

James Wallace

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Interviewer: David Heinlein

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Abstract: James Wallace discusses the details of the organization of Eagle Hook and Ladder Company and the Washington Hose Company, the duties of the Fire Chief, types of equipment, and training.

Interviewer: ... 1977, David Heinlein is interviewing Chief James Wallace of Metuchen Fire Department. Okay, you can come sit here.

J. Wallace: My name is James A. Wallace, Jr. At the present time, here in 1977, I am the Fire Chief in the Borough of Metuchen. The Metuchen Fire Department consists of two fire companies, the Washington Hose Company and the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company. The Washington Hose Company was formed in November 26, 1897 and they were incorporated December 2nd 1898. The Eagle Hook and Ladder Company, the oldest fire company of the Borough of Metuchen, was founded and formed on May 2nd 1882, and they were incorporated on August 8th 1888. These two fire companies were located in different parts of the Borough in those days, and they consisted of businesspeople and just general citizens, as the fire company does today. However, although there's two companies, at that time they were located at two different parts of the Borough, when the fire alarm sounded, they responded and worked together at the scene of fires.

In 1927, the Borough took over the fire companies and up until today, the Borough still does hold all the equipment, they pay for the maintenance of it, and they purchase all new equipment. The basic function of the firemen is that they maintain all the equipment for the Borough, and they operate at the scene of the fire to extinguish it as quick as possible. In 1950, the Borough took the two fire companies from the different parts of town and consolidated them into one building on Middlesex Avenue, where they are still located today. Prior to the movement into one building, the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company was located at 398 Main Street, which is where the Breyers Ice Cream Store and the Hands of Man store are now located. That was one building and they have since renovated to where it is separated to two stores. The Washington Hose Company was located on Middlesex Avenue, right next to the present firehouse and it is now the small antique shop called the Borough Art Center. The two fire companies, although they are located in the same fire house, still hold separate monthly meetings and they still hold their own company drills. However, when the fire alarm sounds, everybody responds as one unit. Members of one company may be riding on the other company's engine or vice versa. The only concern to all of us as firemen is getting to the scene of the fire and getting it out as quick as possible with the least amount of damage. Each company today consists of twenty-four men and that is the maintained roster at all times.

Interviewer: That's very good. Is there any kind of hierarchy within the Fire Department?

J. Wallace: The way it works with the officers in the Fire Department, each company has a Captain and a Lieutenant and then has, of course, its business officers, secretaries and treasurers, etcetera. But when it comes to the higher-most ranking, the Chief and Assistant Chief, the Chief and the Assistant Chief serves for three-year terms. He is elected by the full membership of both companies. When the Chief is from the Washington Hose Company, the Assistant Chief would be from the Eagles and vice versa, when the Chief is from the Eagles, the Assistant Chief would be from the Washington Hose Company and every three years at the end of a term, the Chief alternates from the companies. One three-year term will be from the Eagles, the next will be from the Washingtons and it continues that way on down the line.

Interviewer: Okay. How has training been carried out in the Fire Department?

J. Wallace: We drill at least three times a month – each company – here locally. Each week we try to do something else, so the men get a wide variety of training. We also bring guest speakers in, experts in different fields, and we also attend many fire schools. The Middlesex County Firemen’s Association runs a training academy that consists of a spring course, which is basic firefighting and that’s for the new firemen and that’s all classroom. In the fall, the second half of that school is all practical training, where they’re out on the fire grounds. At the present time, the county is trying to get a larger setup but now we impose on different fire departments around the county to use grounds near their firehouse for the different types of training. Along with the local training and the county fire school, many firemen attend courses at the state fire college.

Interviewer: How long as there been a state fire college?

J. Wallace: I’ve been associated with the Fire Department now for fifteen years and the state fire college was in existence at that time. I don’t know exactly how long the state fire college has been in existence.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright.

J. Wallace: A lot of seminars where do just get classroom training come up all the time and we try to attend a lot of these, whenever possible, a few men, anyway. And a lot of other type training, special courses now and then. There was one that I really will remember for a long time was held down at the Pomona Air Force Base, South Jersey, that dealt with how to handle if you ever have an air crash. An air crash, I guess, could be the worst thing that could ever happen to Metuchen, even worse than our train wreck of this past summer. But there was this school and several of our men did attend it and I think, mentioning the train wreck this past summer, the reason we were able to handle that as effectively as we did, I believe is because some of the training we have had on dangerous chemicals and different liquids that might be on those railroad cars as they travel through the Borough of Metuchen. I myself and I know several other men of our department have been to special schools many times on these, and just this past springtime, we had the safety engineer of the GATX Company over there in Carteret came and gave us a three-hour slide demonstration and talk on what to do if we had propane cars involved. Luckily, we had no propane cars in the middle of that wreck, but we did have some chlorine cars and some other hazardous liquid chemicals and I think that had a lot to do with the way we set up that night and I

think it had a lot to do with proving that a major thing as that train wreck can be held to a minimum of danger when handled properly.

Interviewer: Now you said the firemen themselves maintain the engines?

J. Wallace: When I said that, I'm referring to they make sure they are running in good order, they wash and wax them, keep the equipment clean. For repairs, no, maybe I should clarify that a little better. Repairs—we do not put a wrench on any mechanical parts of that. We have them serviced by the company that they were purchased from. Except for one piece of equipment, everything we have is Mack, and Mack Motor type engines and the Mack Truck Company in Edison does all our mechanical repairs and annual service. We have service regularly to try to make sure we don't have any breakdowns and I think we are pretty fortunate here in Metuchen, we have a rare occasion something does break down on us because we do maintain them quite steadily.

Interviewer: Were the engines from the beginning Mack Motor Engines?

J. Wallace: Yes, it was back in 1927 and that's, I think, the first couple engines of Metuchen were Mack. They have some pictures around of them and they were the old chain driven Mack, and we came up the line and they seem to get Mack almost every time. A few times there have been different engines mixed in with it. They used to have two of the department, each company had one and then in 1950, the Eagles were rewarded with an engine by the Borough and that was a GMC. And in 1951, the Washington Hose Company got a new engine that was a 1951 Mack Pumper, which we still have in service in our department as our reserve engine and we have set it up specially with foam and other specialized equipment in case we had a major chemical problem but it is in good running order and if one of the other engines is out for service, the Mack can fit right in as a first line pumper.

Interviewer: So the first engine was introduced in 1927?

J. Wallace: No, they had one before that. I'm not sure the exact year that was but when the Borough took over, each company got a new piece of apparatus at that time. The Eagles got a ladder truck, which in those days, when you talked about a ladder truck, it was a longer truck that had a lot of wooden ladders on it – long wooden ladders – not an aerial ladder of today's standards. And the Washington Hose Company got a pumper truck, although the Eagles' long ladder truck did have a pump on it.

Interviewer: What is the size of the budget of – I don't know – what is, just, could you just tell for the record the size of the budget of the Fire Company now compared to say, ten years ago, twenty years ago? If you can say that.

J. Wallace: I really can't give you twenty years ago because I don't know. This past year the operating budget for the Fire Department was \$31,715. That is just the operating expenses. That has nothing to do with the fire hydrant rental service, which the Borough has to pay to the water company every year. That's a separate item; the borough budget is in another area. The \$31,000 takes care of the maintenance of the equipment, the new equipment, different things like that. It has nothing to do with the capital outlay part either, like when it comes to buying a new fire truck, that's a separate line item, they usually put in capital

improvements. Like, this past year in capital improvements, they bought a large amount of hose to keep our hose supply up. In the good hose category, we were evaluated just recently, and they found that we had some hose that was as old as twenty years old and they don't count that in your rating after it's so many years old, so the Borough bought a large amount of hose this past year to get us back up in the area that would constitute the rated hose.

Interviewer: What kind of hose is used now?

J. Wallace: We operate, not counting the Booster Line, which is just a hose that rolls on a reel on your engine, we operate with two and a half inch and one-and-a-half-inch cotton jacketed hose. That's a fabric covered, rubber lined hose.

Interviewer: It is cotton jacketed?

J. Wallace: Uh huh.

Interviewer: About how many fires are there per year?

J. Wallace: Well there's something I can give you a little statistic on. Just to show you the increase in the type of fires there are. A mere six or seven years ago, we used to have just about 120 to 125 fires a year, and a majority of them used to be brush fires. Last year, 1976, we had 281 fires in Metuchen and in the present time for 1977, we've had 264 this year and the fires are getting a lot more complex. A training session that we just had at the firehouse just a mere three weeks ago, slide presentation and talk on the type of things you're running into in the home now. So many things are made of synthetic materials, a lot of plastics, different type fabrics, the making of your curtains and everything like that. So the alarms are more than doubled in seven years, even in a small town, our size and the severity of them have been greater. We've had more of what we consider a major fire each year, the last few years than we used to have every couple of years prior to this. The increase is, I say, astronomical. As much as when you say 281, it doesn't like much but when you talk about a town the size of Metuchen and from, what was it, 120 alarm or 130 alarms before, we're up 280 or 260, that's some increase.

Interviewer: How many Fire Chiefs have there been in the history of the department? I guess originally, there were two Chiefs, right? One for each company?

J. Wallace: Right. Prior to 1927, those records I do not know how they worked out, but we have a plaque down at the firehouse, which puts down each Chief's name since the Borough took over in 1927, when there was one Chief for the department and we have had thirteen Fire Chiefs since 1927. I'm sorry, correction on that. It wouldn't be thirteen, it would be seventeen. Yes, seventeen.

Interviewer: Now, I forget whether you spelled out the duties of the Fire Chief to me or not. Maybe if you just briefly went over them.

J. Wallace: The Fire Chief is top officer of the department. His immediate supervisor is the Borough Councilman that is assigned to Commissioner of Public Safety by the Mayor. But the Chief himself runs the Fire Department, all aspects of firefighting and the equipment. The social activities, he has nothing to do with.

But the fire house is his responsibility, the equipment is his responsibility, to make sure the men that are assigned to do different duties like the truck checkers and everything. It is up to him to make sure that the Captain of the company has his men to do this. He is responsible for drawing up the budget and turning it to the Borough at the proper time when they request it at the beginning of each year, and he is the person that is responsible for operating within that budget. He has line items in there, where he buys different things under different categories, and he must maintain his budget in those categories. He is responsible for reports to the borough, monthly reports on the activities of the Fire Department, amount of alarms, type of alarms, any injuries. All the general administrative work that would go along with something in this nature, even in industry.

Interviewer: How many hours per week do you put in on the fire job?

J. Wallace: Well, not counting the fire alarms themselves, some weeks I put in an excess of thirty hours. I should clarify that a little better, I'm also the Fire Inspector. What they've been doing the last few years is making the Fire Chief the Fire Inspector also. So I would say, with the two jobs administratively and everything, an excess of thirty hours a week.

Interviewer: I see. Social events ... that's ... some of the other firemen are involved in organizing those?

J. Wallace: Right. When it comes to social events, like we have a company picnic or a department picnic during the year. When it comes to the Christmas Parade, this year we had a float and a few other years we've had a float. That's a social event. Every third year when a new Chief comes in, we have a Fire Department dinner for the outgoing Chief and we've had Christmas parties in the past sometimes, it's not an every year event.

Interviewer: And those are organized by the—

J. Wallace: Right, a committee was set up among the men to handle these functions.

Interviewer: About how many years on the average does your firemen have in experience?

J. Wallace: Well right now we have quite a few newer, younger men in there. Just a few years back we had four men retire. One man was a fifty five-year veteran, another man was a fifty-year veteran and the other two were in the forties. So of course, that was just about three years ago so, you know, you have a few younger men in there. We just had a man retire this past Monday night, the council honored him and presented his retirement badge at the Borough Council meeting, and he was thirty-seven-year man. So when you deplete your ranks of five men there and allow for people we have moving in and out of town as they move, we have some business executives amongst our company, where, you know, they're moving up the ladder, they're in for a few years and then they leave. At the present time, I'd say the average time must be, I'd say, eight years, if you average out the younger ones, we have to some of the older ones. In fact, maybe let's even it out to ten with a quick calculation I'd say. I have fifteen years. I'm in the around the number ten spot on the company I belong to. Out of twenty-four, so I'm in about the tenth slot there. So I would say, you know, you calculate this out of there and break it down, I would probably get around the

ten year area. Eight to ten. We'll leave the eight in there. We'll make it eight to ten.

Interviewer: Okay, that's what you said to begin with. I had another question. How many square miles do you cover in Metuchen?

J. Wallace: Well, I've heard so many people get different boundary lines. I've always been under the impression that people tell me that Metuchen is 2.9 square miles. We just cover the Borough of Metuchen, unless it's a mutual aid call. All the fire departments in the county belong to County Mutual Aid. If one town has a major operation of some type, and they call you, you immediately dispatch whatever piece of equipment you have that they request. Some towns have specialized equipment and if that's something that town feels they can use, you do it. We average about three or four mutual aid alarms a year. This past year in Metuchen, I've had to have outside equipment in Metuchen four times. But it works. You just work hand in hand together, all the towns and anywhere in the county if someone needs help, you want to go help them right away. If they're calling you for help, that means they have a problem, you don't ask what it is or anything, whatever they request, you get going right away. But we just cover, really, the Borough. Like I said, I've heard people say it is 2.5 square miles, somebody else 2. Years ago somebody told me, that I thought was knowledgeable at the time, that it is 2.9 and I've always said 2.9, I could be wrong but 2.9 square miles is the understanding I have of the size of Metuchen. Of course, everybody knows, we are completely surrounded by Edison. Like the hole in the donut.

Interviewer: Yeah. Right. And did you tell me the types of equipment you have? Let's make that the last question.

J. Wallace: Okay. We have five pieces of equipment and the Fire Chief's car. The Fire Chief has the car to take home and have at his house so he can respond when the alarm comes into the scene, size up the situation and he can tell over the radio – we all have radio equipment – what we have and what we need at the scene. We have two 1970 Mack Pumpers, a thousand gallons per minute, one in each company. We have a seventy-five-foot aerial ladder truck that also has a 750 gallon per minute pump on it, and it has much more specialized equipment to ride on that ladder truck. We have a brand-new emergency truck that we just put in service this year. It carries all our specialized equipment. It has a 12,000-watt generator on it. Just to name a couple things it has on it: it's an enclosed back for if a major disaster did happen, we could transport 400 people at one time in it and just for wintertime it gives a fireman a five minute break in real cold weather. He could go in there and try to warm up, it's heated back there and probably he has in the past. This carries all of our specialized equipment and we then have the fifth piece of rolling equipment is the '51 Mack that when they bought the two new pumpers in 1970, we kept the '51 and we keep it in good running order, it's our reserve pumper if either other pumper is out of service for some reason or another, its general maintenance call or something and it also has been equipped with some specialized equipment. We carry foam on this, this is our foam unit in case we, whatever, have a major liquid chemical problem, this carries our foam and we're ready for action. We don't have to send back to the firehouse for it, like a lot of companies do. They have foam but they keep it at the firehouse, or they arrive on a scene with some of these chemicals and if chemicals are involved, they have to call back to the

firehouse, tell one of the guys that's on their pickup truck or send a truck back, but we have it right with us.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you.

J. Wallace: Glad I could be of some help.

Interviewer: Okay.