

INTERVIEW WITH EARLY OAK LAWN VOLUNTEER  
FIREMAN LEONARD RENO, MAY 4, 1984 AT THE  
OAK LAWN PUBLIC LIBRARY, 9427 SOUTH RAY-  
MOND AVENUE, OAK LAWN, ILLINOIS.

(Interviewer - Peg Nevins, Local History  
Room, Oak Lawn Public Library, Oak Lawn)

Int.: Mr. Reno, would you please state your full name and address  
for me?

Mr. Reno: My name is Leonard Richard Reno, 9824 South Cook Avenue,  
Oak Lawn, Illinois.

Int.: Were you born in Oak Lawn?

Mr. Reno: Yes, I was, at 9416 South Cook Avenue.

Int.: Can you give me the date of your birth, please.

Mr. Reno: 5/10/15. (May 10, 1915)

Int.: How long had your family lived in Oak Lawn when you were  
born?

Mr. Reno: I think they were here three years.

Int.: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Mr. Reno: I have two brothers.

Int.: Older? Younger?

Mr. Reno: Both younger. Arthur's the second one and Robert's the  
third.

Int.: No sisters.

Mr. Reno: No sisters.

Int.: And what was your father's job?

Mr. Reno: He retired working in the syrup department for Walgreen Drug Company.

Int.: You did mention, before we started the interview, that he did work at one time for the railroad.

Mr. Reno: The railroad, the Wabash Railroad. He was a firemen.

Int.: How long did he work at that job? Can You remember?

Mr. Reno: I can't remember.

Int.: Then you went to school in Oak Lawn.

Mr. Reno: Cook Avenue School.

Int.: The whole eight years?

Mr. Reno: Eight years at Cook Avenue School. Two months at Tilden Tech.

Int.: That's in Chicago.

Mr. Eno: Yes.

Int.: Can you, in your own way, tell us what life was like in Oak Lawn when you were a child going to Cook Avenue School? What did you do for recreation, and what was Oak Lawn like? Can you recollect?

Mr. Reno: Well, at that time we used to go fishing to the lake in Oak Lawn. And we had a lot of fields that we could play ball in. We made up teams in different areas. Then I did an awful lot of caddying at Hickory Hills Golf Course. When I got old enough to walk, I was caddying.

Int. Were there movie houses in Oak Lawn?

Mr. Reno: Oh, yes. We had the Cook School. Upstairs was like a big auditorium, and we used to have this state trooper, Carl Rein-view (not sure if this is spelled correctly), come in and show us movies. It was ten cents or fifteen cents on a Friday night.

Int.: Every Friday night?

Mr. Reno: Yes, for a long time. And we had movies against the Cook Avenue School and movies against the Behrends' building.

Int.: Were those well attended?

Mr. Reno: Oh, yes.

Int.: That was adults and families?

Mr. Reno: Yes.

Int.: Do you recall at what age the thought of being a firemen occurred to you for the first time? Was it something you had always had in mind?

Mr. Reno: Well, I looked into it before I was 21 years old. You had to be 21 to get on the fire department. Well, I just count the years, and, two weeks before I was 21, they accepted me. I'm still a, they call it a paid-on-call firemen, but I call it a volunteer.

Int.: What year was that when you became a fireman?

Mr. Reno: I went on when I was 21 and I've been on 48 years this month. So, 48 from 1984 is 1936.

Int.: Nineteen thirty-six is when you went on, and you were 21 years old at that time.

Int.: What was the fire department like at that time? Can you give me an overview of how many men they had and what the buildings and equipment were like?

Mr. Reno: Well, at the time when I went on when I was 21, we had the old village hall and the fire department and the police department were all combined into one little building. And, at that time, we elected our fire chief and our assistant chief. And we used to have Captain Collins come out from Chicago and drill us, come out on a Sunday.

Int.: What were your hours like? Did you put in a full 40-hour week or how was your work scheduled?

Mr. Reno: No, no, it was strictly volunteer. When you heard that siren blow, you come arunning.

Int.: No salary involved of any kind?

Mr. Reno: Well, in the beginning there wasn't. Then we were getting about, they changed it to two dollars, a dollar-and-a-half an hour and then two dollars an hour for each call we went on.

Int.: Before there were volunteers, how were the fires handled in the village? Can you recall any in particular that were spectacular and what methods were used to try and ...

Mr. Reno: As far as I can remember, we always had a pumper out here and all volunteer men that were firemen. The big deal was when they had the last Chicago fire, the Stock Yard Fire. We sent

our piece of equipment there.

Int.: Were you with the piece of equipment? Did you go to the fire?

Mr. Reno: I just missed it. And we used to cover Grandview, Columbus Manor and we went to Chicago Ridge, Palos Heights, and that's about it. And we'd assist anybody that needed help. That's where I got these scars from. On Cicero Avenue.

Int.: How many men were on the fire department at that time? Do you remember? Volunteers?

Mr. Reno: I'd roughly say twenty-four or twenty-five men.

Int. How long were you a volunteer before you became a full-time professional fireman?

Mr. Reno: I've never been a professional fireman. I'm still a volunteer.

Int.: Oh, you are. Oh.

Mr. Reno: I was too old when they formed the regular fire department out here to get on it.

Int.: There was an age limit.

Mr. Reno: Yes, 21 to 35.

Int.: And you had gone by the 35 by that time.

Mr. Reno: It made a few of us very unhappy, because we figured we built the fire department and then we're too old to get on it when they put regular men on it.

Int.: But there was no way that situation could be resolved.  
Those were the rules and ...

Mr. Reno: Those were the rules.

Int.: Those were the rules and that was it, but you still wanted to be a fireman.

Mr. Reno: Oh, yes.

Int.: You mentioned, Mr. Reno, that you were also a member of the police force at one time and also the public works department of the village.

Mr. Reno: Yes.

Int.: And how long did you work for the police department?

Mr. Reno: Five years.

Int.: In what capacity?

Mr. Reno: Just a regular police officer.

Int.: I see. And then you went to work in the public works department.

Mr. Reno: Public works. Twenty-two and a-half years. Retired from the public works June 1st, 1980. I was superintendent of the sewer division.

Int.: Would you tell us again, for the listeners, about the fire on Cicero Avenue that you were involved in and some of the consequences of that?

Mr. Reno.: Yes. The first part of December, we got a call from the state patrol that they had a truck on fire at approximately 117th and Cicero. When we got there, the truck was burning and we went to start pumping and our water lines were froze. So, we pulled behind it. We were going to thaw out the lines and the truck was burning, burning all over, the whole truck was on fire. The first thing you know, he had a 55-gallon barrel in there for his gas tank and the end blew out and five of us that answered the call ended up in the hospital.

Int.: And the extent of your injuries?

Mr. Reno: Well, I had to have all the skin removed from my face. It left my forehead scarred. Then I went down with pneumonia after it.

Int.: And how long did it take you to recover from this situation?

Mr. Reno: Oh, I'd say I was off work a good month and a half.

Int.: And you said that still didn't deter the draft board from calling you.

Int.: No, and I did receive, while I was home from the hospital, a notice from the draft board in Summit to go down for a physical. We had a member who had a business in our village and he was on the draft board. I called him and told him, everybody knows that the fellows that answered that call, they all got burnt pretty bad. Now, my doctor tells me to stay in the house and you tell me you

can't do anything about it. I've got to go down there, to the draft board. So, the doctor told me to have my wife put a sheet over my head, with holes for my eyes and my mouth, and don't take the sheet off in the air and go down there that way. So, I went down there and reported to the draft board and they gave me a six month deferment. And I ended up in the service when the six months were up.

Int.: In the Navy.

Mr. Reno: In the Navy.

Int.: Would you tell me some of your experiences in the Navy?

Mr. Reno: Well after I got through with boot camp, I went on ship's company in the fire department for ninety days. Then I was shipped to California and from there, was issued island gear. We were supposed to go to Okinawa and stay on land there. That was October 7th, my seventh wedding anniversary, and a typhoon hit and we got out of there. They didn't take us off ship, and I ended up in Tokyo Bay aboard a communications ship with a three-star admiral, so I've seen quite a bit of Japan with that admiral aboard our ship.

Int.: And then when you got out of the service, what did you do?

Mr. Reno: When I got out of the service, I went back to work for Walgreen's for a short time. Then I came to work for the village of Oak Lawn on the police department, and, from the police department, I went to public works.

Int.: In all this time, you have still maintained your status of a volunteer fireman.

Mr. Reno: Yes.

Int.: And are you still a volunteer fireman today?

Mr. Reno: Yes.

Int.: There's no age limit for a volunteer fireman. Is that correct?

Mr. Reno: No. (There is no age limit for a volunteer fireman.)

Int.: Mr. Reno, you said you were involved when there were some airplane crashes in the area. Can you give us some details about some of those experiences? Can you remember?

Mr. Reno: No, we had them right out here about 91st and right off of Ridgeland. We had one over here near the Pilgrim Church. And they were all small planes that landed in this area. Didn't have any fires.

Int.: No fires as a result of the crashes.

Mr. Reno: No.

Int.: But you were still involved as a volunteer fireman.

Mr. Reno: Yes.

Int.: There was no ambulance in the fire department at that time, probably.

Mr. Reno: No, I think we had to put them in the cars ...

Int.: And take them to the hospital. What was the closest hospital at that time? Was Little Company of Mary ...

Mr. Reno: Well, that's been here for a number of years.

Int.: That was the closest one. Is that correct?

Mr. Reno: Yes, that and St. Francis in Blue Island.

Int.: That's where most of the fire victims would have been taken - either to Evergreen Park, Little Company of Mary, or to Blue Island, St. Francis Hospital. Is that correct?

Mr. Reno: Yes.

Int.: You mentioned earlier about another fire you were involved in over on Ridgeland Avenue with a family and a young baby.

Mr. Reno: Oh, yes. I don't recall how many were in the family that died in that fire, but there were a couple that died, there were a couple burnt very seriously, and there was one little baby burnt to death on a little crib. After I saw that, I didn't go to work the next day.

Int.: It got to you.

Mr. Reno: I went home.

Int.: Mr. Reno, when you came back from the service and World War II was over, and Oak Lawn's population was doubling and tripling, what kind of changes did you see in Oak Lawn from the way it was when you were a young man growing up in the village?

Mr. Reno: Well, it seemed as though help thy neighbor and friendliness had parted. We were getting people out here that wouldn't talk to you. We were kind of used to say/<sup>ing</sup>hello to everybody. If

a delivery man would say, "Where's so-and-so street?," we'd say "Never mind the street. What's the name?" Then, we'd tell him what house to look for, what color, what roof." But, then as the town started progressing, we lost track of all that, so then we had to go by addresses then. The small town friendliness left.

Int.: That was the price we paid for growth and progress.

Mr. Reno: Right. And you can't stop progress.

Int.: When 95th Street was widened, in the sixties, do you remember that and was that a state project? Was the village involved in that at all? When 95th Street was widened to what it is now?

Mr. Reno: I believe our engineering department was involved in it, but as far as public works, no.

Int.: You didn't have anything to do with that.

Mr. Reno: No.

Int.: Was there any community involvement in that decision to widen 95th Street, or was that something that was done on a higher level? Was there any voting or anything on that matter?

Mr. Reno: No, there was no voting on it as far as the citizens of Oak Lawn. That was on a higher level, the state and our village fathers.

Int.: When the tornado struck in 1967, do you remember what the village's various agencies and departments did, and perhaps your department in particular? How you were involved?

Mr. Reno: Well, at that time when the tornado hit, we were southwest from St. Gerald's School and Church, and we had a little building over there, one of the ex-water pumping stations. And it blew the roof up and back down, and the building was condemned, so we couldn't use that. And we moved in over at the equipment maintenance, our office over there and our equipment in by the equipment maintenance department.

Int.: Where was that located?

Mr. Reno: Equipment maintenance?

Int.: Yes.

Mr. Reno: 97th and Central, right off of Central, east of Central.

Int.: Is that building still there today?

Mr. Reno: Oh, yes. That wasn't hit. Then we had to clean up around our sewers and keep them open, because there was quite a bit of debris around.

Int.: There was a major effort to relocate people, those people whose homes were destroyed. Was the public works department involved in that at all?

Mr. Reno: Oh, yes. They were involved. We had to help them with their sewer lines. They moved a bunch of mobile homes over by Gaddis School. They had one solid block there of people who couldn't stay in their homes. They were condemned.

Int.: That tornado effort received a lot of publicity. Do you

think that the community was strengthened and that small town feeling perhaps was present during that situation?

Mr. Reno: Yes, I do.

Int.: The cooperation of everybody trying to....

Mr. Reno: Yes, and at that time they had to use the V.F.W. Hall as a morgue and they had to get a portable generator over there to have lights so people could come over and see if any of their family was involved in it.

Int.: Were there any changes that you know of in the building codes or anything having to do with the fire department after the tornado that would help to cope with a situation like this if it should happen again? Like the tornado. Were there any new ...

Mr. Reno: I don't recollect any of them, but I'm sure there has been something going on with our regular firefighters.

Int.: As a volunteer fireman now, how much time are you involved in ...

Mr. Reno: I am not involved in any at all right now. I haven't been for the last few years.

Int.: This is your decision?

Mr. Reno: Yes, it's my decision.

Int.: But you still maintain that you are a volunteer fireman to this day and that you will continue to be one. Is that correct?

Mr. Reno: That is right.

Int.: But the occasions have not been present for you to participate.

Mr. Reno: That's right. When the occasion arises, and I have to help them, I will.

Int. I see. Well, would you sum up then in your own words, your experience as a volunteer fireman in the village and tell us what you feel about your experiences in that capacity?

Mr. Reno: I would say, that like the rest of the volunteers, there were volunteers on the fire department from the village of Oak Lawn. They did a tremendous job and I feel as though I've done it along with them for the village.

Int.: And many of these men are still in the village and you keep in touch with them from time to time?

Mr. Reno: Some of them are in the village, but are deceased, some have moved to other states.

Int.: You don't have a reunion from time to time?

Mr. Reno: No. When they have the installation at the fire department, once in a while we bump into each other there. That's once a year.

Int.: Well, your experience as a fire department volunteer was a positive kind of an experience for you and the village has certainly

profited from that and the efforts of your fellow volunteer firemen.

Mr. Reno: I believe one hundred percent in that statement. The village came an awful long way with the volunteers and what they've done. Dances, carnivals, buying equipment and it's helped this village out.

Int.: It was all a great effort and it helped Oak Lawn to grow.

Mr. Reno: Yes. I would say so.

Int.: Thank you very much Mr. Reno for discussing this matter with us about your experiences as a volunteer fireman. I hope that maybe we will be able to do another tape another time about early Oak Lawn. Thank you again.

MORE

Mr. Reno: There were about five of us in this village. They issued us a policeman's cap and a badge. and we used to direct traffic on Sunday for the churches.

Int.: About what time period was that, do you remember, as far as the years, the dates go?

Mr. Reno: Well, I was 21 then, to get a police star and carry a gun. Just like this, put a star on this, and put a policeman's cap on, and you're stopping traffic on 95th Street.

Int.: So, you were just a young man at that time.

Mr. Reno: Oh, yes.

Int.: You said your wife thought you were married to the fire department because you spent so much time with it.

Mr. Reno: Yes, especially cleaning up.

Int. That was all volunteer, of course, too.

Mr. Reno: Oh, yes.

Int.: When you had to clean up, that was cleaning up the premises of the building, of the fire building?

Mr. Reno: Yes, and sometimes wiping off the fire trucks.

Int.: The equipment.

Mr. Reno: Yes, cleaning up the equipment.

Int. How was the equipment kept in shape? Was that a volunteer effort by everyone on the ...

Mr. Reno: Yes, it was a volunteer effort. But, then it got to be too much and they got a couple of paid men in there. They'd come in once a week and they'd pay them to keep it clean.