

THE HOBOKEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: BILL BERGIN

INTERVIEWER: HOLLY METZ
with Robert Foster

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TRACK #1

HM: We are in the Firemen's Museum on Bloomfield Street, with Bill Bergin. Maybe we can start with you telling us when you were born, and where you were born.

BB: Okay. I was born September 4th, 1939, and I'm pretty sure it was Margaret Hague Hospital.

HM: That's in Jersey City.

BB: Right.

HM: Tell me about your parents, and any siblings you have.

BB: Well, my mother's maiden name was Virginia Callandriello.

HM: And your father's name?

BB: My father's name was William Howard Bergin.

HM: So you're Junior? Or, you're not Howard.

BB: I'm not Howard. But everybody used to call me Junior, William Bergin, Jr. A couple of the plaques and stuff have junior on them.

HM: And do you have brothers or sisters?

BB: I had three sisters. I had twins who didn't look alike, but were born at the same time.

HM: Fraternal.

BB: Fraternal. That was Adelaide and Grace. The older sister, Audrey, she's eighty-seven years old now.

HM: So Audrey was first. Then where were you in the lineup?

BB: I was ten years younger than the twins.

HM: So you were the baby. You were spoiled.

BB: They used to beat me up. But I was spoiled.

HM: Well, you're the only boy, and the last one. You did something right in your last life.

BB: They tell me stories about how they used to keep me in the sun so I'd keep my eyes closed, so I'd fall asleep. They'd keep the carriage in the sun.

HM: So they looked after you.

BB: Yes. You know.

HM: And what did your dad do?

BB: My father, actually -- back in those days, baseball and basketball in Hoboken were big-time. They had all these organizational teams -- the Oxfords, the Union City Reds -- and he actually got his job with the First National City Bank in New York because he was a good basketball player.

HM: How does that happen?

BB: Just from going around on these club teams, and somebody who worked ahead of him, in First National City Bank, got him a job. Then they played for the First National City Bank on these teams.

HM: So his job -- he wasn't inside the bank, doing any kind of banking.

BB: Yes.

HM: Oh, it was. So what kind of -- ?

BB: He started off small, I guess, with a first-level job. Then he worked himself up to where he had X-amount of people under him when he retired.

HM: Tell me more about this baseball and basketball being such a big thing in Hoboken.

BB: The funniest part is I always felt bad that I didn't have a good memory of that time, until I saw a photograph of my father and my Uncle Tony -- which you can mention. They were both involved with the team that actually had Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig play with them.

HM: Wow. What team was that?

BB: It was West New York. And, actually, the games took place over on Staten Island.

HM: And when was that?

BB: In 1931. And that answers my question about why I didn't have a good memory of my father playing -- because I was only born in '39. So I was on the tail end of that.

HM: Were there photographs around the house?

BB: Yes. We have photographs.

HM: Do you have them?

BB: Yes, sure.

HM: We're going to have to pull those out and go through those, because that will be a nice thing.

BB: It's a nice photo. And my Uncle Tony Calland -- he was actually Tony Callandriello; he shortened his name up; he became Tony Calland. He liked that better. He was very active in the same way, with sports and that, both basketball and baseball. He actually worked for the recreation department at Hoboken for many years.

HM: What time period would that be?

BB: That's where I'm going to come up with the dates and stuff.

HM: We can work backwards, too.

BB: I can get the dates for you, but off the top of my head, I'd be guessing. They both were in the Hudson County Hall of Fame. They were inducted into the Hall of Fame. My father was up in years; he couldn't even attend the dinner. January 1996. He was also inducted into the Old Timers Hall of Fame. They used to have an Old Timers dinner for this type of team. The dinner was always held in Brooklyn. The night he was inducted into the Hall of Fame, as an Old Timer, Willis Reed was inducted as a professional player, in the same Hall of Fame.

My father was six-feet tall, but Willis Reed made him look like a midget. Willis was big, and he was solid. My father's nickname was "Bad Bill." A lot of people think that nickname was mine, but it actually came from my father.

HM: And why was he called Bad Bill?

BB: Well, I guess, in those days, six feet was pretty tall for a basketball player, and he was put in under the boards where it was a little hectic. That's where he got the nickname "Bad Bill."

HM: And it probably encouraged people to come and see him. Wasn't that a bit of advertising?

BB: No, I think it was more his reputation of the hard work he did under the boards. I'm putting it politely, I guess. But he tells the story that they used to play in gyms, so-called gyms, in town that actually had columns in the way. They used to play around the columns. It was amazing.

HM: And the gyms would be where?

BB: The one building I can remember, I think it was the Salvation Army. It used to be up on Washington Street, their headquarters there. I kind of remember a big room there, with columns in it.

HM: I'm wondering if it was the former Queen store. Remember how big that was, upstairs?

BB: They were in unusual places -- school halls -- anyplace they could get a game. And they always seemed to be tied in with a dance after the game. Those were the activities in those days. Then they tell stories

about when they used to play baseball down at the field, down at the back -- they actually used to send the guy up into the hills and pass the hat around. People would sit up in the hills, to watch the games.

HM: So the Jersey City crowd -- you're talking about hills, meaning Jersey City -- that's considered the Heights now -- and they would look down and watch --

BB: They would sit on the side of the hill to watch the game. There were no bleachers down there.

HM: So they looked down on, pretty much, where the Hoboken housing projects are, and those big fields there.

BB: Yes.

HM: So were there commercial sponsors -- like how when you see the Little League --

BB: No. I think it was mostly clubs -- Union City Reds, and different organizations. The Oxfords. Then

at one time I think they played for the religious organization, that you had to shave, or you had to have a beard -- what the heck was it? The House of David. They played on the team -- House of David.

My father never finished high school; yet he was well respected -- my father and uncle -- but my father was well respected through the town. They used to keep the time by him going up First Street, going to work. He was so regimented, going up to catch the train, to go to New York City. They used to tell that. Then there's another story -- when he retired -- he retired at age sixty, and he passed away at age ninety-eight. The last dinner I took him to, over in Brooklyn -- well, this was not the basketball now. First National City Bank, at that time, was very good to their retired people. They had an annual dinner for the retired people every year, and it got to the point where he didn't know anybody and nobody knew him, because he lived that long.

But I took him over there. But he decided to retire at age sixty, and he had opportunities because of his reputation -- he had offers for different jobs in the city, but he never took them. He was just full-fledged retired.

HM: And why was that?

BB: He just felt like he wanted to do that. He actually got involved with the court, at City Hall. He would attend court with other retired fellows, and it got to the point where the judge wouldn't start until they had the first row for them -- him and a couple of other fellows.

HM: And when was this -- around? Sixties, or earlier? Fifties? Seventies?

BB: Yes, it would be in the '70s. I was on the job yet. Then, on Law Day, the judge would take them out for lunch, on Law Day.

HM: What day is that -- Law Day?

BB: Law Day, they called it. I think one fellow, the judge that he got friendly with, was Judge Addio, and his daughter owned a restaurant up on 11th and Wash. Anytime I wanted to take him out to eat, he insisted, "Let's go to the judge's daughter's." He was that type of

guy. So we ate a lot up in the place up off 11th and Wash.
Nice. So that was his friend.

HM: Do you remember who some of his buddies
were, who would go and sit -- ?

BB: I forget. My sister, Audrey, probably
would remember some of them.

HM: Let's see -- '70s. Not someone like
Charles DeFazio.

BB: No, no, no. They were mostly other
retired people, not lawyers. They basically did it, I
guess, just to give themselves something to do in the
mornings.

HM: And it's interesting.

BB: Oh, yes. It was. Actually, after I
retired I tried it. I kept getting accused of being part of
the case. You'd be surprised. I went out in Hackensack, a
couple of times, and a judge would ask, "Can I ask you what
you're doing in the courtroom?" And I would say, "I'm just

observing," and that would be it. But I guess they didn't want you to hear anything, in case you were going to be a witness in one of the cases, you know? But it was interesting, but not my cup of tea. [My wife Marge and I enjoyed spending our time watching our grand-daughters Alexandria and Zoie in all their activities over the years.]

HM: So just to get back to this thing -- people [including teachers] were saying, "You're never going to be as good as your father."

BB: Well, I think because he was so well liked -- maybe I was a little different than that. A couple of the teachers who knew my father -- maybe I was bad at -- my sisters accused me of being a bad, bad, spoiled kid, which you can understand.

HM: What school did you go to?

BB: I went to Public School #9, down on Second and Madison -- actually, Second and Monroe (Streets).

HM: And where was your family home?

BB: 116 Jefferson Street. That's right
across from the recreation center.

HM: Good location.

BB: My uncle was in charge most times, and
most times I was barred.

HM: Because -- what? Fights?

BB: No, no. Nothing bad. I was a very active
child, I guess.

HM: Did your family own their home, or were
they renters.

BB: Yes, yes. It was owned.

HM: Was that unusual in that neighborhood,
or not?

BB: When you say unusual -- ?

HM: Unusual to own your home.

BB: Not really. The area itself -- in fact, some of the owners were still there, up until recently when most of them have passed away now. But even some of those four-, five-story jobs were all owned by individual Italian families on one side, and -- you know.

HM: I'm just thinking -- 116 Jefferson -- was your mom Italian American?

BB: Yes.

HM: And your dad was Irish American.

BB: Irish/German, yes.

HM: Was it unusual that they would be married at that time -- considering how Hoboken was -- there was kind of a tension between ethnic groups.

BB: I don't think so. I don't think at that time --

HM: When did they get married? Around?

BB: Let's back it up. My sister would be approximately eighty-six years prior -- she's eighty-seven now -- so it would be eighty-six years ago, approximately. I'm bad on --

RF: 1920s.

HM: 1920s. Somewhat unusual, I think. So he was Irish/German.

BB: Right.

HM: And were his parents born here?

BB: I'm guessing now.

HM: I can look up some of this stuff, too, if you give me the names, their names. I'll look up some of that stuff, and find out where they were and where they came from. It's easy to do now.

BB: I'm thinking as you're talking -- there were no brothers or anything involved with my father.

HM: Meaning what?

BB: That's right. He did have - Adelaide, Mildred, Helen were his sisters.

HM: He only had sisters. Like you.

BB: Right.

HM: So your mom -- was she a homemaker, primarily, or did she work, also?

BB: The house is still down there. It's three stories high. On the upper two floors, people were living in there. Downstairs, at one point, there was a store, like a lunchroom and stuff.

[interruption]

HM: So what are your memories of growing up in Hoboken -- when you think about it?

BB: Oh -- great. The biggest thing was that we always entertained ourselves. We were always the last ones to go up -- with your mother -- she used to just call to you out the window, and you just kept going and going until she got louder and louder, and then you went up to eat. But we were always doing something, crazy things. Everything you'd use was usually homemade. If you were playing touch football, it was a rolled-up newspaper with black tape around it. Kick-the-can was a big game.

HM: And "crazy" things meaning pranks, or just crazy in comparison to today.

RF: Pranks come later.

BB: I shouldn't say crazy. I'd maybe change that to creative, by yourself, these different games. It wasn't formal, as we know it today. It wasn't formal leagues and stuff like that.

HM: The best kind of play. It really is.

BB: If you had a football game, if you played tackle football, you were very lucky to have a

helmet on. Most times you were playing with just nothing on. But if it was tackle -- that's when -- some of these bumps --

HM: Tell me about some of the kids you played with; your memories of them.

BB: In every area, most of the kids we played with were from the same block, or around the corner, not too far away. You had your group of friends, and that was it. You were outside, done with school, until nighttime. And, like I said, until your mom or dad would call you up to eat. But it was always a smaller group of friends -- although I had some friends -- my cousin lived up on 11th Street, so at times I would go up there, and I got to know people up in that area, as well, because of him being up there.

HM: It seems like, when I talk to people, every block was its own little --

BB: Yep.

HM: What did people in the neighborhood -- what were some of the jobs that the fathers and mothers did, who worked?

BB: There were a group of men on the street who were longshoremen. There were quite a few Italian families. In fact, in the earlier days, when I was younger, an Italian family lived above us in the house.

HM: They were renting from her.

BB: Yes.

HM: Do you remember their name?

BB: Yes. That one I remember. That was the Amato family. There was a son, and I think they had two daughters. There would be a certain time of the year where they would make their wine, and we loved it because that was the time when they put out the empty boxes, and we would make scooters out of the grape cases. You'd get one piece of 2" X 4", one skate, you'd split the skate in half so you had a front wheel and a back wheel, and that was your scooter. You tried to make them fancy. We made them

with little handlebars on them. That was, again, another activity.

HM: And the longshoremen -- you're saying that's what a lot of the men did. Is there anything else you remember?

BB: There was one family -- Sinascalci was their name -- they had a bakery right down the block. That was a good-size family. They owned the bakery, they owned the house above it, and they were involved with the bakery, of course. In the opposite direction was Muzzy's, which was a big hardware store, and they were there for years.

RF: So is the bakery on that block?

BB: Yes. The bakery would be -- we were 116 -- he might have been 128, 130, something like that, with the bakery.

HM: Did your family go to church?

BB: Yes.

HM: Which church did you belong to?

BB: St. Francis.

HM: Really. Was that because of the Italian side of the family? Because that was considered an Italian church.

BB: Yes. Well, I guess because of its location, as well. And we were Catholic, so that was the place to go.

HM: You told me you went to #9 School. What was that like?

BB: [Laughs] Oh, it was good. I got left back in the eighth grade. Part of the reason was that when one teacher was out sick, she let us watch her gold fish. But the gold fish died while she was out sick, so I think she held that against the room.

HM: That's a lot of payback for a dead fish.

[Laughter]

BB: Well, we were with a group of fellows -- and I wasn't the leader -- but a couple of us got left back, and the leader got promoted. So that one was tough to figure out. Not that we did any damage or bad things; it was just a group of us that hung out together. But that was part of the reason I got left back. Not too many people know about this. [Laughter]

HM: Oh, well, we can't cut that out.

BB: It gets better.

HM: It makes you think there's something wrong with you, too. No? Or did it not affect you that much?

BB: No, no. You mean as far as getting left back? No. Because I realized, even as young as I was, that it was partially my fault. Because I was -- not bad, just the normal teenager type.

HM: So after school, when you left school, what did you do?

BB: You mean the day I came out of school,
or you mean after grammar school?

HM: Well, you could tell me both. They're
actually both interesting.

BB: Well, after school you just did
everything within the neighborhood.

HM: You played outside.

BB: I did get into the Rec. I boxed for a
while. In the Recreation Department they had a ring,
actually, in the middle of the gym, at times, and the
fellow who was in charge of the boxing was a fellow named
Champ Sica. He ran a boxing program with the Recreation
Department. I always remember trying to box the kids from
down at the -- we called the "the projects" at the time.
They would come in, and I would wind up getting beat up,
and I would always hurt my thumbs because I didn't know how
to punch the proper way, with the gloves. In fact, we
became friendly with a couple of them. To this day, I see a
couple of them, and we always kid about it. I always tell
them about how they used to beat me up in there.

HM: So tell me a little bit more about the Champ.

BB: Oh, he was well known with boxing. He was tied in with some professional boxers. He had some -- what do you call them? -- underlings, who would actually do the work for him. But he was the guy who, "Oh, yeah, you box," Champ Sica was there to watch you and everything. It was fun -- even though I don't think I ever won a fight.

But it was all just fun, with recreation. It wasn't to go on to be a boxer or anything like that.

HM: And was your mother worried that you were going to get your faced smashed in?

BB: No.

HM: So when you left grammar school, what was next?

BB: Demarest High School.

HM: And what was that like?

BB: That was very interesting.

HM: Tell me. You were chasing girls.

BB: No, to tell you the truth -- as you'll find out later on -- I was a one-woman man in high school.

High school was good. It was a lot of fun. This was the funny part. My father was big in baseball and basketball, never touched a football, and I was the reverse. In high school I played football, and never got heavily involved in baseball or basketball.

HM: And that's just because you didn't like those sports, or do you think you avoided them?

BB: I was never any good. I think part of the reason -- I'm sure my father would have liked to have gotten me to play those sports, but when I got to be that age he was up there in age, so it was difficult for him to take me out, to have a catch, and stuff like that. Not that he neglected me, but I don't think it was -- and I liked the activity, I liked the roughness of the football game, I

guess. Baseball, at times, could be very boring. But it was different. I enjoyed football.

HM: And you played on the team, for the school.

BB: Yes, the high-school team.

HM: Did the team do well?

BB: We did okay. But my junior year, I didn't get enough marks so I couldn't play my junior year. So I went freshman, sophomore, and my senior year. Then, in my senior year, I wound up getting scholarship offers from a couple of the colleges. I only bring this up because I'm still amazed -- I had one for Villanova, and I had one for Wagner College, on Staten Island. Wagner College was mainly, at that time, a basketball school. They were big in basketball, so they were building up their football program. At that time Wagner was called Wagner Lutheran College. That was the full name. So they gave out a lot of scholarships that one year. There were a dozen scholarships, and I think ten of us were from New Jersey. I think eight of us were Catholics, and we wound up getting

the full scholarships, and at that time the full scholarship to Wagner was \$2,750 for four years. I think today Wagner is probably up over \$40,000 a year.

HM: I have no idea. So why Wagner and not Villanova? Because it was closer to home?

BB: I think so. I commuted to Wagner. And I broke my arm in the first year. My freshman year I broke my arm, toward the end of the season. At that time you couldn't play with a cast, even if the cast was well padded. If there was a hard substance underneath that padding, you weren't allowed to play. So I couldn't play the final three games of the freshman year.

HM: And you would have wanted to play with a broken arm?

BB: Oh, sure. Today, they do it.

HM: I didn't know that. That's amazing.

BB: Once it's in a cast, you can't feel it. But with the pads -- I'll never forget it -- the pad made

the arm come out this far, and before the game starts the referee comes in and feels it, to make sure it's padded. But the first thing they ask you is what's underneath the pad? And once you tell them, it's a cast, that was it. No matter how well repaired it was, you couldn't.

I left Wagner College, not because I broke the arm, and not because they took the scholarship away -- I still had the scholarship, which was still mine. But from day one, I didn't anticipate going to college, and the big part of my younger career was chasing fire engines on a bicycle. That was in me from a long time ago. If you ask me -- because I still pal out with a lot of guys from that team, from Wagner, and everybody went on to do different things -- but I don't think I would change my life with any of them, as far as the department and my career. I think that was something that was in me from a kid.

HM: Yes. So tell me about that.

BB: Well, I grew up on Jefferson Street, 1st and Jefferson, in the middle of the block. The firehouse was on the corner of Jefferson and 2nd -- 2nd and Jefferson. At that time it was an engine company, it was Engine No. 3. I got to hang out, go to the store for the firemen, help

them wash their cars, and a million different things. I got to know them personally, and they gave me a cut-off from a coat, so I had my own rubber coat.

RF: How old were you?

BB: I guess it started -- I was riding a bike. It had to start while I was in grammar school.

HM: Do you have a picture? That would be so cute.

BB: I probably do, somewhere. Well, I have a picture because -- well, another thing I got involved in was tied in with the fire department. The Salvation Army was very big in Hoboken in those days. Any large fire, they would show up and serve coffee and soup to the firemen. I got involved with the family. It was a husband and wife team, and the one who was in charge was called the Captain of the Salvation Army, and her name was Eleanor -- a big, heavy-set woman. My sister would remember -- a lot of people in Hoboken would remember the family, because they were the Salvation Army.

I got to go there, and I stayed with them at fires, to help serve the guys. Again, I think it was embedded in me that that's what I should be doing when I got older. At times my mother would be concerned, because some of them lasted a long time. But she knew where I was.

HM: And the fires you're talking about -- would you go all over Hoboken, or just in the neighborhood?

BB: Pretty much all over. The ones I remember most are the pier fires, where they would go days. So I would do my thing. If it was school time, I would attend school, and then go back up there to help out. Because a couple of them lasted three or four days before they got off the piers completely.

RF: Can you describe a pier fire a little bit, just because most people might not even get it.

BB: Basically, a pier fire is so large that any effort you put in to stop it, from the land side -- it's rare that you could stop a pier fire from the land side. If you didn't get the help from the New York Fire Department -- and in those times the river was

unbelievable, crowded with tugboats and that. And the tugboats, traditionally, they would come in -- not even being asked -- when they saw a pier on fire, they would come in. Each tugboat, at the very top, had a turret gun, just like you see on a fireboat. These people would come in and use their turret guns, besides the New York Fire Department. Without their help, half of them wouldn't be extinguished.

HM: It's like a volunteer fire fighting force, the tugboats.

BB: The tugboats -- it was a tradition. Sure. Sure. And it was very easy for them, because that was built into the system. So when they wanted to use that gun, there was no hose involved; it just sucked up the salt water, it was sucked up and directed up into this gun. Same principle as a fireboat, but the fireboat had maybe seven or eight of these turrets on them.

HM: And were those fires quelled, or did they destroy the piers? What happened?

BB: In most cases -- most pier fires would destroy completely, in most cases. They would start in a remote location, be out on the end, with the wind blowing the right direction it would come onto the pier, and the pier itself -- the timbers were treated with Creosote, which would help the fire increase in size and speed. And depending upon the wind -- as you can see, the waterfront, they're all gone up there. Most of the piers that made the waterfront as empty as it is now is because they were burned down. Of course, the big one downstairs, the big one from the 1900s -- that burned not only the piers but the ships involved. There was so much -- I don't know how many people were killed, but the figures go anywhere from 250 up to 375, depending upon what you read about how many lives were lost there.

HM: People died in the ships?

BB: Yes. What they learned very quickly after those fires was that the portholes on the ships were too small. It was impossible for the victims to get out. Some of the things you read turn your stomach, but they were caught in the portholes, and they couldn't get out. They were talking to people. People could reach them, try

to reach them, get close to them, but couldn't help them. Eventually, the individual at the porthole would fall back, and they would never see them again.

There were other stories which I couldn't believe the first time I read them. Those who were able to jump into the river would be floating around, and the tugboats would come up to them, and some of the tugboat captains would ask them if they had any money on them. If they didn't -- that was my expression when I first read it. If they didn't have the money, or any money, that this captain thought was worthwhile for him to "take," they would just leave them and go on to the cotton bales that were floating -- because the cotton bales were worth a lot of money.

Again, when I read it the first time -- but I read it in three different books. It was a shame.

HM: Not a good example of human --

BB: No.

HM: I don't know if you want to talk -- let's talk about getting on the force, back when you first

-- the process of becoming a firefighter. You start out; you're really interested; you leave Wagner.

BB: Right. When I left Wagner, I went into Uncle Sam's army. I volunteered for three years. I signed up for three years.

HM: And where did you serve?

BB: I served in the Battle of Route #35.

[Laughter] No, I went into the service -- actually, I went in through a recruiting sergeant, a fellow by the name of Eddie Shroback, who was a very good friend of my father's, and was a good ballplayer who played in the same time period as my father, although he was a lot younger than my father. But they knew each other, they knew of each other, and I went in through Eddie Shroback. I loved boats. As funny as it seems, there was -- you know, they showed you the different things you could get involved with, with the Army, and one of the groups you could go with was small boat repair. So I saw "boat," and I thought, "Oh, this is for me!" But Sergeant Shroback said, "No, you don't want to do that, Bill." So I went down -- he advised that I go into a class down at Fort Monmouth. The class itself, believe it

or not, lasted fifty-four weeks. It dealt with general cryptographic equipment repair. It was a top-secret operation that dealt with the machines and stuff that very -- what's the word? When you get permission to go into certain areas?

HM: Top secret?

BB: Yes, but I had -- it gave me permission to go in there.

HM: Classified?

BB: Well, yes, but it was -- oh, god. When you're allowed to go into a particular area that's restricted to other people.

RF: High-level clearance, or something like that?

BB: Yeah -- high-level clearance, to be involved with this -- to the point that when we had fire drills, we would have to go to the doors and stand, with

submachine guns, at a fire drill, just to show that that type of secrecy was involved.

HM: So that was fifty-four weeks.

BB: Fifty-four weeks. That's why I left -- because [unclear] about the Battle of Route #35. You had to fight the Battle of Route #35. [Laughter] But my basic training was done at Fort Dix, and I was going to pull a shrewdy and go in -- which I did -- I went in in March, to avoid the snow storms, and, of course, the first week I'm in there we got like sixteen inches of snow. Our whole area to shovel was the obstacle course, which is in the middle of woods. So I had fun, shoveling the obstacle course.

RF: That was top secret. [Chuckling]

BB: Yes. The funny part -- when you went to the service, volunteered and that -- my family threw me a nice going-away party. So I go away, we get to the company I was assigned to at Fort Dix -- the captain in charge of the company wanted to have a company band. So the first week I'm there, everybody was restricted to the post -- except [laughs] for anybody who played a musical

instrument, who could go home to get his musical instrument. So, of course, my hand went up -- I had to go home to get my musical instrument. I did play in the band at one point, but I was a faker.

HM: What did you play -- supposedly? What did you pretend to play?

BB: French horn. I played in a band, but I went home -- of course, my mother and father were very surprised. My family -- that I'm back home in five days. Now I had to go through the neighborhood, trying to find a French horn. [Laughter] But the captain did create a band that was -- I was on the bass drum, somebody else was on the accordion, and one instrument we had -- I think the first time -- all we knew was *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* -- and the first time we went out the fellow's accordion strap broke.

Now it's all coming back to me, the service. We had a lot of fun in the service.

HM: So did you come back with a French horn, or not?

BB: Yes!

HM: You said you played the bass drum.

[Unclear]

BB: Yes, I wound up with the bass drum,
because I couldn't play the French horn!

RF: The French horn is a tough one.

BB: It's a nice instrument. I did play
French horn. I was learning how to play the French horn,
and GI Joe's was the band. We had a Hoboken group.

HM: Really? When was this? This was before
you went in -- this was when you were in Demarest? No. When
you were in Wagner.

BB: No. It had to be younger. I was younger
than that. Because I remember the one trip -- I remember
going to Atlantic City, and after the parade we went to
ride horses on the beach. I'll never forget it.

HM: Cool.

BB: Yeah. And we were in the band uniforms. We had a big bus. It was just down there, spend a couple hours, and come back home.

HM: Nice.

BB: Yes.

HM: So that would have been not Demarest, it would have been #9 School? You were that young?

BB: No, it probably had to be Demarest. It would have been alternate -- it probably would have been in Demarest.

HM: So the GI Joe's -- that was a school band? Or it was a band of kids that knew [unclear]?

BB: A band of kids, yes.

HM: And did you play for groups?

BB: Yes. Well, the band participated in parades and that, you know. But, again, I was a rookie. I was just learning.

RF: Was it a marching band?

BB: It was a marching band, yes. Oh, yes.

HM: What kind of parades?

BB: Like Memorial Day parades, anything like that.

HM: What did they used to call May Day? They called it something else. I don't remember.

BB: We've got to ask Jack O'Brien. I read his book. He had all the names and that -- unbelievable.

HM: Yes. He had all that stuff. I like that story.

BB: I got another one on the Army. You'll laugh. Again, they had what they call post restriction.

Everybody on the post was going to be restricted to base, except if you wanted to volunteer, they were going to have an NCO -- the biggest assembly of NCOs -- on the Friday before everybody was restricted to base. But if you volunteered to take part in this NCO affair, this -- what do you call it? -- NCO meeting, or lecture that they had for the NCOs -- you would get a pass to go home.

So I volunteered, and it wound up that you started -- the part that I was involved with, you started in your underwear, and you got dressed the proper way and the improper way, to put on your dress uniform. I was the good guy. I was going to dress properly, and the other fellow, next to me, was going to do it the wrong way. Well, what they failed to tell us was that when you walked out onto the stage -- and there were a couple hundred people out there -- the first couple rows were the female NCOs. So here we are, standing in our shorts, with these females sitting there. I was very anxious to get my pants on quickly.

But you did a lot of things for a weekend pass. That's when I was courting my wife.

HM: Now was she from Hoboken?

BB: Yes.

HM: And where did she grow up, in Hoboken?

BB: She grew up at 709 Willow Avenue. And the funniest part of that was that I actually met her in Keansburg.

HM: Your wife's name -- ?

BB: Margaret -- Marge.

HM: And what was her maiden name?

BB: Glaser.

HM: So you met her in Keansburg? How did you meet her?

BB: There was a local -- we played pinball machines, and a little jukebox, and a dance hall, and I actually had to fight off all her old boyfriends. But she always wore this sweater -- ASH -- and I was chasing her around for about a week, not realizing that ASH stood for

Academy of Sacred Heart. She was actually from Hoboken. I didn't realize that in the beginning.

So we started to get serious down at Keansburg, and then, of course, when we both came back in September, for school and that, and she lived up on the top floor of 709 -- it was a four-story walkup -- so, to make an impression, of course, on her mother, you help with the groceries, four stories up and that. It was a very difficult courtship.

RF: Right by [Unclear], right?

BB: Yes. Yep. Yep.

RF: So were you summering with your family down in Keansburg:

BB: Yes.

RF: Did they do that?

BB: Almost every year. That was the place to go to. All the Hoboken people were down in Keansburg in those days. We started renting, then, actually, it was one

brother-in-law Eddie Radigan who came up with the idea we rent every year, why don't we look to buy? So they chipped in, my three sisters and their husbands, and my mother and father, and they bought this pretty, big place that belonged to a doctor. We all lived in this one house for the summer months.

HM: Didn't your grandparents -- his grandparents also did Keansburg.

BB: Oh, yeah. Keansburg was big-time.

HM: Does that continue to this day?

BB: No. No, what happened was that everybody just got -- the children started to go further south. My father actually was the last to be down there. He was reluctant to leave it, but it just got to the point that during the week there was nobody there with them, and they just sagged, the activities. But when they were younger, there was nothing but activities around the place.

All the kids wound up on the front porch. We slept on the front porch, because there were so many visitors down for the weekends and that.

RF: So you would drive down?

BB: Yes. And that was back in the old days, no air-conditioners, no turnpike. You used to get as far as the Skyway -- it used to be bumper-to-bumper traffic, coming back into Hoboken, and the other areas.

HM: So you met your wife in Keansburg. Are you working at that time? What time period is that?

BB: High school. The end of high school. I told you I was a one-woman man.

HM: Since high school. Then when did you get married?

BB: I actually got married when I was in the service.

HM: Because you got time off.

RF: I was going to say!

BB: [Laughter] Yes. I had to dress in my underwear to get to see her. Yes, that was a funny day. I tell people that story. But we got married in December of '59.

HM: So you became a firefighter after that.

BB: Yes -- and that's another [chuckles] -- well, staying with the service -- at the end of that fifty-two weeks, you got your orders. You went different places. But they would keep one out of the class to stay. There were civilian instructors for the most part, and they would take one out of the class to stay and be an assistant instructor. That's basically what I did. So I stayed at Fort Monmouth, and the only time I left Fort Monmouth was to go play flag football up at West Point. They had tournaments. Each post on the East Coast would have a team. You'd go up there to play like a championship round, up at West Point. We always came in second place. We always lost to Fort Dix. Fort Dix was the size of -- they had a bigger choice of getting some football players in that.

HM: That sounds like fun.

BB: It was fun. It was an experience. And it was a time when West Point was practicing for the Navy, the Navy game. So you saw all that. You saw the security. They would actually have a big fence covered with canvas, that you couldn't see through to see them practicing. Yep. One time we were up on a hill, and they actually sent an MP car up to see who we were, standing up on the hill. But once they knew you were military, that was okay. That's top-notch security up there.

RF: Top secret.

BB: Yeah. But it was interesting. Something you'd never know when -- the first night we went up there, you'd see these guys practicing on the field, and you'd just assume that that was -- but it wasn't the varsity. They have a league in West Point (a lot of the schools have it) where you can only be up to 165 pounds. That's a separate, distinct league that they play, just to give them -- they have to do so many sports while they're at West Point. They have to participate. That was just another way so they could play some football, because they weren't big enough or good enough to play on the varsity team. But it was amazing to see that many people working out. You think

you're watching the varsity, and the varsity was in a totally different place.

HM: Unless you were actually doing it, you wouldn't even know anything about that, until you got to watch it.

BB: No. And you slept up there in the barracks. There were a certain amount of Army personnel stationed up there -- your MPs and that. They're all regular Army. That's where we stayed. As long as you kept winning, you stayed up there. Then, at the end of the week, the weekend, there was a dinner, and trophies were awarded. We got to stay to the dinner because we always came in second.

HM: So you finish with that. You're the assistant instructor. And that goes on for how long?

BB: Basically, until I was ready to get out. They had what they call in the Army -- well, while I'm in, somewhere along the line there, I take the test for the fire department. I passed, and it came time -- they were going to make some firemen, but I was still in the service.

So they have what they call an "early out" in the service, and some of the reasons you can get out is to meet a job that you might lose if you didn't get out in time; or, if you were from an area with farms and that, you could get out to help your family with --

HM: -- bringing in the crops.

BB: -- bringing in the crops. So I go and I put in for the early-out, and I'll never forget it -- the company sergeant there said to me, "You'll never get this," blah, blah, blah. But it ended up I got it.

HM: Why did he say that?

BB: Well, I guess it's such an unusual thing. Maybe he figured it wasn't legit or something. But it was, I did get out, and I got out on a Friday, and I went to work on a Monday, in the firehouse.

HM: Tell me about the test for the fire department -- because you always hear about how hard it is, just physically, even -- carrying things --

BB: Yes. Well, it's changed quite a bit now. But even back in those days -- back in those days, it was not related to the fire department as it is today. Today they have you doing more practical stuff, more toward the fire -- what you would be doing on the job. Years ago, it was strictly a physical test -- pushups, sit-ups, chin-ups, stuff like that. You passed your -- I think it was the written first. You passed the written first, then you took your physical after the written. Yeah. The written came first, and I'll never forget it. I took it in Demarest High School, and they would come out -- they came out with a bunch of cards in their hands, they would go through the cards, and just yell out the name -- who passed, who failed, and that. I was so anxious to -- I was very fortunate, very happy that I passed. One fellow -- Carmine Gullo -- was a fire fighter. I'll never forget -- he was going to be promoted to Captain when I came out of the Army. He knew the family, he knew my sisters and that. He would keep calling, saying, "When is Billy getting out? When is Billy getting out?" Because he was anxious to get promoted. Finally, that's just what happened. The day that I got on the job, he was being promoted.

HM: Your fates were tied.

RF: So what year was that, when you joined the Fire Department?

BB: Nineteen-sixty.

RF: And what firehouse were you assigned to?

BB: Oh -- we got some good stories with that! Oh, god, what they didn't do to me.

Observer Highway. I started at Observer Highway.

RF: Which is like two blocks from your house, or less?

BB: Yes. Yes.

RF: Where you grew up.

BB: Yes.

RF: Did you live at home when you came back?

BB: No, no. Because I was married. We stayed some months -- just getting married, we stayed with my in-laws, four stories up, on Willow.

HM: Still carrying those bags.

BB: Right. Then I went to -- my brother-in-law and my sister had a house on 9th Street. My brother in law was a policeman. Two brothers-in-law (Eddie Radigan and Nick DePalma) were police, and the other one was a Stevens graduate (Anthony Herenda); he was an engineer. So we lived with my brother-in-law Eddie on 9th Street.

HM: And you were living there when you joined the force.

BB: Right.

HM: So what was the Observer Highway firehouse like? You said you had stories.

BB: Oh, yeah, funny, funny stories -- with the rookie, you know, when you come in. Well, the first

thing, when you're a rookie, when you come in, somebody there has to be detailed out to make room for you. So you had to get over that first -- you were the stranger in the house and that. But they were good about it. But the first night you were on house watch, the first time. You don't go down there right away, but the first time I was down, you stay on the apparatus floor, and basically you're in charge. If somebody were to come in and report a fire and that, or when the alarms come in, you had to let them know what the alarm was, when they started to come down the pole holes and that. But when I went down there, I actually find myself down there and I'm on watch -- and you could sleep down there. They had cots set up and that. Maybe 1:00 in the morning I hear, "Bing." Then it would stop. A half hour later, "Bing," again. I'm a rookie, I'm scared. What's going on? Is it haunted, this house?

So I go upstairs, I go up quiet, and everybody's in the bunk room, the lights are out. They're not movin' or nothin'. Who's snoring? I say okay. I go back. I go down again. "Bing." I hear this thing, "Bing." Finally, I realize something was going on. What they did was -- they were in bed, and they had a cord going from one guy's bed, down the pole hole, and it was attached to the fire engine. They were laying there like this, pulling this

bell every so often on me. Yeah. They were characters. All [unclear] guys.

Then another time, I started at 6:00 at night. I was having a cup of coffee. One guy comes out, "Hey, Cap, Happy Birthday," and gives the captain a nice, beautiful gift and everything. The next guy comes out, "Hey, Cap, Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday," they all do it. Now I'm feeling this big, because nobody told me about the birthday party, right? There wasn't a birthday party. They just did it to bust me.

HM: Did you jump to it, that you went and got a present?

BB: No, no. We just had a few words about it, all in fun. Yeah. [Unclear] Walter Schlicker was one of the guys -- in those days, when you were in the truck, which was the hook and ladder, you rode on the side, no covering, no nothing. By the time you got to the fire, in the winter, your eyes were watering from the cold and everything. So Walter says to me, "Come here, Bill. You stay in front of me, and I'll watch and make sure you're okay; that you don't slip off this thing." It took me about two months to realize that I was buffing the wind for

Walter, behind me. Walter was taking advantage of my big head, and his eyes weren't tearing. Well, laugh!? Then another guy tells me there were two five-gallon containers back by the "tillerman." The one fellow said to me, "Oh, those are spare gasoline, in case we run out of gas with the truck." But they weren't, they were foam for the foam operation we had. But he got in trouble, because to tell me something as crazy as that -- I guess I should've said in the beginning, it was like having a second family. Me wanting to have the job, when I finally got it, then I was -- what's the word? Overzealous, I guess. I always used to be doing something, whether it was maintenance of tools -- I used to like to paint, and every company had a different color, that showed that those tools belonged to that particular company. Of course, they had to be freshened up every so often. So this one day -- and you should only do a couple at a time, so they have a chance to dry and that. But I would go overboard, and sure enough, we'd get a working fire -- and I was using silver. Everybody had silver paint all over their gloves.

Well, you know what they were saying to me! Everybody had this silver paint on them. And one time -- I never cooked, because I was terrible. I used to maybe go to the store, and that was my limit. Of course, I would help

washing the dishes and that. But this one time we were going to have a barbecue out back, in the back there at that little street behind the firehouse there. We were going to have chopped meat -- we were going to have hamburgers and that. I go to the store, I get the meat. I don't cook; somebody else is doing the cooking. Now, all of a sudden, it starts raining. So we pull the grill inside, we close the door -- well, all the smoke was going out the firehouse windows, to the point that the captain got so upset he was going outside, walking around the firehouse, so nobody would think the firehouse was on fire. Of course, I heard about that, too, with the fat and everything in it-- the meat I picked up.

RF: So that particular firehouse was called The Island?

BB: Not at that time. They gave it the nickname more recently than that. Yes -- The Island.

RF: And just so people know -- how did it get that name?

BB: Just because of the way it's situated, on that little triangle. It was out by itself like that. It did seem like it was kind of out by itself. That was an exciting place to work because you got a load of car accidents down there, too. There was one -- we had a little bench outside the firehouse, and there was one time that the guys were out on the bench, and, of course, somebody came in and right up, where the bench was here -- it crushed the bench, and the car wound up, up on top of the bench -- everybody got away without getting hurt. Then they would come out of Jersey City, and not realize, and just drive right straight ahead, over that island. And they would just go right across there. Then they made the island a little wider, and made it a little more obvious.

RF: So now you can't really cut through there. But at one point they did, and they had accidents. That's why it [unclear].

HM: Were some firehouses busier than others? Was that one considered a very busy firehouse?

BB: Yes. Usually, the downtown area is busier than uptown. In fact, the uptown firehouse, at one

time, got the nickname of "Hollywood," because they ran a little bit less. The truck company in the center of town -- [unclear] there were actually three truck companies, three hooks and ladders, and the one in the center of the town, that rode on everything. That rode both ways. It rode with the downtown --

Track #2

BB: -- companies and it rode with the uptown companies, as well. Truck #1 and Engine #2.

HM: So you're talking about the one that's on --

BB: -- on high school -- Clinton Street. Yes. They would have the most runs of anyone, back in those days.

HM: Because they were going to all places. And you were just talking about the car accidents. Were there different kinds of incidents for different houses? Like did you have more car accidents that you had to deal with, in addition to -- ?

BB: Well, just because of the location of the house.

HM: Are there any memorable fires that you want to recall?

BB: I think maybe just a general statement up front -- because a lot of people ask what were the worst fires that you had. Some of the larger fires were not the worst. The worst fires and the toughest -- I feel, my opinion -- to be extinguished is the one that's in a one-room bedroom, that sets in an apartment house that's tightly sealed by its construction and that, and you don't get the normal means to ventilate a fire like that. So, in a lot of respects, it's more difficult to put that out. The big one that you see, with all the flame coming out through the roof and that, that kind of restricts you to the outside, so you're using larger streams, larger instruments to produce the massive streams. In most cases, those larger ones, you get the less injuries in that. But, again, the worst one, again, is, of course, where you find a victim. That's something that nobody on the job will ever forget, as long as you live. That's the one you remember. Again,

most times it was an inside fire, where it was difficult to get at it.

HM: Because Hoboken had -- not so much now, but had a frame-house versus brick-house divide --

BB: Oh, yeah. That's why the downtown area, you were busier down here because that was the type of home that was down in the center of the city.

HM: And the frame houses, I would assume, they burn --

BB: -- much faster. Much faster. Yes. Back in the early days they had kerosene stoves, and kerosene stoves were like a bomb. It would start in the person's apartment. They'd get nervous, and they might throw the tank, or, actually, the stove itself out in the hallway. Then that would help start the rest of the house on fire.

HM: So you were at that firehouse -- you said you started in '60. And you were there how long?

BB: I'm just trying to think. I went on in '60. I'm just trying to think when I became a captain. I think you had to be on three years before you could take the test, then I waited just about to the end of the list before I was promoted. So probably six years later I was promoted to captain. Actually, in my career, you probably worked in every house, but I was mostly in a truck company, which was the hook-and-ladder company. I went, at times, from downtown to uptown, again staying mostly in the truck companies. I worked a short time in 8th Street, in that truck company, as well.

HM: So in 1966, you became around -- you became a captain.

BB: Right.

HM: I came to Hoboken in 1979, and that's when those fires started to happen.

BB: Those condo conversions.

HM: Do you mind if I ask you about that time?

BB: No. No -- because everybody does. It was just a load of large fires that were started, and it seemed to be in the building that eventually became condos. We found out that it was easier to convert to condos when the buildings were empty. But arson is an extremely difficult thing to prove, and as much as you talked about it -- and during that time period, I don't think anybody was convicted of arson.

HM: Nor later.

BB: No.

HM: Ever. But I always wondered -- I'm glad you're willing to talk about it -- what it felt like to be on the force then, knowing that people were setting fires, or believing that they might be setting fires?

BB: It was tough for us, but it was tough for these people who lived in these buildings, that were in there. We fought the fire, and when you first pull up you don't even think of that as far as who started the fire or why it's burning; you've just got to do the same thing. And

for the most part, Hoboken and the surrounding towns -- we were inside firefighters, where you went in to fight the fire. You actually tried to get at the seat of the fire. When you get in trouble and you don't do it properly, you set up your lines and you work from outside, shooting in windows -- that's when the fire gets ahead of you. So you're inside, you're inside doing your job, and I'd say that 80% of the time you pulled up, and somebody was always yelling, "There's somebody in the building! There's somebody in the building!" and a lot of times you found out, later on, they were out. But you had to attack the fire, and you had to listen to what they were yelling to you -- that there was possibly somebody in there.

Again, that was the difficult part -- if it was in a back bedroom. We had guys -- when I was a young rookie, the macho image was still in effect. Guys were reluctant to wear protective breathing masks and that apparatus. We had guys who could stand in a roaring fire, smoke and everything, and they just had the ability to withstand that. The bad part of that is, a lot of them didn't live that long into retirement because they took that beating during their young careers. Today, thank god, it's changed to a point where they're not allowed to enter a building unless they're properly equipped. The safety

factors are much more important, to this day. Years back, some of the older deputy chiefs at the time, their expression, or one of the expressions, was "Gumps." "Get in there you gumps, and let's get this out." "Gump" seemed to be what we were called. Sometimes you got the feeling that you started the fire, because they were a little bit more boisterous, and would yell, "Get in there! Get this done! Get that done!" They believed in -- what was it? "Iron men in wooden ships." That's what they wanted you to be.

But the equipment and everything is all changed. It's much better. It's much more improved. The safety device that is terrific now is that heat-sensitive device that will help you locate a fire, help you locate a victim. This stuff is unbelievable. While I was on, we got involved with a forcible entry tool that was called a "rabbit tool." We got the information from New York City. The difficult part of getting into the doors, an apartment door, leading back to the projects -- those doors were difficult to open. In the more modern apartments, the doors are built -- most of them are metal doors, and they were tough to get into. So this "rabbit" tool was a hydraulic system, very small, and when we got the information from New York, they could open several doors with the "rabbit" tool before you got one open without this tool. It was just

a little pump affair. You'd put this, like a blade, near the lock. You'd pump on this pump to create this hydraulic pressure, and that would snap the door away from its jamb, and you could get in much, much quicker. It's still in use today. Maybe it's changed its name, but that's in use. All the companies have this heat-sensitive device now. One very good thing is that when they do have a working fire, they'll bring in an additional company. It's actually a company that stands by. They call it a "fast truck," in some cases. They'll stand by, outside the building. They'll have all their gear on, and have other gear with them, and they'll be ready to go, in case there's a report of a civilian in trouble, or a report of a firefighter in trouble. They'll be there, on standby. They don't get taken in to do anything else. They're there just for strictly emergency reasons -- extra emergency reasons.

HM: So they're like the medical team, you're saying.

BB: No, no, not medical. Just rescue -- to go in physically, get somebody out, or if there's an additional problem, and we need some attention immediately --

HM: Someone who understands how --

BB: -- rather than have to take two men from a roof, or two men from the basement, to go do what these guys are on standby to do that.

HM: To return, briefly, to the '70s-early '80s problem, what I was thinking, in terms of the arson question, is the concern that there was an accelerant. Here you are, you're a firefighter, and you know someone wanted to burn this. I just wanted to get back to that.

BB: A few times the accelerant was found before it was actually used. Somebody would report that they smelled gasoline, and sure enough, you'd get there, and the hallway would be loaded with this accelerant; but, for whatever reason, it was never lit.

HM: So the mood of the firefighters -- it had to be -- not that you go into a fire -- if you're a firefighter you can't be afraid, but to know that that's what's going on -- did it change how people -- ?

BB: I'm sure, in my case or anybody's case, you'd like to have the individual who set it; you'd like to have your hands around his neck -- at least to make sure you got a hold of him so he could be put in a proper place. But when you pulled up to the house, there was just too much to think about, to do, without worrying about who started it. You had to react the same way, whether it would be for arson or whatever, because, usually, there were civilian involved. So the actions, and your job, was the same. Then, after, it would be, "Yeah, that smelled funny," or the flames, sometimes, would be a different color, and you'd realize -- then if you got that, if you did suspect anything like that, you didn't touch anything. You tried to keep everything where it was, in case there was evidence. You didn't want it to get caught up with some of the other stuff you were doing.

HM: And a whole separate team of people comes in after that.

BB: Right. Again, it's so involved, it's difficult to -- at one point they even had our guys, the inspection bureau were qualified with pistols, and they actually carried guns at one point.

HM: When was this?

BB: Around that time period. Like when they had to do investigations and that. But that didn't last too long, because we were afraid they were going to shoot one another. Because, actually, that's a police deal. As far as investigations and that, it's more with the police, with the investigations and that. Even a bomb scare -- bomb scares, we used to go in and walk around. But, really, that again is police, and they've changed that now. The police come, they come with their dogs and everything. The Port Authority will come with the dogs. That's the true way. Years ago we got bomb scares mostly in schools and that, and you really didn't treat it -- it was a different era. Now, today, you have to treat a bomb scare much more differently.

HM: Take it seriously.

BB: Much more seriously.

RF: I was thinking about the arson also. So you're saying that in the '70s and '80s we have all these fires -- who would investigate those fires?

BB: We had our own inspection bureau that investigated.

RF: That's special training.

BB: That's what I was going to say. Some of them would go to special classes, to give them a more in-depth study of it, what to look for and that. Then you had your county that would come in, then you had your state association that had to investigate it, as well. They would all take part in it. But no matter how many -- well, I shouldn't say that. They did get to a point where they could tell where something started. They could tell by the depth of the burn, maybe, what type of material was used to start it. They do get good at it. But, still, who started it? When did he start it? That's a tough thing to prove.

RF: Right. And Hoboken is still a relatively small city. So would they have someone assigned just for that, as an ongoing thing? Or is it on an as-needed basis?

BB: Well, the inspection bureau there -- there is one up there that would more or less be handling that end of it.

RF: Is that the county?

BB: No, no -- within the department. So whenever there is doubt, or whenever they think something should be investigated further, our own inspection guys would go down there; take photographs; they'd try to get what they could from it; maintain the evidence; not touch anything, and then bring somebody else in, even, to look at it again.

RF: How did the police get connected to that?

BB: I think the police end is more for the security end of it, Bob. Let me think. I'm trying to think if they physically -- no. I say, arson is strictly fire department. As far as the evidence, maintaining evidence and that, it would strictly be fire.

RF: I often wonder if that type of theft thing occurred again, would we be more prepared to investigate it, and deal with it head-on.

BB: Oh, yeah. I think they've put more emphasis on it now, because everything has changed. The same way with a bomb scare -- they're doing them properly now. They're bringing in dogs -- because everything is changing. Years ago, you wouldn't even think of that. You'd make the kids go out on the sidewalk. We would do a fast walk-through and that would be it, because you didn't think.

HM: I remember around that time period, too -- unless I'm mixing it up in my mind -- there was an attempt to close the Island. Right? Wasn't there a protest? That people protested downtown people because they wanted to close that firehouse?

BB: Yes. I could do a whole chapter on Stevie Capiello and myself -- because I was the union president for fire officers.

RF: Let's hear about that.

HM: Well, tell me what time period that was, because, as I recall, they were together, in my mind, while all this stuff was happening, and then they wanted to close a firehouse!

BB: Well, it was always budget time, and they would always try to --

HM: But look what was happening! Wasn't it the same time frame?

BB: Even later. It was maybe there and later. But the thing was, it was being done for taxes and stuff. The threat was there. They always wanted to close -- and the business down there was that that house was in such tough shape that it was going to cost them a lot to do it over -- which they finally did it over -- which made it more practical to keep now. But that place -- sure, it was condemned, and we stayed in there fifteen years after it was condemned. Because it's location is ideal.

HM: I just remember that time period, and thinking it was such a crazy thing to consider.

BB: I don't want to get into too much of it because --

HM: We don't have to go there.

BB: No, no. I would be glad to touch it, but it involves Capiello, and he's up in age now. His big thing was he wanted to make public safety officers. He wanted the cop and the fireman to do the same job. He thought you could ride around in a cop's car and fight a fire when you needed. It was a big, big -- to this day, he still is upset that he never gained that.

But they tried it. They tried it in Clifton, they tried it somewhere else, but in every town it was tried it went back to normal, especially in a town like Hoboken. Maybe Clifton, a little quieter type city, you could do it. We went round and round with that, but, thank god, that never came to be.

HM: And that was connected to it? Or was that a separate -- ?

BB: That was just one part of -- one of the battles. In sixteen years there were a load of battles. In negotiations, I kissed the saint in his office and everything. He was a character, and I was a character, I guess. One of my best friends, Captain Lou Muraca, was always there to make sure I didn't go too far. But we did a lot. Again, that's something -- we picketed, we did different things to make the job what it is today. Because years ago, we would get a \$200 raise, and everything would go up. Your pension would go up, [unclear] would go up, and you wound up coming home with an extra ten dollars in your paycheck. Not until they came up with arbitration and stuff like that, and that's where it became -- where you had an ability to fight for what you wanted, and the path to go. Years ago, you just got the crumbs that were left over.

HM: That's why it's good to have a union. People say all these things about unions -- my father, and his father, also, helped start the teachers' union.

BB: Without that you had nothing.

HM: You had nothing. I remember reading about, in the McFeeley years, the firefighters and the

police, they liked him because he gave them equipment and stuff. But he also had a tight rein on them because there was no union, there was no civil service, so if you didn't do what he wanted --

BB: They locked the cops -- they locked the cops in a room at City Hall because they were going to vote for the other side.

HM: That's correct.

BB: My brother-in-law Eddie was one of the cops who was locked in the room.

HM: Who was?

BB: My brother-in-law.

HM: Are you talking about the whole thing -- the 1946-'47 -- interesting. I've been reading a lot about that. That's when it was Fitzpatrick-- because they all, when they overturned the 1947 election, the "fusion" -- these are the people you're talking about, right?

BB: Yeah. Yeah.

HM: "Heroic cops who fought --" Did they beat them up?

BB: I don't know if they beat them.

HM: They said they did.

BB: But, yeah -- who was the mayor?

HM: McFeeley was the mayor, and his brother was the chief of police. They wanted to support -- let me get this right -- de Sapio? Bob?

RF: The next mayor. De Sapio. But then they changed the former government, too, right around there --

HM: But Chief McFeeley didn't want civil service. He didn't want that, because he couldn't control them. So that's what they fought over. And they did all kinds of things [unclear].

RF: So how many years were you union president?

BB: Sixteen. Those were interesting times. For the most part I enjoyed the support of the members and I was kept in line by a great friend of mine, Deputy Chief Bobby Moore. And others.

RF: You have to be tough, right? Looking back, how would you describe your approach?

BB: My approach -- we did some things, but at the same time we kept in mind that we worked for the people of Hoboken, and we would do a lot of things on our own. You'd get something at a church -- they needed help with odd jobs and that, we would take on ourselves, just to show that you're not -- you weren't just interested in yourself. You'd do other, odd things. Years ago, the jobs we have today they wouldn't -- we would get flooded crawl spaces that you used to have to crawl through, with human waste flowing in and everything, and you would go into this stuff to try to reach an electrical meter. Today, it's all different because you're thinking differently.

Right down the block here used to be Geismar's [Department Store], and they had a water tank up on the top. Well, it had a leak in it, and every winter the leak would still drip to the point that it built up icicles that used to be 6"-8" in diameter, and maybe 20 ft. high along the metal supports. We used to have to go up, periodically, and chop these icicles away, and make sure they didn't come down on the street and kill anybody. There were odd jobs.

Then, the big one always was the cat up in the tree. In all the years, anytime a fireman ever went up for the cat in the tree, I don't think we ever got the cat down. The cat always jumped by himself, and the cat always hit, got up, ran away, and was fine.

RF: But you score points.

BB: They would keep calling! I should go back to my mother-in-law, at 709 Willow Avenue -- the bad part of being there was, because I was on the job, whenever her clothesline broke, I would have to go four-stories up in the air to put a new clothesline up for her. The top of that pole was like two inches in diameter, and it was

shaky. But I'm a fireman, you should go up and fix my pole. Which I did. [Laughter]

RF: I want to ask you to relay a story about an event that was tragic. You told me once about the Maxwell House story. Could you tell that story?

BB: That was tragic, and an unusual thing, too. This was when I was stationed up at 14th Street. We'd stand outside. We got to know the neighbors. This one Spanish fellow was going to work one night, it was like 3:00 in the afternoon or something, and we were kidding him about taking the fire department job. He said something like, "Nah, that job is too dangerous. I don't want that job." So he goes on to work. By his attire, we knew he worked at Maxwell House.

I guess it was 1:00 in the morning we get a call, special call, and a special call meant it could have been a water leak, it could have been a non-fire emergency. That's basically what a special call is -- a gas leak or something. But we get a special call to Maxwell House, second floor, man fell in the tank. So now, on the way around, we get from the radio, "Make sure you come in with your breathing apparatus." Now, instead of it being just a

tank, where you had to pull somebody out, now you're taking breathing apparatuses, there's gas or something leaking that was involved with it. We didn't know until we got there.

But when we went in -- and I'll describe it to you, just to give you the picture -- I'm saying second floor, maybe third floor -- we got up to the third floor, and there were these big tanks, almost as big as this table (8 feet in diameter). But in the center, about here, there was almost like a porthole, and that was open, and there was nothing in the way but this hole. What happened -- this had something to do with the instant coffee procedure. The tank was here, but then it went through the floor, and was maybe twenty feet long down on the next floor. They had propellers in the bottom that caused these things to mix and whatever. Then they would drain it out down below, to go somewhere else.

It winds up that, periodically, they had a little cup on a chain, and they would drop this cup in there, take out samples to test something with the process, and what happened was that this cup got caught on one of the propellers, and the chain wrapped around. It winds up that this guy, that we said went to work, he wound up being asked to work overtime. So instead of coming home at 12:00,

he was on the second shift, and I guess this cup got hung up, and he wanted to get this cup off without getting in trouble, or whatever the case was.

So in this hole was a ladder going down, and evidently he went down a couple of steps on that ladder, it was very hot, and lack of air, and he went into the tank. The foreman, a much bigger guy, saw this happen. He came running over, he went down the ladder to try to get the guy, and he went in. So when we get there -- the time involved and that -- they're saying, "Cap, there's two guys down in there." You looked down in the hole, and all you saw was like beer foam. They had shut the machinery off, and this heat and everything and this foam -- you couldn't even see them at this point. They were down at the bottom of this tank. So it got to the point where you knew you weren't dealing with a victim, you were dealing with somebody who was dead already.

Now comes the unusual part of it. The hole was small that you had to go down. You knew you had to go down with some kind of protective breathing apparatus on. The ones we had on the trucks were too big to get down into that hole. They were too awkward to work with. But we did have little, smaller bottles, little small ones, that you would throw over quicker, and they were good for like

fifteen minutes. So those were the ones we used to go down. Basically, what you did was tie them up and bring them out through the hole, one at a time. It was unusual, and a shame, because of the circumstances -- where it was over a lousy cup with a piece of chain, that caused them to lose their lives.

HM: Also, you had seen the man in the early afternoon.

BB: Then the next time we went up to Maxwell House, of course, they had welded three pipes over those holes, so that could never happen again. Was the guy right in what he did? No, he should have never did it over something as simple as that. And the poor foreman -- now here's a foreman who wants to help out, and he lost his life -- same thing. Over the cup. Which was unusual.

But yeah, that was one of the more unusual ones for sure. The fire, the one we thought would never go out, was the Levelor [blinds] fire, when that building went. That was a doozy. That spread from building to building. That was scary. Everybody was in there. We had Jersey City all over the place. I think Secaucus was even in that one.

HM: Why was that one so volatile? Was it because there was stuff in there that was -- ?

BB: No, it was the building itself.

HM: It was the construction of the building.

BB: If you have a photograph of before the fire, and it was just like the old roofs that you see. Actually, the shingles they used in those days were strictly tar. The building itself was wood, the whole building was wood, and it was a block square. Once that got started -- we couldn't even get close, the heat was so intense. Forty cars were destroyed in a parking lot across the street from it -- forty cars.

HM: That's intense.

BB: We even went up to the steeple in St. Ann's church, to make sure the sparks didn't get involved with that -- that's how much it was blowing all over the place.

RF: There were fires all over town, from the embers.

BB: Yeah. Jersey City -- there you've got a picture downstairs of them jumping off their truck because the wall had just caved in. They were all for helping out, and they jumped for their safety. That was one of the bigger ones in the city. The pier fires -- that was something else. But again, after the pier fire was down and the crowds went away, the toughest part was getting underneath the pier, to extinguish the fire. We used to go up to Todd's shipyards and borrow a rowboat, just to get underneath. Back in those days, you didn't have any boats. [Interruption]

HM: That's amazing -- basically, to get the equipment, you need to get under the pier. If you don't have that equipment, you had to go to Todd.

BB: We went to Todd at times, sure. The fireboats from New York were good, but they were too big. They couldn't go under the pier. They would do as much as they could. They would actually shoot their heavy streams

into the river, so that would splash up underneath; but, eventually, you had to go underneath --

HM: It's amazing. Just think how valuable those piers are, and that that wasn't something that was kept in mind -- that there was a possibility they could burn. Maybe they figure if there's a fire, you'll just have to rebuild, if you're going to rebuild.

BB: Some of them had the concrete floors, but they were held up by the wooden supports underneath. Oh, yeah. And you didn't go underneath with a big hose, you went underneath with the smaller hose, that you could get maneuverability in that. But that was the only way you could put them completely out.

RF: Could you tell us a little bit about the fire museum, and how that got started?

BB: Yeah, that was just -- again, there were a few fellows who were interested in maintaining the history of the department. We got started in a very, very small way. The last outfit that was in downstairs was the city's water department. They parked their trucks in there.

We had a temporary wall set up -- plywood -- not plywood but a sheetrock wall that separated it, and when you wanted to come up here for meetings, you'd walk through this long corridor to get up here. When they went out -- I think they left because the central garage was completed. That's how we got to get the whole building, at the time. We started off small, and everything that was done in here was done by the members themselves. Nobody received any pay.

HM: And it started when? What year did it start?

BB: I would say '79, when we started, when they actually left. We could probably check to see when the central garage opened up, but it had to be around that time. We started off slow, downstairs. You can see some of the older pictures -- there were very few pictures on the walls downstairs, because we started off -- a lot of the pictures -- I think Bob asked a question -- there's a lot of pictures up here with Fred Stanewitz, Sr. on them. Fred was assigned -- because he was injured, he was assigned to be a dispatcher up on Hudson Street -- which was fire headquarters in those days -- and at the time, they were starting to get ready to rip down that firehouse. He

noticed that there were a load of photographs in the dumpster, outside the place. He went out, actually got in this dumpster, and saved a lot of the photos that are on display here. Without him, a lot of the history of the job would have been lost. He's since retired, but he was very helpful, and critical -- critical to keeping this the way it is now.

RF: Is he still living?

BB: Is he living? Yes. His son just retired. His son was on the job. But Senior was big in this. He was very active in the parade that was created for the 125th anniversary parade. Freddy was the mainstay with that one, as well. There are so many. As far as who did what in here -- somebody said we should put up a plaque with all the names on it, but it would be enormous, the plaque. So I say the guys who did it know who did it. There were some that did more than others. You start mentioning names, and I know I'd forget somebody. But my assistant curator, firefighter Joe Kennedy, has been extremely helpful over the years.

HM: You'd make a plaque, and then you'd have to add on.

BB: Yeah. Yeah. Like I say, the guys who did something know it, and the guys who didn't do anything know it, too. [Laughter] But the guys were good. We started ripping out downstairs. We painted the whole place. That was another one of my functions. At one point, I guess, I must have had five different jobs. The fire department was first. I was union president for sixteen years. I officiate high-school football; I still do it to this day. And I had a painting business.

RF: And painter. And curator.

BB: And painter, and the museum. Yeah. It was busy. I was on thirty-one years. I'll betcha thirty of those years I always had a second job. It was just the nature of the beast. I had two daughters, Corinne and Allison, and you wanted to do the best you could for them, so you put in the time. My wife was supportive (at times. At times she hollered at me).

But getting back to this place, what made you feel good was that you'd see the end result. And

everybody who came up here worked -- most of the guys worked with enthusiasm, and were happy to help out.

[Unclear] about no pay. If a guy worked here for a long period of time, maybe we'd buy him lunch and that, but that was basically it. Anybody who thought they were going to get paid, didn't get paid.

The early pictures show you where there were very few pictures on the walls. But people were good. All over town, the people would come in and say, "I just bought a house. I found this picture in the closet," then they brought the stuff here. You'd be surprised how many people helped out that way. Now that we're here, we're getting a lot of great-great grandchildren in coming in and looking for their grandparents and stuff. We have the books that go back to the day the fire department started. We have books that go back to 1846, when it started. One book [of volunteer firemen] goes from then up until 1891, and that's when it became a paid department. Then that book, from 1891, it contains the names of everybody up until the present day. Everybody who comes on is in that book, and basically, years ago, it said his age when he came on; what he did before he came on; and then there's a listing some places they maintain, what companies he was detailed to and from. It's some book.

In fact, David has the one book from 1846 to 1891. I have it at home -- big letters on my desk -- David, this book and that book [unclear].

RF: He's a good caretaker.

Then one of your dreams has been to do certain renovations, which you're doing right now.

BB: Yes.

RF: Can you talk about them a little bit.

BB: Well, just to, as we did inside, show the history of the department -- trying to show the exterior of the building and how it was in 1881, when it was opened -- we're in the process now of completing that. The first thing was to go in front of the Historical [Preservation] Commission, to get the approval. They were very good. They were very supportive, and very detailed. They were very detailed on what had to be done, and what we had to present to them. We did that, and took two meetings, and one -- not for any other reason -- but it was quite involved, even just to get windows replaced, and stuff like

that. This guy over here was very helpful to me because he said, "Did you ever try Donald, down at General Lumber?"

And that was it. Because I was getting to the point where it wasn't going good, and I'm bad on the computer. Everything -- the doors were in Oshkosh, this was here, this was there. I went down to Donald, and in fifteen or twenty minutes, "No problem. No problem. We've got this guy, we've got that guy," and that's just what's happening. The people he recommended to do the exterior of the building, they were unbelievable in the way they --

HM: He knows his stuff.

BB: He knew the people, he knew who you could depend on to do it. These guys come in -- nothing in Hoboken's on the level, but they did a beautiful job with the windows, the door -- it's really going to look sharp. The thing that will finish it off will be that overhead door, when we get that put in. That'll finish it off nice. Then we have the plaque already made up. We're dedicating the restoration to all the deceased members of the Hoboken Fire "Exempt" Association. That's all done. Ray Guzman's been great with us. He actually did all our labels and our stationery. This thing is on everything we own.

But yes, it's really coming out sharp, and we're taking care of it ourselves, we're paying for it ourselves, and it's coming out of an association that's more like a fraternal organization. It's not dealing with the unions, it's not dealing with negotiations. Everybody on the job belongs to it, and pays his small dues. So it was, the quickest way, but I did deal with attempting to get grants over the years, and I always ran into dead ends. It just got to the point that I was tired of trying, and I presented it to the men, and the men supported 100% that we take it out of our own. Eventually, in four or five years, with the dues structure, that money would be replaced anyway. It was just laying there; it wasn't being used for anything else. I think everybody's going to be happy with it, now that it's done.

HM: Well, things like changing the windows, your heat bills will go down and everything else. So it all comes back in the end.

BB: Oh, yeah. Yeah. But the money was there.

HM: Well, it's a great use of that money.

BB: I think so. I think most of the guys -- everybody remarks, now that they see the changes --

HM: I've seen pictures that Bob's taken of little kids who come in -- and, you know, all these boys go through their firefighter stage. Their faces --

RF: Billy's still in his firefighter stage, so be careful.

BB: I had a big phase. Yeah. What I didn't mention, and should be mentioned -- as a kid -- the kids in the neighborhood -- you asked what we did. Most times, if the fire engines went out, we went down to the firehouse and slid down the poles. They used to come back -- of course, back in those days, when you were coming back from an alarm, you rang the bell. We'd hear the bell coming, and we'd take off before they got back. A couple times it got close, where we almost got booted in the rear end. But one thing I can say -- regardless of what was laid out or anything, we never touched anything. It was slide down the pole and get out of there. But there was never anything missing, or anything like that. The same way with the

"active" men -- and I'm sure it's the same way. A guy's wallet could be out somewhere, left out, and money could be left out -- nothing gets taken in the firehouse by each individual member. But don't dare leave your flashlight batteries around, or your gloves -- you might lose them, but money and stuff -- because it's like a family. God forbid, if that ever happened -- we always used to say, "We're going to show that guy how to work a chain saw by holding onto the blade." But it never happened.

RF: Two things that are like symbols of the firehouse but don't exist anymore would be the fire pole and the Dalmatian. Can you talk about them a little?

BB: I was never in a house that -- we had a dog down on Observer Highway at times, but I guess the dog that was shown the most affection was the one on Grand Street, between 4th and 5th. They were mostly all Dalmatians. At one time we had a mutt that was grayish in color, but wasn't a Dalmatian. Some of the guys were really attached to them. Most of the dogs were heavy, because all the different shifts would bring in something from home to feed them. The one that was really shown was Taps. When Taps passed away, they had a big ceremony, and Channel 7

Eyewitness News came over to cover it. He was actually buried below the statue in the park, at 4th Street, across from OLG. That statue was put up in 1891 for the members of the volunteer department. They put up a statue honoring the members who were volunteers.

The funny part -- I think I was off the job already -- that statue, if you notice, has a lantern in the hand of the individual. The lantern disappeared -- whether it rotted away, fell off, or whatever -- and we got the idea one time to replace this lantern. So I called up -- I'll tell you this story but I can't tell you -- I called up the fellow -- we had this apparatus, the engine rebuilt up in Maine. So a very nice man -- I called him up, I said, "Andy, do you think when you come down next time, could you bring us down one of those lanterns? We've got a reason --? And sure enough, the next time he came down, there was the lantern. We put the lantern up and everything. We reinstalled it in the statue, and it's still there, to this day.

I even put inside it -- I put one of these lights, dusk to dawn -- a little light that comes on and goes off. I don't know if it's still working, but it worked at the time.

It was funny. It came out beautiful -- the same type that's in every photo you see of that statue. Like I say, it's still there.

RF: And then the poles in fire houses?

BB: The pole, basically -- there are a couple of them still in use. But for the most part, I think because of the crowded conditions in the buildings now, with the exercise apparatus and that, it got a little too crowded, and most of them have been removed. Even when the firehouse uptown, at 14th Street, was rebuilt after the fire that was up there, that pole was removed and they put in nice staircases, so that you didn't lose that much time.

In a lot of respects -- you notice it more in New York City -- sometimes it doesn't pay to come down from the bunk room, down to the apparatus and get down there that quick; that you still don't have your feelings around you. Sometimes it's better to walk down that flight of steps, to get your bearings, and not be too quick. It's no good to get on an apparatus, with that adrenaline going, too fast. Because that could be dangerous. You want to settle down, and the walk down the steps, for the little time that's lost, it's not going to hurt, I think it would help. The same thing is important when you get off the

apparatus, at the fire scene. You don't want to be running, helter-skelter. That calming effect is good. Sometimes, years ago, like I said, it was, "Get in there and put that out!" That's gone, that element now. You're going there to put it out, but there's a little more attention to your safety, with that. That, I think, is more important than those few extra seconds, sliding down the pole. I think that's why many of the newer firehouses don't have them installed anymore.

RF: A lot of people might not realize the time. It's a job, obviously, but they don't realize the schedule of a fireman. Can you talk about that?

BB: Yes. The schedule has changed. The reason that I came on the job was that way back from when they went from a 56-hour week, they went to a 42-hour week, and that necessitated a lot of firemen to come on the job. That was the time period when I came on -- when they put in the 42-hour system. The 42-hour system was you put in two days, from 8:00 A.M. to 6:00, and you did that twice. You did Monday and Tuesday from 8:00 A.M. to 6:00. Then you were off on Wednesday, and you came in Thursday and Friday, from 6:00 at night to 8:00 in the morning. You did that for

two nights. Then you were off for 72 hours; you were off the following three days. That was the 42-hour shift.

Now the shift they work today is a 24-hour shift. They work on Monday for 24 hours. They're off three days; they come back in and do it again on Friday; then they're off three days again. The disadvantage of that, of course, is if you're on the 24, and you happen to get multiple fires during that 24-hour period. I always relate working a fire to a football game. It's like you're playing two football games at one time, if you're at a working fire. Because the energy you have to have involved with a working fire is unbelievable. That's the danger of the 24-hour shift. But in most cases -- and, again, Hoboken -- the work load in Hoboken has been reduced drastically because of the type of construction now. With the type of construction, with the sprinkler systems installed, standpipe systems installed, and the smoke and carbon monoxide detectors -- all that has helped, and has reduced the work load in Hoboken.

RF: So the 56-hour workweek -- was that something -- was the union involved in changing that? Or what happened there?

HM: To 42, you mean?

RF: Yes.

BB: Yes, the men were involved. They actually went out and the people of the city voted to change to the 42-hour workweek. Because there are buttons here, "Vote for a 42-hour Work Week," and that. It was a regular campaign put on by the men themselves, in the organization.

RF: But it actually went on the ballot, it seems like -- a referendum.

BB: A referendum, yes. And it was approved. But the men, themselves, worked hard to have it passed.

RF: Since you're here 24 hours -- are meals still cooked in the firehouses?

BB: Oh, yes. Meals. That's a good one. I'm glad you mentioned that. I told you the story about the Christmas meal, with the Swedish meatballs? No? Oh, that's a classic.

But yeah, getting back to the meals.

Whatever they cook, everybody that's involved, that's going to eat from that meal, they all chip in X-amount of dollars, to pay for the food they get for that particular shift. Some of the cooks are excellent. Some of the cooks are better than some of the wives' cooking, but you can't say that. But some of the cooks are good.

RF: Who was the best cook in your day, for the whole shebang?

BB: God. Again. Mention that name and you can get in trouble -- because everybody thought they -- but I'll tell you one cook we had, and I'll tell you a good story. His name was Joe Davis. Joe was a good cook, he had a good [unclear], but he had a short temper. A temperamental cook, he was. So on a holiday meal, you went a little bit overboard. You tried to make the meal -- like if you were working Christmas day, you tried to make the meal as nice as it was at home, or the best way you could do it -- turkey -- whatever the case was, on Thanksgiving Day.

So Joe was cooking. I think it was Christmas time, and he was cooking up the whole thing -- appetizers,

main course, everything. He started making Swedish meatballs. I was captain, and Captain Mike Green was with me up there, and we're sneaking over, and we're stealing some of the Swedish meatballs, as Joe was preparing them. Mike said, or I said to Mike, "They're good, but they're a little dry." He says, "Shhh. Don't say nothing. Don't get Joe mad," right? So we ate the Swedish meatballs, we ate the rest of the meal, the next morning a guy comes walking in -- each group had its own locker, food locker. The one guy, Freddy Christians, comes in and he says, "Okay, who's got my plaster of Paris?" Instead of rolling them in flour, he was rolling them in plaster of Paris, the meatballs. We ate every one, and nobody got sick or nothing.

But can you imagine? I should've said that's what he was doing. Well, we laughed. But you had these plastic containers, the flour was in the one, and this guy's plaster of Paris was in the other one. And we ate everything. Ah. God. Stories.

RF: I'm curious. Who's the guy you'd get in trouble mentioning. You said there's another name -- ?

BB: Oh, no, no. Like everybody -- like Angelo Migliaccio -- he thought he was the best cook in the

world. He used to cook for our meetings and everything, our officers' meetings. He was a captain at the time. But then we realized that he's doing all this cooking, and me and poor Captain Paddy Green, we'd be back here washing the dishes, and miss the whole event because we were busy washing up after this guy. So then we went to a caterer, and it's a lot easier.

RF: For the parties.

BB: Yes, for the parties, or for our meetings, our special meetings that we have. But we were the bottle washers, and he'd be -- but a good point would be to mention the communion breakfasts. Also, Sister Rudolpha, who was a nun who was heavily involved with both the police and fire departments.

But getting back to the communion breakfast -- actually, the full title is The Public Safety Department Communion Breakfast -- which means that it involves both the police and fire departments. I'm going to get this date for you. It's still running [unclear] -- 1948 was the first one. It's still going on. I think we did 64 o 65. Could that be right?

HM: And who was sister Adolpha?

BB: Sister Rudolpha.

HM: And what church was she from?

BB: She was actually was involved with St. Mary's Hospital, and she was involved with the Sisters of the Poor. She would always be at police headquarters on payday, collecting. She was always at banks throughout the city, collecting. She'd sit in the vestibules. She got very friendly with both the police and fire departments. We had our community breakfast, then she would, in December -- she used to run a separate one, a little one, in St. Mary's Hospital. She started to run a smaller communion breakfast. Then she retired, and she went up to a home up in Warwick, New York. She was up there in a home. So we decided -- the breakfast that she ran for us -- how about if some of us go up there in December? Because that was Christmastime and Advent. We went up in December, and we would bring buns and stuff up to her, and they would arrange to have the coffee for us. We did 9:00 mass up there, and she got a big kick out of it.

She loved her bottle of German wine. We used to bring her up a special wine. We would pass the hat around the fire department before we went up, and whatever money we had we would give it to her up there, at the home. I know for sure that she probably never used it herself; they probably just kicked it into a fund or something up there. But this went on for about fifteen years. Then we got a call that Sister Rudolpha passed away. So we go up to the funeral mass, and we get there early so we were in this place having a cup of coffee, and we say, "You know, maybe this is a good time to cut this off, now that Sister Rudolpha passed away," blah, blah, blah. So, sure enough, we get there, and this little Irish nun says to us, "This doesn't mean you're going to stop coming up does it?"

So we're now up to 34 years in a row, in Warwick. But the last couple of years, because Warwick is in an area where you've got to be concerned with ice and snow, and December was a bad month -- so the last couple years, we're going up around Easter time now. But this year, I think it'll be at least the 35th year.

HM: She knew what she was doing, Sister Rudolpha.

BB: Yeah. She was a character -- and she liked her wine. She made sure she was the only one to get the envelope from us. She didn't want none of the other nuns to get it. We used to go up there and there'd be 20-25 nuns up there; now the last time up I think there were four or five of them.

HM: Right. Because of retirement. And no one's joining.

BB: No. That's it. But the communion breakfasts, for 60-some odd years, I would venture to say, in the country but definitely in the state, that's the longest-running communion breakfast there's been, that I would think of. Most of them don't even have them anymore, let alone -- and when it got a little slow, and the crowd started to dwindle -- at first it was just men. Now, when it got a little slower, the guys on the committee said, "Hey, maybe it would be a good time to invite the families." So now the wives and some of the kids come, as well.

HM: Make it lively.

BB: Yeah. It's been running well, with the families coming for the last fifteen years or so, and it's worked out well.

HM: So I'm done. Are you done?

RF: Yes, I think so.

HM: We can follow up after, when I read the transcript. Because I'm going to need photographs.

BB: I realize. Yes. Most of the stuff -- like I say, the stuff I hit on -- I think I've got photographs of my father.

RF: Is your father in that picture?

BB: No. But that's basically the same idea. That's what they did. Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig are standing in the middle of this team. I don't have one here, but I have copies of it.

RF: You talked a long time, by the way. Your voice is steady, though.

BB: I lose my voice, though. Everybody says,
"What? You got a cold?"

END OF INTERVIEW