

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

TIM CONNER

INTERVIEW 1701.3

This is John Phaup representing the Memories of New Bern Committee.

My number is 1700. I am interviewing Tim Conner today for the third time. Mr. Conner is curator and guide of the New Bern Firemen's Museum.

This interview number is 1701.3. The date is Friday, January 15, 1993. We are at the museum which is located on Hancock Street in downtown New Bern. Tim and I are going to be talking about the two volunteer companies today that exist in New Bern. New Bern is rather unique in having volunteers form a majority of their firefighters.

Things have changed over the years. Originally everyone in the fire department essentially was a volunteer, today there are some paid drivers, some paid officers. The rank and file are still volunteers.

JOHN PHAUP: Tim, tell me, do you know of another city in North Carolina, can you think of another city where they still use the volunteer system?

MR. CONNER: There's a few other cities the size that we are but not many.

JP: You can't think of one?

MR. CONNER: Not right off hand, no.

JP: I always think of firemen as volunteer firemen. I know several that work of course full time jobs to earn their living and they are paged by electronic means now a days, beeper systems, that sort of thing. Is it hard to muster enough firemen on a given fire to fight a fire?

MR. CONNER: No, we don't ever have that problem. Sometimes we might run a little short in the daytime hours, but after five o'clock

in the evening we don't ever have that problem.

JP: So, nighttime fire is a little bit easier to fight as far as the manpower?

MR. CONNER: Well, there's more of us there at night.

JP: Do you have a person who checks in volunteers that come to a fire?

MR. CONNER: At the scene of the fire? Oh yes. We have records kept of all officers there.

JP: If a person makes all the fires in a given year, are there any honors bestowed at the end of the year?

MR. CONNER: That makes all the fires?

JP: Or the most fires.

MR. CONNER: We have an annual reward system which is primarily we get a free vacation every year. We have to attend a certain percentage of our alarm and company meetings to be eligible for that trip.

JP: Where do you go?

MR. CONNER: Well, we all go where we please now. Used to we had to go at the same time at the same place in a group, but we changed that many years ago and we all go where we please now. We all get the same amount of money apiece.

JP: That's a nice trip. Does it have to spent on a trip?

MR. CONNER: Technically, yeah. That's the primary purpose of it. But we don't have many teeth in there as to how we can spend it now.

JP: The two surviving companies are called the Atlantic and the Button Company. I know they date back to the nineteenth century. The full name of the Button Company is the New Bern Steam Fire Engine Company Number One and it was organized I understand by Union soldiers after the Civil War, is that correct?

MR. CONNER: That's correct.

JP: At that time, they left a hand pumper which required not only men to pull it to the fire but men to actually pump it to get any water pressure. Are you familiar with that?

MR. CONNER: Well, it was used during the War Between the States.

JP: And that was brought down here from the North after the occupation of New Bern.

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: It's very interesting. The common name for this steam fire engine company is the Button Company. Tell me the origins of that name.

MR. CONNER: Button was named for the steam fire engine because it was made by the Button Engine Company in Waterford, New York. So we acquired the nickname of Button from the steamer in 1884 and we've had the nickname of Button ever since.

JP: Did the Atlantic Company have their own steamer?

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: But it wasn't Atlantic steamer. Was it also a Button?

MR. CONNER: No, no. It was made by the Silby Company.

JP: I know that the two companies were housed in separate quarters

and they were brought together right after the turn of the twentieth century. 1920's, is that right, '28, something like that, in that period?

MR. CONNER: 1928.

JP: I'm getting to be a pretty good expert here in the history of the fire department. Where were the companies housed over the course of their lives when they were in separate quarters?

MR. CONNER: In earlier years, way back, there was a station on Broad Street near the present courthouse. Then later on the Button station was on Craven Street at the old city hall building. The Atlantic station was on Broad Street catty-cornered across from where our main fire station is located now.

JP: Was there a keen rivalry between the two companies?

MR. CONNER: Well, years ago there used to be quite a bit of rivalry, even at the scene of a fire. Way back there was almost fighting and hiding to see who got there first and who would get water on a fire first. But that was way back in the steam engine days. Of course we don't have that now. No more competition now.

JP: Tell me how late the steamers were used in New Bern. I know the pieces in the museum here now, I'm looking at two of them, they're almost side by side, one is polished brass and the other is, is that a stainless material?

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: How late were they used in fighting fires in New Bern?

MR. CONNER: The Button steamer was used until 1912. The Atlantic

steamer, the last time it was used was 1915.

JP: Why was one put out of service earlier than the other?

MR. CONNER: It just wasn't used anymore after 1912. It needed a little work done so just the one steamer was used. Then of course we got our first motor truck in 1914.

JP: I know growing up as a boy, I remember I grew up in a town about the size of New Bern and I wanted to be a firemen. I don't know if every boy has this dream. Firemen used to come, they had fire prevention days at schools, and they would do exciting things like start fires and put them out. I'm still thrilled to the memory of these things. It was quite a day, and part of the thrill was we got out of class for a while. But I always admired the uniform of the firemen, and the fact that they were performing a public service. Was this something that led you to join the fire department, the fact that you would be performing a public service?

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: Tell me about your feelings as a fireman. Do you enjoy putting on your uniform and dressing for parades?

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: Do you feel a civic pride?

MR. CONNER: Yes. Something gets in our blood and it's always there.

JP: I don't know if the practice is still continuing, I'm sure people could do it if they wanted to, but a person, a victim of fire, would place a thank you notice in the newspaper thanking the firemen

for saving their house or business or building. Were you ever on a fire where you were publicly thanked like this?

MR. CONNER: Oh yes. You mean a card of thank you in the paper you mean?

JP: Yes.

MR. CONNER: Oh yes. That's happened many times through the years, yes.

JP: Tell me about these competitions they had between the volunteer companies. Not only in New Bern but across the state and I guess throughout the world, they used to have competitions for running a line of hose and connecting it to a fire hydrant and getting water through the hose. Tell me about the different types of competitions that used to exist between the companies.

MR. CONNER: One was a quick steaming contest with the steam engines. That was getting up steam from a completely cold boiler. The other was the hydrant contest, laying so many feet of hose to the hydrant, jumping off the back of the wagon and having water out of the nozzle in so many seconds. That's, of course, running a hundred yards. That was the hose wagon contest.

JP: And the other was a quick steam contest?

MR. CONNER: Steam engine contest, yeah.

JP: Did the firemen ever take extra pains to make sure that they got their fire as hot as they wanted to during one of these contest?

MR. CONNER: Oh yes. We hold two world records here. My company, the Button Company, we hold the world record with the Button hose wagon

and one with the Button steam engine. Twenty-six and two-fifths seconds is the time for the Button hose wagon; one minute and forty-six seconds is our world record time for the Button steam engine. That was getting up steam with the steamer standing completely still, getting up steam from a completely cold boiler and having the water out the nozzle in that length of time.

JP: Does that mean you had that whole boiler full of water and boiling in that length of time?

MR. CONNER: That was boiling, yes.

JP: And you're talking about 200 gallons of water?

MR. CONNER: Thereabouts, yes sir.

JP: And the time of the world's record is how fast?

MR. CONNER: One minute and forty-six seconds.

JP: So you're taking 200 gallons of cold water and boiling it in one minute and forty-six seconds. What kind of fuel did you use to generate that kind of fire?

MR. CONNER: Well, ordinarily coal was used, but in this particular occasion it was doctored up a little bit.

JP: Was this in keeping with the rules of the competition?

MR. CONNER: No, it was not in keeping the rules of competition, but it was still doctored up a little. (laughter)

JP: If you go on tape saying that the fuel was doctored up, they're not gonna take the prize away are they?

MR. CONNER: Can't take it away now, no. (laughter)

JP: I know that stock cars will sometimes add a little special



fuel. Especially drag racers, will add some little alcohol or something to the gasoline to make it go faster. So you're talking about something of the same nature being done to the boilers.

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: Was there ever any possibility of heating the water too fast that you would damage the boiler and possibly explode it?

MR. CONNER: Well, yeah. The Button steamer left the ground about a foot there was so much steam pressure on it when we got the world's record.

JP: Did the judges suspect that something might be going on?

MR. CONNER: Well, if so, they could never prove it. They could never detect it.

JP: Did the other companies claim foul, that the rules weren't being followed?

MR. CONNER: I think way back in their mind they believed it, but like I say, no, it could not be proven. So we got the title, world's record.

JP: The fire chief, there's one chief, there's not two chiefs for both companies, is that right?

MR. CONNER: That's right. We have one chief and one assistant chief.

JP: Tell me, how is the chief selected?

MR. CONNER: He is elected by we firemen. We elect who we want and then he is approved and appointed by the city Board of Aldermen. The same applies to assistant chief.

JP: Does he have to be a member of the company or can he be an outsider?

MR. CONNER: He has to be a member of our company.

JP: Dale Millns, Dr. Millns, tells me that when he was mayor he had the idea of hiring a professional chief to serve over the two volunteer companies. He said he very politely was invited to a meeting of the volunteer fire department and they criticized the idea. Tell me, were you at that meeting?

MR. CONNER: Yes, I was there.

JP: Where was it held?

MR. CONNER: In our Button club room upstairs over our main fire station on Broad Street.

JP: You had a spokesman. Who was your spokesman?

MR. CONNER: Libby Ward. He was an attorney and belonged to the Atlantic Company. He was our spokesman.

JP: Tell me what your objections were to having a paid fire chief.

MR. CONNER: Well, a full time paid chief doesn't work very well most of the time, you see, with we volunteer firemen. Then, too, a full time permanent chief, see, we firemen wouldn't have a chance to ever become chief if we had one chief all the time. So for those reasons we were definitely against it and we let it be known we were against it and we won.

JP: And it hasn't been brought up since 1961?

MR. CONNER: No sir.

JP: You would say it's a dead issue.

MR. CONNER: I hope it is. So far it is, yes. So far.

JP: The chief, he's selected between the members of the two companies. Is it rotated on kind of a semi-official basis between the two companies; one chief coming from the Atlantic Company one year and then the next year coming from the Button Company?

MR. CONNER: That's the we operate, yes.

JP: The current chief, what is his name?

MR. CONNER: Larry Myers.

JP: I know that reading the history that a gentleman by the name of Jack Honrine wrote a history for the fire department when they dedicated the museum. It's a fascinating reading. He mentions Jimmy Moore who was a fire chief back in the nineteenth century, and his daughter became Mrs. Maude Moore Latham who initiated the restoration of Tryon Palace. Was he alive when you were growing up or when you became a fireman?

MR. CONNER: No, he passed on.

JP: He was fire chief in which year?

MR. CONNER: About 1883.

JP: Tim, tell me how a person if he wanted to join one of the volunteer companies, would he specify the company he wanted to join or does he have to be nominated to be a member or what? How does one go about becoming a member?

MR. CONNER: They fill out the application, then we have an investigating committee, then the next month after anybody applies, we vote on them. If the investigating committee reports are favorable,

then we vote on them.

JP: Do most of your members come from present membership friends of firemen or relatives of firemen?

MR. CONNER: Yes, friends and relatives.

JP: Would you say the volunteer companies are kind of a fraternal organization?

MR. CONNER: To a certain extent, yes. But we're in the fire fighting business.

JP: Do you have any standard procedures for training newcomers to the department?

MR. CONNER: We have fire drills on regular basis and everybody we take in we encourage them to attend our drills.

JP: Tell me about a drill. What do you do at a drill?

MR. CONNER: Different things. We pick different subjects for different drills; breathing equipment, hose laying, and fire science, different subjects pertaining to fire fighting of course.

JP: Firemen have certain equipment that they need to go to a fire. Do the volunteers keep it with them in their trucks, or at home, or do they keep it at the station?

MR. CONNER: At home.

JP: Is each fireman issued a helmet and coat and boots?

MR. CONNER: Boots, pants, coat, and helmet.

JP: Is that paid by city taxes?

MR. CONNER: The city pays for them.

JP: The city supplies the equipment.

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: Do you have any black firemen in the two companies?

MR. CONNER: Yes, we do. Paid men, yes.

JP: You have some paid, but there are no volunteer black firemen?

MR. CONNER: No, not at the present time.

JP: You had other companies in the past. I remember you told me that you had one out in Riverside. I know the black community had their own volunteer companies in the past. It was a Mechanics Company - 4th Ward Riverside, and the Holding Company, and there was an independent colored fire company, and the Axe Rough and Ready Fire Company. Tell me about one of these other companies. The Riverside Company, where was their station and when were they fighting fires?

MR. CONNER: It was in the early 1900's. They had a station near the corner of George and Dunn Streets, the Riverside Company.

JP: Dunn, I can't place that. Where is that?

MR. CONNER: You know where S. B. Parker is located?

JP: Yeah. Is that Dunn that runs down by the tracks there?

MR. CONNER: Yeah, that's Dunn. It runs into National Avenue and George Street. It runs into George Street rather.

JP: Was it on the same lot that S. B. Parker is now?

MR. CONNER: No. It's kind of over this way across from them.

JP: Diagonally across?

MR. CONNER: Yes. But that was in the early 1900's now. That's where the Riverside station was located.

JP: When you had more than two companies, did all the companies

respond to the same fires?

MR. CONNER: Pretty much so, yes.

JP: In our first two interviews we talked about the signal devices for firemen. There was a bell system and then there was a steam whistle which was blown publicly and could be heard all over town given the right weather conditions and everything. Dr. Patterson, chairman of the Memories Committee, remembers a signalling of firemen in the movie theaters during the movies where they couldn't hear the whistles and the bells outside. Were you ever brought to a fire by flashing exit lights in a movie house?

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: Tell me how that worked.

MR. CONNER: The Masonic Theater had a red light. It would flash red when the alarm would go in. It was hooked into our fire alarm system and that red light would flash the box number, the number of the fire box. Like if it was box 15, the light would flash one, pause, then five, and it was located in the theater where we could all see it. So then, of course, that told us that we had an alarm from box 15.

JP: Well, I suppose one of the first duties of a new volunteer was to learn the location of the boxes, is that right?

MR. CONNER: Right, yes.

JP: He had it written down where he could look it up.

MR. CONNER: Yeah. We used to have fire cards. I have an old one here in our museum.

JP: That would tell you which box?

MR. CONNER: Right. All the fire alarm boxes used to be in the phone books up until not too many years ago.

JP: And these gradually kind of went by, fell into disuse I guess, with the number of telephones that came into operation.

MR. CONNER: Yeah. That stopped here, well, several years ago now.

JP: I remember when they disconnected all the boxes. They were a source of pranks.

MR. CONNER: Yeah, but I mean not put them in the phone book anymore. But we still refer to boxes right on though, even though we didn't have boxes. On our beepers, we'd say box so and so at such and such a street corner. Even though we didn't have them, we still referred to them.

JP: That was more geographical to locate the fire so you'd know the approximate location?

MR. CONNER: Right. We don't do that much anymore, refer to boxes. We want to start back on it pretty soon though, learn the box number, even though we still don't have boxes anymore of course.

JP: New Bern has how many paid employees in the fire department?

MR. CONNER: We have about thirty-two all together. That includes our truck drivers, our shift captains and shift lieutenants, a station fire chief and a fire inspector.

JP: Are these mostly hired from the ranks of the volunteers?

MR. CONNER: Not necessarily.

JP: You mentioned a problem with following a professional chief. Is there any problem with following a professional captain or lieutenant?

MR. CONNER: Well, they're just captain and lieutenant over the paid men on their shift.

JP: Oh, I see, over the shift. So, essentially, at a given fire, you have a paid cadre and a volunteer cadre, is that correct?

MR. CONNER: Have a what?

JP: You have a paid force, paid professionals, who form part of the group, and then part of the group is the volunteers.

MR. CONNER: You mean at the scene of a fire?

JP: Yes.

MR. CONNER: At the scene of a fire, of course, our chief and assistant chief is there most of the time. Then, we volunteers, we have our captain.

JP: You have a volunteer captain?

MR. CONNER: Yes, two of them. One from each company. Two lieutenants, two first lieutenants, two second lieutenants, and two sergeants.

JP: All volunteers.

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: I was in the Army, so I know a little bit about organization. When it came to actually fighting the fire, who sets out the policy, who gives the orders? Do the volunteer chiefs and their assistant chiefs on down actually do the fire fighting assisted by the



professionals or do the professionals more or less set the strategy of the fire?

MR. CONNER: No. It's just our truck operators at the fire, I mean our paid personnel. The fire fighting is done entirely by we volunteers.

JP: Okay. So they have a specific job to do, the paid drivers.

MR. CONNER: Operate and drive the truck, yes.

JP: I see. Tim, we talked about the Riverside Company, were there any other companies downtown that existed along with the Button and the Atlantic companies?

MR. CONNER: Yes, we had a 4th Ward Company. That was on Broad Street. The station was between Bern Street and Fleet Street on the left hand side going out Broad Street. It was called The 4th Ward Company.

JP: It was on Broad Street between Bern and Fleet which would be out there by, let's see, there's a donut shop there now.

MR. CONNER: It was located across from the old bus station.

JP: The old bus station, in that section in there. How long did that exist?

MR. CONNER: Oh, for several years. It hasn't been in existence since the teens.

JP: 4th Ward Company. About this company that we mentioned here, the Holding Company, do you remember that one?

MR. CONNER: That goes way back. Gosh, that's a way back.

JP: That goes back in the nineteenth century?

MR. CONNER: Oh yes. Before the teens.

JP: How about the Mechanics Company?

MR. CONNER: That's the same. It goes just as far back. Goes way back to probably the 1890's or early 1900's.

JP: Could any group organize a volunteer company and get a charter? Are they chartered by the city?

JP: Yes.

MR. CONNER: Yes. We're also chartered by the state too now.

JP: I was just trying to understand the politics of the situation or the kind of need that would inspire another company when you had two companies downtown. What was, say, behind the 4th Ward Company? Why was that chartered? Why was it started?

MR. CONNER: Well, a group of fellows that live in that vicinity just decided to form a company. The 4th Ward used to go all the way from George Street west to the city limits, the 4th Ward did years ago. So some fellows that way back and lived in the 4th Ward decided to form a fire company and that happened. It stayed in existence for several years. But of course it's been several, many years ago. Like I say, in the early teens now since it's been in existence.

JP: These steamers, engines, that actually pump the water, these were paid by city taxes, they were bought by the city.

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: Did these other companies, were they able to get a steamer?

MR. CONNER: No steamer, no.

JP: Having a steamer was considered...

MR. CONNER: Oh yes. Just a group of fellows, you know, more or less from out of town say real small fires. There were no steamers involved.

JP: How about a hose wagon? Did they have a hose wagon?

MR. CONNER: Yes, a one horse hose wagon.

JP: Did they have a fire station?

MR. CONNER: Well, yes.

JP: 4th Ward?

MR. CONNER: On Broad Street, they did.

JP: That's right, you mentioned that. And they would come to the fires that the Button and the Atlantic companies responded to.

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: They didn't stay in the 4th Ward, they responded to all fires.

MR. CONNER: Right.

JP: Has there been any recent attempts to form another volunteer company?

MR. CONNER: No, none whatsoever.

JP: So things are pretty well established now with lines of authority.

MR. CONNER: Oh yes. And that's the way it's been for years and years and years now.

JP: When did the last volunteer company go out of business, when did it die?

MR. CONNER: The last one of the others you mean?

JP: Of the others yes.

MR. CONNER: I'd say in the early teens.

JP: In the early teens before the first world war.

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: Well, I've enjoyed this a lot Tim. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the volunteer system? Tim, I know you're proud of your service to the New Bern Fire Department. Tell me the name of your company and your age and your length of service to the Button Company.

MR. CONNER: Well, I'm a life member of the New Bern Steam Fire Engine Company Number One, known as the Button Company of the New Bern Fire Department. I've got fifty-two years in the Button Company of the New Bern Fire Department. I'm still a firemen in the Button Company of the New Bern Fire Department and I'm seventy- years old.

JP: And you'll be a fireman for life.

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: We haven't had a serious fire in New Bern since probably the mid-seventies, is that right?

MR. CONNER: That's correct.

JP: Would you say that building codes have been improved or fire inspections? What would you attribute this period to?

MR. CONNER: I think building codes and more fire resistant dwellings, I think that's played a big part in that. And I think people being fire conscious, that's had something to do with it.

JP: So the education of the firemen in the community is paying off.

MR. CONNER: Right.

JP: We were talking about the names of the mayors on fire trucks. Lee Morgan is current mayor. He has his name on a van, is that correct?

MR. CONNER: Yes.

JP: Every time we change mayors, is it possible to get the mayor's name on a fire truck or a fire van?

MR. CONNER: It's possible if the city will buy a new truck, yes.  
(laughter)

JP: So this is an encouragement to the mayor to put the money up to buy the truck. Thank you very much Tim. I've certainly enjoyed interviewing you. I hope we can do it again sometime.

END OF INTERVIEW