this time, volunteer firemen who participate...

Chief Harker: Yes, we have, I would say, somewhere around eight or ten that are active, paid-on-call firemen, when the alarm goes off. See, when we went over to this new radio system, the police handle all the emergency calls now. It's no longer in the fire station. This is Step One of implementing a 911 system. When we were in this station, all the men had their phones hooked up through the phone company and when we needed them, we would dial a special machine we had here and every man's phone would ring. It would be a different type of a ring and they would pick up the phone and we would tell them what we needed them for. When we moved over to the Police Department, this was an obsolete system and the phone company, with their divestitures and everything else, could no longer provide us with that service. We're in the process now of going with the pagers. So, every man would have a pager and then we can call in through the alarm room when we need them. At this time, I have fifty of them and I'm trying to get fifty more because we don't have enough to equip every man

with a pager at this time. So, the fire department, I'd compare these people with anybody in the state today. They're a good bunch of people. They're doing the job. They're doing it the right way, and I have every intention, within a year, of having the insurance service office come out and rate us, as far as the fire department is concerned, and I have every intention of being classified as a Class I Fire Department, and there is none in the state, but I need fifty more pagers in order to do this.

Int.: From the accounts in the local newspapers, the Oak Lawn Fire Department has won distinction in many areas, both state-wide and on the national level, has it not?

Chief Harker: Yes.

Int.: Can you give us some of those distinctions:

Chief Harker: Well, about eight years ago, when I took over as the Chief of the Department, I became involved in the State Chiefs Organization, and, in the process of conversation, they were trying to recruit people from this area to run for office and I told them I'd be interested. So, I started off as an area rep for a couple of years and then I ran for a director's position and I had that for a couple of years. Then, I went up through the rungs of the ladder from second, first vice, and then I was the president of the state group. And, I'm also a member of the International Fire Chiefs. I serve on their legislative committee and the auditing committee for the International group. And, an off-shoot of that group is the Great Lakes Division, which includes six states in this area. I'm on various committees for that group. It takes participation in all of these areas to get the knowledge you need to run your own department more efficiently. So, it's been productive for the people of the town. It's been hectic, at times, for me, but it's enjoyable. If you're not willing to do it, you have no business taking the job.

Int.: When did you, can you recall, begin to take a serious interest in becoming a fireman?

Chief Harker: Well, I had no serious interest because I saw the life that we led at home with my father being the fire chief and I thought, that's not what I wanted for myself, so I stayed away from the fire department. But, many of my friends were volunteer firemen and, so I thought, well, what the heck. They had a lot of social functions and it didn't seem like too much work. So, I put in an application to become a volunteer fireman, which I never did end up being a volunteer at the time. They had hired six original full-time men to start the department out and, the next list that came out, my father was sick at the time, and I knew he would no longer be going back to work. I didn't want to be a fireman on the department if he was the chief. When I knew he was no longer coming back, then I took the test for full-time fireman. Then, in November, I think November 1st of '62, then I came on as a full-time fire fighter, and he had a few months before, well, he passed away in April of '62 and I came on in November of '62. So, that's where it all started. The early days was an awful lot of work, enjoyable work, but we only had, I think, eight of us on the job at the time, and it was very hectic. We'd get an ambulance call or a fire and we'd call the off-duty, the volunteers in and we'd have the engines out on the ramp waiting for somebody else to come to get on it and go to the fire. But, it was a step in the right direction. You have to start somewhere. And it progressed through the years, adding a few men a year, building this station, and we've got another station now. They've just passed the financing on it where the northwest end of town will be protected the way they should be and I intend to give them a paramedic unit right in the new station.

Int.: How many fire stations are in operation in Oak Lawn at the present time?

Chief Harker: There are four stations in operation today manned around the clock. When we build the new stations, we will be able to close two of those stations, because the positioning of the new station will allow for that and then we will be able to put more manpower, we will operate three stations, but we will have more manpower on duty at the stations and be able to respond faster with more equipment and more manpower.

In.: What is the number of staff on the fire department, total?

Chief Harker: Today, there are ninety-four uniformed and then we have a full-time secretary, a part-time girl that fills in. We've got two full-time secretaries, one in the Fire Prevention Bureau also. And, then our radio people - we have six radio dispatchers, but we transferred them over budgetwise to the Police Department, but we still maintain equal control over the alarm room. So, we have no problems, because historically, anytime a Police Department handles the radio or telephone for fire departments, the fire calls do not get priority. It's family disturbances, robberies and everything else seem to take priority and historically, there's been a problem with that. We, hopefully, will not run into that. We've made plans the best we can to make sure the priorities, as far as fire and ambulance, are number one.

Int.: Going back to the fire department when your father was active, do you recall what the volunteer firemen were paid per call at that time?

Chief Harker: I think in the beginning, they were paid nothing. I believe later on, they got a quarter a call, or a quarter an hour or something like that. It didn't cover the expenses that they were stuck with for responding to calls. I mean, they'd run out, ruin a pair of slack pants or a pair of shoes or something and that was too bad. They just made it out of their own

pocket and that was it. They took that job on because they knew it was something that had to be done. It was the same way they started an ambulance service. They saw a need for it and they were willing to work and buy an ambulance and equipment and everything else. It was all done through various fund-raising functions.

Int.: The Oak Lawn Fire Department has how many ambulances?

Chief Harker: We have three ambulances in service today and one paramedic rescue squad. But, there's fully-trained people and, for the most part, paramedics on every unit. We have fifteen paramedics now and one fellow has just completed his training and two more will complete it by the end of the year. That will give us eighteen paramedics to serve the people. They work three shifts, so that will be, for the most part, six on duty every day.

Int.: Are there any full-time female firefighters in the Oak Lawn Fire Department?

Chief Harker: No, we had one gal took the last test and I think she ended up number six on the list. I think we only hired one person off the list. That's since expired and I'm waiting for the Fire and Police Commission to give another test, but many departments have females. That was something that was a problem, if you want to call it a problem, initially, but now, it's nothing. It doesn't mean a thing. The female firefighters are doing just as good a job, and better in some cases, than the fellows are doing.

What kind of training does a firefighter have to undergo before they are actually able to participate in a fire?

Chief Harker: When a fellow comes on, when a person comes on our department, the last person came, we sent him down to fire school. I think it was about a six-week school. It's a very rigorous training, something on the order of 240 or 300 hours of hands-on classroom training.

Int.: Where is that school located?

Chief Harker: I believe that was in Champaign, but we do have the capability of running the school right here in the department and we have done that in the past. Our own people give the instructions. They operate with our equipment, our apparatus, and the whole training period is guided by the state fire marshall's office. We are a part of their program whereby the first year a person comes on the department, they're on probation for one year, and in that period, there is firefighter one at the state level and a firefighter two. They must complete firefighter two certification before they even pass probation or are kept on the job. Then after that, they go through emergency medical technician training, through firefighter three training, and then they branch off into the multitude of specialities. But, this is all under the guidelines of the state. We must keep complete records on all their training because the Village of Oak Lawn does receive reimbursement from the state when we do follow those guidelines and submit the right justifications. Supposedly, we're supposed to receive fifty percent of the man's salary for this training, but the state never has enough money, so if we receive sixteen percent or twelve percent, we consider it fortunate because it makes no difference if the state didn't pay us anything. We would still follow the same guidelines because it is a good program. In fact, I think the State of Illinois is one of the leaders in the country now as far as fireman training. They're doing a super job and that's through all levels.

Int.: How many hours a week does a fireman work?

Chief Harker: They work twenty-four hours on, and then they're off forty-eight hours. Then, every tenth work day, they get one of those twenty-four hour days off. So, that cuts down the hours to a little over fifty.

Int.: Chief Harker, there was some discussion a while ago about the Fire Department being unionized. Are they unionized currently?

Chief Harker: No, the firemen in Oak Lawn have their own association of firemen. They've had union people come in and attempt to organize them and take them into the union. But, the men feel they can do more for themselves by being represented only by themselves. They don't see any benefit in outsiders coming in to try to bargain for them. They are versed well enough that they can handle their own so-called union problems. The bottom line was I don't believe the union could have benefited them any more than they had done through themselves. The politicians seem to respect them more when they come in and do their own talking instead of having outsiders come in and talk for them. So, through this association, they have turned the job into a very good lucrative job. There's many fringe benefits. The pay is not bad at all now. I believe they're well satisfied with the way it's operating now. If they weren't, they would have joined the union.

Int.: Speaking of politics, there was a time, according to an account that your son, Steven, wrote in high school concerning your father, there was a time when your father and three other firemen were temporarily suspended from the fire department and someone said that it was all a matter of politics. How did that come about and how as it resolved? Do you know any details about that?

Chief Harker: Well, I think it was probably just a difference of opinion or a clash of personalities. Politicians are not versed in fire service. They may have their own opinions and they may not necessarily be right, or they may be right, but they still have the power to appoint or to discharge. I believe that's what happened at that time. There was a difference of opinion and personality clash, whatever. Firemen are

historically stubborn people, dedicated to their jobs and they do not take outside interference lightly.

Int.: Do you remember who was the mayor at that time?

Chief Harker; Yeah, I do, but I'd just as soon not get into politics again.

Int.: All right. But, that did not last very long. I understand that they were ...

Chief Harker: I think it lasted until the next election and then the mayor was gone and they were back in.

Int.: I see. Things righted themselves when the village officials changed.

Chief Harker: Yes. Right.

Int.: What part did the fire department play during our disastrous tornado? Were you involved in that?

Chief Harker: Yes. Absolutely. We did everything. We went for five days sleeping on the back ends of fire engines or sleeping on the floor. For the most part, I don't think we left the job for almost five days. We'd work until we couldn't work anymore and then somebody else would fill in for us. And after that, I believe we went on twelve-hour shifts. We were off duty for twelve hours and then back for twelve hours. I think it ended up quite a few weeks after the tornado before we were back to normal. (Note: The tornado took place Friday, April 21, 1967.)

Int.: And surrounding communities also helped, didn't they?

Chief Harker: We had, and I don't have the records right now, but I know we had fire departments and we had volunteers come from Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, not just from Illinois, plus all over Illinois. I mean, everybody. If my memory is right, I think we had 192 other departments come in to help us during that tornado, and we needed every one of them because

this town was a mess.

Int.: I remember it distinctly, too. We were very fortunate, you and I, living two doors away from one another, that we didn't have any damage.

Chief Harker: Right.

Int.: Your son, Steven also mentions an incident in his high school report about the robbery of the bus station that your father was involved in.

Chief Harker: Yeah. That's when he was the police chief, too. I guess they had some reason to believe that the bus station in Oak Lawn was going to be robbed. I don't know if it was a suspicious car or people around there or what. But, my father and Elmer Hanegan was on the department then also. They had some type of arrangement set up with the cleaning fellow that was in the bus garage at night and, again, if memory serves me right, it had something to do with a piece of cardboard in the window or something. That he would either, if there was any problem, he would either put this piece of cardboard in the window or take it out of the window, whatever, and they would know there was a problem. And they did keep quite a close eye on the bus garage during the few days that this happened. And they went by there one night and saw the signal there. So, they got out of the, they pulled up to the bus garage in the squad car. My father and Elmer, and Elmer Hanegan at the time probably each weighed three hundred pounds or more. And I guess as they pulled up, the armed robber came out and there were shots exchanged, and my father and Elmer Hanegan, to the best of my memory, tried to get underneath the squad car, which was almost impossible. It had rained, the fellow lost his gun or ran out of ammunition or something, and ran through one of the prairies there and they were chasing him and they lost their shoes and everything else. But, I guess they finally apprehended the fellow. It was an interesting story.

Int.: And your father and Mr. Hanegan were not injured in any way.

Chief Harker: No, not physically. They were nervous wrecks, but that was about it.

Int.: The fire department is often involved in calls in conjunction with the police department, are they not, that don't involve fires at all:

Chief Harker: Right.

Int.: How is that distinguished? How do you know when you are needed at some incident other than a fire?

Chief Harker: The police call us direct. We have direct phone lines between the police department and our stations. Many times we'll get call where people will see someone on the roof of a store or a burglar alarm will go off and the police will call us for ladders to search the roofs of the buildings. Quite a few times, in order to circumvent the burglar alarm, they'll cut a hole through the roof, and then they don't know if the fellow's still in the store or gone. We had one case where I think he was between the top roof and the suspended ceiling or another roof. He was there, hiding. We furnish them with the ladders or lighting units or whatever they need.

Int.: So you work very closely with the police department then?

Chief Harker: Yes, and we work very closely with them in all fire investigations, too. That's another one of the things we're doing now. Every time there is a fire, we check it out very thoroughly. This is a nice community, but we have more than our share of fires that are set deliberately, and it takes the combined efforts of both departments in order to finalize these cases.

Int.: Recalling articles in the local newspapers a while ago, there did seem to be a rash of supposed arson fires. Has that situation been somewhat slowed down?

Chief Harker: Well, the area may change a little and the people change a little, but it's happening today. We just apprehended

a group of so-called arsonists. Two or three of the people involved are eight-year old boys and their ringleader was a seven-year old boy.

Int.: How do you handle something like that?

Chief Harker: Well, the people that handle the investigations are also versed in the juvenile firesetter program. They've gone to school for it. They've been trained in this area and it involves bringing the kids in, working through the parents. Sometimes family counseling is recommended. It's handled. The problems that seem to arise is if we don't come in contact with these kids until after they've been doing this for a few years. Supposedly, the seven-year old boy has started fires in his house, his own home, two or three times, and the parents covered up for him, not covered up, but didn't understand what the possible problem was, and now he's going out and has other boys and they broke into a home and vandalized it a little bit and then set fire to it. If we can get to them right away and get them the right help, the problem is more or less eliminated. If you don't, they grow up to be pyromaniacs or fire starters.

Int.: Does the fire department currently have any old equipment from the early, early fire department days?

Chief Harker: The earliest piece of equipment we had was a 1944 Seagraves pumper. That belongs to the park district now and they have refurbished it like brand new. They've done a fine job on it. That's the oldest piece we had and that piece was delivered during the second world war when you could not get fire apparatus because of the war. And we had a house fire in Oak Lawn and I believe two or three children burned to death because we didn't have the apparatus to respond. There was a lot of paperwork done through the state, through the federal government and they gave Oak Lawn a priority on purchasing this 1944 Seagrave pumper and the volunteer firemen at the time, I think they went to Pennsylvania to pick it up and when they

drove it back into town, it was like a parade. They were very proud of being able to handle the situation, and to this day, it operates completely the way it should. It's still a good engine, but ...

Int.: It's still working.

Chief Harker: Yeah.

Int.: I understand that in most cases, when you did order equipment, that you had to travel to the site where it was manufactured and pick it up and drive it back.

Chief Harker: Right.

Int.: You don't have to do that anymore, do you?

Chief Harker: Well, we did that - the three newest pieces we have now are Mack pumpers and we did travel to Pennsylvania again to pick those up. What we do is we go, we send people there to more or less check them over and make sure we're getting what we ordered. We check them through by using the specifications that were submitted to make sure that the manufacturer meets the specs, and then they drive them back. Half work and half fun.

Int.: When the new firehouse is built, will it also have to be equipped with new equipment or will some of the equipment you already have be used in that ...

Chief Harker: No, we have all the equipment we need to completely fill that station. The only thing that I would like to do is purchase another paramedic rescue squad and I would intend to then have a paramedic unit in this station to cover this end of town and a paramedic unit in the other station to cover that end of town, with ambulances to back them up. That's about the best service we can give the people.

Int.: Do you recall any particular incidences that your father related during his long service with the fire department, any

fires that had historical significance, and, are there any that you can recall in your own tenure as a fireman?

Chief Harker: Well, as far as stories from him are concerned, there's probably only two that I can recall and one was, I believe it was a gasoline tanker truck on 95th that had caught on fire and when they responded there to extinguish the fire, it exploded and I guess three or four of the firemen, including my father, ended up in the hospital for, I don't recall how long, a week or so, something like that, but they were burned pretty good.

Int.: I think Reno was one of those firemen.

Chief Harker: Could have been.

Int. Yes, I talked to Mr. Reno not long ago and I believe he mentioned that same incident. Yes.

Chief Harker: And the other was the fire where a couple of the kids burned up and that was the reason they were able to purchase the new, at the time, Seagrave pumper. Otherwise, it would be Saturdays and Sundays, then you'd be out all day in the summertime, because the kids would be out of school and they'd be starting the prairies that we used to have on fire. You'd go twenty or thirty times a day, just from one call to another, trying to keep up with the kids and that lasted even when the fire department was full-time until the town developed and we don't have the prairies anymore. They keep us a little busy sometimes in the Stony Creek area, but that's about all.

Int.: When Grandview and Columbus Manor were annexed to Oak Lawn, it wasn't long after that that their fire departments also became a part of Oak Lawn's fire department. How was that handled?

Chief Harker: Right at the time the annexation was complete, Columbus Manor Fire Department and Grandview were incorporated into Oak Lawn. Their volunteers were taken into our department

from both departments. Their equipment was taken over by Oak Lawn their engines and trucks. Oak Lawn had, I think Grandview, and I don't know about, I believe both of them may have had some debts on their equipment through purchasing, which Oak Lawn assumed and then paid off over the years. There was some type of arrangement with, Bridgeview, I believe contributed some of the money for one of the Columbus Manor stations because it also protected part of Bridgeview, so we had to repay that debt to Bridgeview. But, all their people, and even today there are people from Columbus Manor and Grandview, probably most of them are now full-time firemen because the younger fellows then took the test and became full-time firemen in Oak Lawn.

Int.: Did that step initially put a bit of a strain on the fire department, do you think?

Chief Harker: Not as far as performing their duties were concerned because, even before the annexation, all departments worked together. When they'd need help, they'd call up and we'd be there. When we needed help, they were in here. For many years, fire departments operated on strictly a handshake.. If you need us, call us and we'll be there. Today, it has to be done more legally and we have to have written contracts and agreements and all this other baloney that doesn't accomplish anything more than we had at the time. What we have now, we're in the process now of having written contracts that will almost cover from the Wisconsin line to the Indianaline, right around Chicago, and including Chicago. The reason for the written contracts I never fully understood, because a man's word is better than any written contract.

Int.: When the 911 system goes into effect, is that scheduled for sometime next year?

Chief Harker: Right. Hopefully, right after the first of the year sometime.

Int.: What will be the advantages of that to the community that we do not have at the present time?

Chief Harker: Well, right now, I could ask you what's the emergency number of the fire department and you may know it and you may not know it. With the 911 system, if you want any help at all - fire, police, or ambulance, you can just hit 911 and it's answered immediately. You tell them the problem and the right equipment is dispatched, be it burglary, ambulance, fire, whatever it is. It's three digits. You punch fast, and they're gone. Why they ever picked 911, I'll never figure out, because on a dial tone, it's, I would have sooner gone with 211 or something that's faster to dial, but it didn't turn out that way.

Int.: There was some discussion and some disagreement among the neighboring communities about the cost to us and the cost to them for the 911 setup. That has been resolved now?

Chief Harker: Well, for the most part, it has. What caused the problem, and it's strictly telephone company as far as I'm concerned. It was all started by the telephone company. It depends on your phone numbers. If Oak Lawn was all 422 and 423, and that stopped at our borders, there would be no problems for another town. The phone company decided that as long as they had people on Crawford Avenue somewhere that had a 423 and then somebody on the other side in Evergreen wanted a phone, they just gave them a 423, and so they've got all the exchanges spread out. They did that for economical reasons. So the phone company, now, when they put in a 911 system, there's many types of systems you can put in. Four or five years ago, we researched the 911 system, and it would have been what they called a selective routing system, and we had people completely cover the village of Oak Lawn getting the last address of every house on the border, so they could, through their computers or whatever, give us a 911 system that would not go outside of

Oak Lawn. Since that time, they've changed their thinking or their operation to the point where now they will give us a 911 system, and it will be based on every exchange that's in Oak Lawn. If that exchange happens to overflow and go into a neighboring town, people that have that, if they dial 911, they will come into Oak Lawn's dispatch office. Evergreen Park, for instance. The whole town has the same exchange that Oak Lawn has. Evergreen Park will be getting a 911 system and not utilizing it unless they want Oak Lawn to handle their fire and police calls.. Today, we do handle the fire calls for Evergreen Park. The police, we do not handle. They have their own dispatchers.

Int.: Why do you handle Evergreen Park's fire calls?

Chief Harker: Because they had problems a few years back with police answering them on which call takes priority. We have a mutual aid agreement with Evergreen where we respond initially. If Evergreen Park right now has a house fire, or a store fire, structure fire - the people call into Oak Lawn - automatically Evergreen Park's equipment is sent, their men off duty are called back, and an Oak Lawn engine is sent with a full crew right to the scene, without being asked or anything. That helped them in their fire insurance rating. They were just evaluated and went to a class three fire insurance rating. I believe they were a six, and because of the mutual aid and working together with the towns, that does, that is recognized by the insurance industry and they give you better grade for that type of aid. Part of the problem with consolidating the alarm systems personalities, there's another unit somewhere in Palos - I think they call themselves Central Communications or something - they are trying to implement a central alarm area for any towns that wish to participate. This would be a profit-making organization and, although it may work good, I don't think the towns can financially support it for too long.

We have everything here. We could take Chicago Ridge, I believe, for instance, the best part of it, and Burbank, Evergreen Park, and if they wanted to have Oak Lawn handle their alarms, they would automatically have 911. Unless, I think Burbank has a few phones that go through a Stickney office or something else, but, for the most part, it's the same exchanges as in Oak Lawn, and they'd have 911. Bridgeview objected very seriously with Oak Lawn going 911 because, their complaint was, if somebody in Bridgeview calls 911, what's going to happen. And, I said, if they call 911, and Oak Lawn has 911, they're going to get Oak Lawn's office. Our operators will take the information and call Bridgeview by radio, and let them handle it. Well, they didn't think that was right. I said, well, what happens if they call 911 today? I don't know. They get a recording saying 911 is not in service in this community, check your directory for the proper number, and redial. I said, "that's a delay." They just didn't want Oak Lawn to have a 911 system. And the thing now is the type of system Oak Lawn is getting is the most economical the phone company has because its all the exchanges. If Bridgeview wanted to go with the 911 system, or any of the other towns, then they would have to go with the selective routing system that we looked at originally, and it would cost more because then the phone company would have to do a lot of different types of hookups, I believe, but it would cost them more. So, I personally think a lot of it is jealousy. There's personality clashes, but I don't think we have it in the fire departments. I think it's mostly in the police departments, because we're used to working together for years, anyway, and we've worked with every town around here many times. I think it will all work out in the long run.

Int.: There has been some discussion in the local papers about the Doppler warning system for tornadoes. Is that going to be of benefit to us? When is that scheduled to take place?

Chief Harker: It's operating today.

Int.: In Oak Lawn?

Chief Harker: Yes. It's not an in Oak Lawn operation. The Doppler radar system is installed at Marseilles (Illinois). The area it covers includes Oak Lawn and all of Chicago and all of Northern Illinois. Four or five years ago, due to the tornadoes we have in Oak Lawn and other towns, we talked to the federal people regarding the Doppler System. to protect our area, to give us warning. They put us on the schedule for '85 or '86 if they had the money and blah, blah, this and that. So the state fire chiefs got on this real hot and heavy and we asked them for prices, how much it would cost. We pinned them down to figures. Then we went out and raised the money for it through the state group. We went to the County Board and they promised so much money toward it. The City of Chicago promised so much money for it, and quite a few agencies. Otherwise, we would have been out selling tags or something because we were going to get a Doppler System in. And it was installed and in operation, I believe, last year.

Int.: How large an area does that cover?

Chief Harker: A hundred or so miles or something. It goes out on the sweeping beam from the center, and it more than covers all of Northern Illinois.

Int.: Now, we had a tornado watch and warning here in Oak Lawn about ten days ago. Was the Doppler System involved in that?

Chief Harker: Yes. What we're looking at now ... The Doppler is a newer system. In order to have it operate efficiently, the people that are physically in there have to have experience on it.

What we need basically is a lot of bad thunderstorms. We need a couple of tornadoes so they can physically see how this appears on the screen. And that what they're in the process now, they're actually training. But, it's coming along. It's doing fine, and what we're working on now is the alerting from the Doppler to the different towns. We're trying to figure out how to do this and get the earliest possible warning. If we want to put a radio there and have them broadcast out to certain departments and then spread it from there, or if we want to go through the state police and have monitors in our stations. We're trying to work out the alerting method from the Doppler to the individual facilities to get the fastest warning in the earliest time frame.

Int.: Speaking of the warning and time frame, how much lead time does the Doppler System give us, on the average, that we didn't have before?

Chief Harker: Well, the information I have now, it can give you ... I think they're using around 20 to 22 minutes as an average lead time on a tornado. When everything is right and there's going to be a tornado ... now, it may not touch down ... it may be a hundred or a couple of hundred feet over your head, but that system will pick up and tell you, there's a tornado there. This is all color coded and I guess red is the worst. I'm not versed in the operation of it, but they can go from thunderstorms to sprinkles to actual tornado conditions. The problem being, in the past, we

would get tornado warnings in a certain area. Now, when you get a tornado warning, what do you do? Do you blow the sirens and scare everybody and they all go in their basements or whatever? And then an hour later, you get an all clear. And the next day you may get another tornado warning. Well, by the end of the month or so, people are going to say, "Aw, it's just another warning. There's nothing to it." And there's a problem there. They don't take it seriously, and they're right. With the Doppler System, when they tell you it's coming, you'd better head for cover, because it does, and I don't recall exactly the width of it, but it can give you, I think, within 20 miles of a certain point. It's coming through there. If nothing else, it should prove to be a life-saving method. I hope we never need the darn thing.

Int.: Well, the fact that many homes in Oak Lawn do not have basements put us at greater risk, don't you think?

Chief Harker: Yes. That's another unanswered question. What do you do when the tornado comes. For the most part, there is no foolproof place to be. If you don't have a basement, I would, as far as my information is concerned, and what we do in our home is we just head for an inside closet, close the door and just huddle inside the closet. A tornado's a funny thing. I saw so many strange things when we had it here that it's unbelievable. It'll completely destroy two homes and leave a home between those two homes untouched.

I've seen it take a home completely apart and from the street you can see the dining room table was all set. Glasses, napkins, silverware -- everything is on there untouched. but the house is gone. It's unbelievable.

Int.: Scary, isn't it?

Chief Harker: Yes. There's no way you know what it's going to do.

Int.: Oak Lawn did not have tornadoes as frequently, it seems, in its early history, as we do now. Or maybe, we didn't recognize them as tornadoes at that time.

Chief Harker: Right. You see, they have many tornadoes out in the Midwest, but there's no people there. A tornado goes through a cornfield and nobody knows it. It can go through a cornfield for a mile and nobody knows it, or cares, or you don't get a report on it. But, if goes for a mile through a populated area, then it makes headlines. I think there's a lot of tornadoes that come through and nobody even notices them. It's just a bad storm or something. They can touch down and wipe out this building completely and not hurt another thing in the whole town. You can't figure 'em out.

Int.: Getting back to the composition of the fire department, the firemen are now under civil service protection. Is that correct?

Chief Harker: Right. It's the Board of Police and Fire Commission.

Int.: I see. Is that equivalent to civil service?

Chief Harker: Yes.

Int.: Before that commission came into being, they were pretty much at the mercy of the village officials. Is that correct?

Chief Harker: Yes, for the most part. But not completely. In the beginning, the officers in the fire department, well, the chief was elected by the men and I don't know if the officers were elected or the chief appointed them. If you wanted to become a member of the Volunteer Fire Department, you turned in your application, and I believe there was a board of officers that would review it, talk to you, and accept you or not accept you. For the most part, I think they were pretty well governed by themselves, because it was a separate, non-political group of people.

Int.: It was more or less like a fraternity then.

Chief Harker: That's just about the way all fire departments are today, and rightfully so, because a fireman spends more time with the guys he works with than he spends with his own family. When he's here, he's here for 24 hours solid, working with his brother firemen. Tomorrow and the next day, when he's off, he may go home and have breakfast, then change clothes and go to another job. He doesn't see his family and kids as much as the guys in his crew. So they do develop a very strong bond, very strong. Probably like

the old Italian or Irish family. We'll fight amongst ourselves, but nobody else better get involved.

Int.: The Chicago Fire Department ... is it operated in much the same manner as far as the structure of the department is concerned?

Chief Harker: Basically it is. Yes, basically.

Int. Outside of the new proposed fire station for Oak Lawn, what would you like to see in the fire department in the future?

Chief Harker: I would like to see an additional paramedic unit. I would like to see the Fire Prevention Bureau beef up their activities of enforcing the codes and ordinances, so we don't have the fires originally, and I would like to see a few more men hired, so when the crews go out, they go out with enough manpower to do the job the right way. That's about all we need.

Int.: Right now, the budget doesn't permit the number of staff that you would like to have in the department?

Chief Harker: No. They always frown on hiring additional people because when you hire someone, you hire them forever, you create a position, it cost you thousands of dollars to cover their fringe benefits. I've asked for people the last three or four years and been turned down every time. Financial reasons. But, they did realize the problems we were having, so they allocated through the budget more money for overtime. So, now if a fellow's working

today and he wants to work 8 or 12 or 24 hours tomorrow, and I'm short, I have the funds to hire him back, so at least, we have the manpower, for the most part.

Int.: That helps to fill the gap.

Chief Harker: Yes. What's getting to be a little bit of a concern is because they haven't hired any men for quite a while, the department is all getting older, and we don't have the new guys that we can train so things turn over smoother.

Int.: What is the attrition rate? When someone retires or leaves the department ...

Chief Harker: Then they are replaced.

Int.: They are replaced.

Chief Harker: Right. They are holding at the 94 so far. And 94 men, if they were all on shift, would be fine. That would be 31, say 31 men on a shift, and that's 93 and myself, that would be 94. That's beautiful. I could operate the department that way. But, every day of the year, I have three men off on their off day, and, as the department gets older, they accumulate more vacation time. Almost every day of the year, I have 3 men off on vacation. Then I have 4 men that I took off shift to put on working an 8-hour day in the Fire Prevention Bureau, to make the inspections. I took 3 more men off to be division chiefs to help in the operation of the

department. Within the last few months, I reorganized the top of the department and divided the department into four divisions and appointed a division chief in charge of each division.

Int.: What are the four divisions?

Chief Harker: Fire prevention, training, administration, and EMS (emergency medical services). We're just getting too big, and we've got so many things we're trying to do, I can't physically ... I can't be everywhere ... I can't get out of this office sometimes for a week at a time. But, it's operating very well now. They have immediate supervision in each area, and that's followed down through chain of command also.

Int.: Where are these four individuals located?

Chief Harker: The division chief in charge of personnel is here (103rd and Kostner), the division chief in charge of training is near the village hall, EMS is at 103rd and 52nd, Fire Prevention is by the Annex Building on Southwest Highway. When we get the new station built, I intend to pull the EMS division chief up here, the training division chief up here, and the administration division chief up here. They all have cars, but I want a closer working relationship with them.

Int. So, this will be headquarters; in a sense?

Chief Harker: Right. Either here. We'll have spare offices at the other station, too, depending on where we have to do the work.

But that was the problem when they originally built this station. They put a sleeping quarters in for 22 people with 21 firemen, and we've never had 21 firemen on duty since the day we started. But, they put no office space in. I had to build additions onto the photo room in the basement because we handle all the photography. We have photographers. The arson investigator ... I had to put him in a storeroom in the basement. It's difficult. In order to operate efficiently, you have to have areas for people to work, and that's one of the things we're trying at the new station, to get a sufficient amount of office space so these people have room to do their job. They're not there all day long, but when they have to fill out these reports and records, and meet with people, they have to have an area to do this in.

Int.: Is there anything else that you would like to comment on about the early fire department or, today?

Chief Harker: Well, I've seen the fire department in this town grow from just a group of volunteer firemen who put their heads together and started this department. They worked for many years making it what it is today. And, I think the normal route that it's taken, I'd like to see it happen in every town, because it is the right way to go. You can't blow a siren today in this town and wait 3 or 4 minutes for a guy to come from his house to the station, get his equipment on, and drive to the fire. That's when the houses

are gone. We catch them today when the people are here and we get a call of a house fire, a fire in the kitchen, we get there, it's still in the kitchen, and we put it out with a minimum amount of damage. With the volunteer departments, it's difficult, and it's not their fault. They're just not there fast enough. We strive on speed at all times. We want to be able to be able to cover any part of this town in 3 to 3½ minutes from the time we get the call. And we're able to do that now.

Int.: When your father was on the fire department, most of the structures were wooden, were they not, and there was very little anyone could do by the time they got there?

Chief Harker: Right. Well, even today, I don't care what kind of home you live in, if you have a fire, the first thing you do is call the fire department, close the doors, and get out. We'll be there. If you try to put it out, you only make it worse. It only spreads, and then people get hurt.

Int.: There was some discussion about an ordinance being passed about everyone having to have smoke alarms in their homes. Has that been enacted yet?

Chief Harker: Yes, but it's not in a private home. All apartments, condominiums, public buildings, they are required by ordinance, and there's probably 99.99 percent completed, and that was a heck of a hassle to get passed, because it cost money. The people in the

condos said: "We own that condo. That's our own home. That's our private home. You can't force us to do that." Our answer to that was that the people living above you and below you are in their private homes, too, and if you have a fire, you're affecting them and you don't have the right to do that. It passed and it's been enforced. We've got smoke detectors all over this town. Now, we're trying to go with the sprinkler systems. I've been to San Francisco and other parts of the country on sprinkler systems for the private homes. They have today a fast-acting sprinkler head you can hook up and this was done with plastic pipe. And we had a demonstration about a month ago in Oak Lawn with the same thing. A husband can install it himself, so there's no cost there. You pay a couple of dollars for the pipe. God, they work good, and the expense of the sprinkler heads .. They're, I don't know, they're maybe \$50 apiece. If you had one in your kitchen, and you had a fire in your kitchen, if you weren't there ... say you left the oven on or something on the stove or you went to sleep, which we have a lot, and a fire flared up and started burning, the sprinkler head would activate immediately, spray the whole area, put the fire out, and then close, so you don't have water running all through your house.

Int. Would this sprinkler system have to be installed in each room?

Chief Harker: That's probably the ultimate. Otherwise, we usually suggest the kitchen, the utility room, where you have the furnace and washer and dryer. If you're in the habit of going to bed and smoking in bed, put one in the bedroom. Otherwise, there's not a heck of a lot ... common sense is all it takes, for the most part. You don't overload circuits. You don't leave irons on laying on an ironing board. For the most part, the kitchen and the utility room, that would handle it. If you do crazy things in your garage, put one out in the garage.

Int. Your son, Steven, was not inclined toward the fire department like you were with your father's example that he set. Between your father and you, how many years, total, service to the fire department, have you given?

Chief Harker: Well, he had to be over 30 some odd years, total. Over 30 years.

Int: He went on in 1930?

Chief Harker: Probably late 20's or 30's, something like that. I know he was chief for 26 years and he had to be on a few years before that, so I would just guess, about 30 years. I've been on 22. I came on in '62.

Int.: That's more than 50 years between you and your father that you have contributed to the Oak Lawn Fire Department and to the

community as a whole. There aren't too many other individuals in the community that have given that much service.

Chief Harker: But, the community's been good, too. The community's been good to me, and I have fun doing it.

Int.: There are some other firemen who have followed in their father's footsteps or other relatives in the family who were on the early fire department.

Chief Harker: Right. John Bulow is the assistant chief. He's shift commander. His father was a firemen in Oak Lawn back in the start of it, and his brother, Tom, he was a captain on the fire department, and he hurt his back in a fire. He's no longer with us. He's on a disability pension. I believe he lives in Arizona now. Becker ... his father was a firemen. He's on the department. Ron Murray, who's the division chief in charge of the fire prevention ... his father was on the Grandview Park Fire Department. McCastland ... he's the division chief in charge of training. His father was a chief in Oak Lawn. He was on the department back in the volunteer days and then full time. I have to look at a roster. We've got a lot of them that worked for other ...

Int.: Fire departments in other communities.

Chief Harker: Yeah. Other communities. We've got ... Jay Smith was a captain in Crestwood. Earl Couch, I think, was in Hometown

or Crestwood. I don't recall. We've had a lot of people that worked for the water department, the sewer department in Oak Lawn that came onto the fire department. Rich Ralston ... he's our head mechanic. His father was an old volunteer fireman. There's quite a few.

Int.: Speaking of the water department, there was a time back in early Oak Lawn when the well ran dry and everyone was asked to make a supreme sacrifice and not take baths.

Chief Harker: Right.

Int.: Can you go back and give us some details about that?

Chief Harker: Well, the only thing I remember about it is something did happen. The wells in Oak Lawn did go dry. We didn't have city water then. And the only way we got water into Oak Lawn was the fire department was out on 95th Street. They had their hoses hooked up into Chicago, I guess to a hydrant, and they were pumping the water through the engines down 95th Street somehow into Oak Lawn's system to give the people enough water to at least take a bath and make a cup of coffee. I guess that lasted for quite a few days, if I recall, possibly a week. I don't know for sure, but they had an interesting time, because I believe it happened in the wintertime also, if I recall. I think they were trying to put straw or something on the hoses to keep the water from freezing. They had to keep pumping and moving it. Otherwise, it would have froze. It was another interesting saga of the early days.

Int.: Until Oak Lawn did arrange and negotiate with the city of Chicago for Chicago water, we were, the fire department in particular, was at a distinct disadvantage, wasn't it?

Chief Harker: Oh, absolutely. We had to carry ... well, they had tankers in those days, I guess that had to physically carry the water. To this day, Oak Lawn, all our engines do carry water, strictly speed of getting water to a fire. I get a kick out of the city of Chicago. Their fire engines never carry water, because they've got hydrants all over the place. And, the farmers ... they used to call us the farmers ... we had to carry our own water. Well, when they had their, I think it was when Martin Luther King was assassinated, and they had the riots and everything in the city, a lot of suburban departments went into Chicago because they physically did not have the manpower or the apparatus. And they would put one of our engines in a station with one of their engines. They'd pull everything out but leave one engine with us. And we responded on fires with them, and, because we carried water, we didn't have to lead out to the hydrants and unroll the hoses and everything else. We could have the fire extinguished before they got their hoses wet.

Int.: How much water can each piece of apparatus carry?

Chief Harker: Well, some of them carry up to a thousand gallons. Ours carry five hundred. We have 500 gallons of water, which is enough time, while we're using that five hundred, then the engineer that's on the rig ... he pulls off the hose and hooks it to the hy-

drant and keeps supplying the water. And, for the most part, five hundred gallons puts out a lot of fire if you do it the right way.

Int.: During the riots, when Martin Luther King was assassinated, The Oak Lawn Fire Department then was helping the Chicago Fire Department?

Chief Harker: Oh yes. We had at at least two and maybe three engines in the city at various locations.

Int.: For what period of time? Do you remember?

Chief Harker: I think it was a couple of days. See, the City of Chicago came out in force to help us during the tornado. And we were in there for the riots. We were in there ... We also agreed ... the tricky part was when they had their strike in the city. We agreed we would not put men and equipment in their stations, but we had certain areas, that if they had a fire, we'd respond and go in there. And, our guys, they were very ... they objected seriously about covering for ... (turn it off for one second). Our fellows did not enjoy the thought of, because they're all members of the big brotherhood and they didn't want to go in there and put out fires, but Chicago firemen that lived in the Mount Greenwood area adjacent to Oak Lawn, although they didn't want Oak Lawn coming in, they didn't want anybody coming in, we did get calls from certain firemen ... "if my house is burning, you guys come in, nobody will bother you." We may have responded once. I think Evergreen went in

once or something, but we had a meeting with the guys and I told them that we're not getting involved in their negotiations or their Chicago politics, but I said" "What are you going to do if you get a call of a house fire? We have to go." So, they did. They understood. They didn't like it, but they said: "As long as we're ordered to go, we'll go." Because then they have an out. So I said: "Well, you are ordered to go." And I think it was just two years ago during a bitter winter, we had some problems. When Commissioner Blair was in Chicago, the man was not the best of firemen. And he came out to Oak Lawn. We had meetings on mutual aid. And he more or less told us that, if we ever needed him, he'd come out and put our fires out for us. But, don't worry about ever being called into Chicago, because he'll handle it. Well, I think that was probably the first part of the year, and I don't think it was two or three weeks later and we got a bitter cold spell and a third of Chicago's equipment froze up. And Commissioner Blair was in California at the time and they called and wanted to know if we'd help them. Yeah, we'll help you, but tell that idiot, don't ever shoot his mouth off again.

Int.: Well, he's gone now, isn't he?

Chief Harker: Yes, but the bad part of it is, the man was a complete failure in the fire service, and when he lost his job here, they hired him to teach classes at the National Fire Academy in Maryland.

Int.: My Goodness.

Chief Harker: Some things don't make too much sense to me.

Int.: Does a fireman have to retire at a certain age?

Chief Harker: No.

Int. He can continue as long as he's able to do his job?

Chief Harker: Right. Well now, that may not really be true. A fireman can take his pension at the age of fifty if he has served twenty years, but I think he can stay, I don't know ... probably at least sixty-five as long as he is physically able to do the job that's required of him. I think that's the only stipulation. We don't have those problems, so far. We've only got one person since we started that took his regular, normal retirement, and that was a couple of years ago.

Int.: In Chicago, some firemen and policemen, or was it only policemen, who recently returned to the job when they changed the age?

Chief Harker: It could have been have been some police AND fire. I remember reading about it vaguely, but Chicago has a different pension policy than we do. I think, unless they've changed it, they used to have to work until age fifty-five or something. We're not in the same pension plan as they are. They have their own.

Int.: I see. You're under a different ...

Chief Harker: We're in what they call "Downstate Firemen's Pension Act," which covers everybody in the state but Chicago.