

## **Chester Hensley**

### **Side 1:**

[1/1] He went to a boarding school in Yancey County and then lived in West Asheville.

[1/15] At age 21, in 1926, he started work at the Fire Department on Pack Square. He describes the 1927 fire in the cotton mill area and the fire on Patton Ave (see file).

[1/38] There were two crews working 14-hour shifts. The police department is next to the fire department (see file).

[1/63] On Merrimon Avenue the fire drill tower (built after he went to work) is still used for training. [I learned today that another tower has replaced it].

[1/72] He always got along well with the fire chief. [Jennings C. (J. C.) Fitzgerald]

[1/78] He always lived close to the fire house but for the past 50 (?) years has lived in West Asheville. Duckett is across the street. He wrote for the paper. [Alonzo L. Duckett]

[1/87] Firemen built his house following blueprints his wife bought from a catalogue for \$25. [Edith Hensley]

[1/103] When he was dispatcher he stayed at the station in Pack Square. The chief had a separate car Duckett was chief for a short time (see file). [J. C. Fitzgerald, Alonzo L. Duckett]

[1/115] When the bell rang the men went down the brass pole. He would be upstairs and would hit the bell three times. When he got a radio he could talk to the substation.

[1/126] Every person had an assigned place (i.e. ladder engine I).

[1/131] He made a file of every street in the city and he could tell the drivers exactly where to go.

[1/147] He describes the fire fighters' uniform and how they had to dress so they could be in the trucks in 2-3 seconds.

[1/157] There were many kinds of fires and emergencies such as rescues.

[1/165] He describes different equipment for fighting fires and training.

[1/170] He was captain of the Merrimon Ave. station. The drill tower is 6 stories high. Scaling ladders are used [Note: this is station #4 - no longer used].

[1/182] The fire stations always had a mascot who ran errands. Red came back after the war and worked on Merrimon Ave. (see his tape). [J. W. "Red" Hoyle]

[1/198] Every three years the firemen had a convention (to Carolina Beach or Black Mountain etc.). There was training but it was looked on as a little paid for vacation.

[1/208] The training was similar to military training after WWII.

[1/215] He was promoted to be a training officer. Fitzgerald [Fire Chief] lived on Broadway and Merrimon. [J. C. Fitzgerald]

[1/227] False alarms were frequent. Sometimes the culprit was caught.

[1/237] Buildings are carefully checked for arson.

[1/247] He describes cold winters and concern about falling walls and ceilings. [His heater turns on - noise].

[1/261] Different kinds of fires are discussed.

[1/267] The work was hard but he would do it again.

[1/276] He didn't belong to the union until later in his career.

[1/287] He describes the firehouse - work (from 8-12 the floors are cleaned and engine shined) to relaxation (pool tables, radio, cards, and later TV). Showers and beds were always available.

[1/324] Officers didn't drive trucks. Dispatchers had to stay at their desk 8 hours and couldn't mingle with others.

[1/348] There were an average of 4-5 fires a week but there were a few days when there was no call.

[1/417] Most of the officers had served in WWI. The procedures were strictest at headquarters and there was a roll call every night. Men came on at 6 p.m. and stayed until 8 a.m.

[1/443] He describes the Chesterfield Mill fire.

[1/507] Upper Merrimon Avenue has a library and community center. [I thought this was the station he was talking about - found later that he was referring to station #4 across the street from Baptist Church in 400 block - not used now.] [Tony Lord]

[1/525] Before joining the department he worked for Western Union. He describes Pack Square and the trolleys, fish market, meat market, vegetable stands.

[1/562] Firemen could ride free in trolleys - then busses. He went through Beaver Lake before it was dammed and swam in the pool there [now extinct].

[1/577] He didn't make much money (not enough to pay income tax) - \$100 a month then paid every 2 weeks. Rent was cheap.

## **Side 2:**

[2/1] Firefighters had to know where the fire plugs are.

[2/37] He was also stationed at the fire stations of Beverly Hills and Fairview Road.

[2/48] There was only one dispatcher - this was on Pack Square. He had no other work to do.

[2/83] Fire trucks carried between 400-500 gallons of water and a booster tank of 100 gallons. This was enough for small fires. If they ran out the plugs on the street were used. In the past the French Broad River and Beaver Lake were used.

[2/104] Children were shown equipment.

[2/111] Firefighters had books to study and by passing exams were promoted.

[2/147] Firefighters were exempt from service in WWII - but he studied so that, if drafted, he would get a good job. Some men volunteered. [Captain Albert G. White]

[2/179] The Democratic Party controlled jobs. Weir started out as a nobody. He had a little pull and became city manager. If you were a Republican you kept quiet. There was a fear of Catholicism (see Sister Winters and Mother Potts tapes) (see P. Greer Johnson tape). [Weldon Weir, George A. Digges, Joseph L. (Joe) Digges, Al Smith]

[2/237] If he had let anyone know he voted Republican he wouldn't have been on the fire department. [Herbert Hoover]

[2/233] Men had to be 20, but not over 30, years old to join.

[2/238] There was no retirement plan when he joined. The men had to slip around to get labor organized to form the State Fireman's Association. They didn't let City Hall know.

[2/254] Volunteer groups were trained by Fitzgerald. There are as many fires outside the city as inside. [J. C. Fitzgerald]

[2/318] A new truck was ordered from the American Le France Co. (see enclosure). They last forever.

[2/341] Biltmore Forest has its own fire department (see Jane Bingham tape).

[2/394] The fire department is better organized today - it is run like a business but the men don't take as much pride in their work as they used to.

[2/424] He retired 40 years ago [on the phone later he and his daughter said it was 1971].

[2/431] The golf course is 8 miles from his house, it is in good shape, firemen can play free. He bought his son-in-law a membership, and he plays 6 holes every day.

[2/522] He, being able to sleep much of the time as a fireman, was able to become a painter. He wouldn't have been able to retire on his pension. He put his money away.

[2/549] His wife died a year ago. He has a daughter who lives on Roundtop Road. She has 5 children - some living in Charlotte. [J. C. and Doris Hensley Rector]