

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

ROBERT M. BOYD

INTERVIEW 1510

This is a tape made for the Memories of New Bern Committee and consists of an interview with Robert M. Boyd primarily concerning the New Bern Fire Department. Mr. Boyd is a resident of New Bern and this tape was made in New Bern on June 17, 1993 by Bill Edwards, interviewer number 1500. This tape is designated number 1510.

ROBERT BOYD: I was born in Arapahoe, North Carolina. I was raised in Arapahoe up until, I left Arapahoe around 1950 and I moved to New Bern. When I come to New Bern I went to work with Henderson Cigar and Candy Company to start with. Then I left them and went to work with McCotter Furniture Company and worked with Mr. McCotter for about two years I reckon. I left and went to Virginia and worked at the shipyard for a year, come back home and went back to work with McCotter.

They had an opening at the fire station and Mr. McCotter was a volunteer fireman so I had already joined the volunteer fire department when I come back home.

BILL EDWARDS: That was Cliff McCotter?

ROBERT BOYD: Cliff McCotter. Since I was already a volunteer and they needed a paid man, why I went down and applied and I was successful in getting a job at the fire department. Went to work with the fire department in April I believe of 1953 as a driver. I was a driver up until Murray Phillips was chief and I don't really remember the year. I could get it from the fire station. And then Murray made lieutenants and captains in the fire department, first and second lieutenants. I was promoted that time as a second lieutenant in charge of station out at Station 3 which is in the Riverside section. I stayed

out there for about three or four years and then I was transferred downtown and made it to first lieutenant. I stayed downtown until R.C. Moore retired which when he retired then I got promoted up to captain which it was called at that time and that's when a captain was in charge of all the paid men and the equipment and then you also had a volunteer fire chief which was the chief of the New Bern Fire Department. That was in 1973 that I got promoted to captain. They changed that title to deputy chief not too long after I had become captain but being an old country boy like I was I just let everybody still call me captain. (Laughter)

BILL EDWARDS: Go ahead and work that in however you see fit.

ROBERT BOYD: After I got to be captain, let's go back though and start talking about when I got married. I went to work with the fire department in 1953. In 1955 I married Jean Wetherington which was Ray Wetherington's daughter and he was also a paid fireman. Jean and I were married for about four years and my son Bobby come along which by the way, right now he is a paid fireman with the city of New Bern, so it must have been in our blood. (Laughter)

BILL EDWARDS: It must be.

ROBERT BOYD: And then seven years later after Bobby come why we were blessed with a little girl, Lisa. She lived to be twenty and she got killed in an accident at twenty years old. But Bobby has growed up to be a fine young gentleman I think. He's got two boys which makes me a "PaPa" twice and I'm real proud of them. Bobby married Regina Canady, Ben Canady's daughter here in New Bern. They've been married

for about fifteen years I reckon. They live in New Bern and just like I say, he is a driver-engineer now with the New Bern Fire Department.

I stayed with the fire department until 1983. I had put in a little over thirty years and at fifty years old I retired from the fire department. But I still stay connected with the fire department. I still go to the association meetings and I sell fire equipment every now and then since I've retired. That keeps me kind of knitted in with the paid and volunteer firemen from around the state and I thoroughly enjoy doing that. That's about the history of me briefly with the fire department.

BILL EDWARDS: Well tell me some of the things that if you know, how did the Button and Atlantic Companies get started?

ROBERT BOYD: I really don't know that answer. I don't know how they got started. I do know that at the main fire station on, facing the building on the left side upstairs is the Button Club room. On the right side is the Atlantic Club room. They have separate officers.

They have meetings the same night but one goes on one side for their meeting and the other one goes on their side for their meeting. They conduct all that separately. But when the alarm goes in they unite and fight fire together. They do all their training together. The only thing that they do separately now is, just like I say, have their meetings. Years ago when there was a Button and Atlantic Company I have been told the Button had their fire department and the Atlantic had theirs and they would race to fires and see who could get there first, you know.

BILL EDWARDS: (Laughter) How about that? Probably one reason for the formation of the two companies was for competition maybe.

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah. Back in the olden days they used to have competition. They would travel from city to city and have competition.

BILL EDWARDS: I remember seeing some of those competitions in Sanford.

ROBERT BOYD: In Sanford? They would load their stuff up on railroad cars and ship it up there and have competition. In fact, the city of New Bern, they hold some world records today on the competition.

BILL EDWARDS: Well, do you feel like that the companies have served New Bern well over the years?

ROBERT BOYD: Yes I do. I really do. A fireman has got to be a certain breed. It takes a certain breed for a fellow to be fast asleep in his bed at night and when the alarm goes off jump up and leave that warm bed and go out in the cold and fight the fire, trying to save lives.

BILL EDWARDS: Especially when the temperature is below freezing.

ROBERT BOYD: Trying to save lives and property of other people and getting very little pay. They don't actually get paid but the city gives each one of the companies so much money a year to operate on. They get a little bit of revenue out of it but it don't even pay their gas bill.

BILL EDWARDS: At one time did they not give vacations to certain firemen who had accomplished certain things or been with them so many

years or whatever?

ROBERT BOYD: They did this with the funds they got from the city. If you caught fifty percent of the alarms you was eligible for the money to take a vacation. And years ago the boys in the Atlantic Company would go to Cuba and the boys from the Button Company, they were a little bit tighter, they would go up north to New York and places like that. Yeah, and the city still gives the volunteers money for their trips but they don't go off in a group like they used to. It's more of a family deal now. The men take the money and take their family on vacation.

BILL EDWARDS: That's probably a good idea.

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah. I think it's better that way.

BILL EDWARDS: What did it take to get into one of these companies when you started? Was it just a willingness to?

ROBERT BOYD: Well, yeah you were voted on. In other words, you had an application you had to fill out and you turned it in to the company with a ten dollar bill which was your initiation fee and they read out your application. Then they picked a committee to investigate you for thirty days. Then the investigating committee would come back and you were either favorable or unfavorable. If you was favorable or either one they would vote on you. And if you got as many as three black balls, they would not elect you. But you could get two black balls and be elected. So they screened them pretty tight, the volunteers.

BILL EDWARDS: Did they have any training or skill requirements

to start with?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-uh. Not with a volunteer. In other words, all you had to do was have a willing heart and a mind and a strong back. They had training programs. In other words, we had two fire drills, two training sessions a month for the paid and volunteers. And they would come down to the fire house. Sammy Stocks used to be one of the training officers. He was a city employee and also a fireman and he had been off to school. He used to do a whole lot of training way back in the earlier days.

BILL EDWARDS: Were you a member of the department when this - I heard about this only I don't know any facts about it - truck turning over and killing a driver?

ROBERT BOYD: I come with the fire department right after that happened. Booley Broadstreet. They hired Booley for vacation relief driver. In other words, he was, the paid men, they only had enough to work a shift and you worked twenty-four and you were on call twenty-four and then you was off twenty-four hours. That's the way the paid men first started out. Booley Broadstreet during the summer months, June, July and August, they would take them three months and make the paid men take their vacation all at one time and they would hire a person off the street to be a paid driver for that three months.

Booley was driving the fire truck and we had had a small grass fire and Booley had drove the truck to that and had emptied about half of his water in his tank. And then we had another alarm in. And he just took off from that alarm going to the other one and when he was going

around a curve the water shifted with him and turned over the truck.

Booley didn't die then but he was more or less, he never did come back to be himself again. He got around in a wheelchair and he talked but he really was a handicapped person.

BILL EDWARDS: Well don't they build baffles in those tanks to keep that water from sloshing back and forth?

ROBERT BOYD: They do more so today than they did back then.

BILL EDWARDS: They didn't do it then probably.

ROBERT BOYD: They had some baffles but nothing like they do today. And the fire trucks back then were more top heavy than they are today. We was lucky that we didn't loose some people when he wrecked that truck because Skinny Smith and I don't know who else was riding on the back tailboard when that truck turned over.

BILL EDWARDS: You were lucky that other people didn't get hurt too.

ROBERT BOYD: It really is. But Booley, it affected him real bad.

BILL EDWARDS: Do you remember any unusual incidents occurring in fighting a fire or going to a fire or anything like that that occurred during your service?

ROBERT BOYD: I remember, it wasn't nothing unusual but I can still remember the first fire alarm I went onto. It was Box 327 Eubanks and North Street up in the Duffy Field section and it was a false alarm.

I was scared to death. (Laughter) I really was. And the fire that I recall the most that really dwelled in me is when the Governor Tryon



Hotel burnt. That was really one of the, in my days, one of the worst fires the city of New Bern ever had. That was in 1965 I believe it was.

BILL EDWARDS: There was no one hurt in that fire was there?

ROBERT BOYD: No, we had some boys that got overcome with smoke but as far as getting hurt we didn't. But we called in fire departments. We called in Kinston to help us. We also called in Cherry Point to help us and we stayed down there and fought that fire I want to say a day and a night and into the next day. We had it under control before then but it was just a long burning fire. Well it was a block.

BILL EDWARDS: Yeah, it was a big building and it was all wood, wasn't it?

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah and it was set on fire.

BILL EDWARDS: Was it?

ROBERT BOYD: Yes it was.

BILL EDWARDS: I've never heard that.

ROBERT BOYD: We convicted the person. In fact they caught him in Norfolk. He had set a fire up there too. And the elevator shaft was right wide open and that's what was funnelling the fire and it was really difficult to put out.

BILL EDWARDS: Also, I've heard that some people in order to get in the number of calls would turn in false alarms. Is there anything to that?

ROBERT BOYD: You know there was a saying way back yonder that some of the boys would do that but nobody ever got caught. I really

don't believe they done it. You know, I think it was just a freak thing that we had a bunch of false alarms at that time. They used to accuse the boys from Pamlico County to come in New Bern and turn in false alarms. They did catch some boys from Pamlico County at one time doing it but every time we'd get a false alarm for awhile they'd say them boys from Pamlico County's back in town again.

BILL EDWARDS: You don't know when the New Bern volunteer fire companies started do you?

ROBERT BOYD: No, I don't.

BILL EDWARDS: Why do we have volunteers instead of paid firemen?

ROBERT BOYD: Well, the city of New Bern could not afford back then and I doubt if they could now a paid fire department.

BILL EDWARDS: How many people would it take, just off the top of your head, to really man the department now? Say you had a fully paid crew. How would it require?

ROBERT BOYD: I'd say roughly eighty to a hundred.

BILL EDWARDS: How many members are there in the two companies now? Do you happen to know approximately?

ROBERT BOYD: In the two companies combined you've got about sixty-five volunteers and you've got about thirty-six paid men.

BILL EDWARDS: The city has always furnished the equipment for the fire department, have they not?

ROBERT BOYD: That's correct.

BILL EDWARDS: That includes the turnout gear and everything?

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah. They give them a certain amount of money

each year for them to buy their turnout gear and that's designated you know for turnout gear.

BILL EDWARDS: What is included in turnout gear?

ROBERT BOYD: That's your helmet, your face shield, your coat, pants and boots and gloves and suspenders. You are looking at, per man you are looking at roughly six hundred dollars per man for turnout gear. Six to seven hundred dollars.

BILL EDWARDS: And that goes up steadily doesn't it?

ROBERT BOYD: Yes it does. But way back yonder when we were paying a hundred and fifty-five dollars for them we thought that was high back then. (Laughter)

BILL EDWARDS: When was the statewide Volunteer Fireman's Association formed? Do you happen to know that, about when?

ROBERT BOYD: I sure don't.

BILL EDWARDS: There was a contest between cities. You mentioned that earlier.

ROBERT BOYD: They were but I'm too young to remember any of that. All I know is what the old timers have said.

BILL EDWARDS: Well I remember when Sanford, I was living in Sanford and I was a kid up there, they used to have contests. They'd put sand down on the street so when they jumped off they could slide. Probably New Bern was involved. I didn't know anything about New Bern then.

ROBERT BOYD: I would say so. In fact, you were talking about the state fireman's association, we had a man right here (Telephone

interruption). By the way, talking about the state association, we've got a man here in New Bern that was the president of the North Carolina state association which was Ed Moore.

BILL EDWARDS: Is that right?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-huh. He was president in 1975 I believe it was. So that's right.

BILL EDWARDS: That's quite an honor, isn't it?

ROBERT BOYD: Yes it is.

BILL EDWARDS: Do you remember anything about when fire codes really began to be enforced in buildings? I guess electrical was one of the first things that was specified, wasn't it?

ROBERT BOYD: Electrical. We started implementing, I don't know when they really started, we started in the New Bern fire department in the late fifties and early sixties of enforcing fire codes. The chief would do a little inspection but he had not been schooled for it or anything like that. Our first fire inspector was W.M. Saunders, Zoot Saunders, and I think he started being fire inspector somewhere in the early sixties.

BILL EDWARDS: Do you know when they first had fire insurance, home and business fire insurance? I guess that's beyond, back before your memory.

ROBERT BOYD: Way back I would think, yeah.

BILL EDWARDS: I would say so too. And then they ask a question here, did you have to be a policy owner for firemen to fight a fire at your home or business?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-uh.

BILL EDWARDS: I didn't think so. I've got a thing at home, you've probably seen them, they call a fire plate. It's made out of cast iron and has an old hand pumper on there, a hand pumper. And they tell me that if you didn't have one of those on the front of your building back in the I guess 1800's, they wouldn't fight your fire, that you had to belong to this association before they would fight your fire.

ROBERT BOYD: Is that right?

BILL EDWARDS: Yeah. You hadn't heard that?

ROBERT BOYD: Hadn't heard that.

BILL EDWARDS: I'm not sure that that's true but I've read that and I have one of those plates at home that I found on the street. But they said if you didn't have that displayed on the front of your house and you had a fire they didn't fight your fire.

ROBERT BOYD: I've never heard of that. In fact, the city of New Bern when I first went to work with them we were fighting all fires in the county. Anybody that had a fire and they called New Bern Fire Department we went. And it got bad enough until back in 1950 the county bought a fire truck and give it to the city of New Bern and the city of New Bern maintained that fire truck and manned that fire truck and we used that fire truck for fighting fires in the city and out in the county. And we did that up until, gosh, it was in the late sixties or early seventies. And it just got so big until we couldn't handle it anymore. And the city fathers saw fit for us just to quit it so we give the truck back to the county.

BILL EDWARDS: At one time I seem to remember that you could sign up to get your business protected and that you had to pay a fee to the fire department. Do you remember that?

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah. That was in the county. A taxpayer...

BILL EDWARDS: You mean out of the city limits?

ROBERT BOYD: Right. In other words, a taxpayer in the city of New Bern got fire protection but if anybody wanted fire protection outside of the city limits they had to pay a fee. A house I think was like twenty-five dollars a year. Then the business, it depended on what size the business was for them to get the fire protection. We actually signed contracts with these people.

BILL EDWARDS: Yeah, I remember that.

ROBERT BOYD: But it was a good thing because after the city quit going in the county only by contract, then the people in the county got smart and started forming fire departments. And today we've got fifteen fire departments in the county.

BILL EDWARDS: One of the first jobs I did when I became a civil defense director was to help these people get equipment. A lot of World War II surplus equipment was coming out then. That's what they started with.

ROBERT BOYD: That's right.

BILL EDWARDS: When did they start naming fire trucks after mayors? Was that during your tenure?

ROBERT BOYD: That was before my day but it's a political move.  
(Laughter)

BILL EDWARDS: Oh, I'm sure of that. No question about that. I understand Mr. Morgan has two named after him now. I saw that in the paper recently.

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah. Two of the most expensive ones. (Laughter)

BILL EDWARDS: That brings up another question here. You may want to duck it. Bob, did they ever have, either or the Button or Atlantic Companies ever have black members?

ROBERT BOYD: No, un-uh.

BILL EDWARDS: Why didn't they?

ROBERT BOYD: They've never had any blacks to apply as far as I can remember.

BILL EDWARDS: Never have applied for membership?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-uh.

BILL EDWARDS: Well there are some in the county aren't there?

ROBERT BOYD: Oh, yeah. There's black firemen in the county.

BILL EDWARDS: And paid firemen too.

ROBERT BOYD: And we have paid firemen with the New Bern Fire Department but I don't know whether it was just the blacks around the New Bern area are just not interested or not. But now they've got them in James City. They've got them I mean in Number 7 township and Harlow and just about all the other fire departments they've got blacks. And I really don't know why we don't have any black volunteers in the city of New Bern. (Laughter)

BILL EDWARDS: Maybe as you say they're just not interested.

ROBERT BOYD: That's right.

BILL EDWARDS: Bob, is there a formal training program that these volunteers go through?

ROBERT BOYD: Yes, there are. They have two training sessions per month. A volunteer fireman today has to have as much as thirty-six hours of training a year to stay in good standing with the state association. That's for all of his benefits, you know, through the state. New Bern and most other departments throughout the state are complying with the Firefighter 1, Firefighter 2 and Firefighter 3.

Now Firefighter 1 you have to complete certain things and then you take a test on it and then you're a qualified Firefighter 1. Then it's an advanced course which is Firefighter 2. And then you've got your last course which is Firefighter 3. It's more advanced. And you can actually go on in after you leave that into Hazmat. The city of New Bern at this time does not have a Hazmat team. The closest Hazmat team I think is Cherry Point.

BILL EDWARDS: What is Hazmat?

ROBERT BOYD: In other words, that's when you have a spill with contamination they come in and they've got all the equipment you know to check and see what you have. You had a little bit of that when you were in civil defense.

BILL EDWARDS: Yeah. Particularly radioactivity.

ROBERT BOYD: Right. But now they are into trying to fix the fire suits, your protective clothing, where it's not as much contaminated as it used to be. They've quit using leather and gone to a vinyl because leather you know will contaminate where your vinyl



you can wash off.

BILL EDWARDS: Some things can pass through leather. It's porous.

ROBERT BOYD: The fire we had at Hatteras Yacht, the city of New Bern had to call in Cherry Point Hazmat team and the boys had to take a bath. They had to pull their clothes off. They had to get their clothes cleaned. It's getting to be something this day in time to fight a fire. It's a dangerous job.

BILL EDWARDS: Well I went to a fire school in Greensboro. I don't remember exactly when. It was when I was civil defense director. And they talked about having businesses register with the fire department describing any chemicals, any contaminate chemicals they had and any dangerous chemicals that they had that you might have to fight. Does New Bern have anything like that?

ROBERT BOYD: What we do on that, well what the city used to do and are continuing doing they do what they call fire inspections of the buildings. When they find a contaminated, you know things that will contaminate, they ear mark this and a record is kept at the main fire station.

BILL EDWARDS: Something that would give off a dangerous gas for example?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-huh. One of the dangerous things we've got in New Bern right now is that train coming through here with all that stuff on it. (Laughter) Right down through the heart of town.

BILL EDWARDS: Yeah, you're right.

ROBERT BOYD: But, thank the good Lord, DOT has started making

them plaque them and a fire department today can take a pair of binoculars and look at that plaque and tell you what's on that car and know what to do with it.

BILL EDWARDS: Well trucks, I attended a meeting of the - I'm not sure where this was - but anyway, they talked about trucks handling ammunition and they said they had had ammunition scattered all over the truck from bumping up and down. But they had never had, I believe they said they had never had a serious explosion.

ROBERT BOYD: Well your trucks today have got to be plaquered also just like rail cars.

BILL EDWARDS: That's been in effect quite a long time, hasn't it?

ROBERT BOYD: And they're pretty strict on that. And the truck driver even has to have his bill of lading in reach of him while he's driving the truck down the road.

BILL EDWARDS: So if he has a fire he can tell you right quick what he's carrying?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-huh.

BILL EDWARDS: Have you ever been involved in a fuel truck fire?

ROBERT BOYD: I've been involved in a fuel truck wreck. It never ignited. We covered it with foam and we were lucky we got it back up like it was supposed to be and never got a spark.

BILL EDWARDS: Never did catch fire?

ROBERT BOYD: Never did catch fire.

BILL EDWARDS: Well I notice on television every time they have

an automobile accident and the thing explodes now that's done for effect, isn't it? Because automobiles don't explode generally do they?

ROBERT BOYD: Not generally, no. You've got to hit the gas tank just right.

BILL EDWARDS: Bob, I'm not sure we covered this earlier but tell me a little something about what rewards, monetary rewards that the fire department or fire members get from the city. You mentioned something a little before we started recording so let's get that on tape.

ROBERT BOYD: The city gives, and I don't know how much money today, but they used to give a certain allotment of money to the volunteers to operate on. I mean this was the volunteer's money. They could have a cookout and spend the money or they could at the end of the year if each one of the volunteers would catch as much as fifty percent of the alarms, then they could divide this money and take a vacation. That was their reward for fighting fire during the year. But they had to catch at least fifty percent of the alarms before they would be eligible for this. In the olden days the Atlantic Company would take their money and the men would go to Cuba and spend a week.

Then when they got back the Button men would take their money and go up north, New York and around and spend a week and come back. But today it is a little bit different and I like it much better. The volunteers that are able now, that are eligible, they take the money and them and their family go on a vacation. Now they are allotted so many miles they've got to go on this vacation. In other words,

they just can't take the money and stay home. They've got to take a trip. When they come back they have to have receipts to prove that they've taken this trip. So it's not just a handout.

BILL EDWARDS: Right. That's never been, nobody's ever taken advantage of that that you know of have they?

ROBERT BOYD: No, un-uh.

BILL EDWARDS: I've never heard anything about that.

ROBERT BOYD: I know of a lot of the guys that would get forty-eight and forty-nine percent and they wouldn't give. (Laughter) If you didn't get at least that fifty percent you were just left out.

BILL EDWARDS: Bob, I've heard of hose towers and I've seen the hose tower down at the central fire station. Tell me what a hose tower is and what it's for.

ROBERT BOYD: Those towers to put the hose on a rack. In other words, it's got a cable up to the top of it and it comes down and it has a rack where you hook your fire hose into the rack and raise it up in the tower and it's for drying purposes. Back, today you really don't have to, the new type hose you really don't have to dry like you did the old cotton hose. But fire hose had a rubber lining in it with a cotton outer shell and if you didn't get that cotton outer shell dry and if you packed it in your truck it would mildew and rot.

So that was the purpose of the tower is putting it up there and letting it air dry and once it dried why, they would roll it up and put it in the racks and when they had to reload the fire trucks they would put the dry hose on there.

BILL EDWARDS: How long would it normally stay in the drying tower?  
It would depend on the weather.

ROBERT BOYD: It would depend on the weather. But if you had pretty weather like we've had today, sun shining and warm, about three or four days and it would be dry enough to bring down.

BILL EDWARDS: I heard a tale. One of the firemen was telling me a tale about his being up a ladder and shooting a hose stream into the fire and the force of the water pushed that ladder back so that, I'm not sure whether he fell or whether it just pushed him back and he turned the hose somewhere else and stopped it. Have you heard anything about that?

ROBERT BOYD: No but it can happen if the fireman did not have his ladder properly angled. If he had his ladder too straight up and if he had the water nozzle on straight stream and hit a blunt object, yes it would do it. It would do it.

BILL EDWARDS: Most of those nozzles had a cutoff that you could use right at the nozzle.

ROBERT BOYD: You've got a cutoff on it. The nozzles today unless you get a regular straight stream nozzle have got a big rubber bushing at the tip of the nozzle where you can turn it for straight stream, fog, you know, a forty-five degree you know or close it on up to a straight stream.

BILL EDWARDS: So you can vary the stream however you want to?

ROBERT BOYD: Right. But when it's on a straight stream it's got right much force on it.

BILL EDWARDS: Tell me a little bit about when would you use a solid stream as compared to a fog?

ROBERT BOYD: The only time you would use a solid stream is for reach.

BILL EDWARDS: Where you could shoot it over into the building?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-huh. That's the old fashioned way. Today you go in the building and get to the base of the fire and put it out and come out. Way back yonder they used to accuse the firemen of when they saw the furniture floating out the front door, you know, they had the fire out. (Laughter) They don't use that method no more.

BILL EDWARDS: That brings up another question. I've heard firemen accused of knocking down doors when the door was unlocked or the window was open.

ROBERT BOYD: I'm sure that's happened. I've sure they've broke out a few windows when all they had to do is raise them.

BILL EDWARDS: That was partly due to excitement wasn't it?

ROBERT BOYD: Very true. Very true.

BILL EDWARDS: It wasn't a feeling that you had to destroy something because you wouldn't be a fireman if you didn't want to save property.

ROBERT BOYD: That's right. But through the excitement and everything, why you do a lot of things that you look back at and say hey. But that was back in the earlier days of fire fighting and the firemen were not trained like they are today. You don't get that today. Most of the time when you see a fire department, fire engine company

come up to a building the first thing they do the officer jumps off the truck and he sizes up the fire and he tells his men what he wants to do.

BILL EDWARDS: Where to attack and so forth?

ROBERT BOYD: That's right. It's more organized now and it's through training. You just can't get enough training.

BILL EDWARDS: What about two-way radios? Have they been really valuable?

ROBERT BOYD: Oh, Lord yes they have. Used to you had to use sign language and a lot of times you just couldn't get them to understand your sign language you know. (Laughter) I remember when the city of New Bern first bought their ladder truck, the one they've got now. Not the old ladder truck with the hand ladder, I'm talking about one with the hydraulic. That used to be my pet truck. I used to enjoy working the ladder truck. And Preston Carroway, him and I had the best coordinated hand signals because we didn't have radios. But I could keep an eye on Preston and I knew about what he wanted me to do by his hand signal. But if I'd get somebody that I wasn't used to I didn't know how to carry on or what to do with them. But yes, the two-way radio has, I don't know how we got along without it. I really don't.

BILL EDWARDS: Isn't there a safety belt at the top of that ladder, hydraulic ladder truck?

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah.

BILL EDWARDS: So that would prevent pushing yourself off the

thing or something.

ROBERT BOYD: Off the ladder, right. The belt goes around you and you hook into one of the rungs of the truck, the ladder and actually if you passed out it would hold you up there.

BILL EDWARDS: What about severe electrical fires? Have you had much experience with those? I know you wouldn't like to but have you run across any serious electrical fires?

ROBERT BOYD: No. We've had some but from the word go we were always taught never to put a straight stream on an electrical fire trying to put it out. You want to use fog. We've had quite a few transformers and stuff like that but as far as a big electrical fire we've been lucky on that.

BILL EDWARDS: Are the New Bern fire trucks, any of them equipped for foam?

ROBERT BOYD: Oh yeah. Now they do not have a so-called foam truck.

BILL EDWARDS: Like if an airplane crashes?

ROBERT BOYD: Right.

BILL EDWARDS: They don't have that.

ROBERT BOYD: They have foam adapters that they hook onto the truck with cans of foam where it siffles the foam out through the inductors and goes on out your nozzle which is, it takes a few seconds longer to hook this up than it would a regular foam truck. But in my opinion, I like the way New Bern's doing it better than I would a foam truck because foam will corrode and if you don't use it real



often then when you really need to use it a lot of times it's corroded and it don't work.

BILL EDWARDS: They're not cheap either are they?

ROBERT BOYD: They're not cheap either.

BILL EDWARDS: So you're investing quite a bit of money in a piece that you might not use often.

ROBERT BOYD: Right. And with the equipment they've got now they can produce foam and with really a cheaper method. It doesn't cost no where near it would if we had a foam truck. We tried years ago putting like a twenty-five gallon hopper on a truck with the stuff hooked into it. It never did really work satisfactorily.

BILL EDWARDS: You'd draw that out into the water?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-huh.

BILL EDWARDS: Well what is the indication for using foam? When would you use foam over just water?

ROBERT BOYD: Well, like if you had a flammable liquid fire you would use foam to cover it, smother it out.

BILL EDWARDS: So if you had a tanker truck with gasoline on it that spilled, you would use it then?

ROBERT BOYD: You would use foam.

BILL EDWARDS: You'd probably use it whether it caught fire or not wouldn't you?

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah. For safety precautions, yeah. You'd cover it with foam, that way you've got your option cut off from it you know and you don't stand as likely to create a spark.

BILL EDWARDS: Now I have heard, I'm not sure if I saw it on television or what, but I've heard that you could fill the ground floor of a building with foam and somebody could walk down through it.

ROBERT BOYD: Okay, that's a different type foam.

BILL EDWARDS: I see.

ROBERT BOYD: This is what they call a, really I call it soap suds.

BILL EDWARDS: So that's a light foam.

ROBERT BOYD: It is. It's a light foam and it is on the basis of soap suds. But you can actually pump a, just like this house, you can put that sheet at the front door and fill this house full in five minutes of that foam and you can walk through it and it will actually put the fire out.

BILL EDWARDS: Well, doesn't foam have air in it? It looks like that would supply oxygen.

ROBERT BOYD: It will smother a fire out. It will smother it out.

BILL EDWARDS: Soap suds certainly have air in them.

ROBERT BOYD: In the bubbles, that's right. But when we first started using this soap suds foam I saw a film where a shoe store was on fire and they filled that store full of this type foam and it put it out.

BILL EDWARDS: No kidding?

ROBERT BOYD: They put it out.

BILL EDWARDS: That would save a lot of damage too wouldn't it?

ROBERT BOYD: Oh yeah because I mean you've got no clean-up really.

BILL EDWARDS: You don't have any water damage.

ROBERT BOYD: Un-uh. Today fire fighters actually, they get to the base of the fire, they use less water than we used to in the olden days and they do a much better job with less damage.

BILL EDWARDS: You don't wait for the water to run out the front door to know you've got the fire under control now do you?

ROBERT BOYD: That's right. And you just don't open the nozzle and start shooting. You want to find the base of the fire before you do that.

BILL EDWARDS: What are some of the changes in the equipment that you remember since you first started? You mentioned something about the turnout gear. You didn't have face masks to start with did you?

ROBERT BOYD: No. You had the old metal helmets which if you had got in an electrical fire at that time and that metal helmet hit it well, that was just a good ground. We had what we call cotton duck turnout gear which would burn. Today we use PBI which will not burn.

The insulation in your turnout gear is completely different than it was before because it's got the vapor barriers in it where it's not so hot and it's not as heavy as it was way back then. Talking about our helmets, today we have helmets that don't have any metal in them.

They are OSHA and NFPA approved and they run a test on them regularly. They are changing all that stuff right regular. You have to wear a face shield now which back then what we did was took the helmet around backwards, you know, to keep it off your face. (Laughter) Air packs,

breathing equipment they have really updated them. When I first started with the fire department we used the canister type and then we graduated and went to the bottled air.

BILL EDWARDS: The canister type now, all that did was filter the...

ROBERT BOYD: That's all it did.

BILL EDWARDS: Filter out the smoke. Like a gas mask.

ROBERT BOYD: Very true but back then a fireman wanted to show how much man he was and who could eat the most smoke you know. But I mean you didn't have all the chemicals that you have today, you know the plastics and all that stuff. But back then they didn't even want to use a mask. They'd rather jump right down on the floor and follow a crack all the way to the door you know if they got too much smoke. Today why it's just a completely different ballgame.

BILL EDWARDS: Now you carry the air on your back don't you?

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah you have bottled air and it's pressurized into the mask so in case you were to have a leak in your mask, you've got so many pounds of pressure in there that would keep you from sucking in bad air.

BILL EDWARDS: Any leak would blow out instead of you sucking you in.

ROBERT BOYD: Instead of you sucking it in, un-huh.

BILL EDWARDS: What about axes or hose? You told me about two or three changes. Or nozzles, they're adjustable now.

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah, the nozzles, when I first went with the fire

department we had what we called Navy nozzles which give you a fog, very poor fog and a little of the straight stream. Or either you had what we called a stack tip nozzle which was a straight stream nozzle.

Today you see very few of the straight stream nozzles. The only time you see them is mostly on your master streams. They used inch and a half hose, inch and three quarter hose versus a two and a half inch hose that we used to use. When I first went with the fire department when you laid hose it was two and a half inch hose.

BILL EDWARDS: Will that inch and a half hose carry as much water? It won't will it?

ROBERT BOYD: No, it won't. It won't carry as much water but an inch and a three quarter hose will carry more than an inch and a half and almost as much as two and a half. But you can get, an inch and three quarter hose, one man can handle it.

BILL EDWARDS: I guess that's the difference.

ROBERT BOYD: And that's the difference right there. And you can deliver a hundred and twenty five to a hundred and fifty gallons of water per minute through that inch and three quarter inch hose. A fire's got to be right...

BILL EDWARDS: Were they still using the old steam fire whistles when you went with the fire department when it used to be out there on First Street?

ROBERT BOYD: Air whistle.

BILL EDWARDS: Was it air?

ROBERT BOYD: Air whistle, un-huh.

BILL EDWARDS: I remember that thing. It would get you out of bed if the wind was blowing right. And they'd blow codes, wouldn't they?

ROBERT BOYD: Right. In other words, your box numbers. You had a one hundred zone, two hundred zone, three hundred zone and a four hundred zone. And the first number it would blow it would tell you what zone it was in. Then like 421, that was out in the Ghent section and 327 was over in the Duffie Field section and all your 100 zone was downtown. The reason for the 100 zone being downtown was it didn't take as many time for that whistle to blow, one the zone you know than with the other ones and the response would be a little bit quicker.

BILL EDWARDS: I've heard that the first, what is it, the first three minutes is the most important in fighting a fire?

ROBERT BOYD: First five minutes.

BILL EDWARDS: And can the fire trucks in New Bern get to most of the city within five minutes from where they are now?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-huh.

BILL EDWARDS: Is that one of the criteria of locating a fire station, a sub-station maybe?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-huh. And one of the reasons the city of New Bern has got so many fire stations is on account of the railroad tracks.

BILL EDWARDS: The town is cut in half when the train is coming through.

ROBERT BOYD: Un-huh.

BILL EDWARDS: I remember when I worked for the railroad I worked

for the A&E Railroad and there was a fire in James City, if I remember correctly, and we pulled a tank car down to the corner of Broad and Hancock and filled it full of water and hauled it across to James City.

I don't remember what was on fire but we carried it over there and they filled their tanks from that tank car. Do you remember that?

ROBERT BOYD: No, sure don't. But it would work.

BILL EDWARDS: That was about somewhere in the 1950's, about the time you started probably.

ROBERT BOYD: Probably was.

BILL EDWARDS: I remember we filled it there, there was a Gulf station. I think Dopey Darnell was running it at the time at the corner of Broad and Hancock. Stopped the train there, filled the tank and then carried it on to James City. That might have been when Virginia Carolina Chemical Company burned.

ROBERT BOYD: Probably was.

BILL EDWARDS: That was just across the bridge. Okay, tell me a little something about the fires you've fought when the weather was freezing. Did that give you any problems?

ROBERT BOYD: Very much so. I have actually been at fires when they would put the water on the building and icicles would form before the water would ever hit the ground.

BILL EDWARDS: That was chilly, wasn't it?

ROBERT BOYD: That was chilly. I was on Hancock Street one night and this house was on fire. The hoses actually froze in the street. We had the fire out and we were doing our mop up. When we started

to let the water out of the hose it was froze. We couldn't roll the hose up. We had to pile the hose up on the pick-up truck, couldn't roll it, and carry it back and put it inside the fire station and let it thaw out before we could hang it up in the tower.

BILL EDWARDS: Actually that was a cotton cover that had frozen then, wasn't it?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-huh.

BILL EDWARDS: Rather than the water in the hose.

ROBERT BOYD: But I have been out in the county when we were doing county fires and see, the only water we had was the water we had on the truck and that was five hundred gallons. And we only used a one inch booster line to put the fire out out in the county back then.

I've seen it when it was so cold we were scared to lay the nozzle down on the ground to check around to see if we had all the fire out afraid it was going to freeze. So what we would do is stick the nozzle back into the tank, the top of the tank, and just keep water running all the time to keep it from freezing.

BILL EDWARDS: Did you ever have your hands freeze to a nozzle?

ROBERT BOYD: Never have them to freeze to a nozzle but I've had them so cold until I couldn't bend them.

BILL EDWARDS: You couldn't feel them either.

ROBERT BOYD: Right. I think it used to get colder than it does now.

BILL EDWARDS: I think it did too. You don't remember when the river froze over, do you? When that Model-T went across the river?



ROBERT BOYD: No. That was in 1933 and that was the year I was born.

BILL EDWARDS: You wouldn't remember that hardly.

ROBERT BOYD: No. My daddy used to tell me about it. I can't call that man's name. I can see him just as I can...

BILL EDWARDS: Robert Tooker worked for the sheriff's department, didn't he? Wasn't he a great big man?

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah but Robert Tooker first worked with the fire department. And then he got sick and the city started to retire him but he didn't want to retire so he went to work, stayed with the city but he went out to the garage and he kept books and pumped gas out at the garage. All he did was set there and mash a button. I don't know whether in his later years he worked for the sheriff's department or not.

BILL EDWARDS: Seems to me I remember his being at the courthouse in some role. Now what it was, he may have been a dispatcher or something like that for the sheriff's department.

ROBERT BOYD: Yeah, he could have been that.

BILL EDWARDS: Let's see, are the paid firemen regular city employees? They are aren't they?

ROBERT BOYD: Right.

BILL EDWARDS: Permanent employees?

ROBERT BOYD: Right.

BILL EDWARDS: Provided they do what they're supposed to do of course. Do they go through the same hiring procedures as policemen?

In other words, do they go through, what do they call it, the civil service board?

ROBERT BOYD: Un-uh.

BILL EDWARDS: They don't?

ROBERT BOYD: They go through city personnel.

BILL EDWARDS: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW