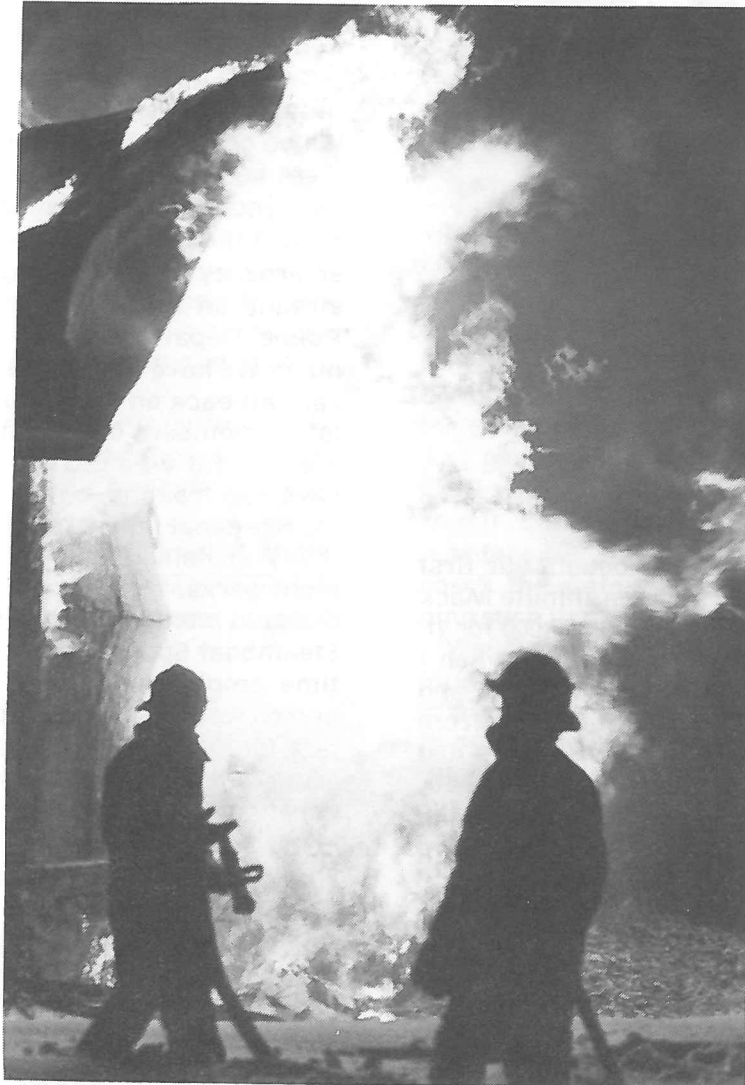


"They call us volunteers but we're really professionals."

By Aden Krug



Jay Muhme

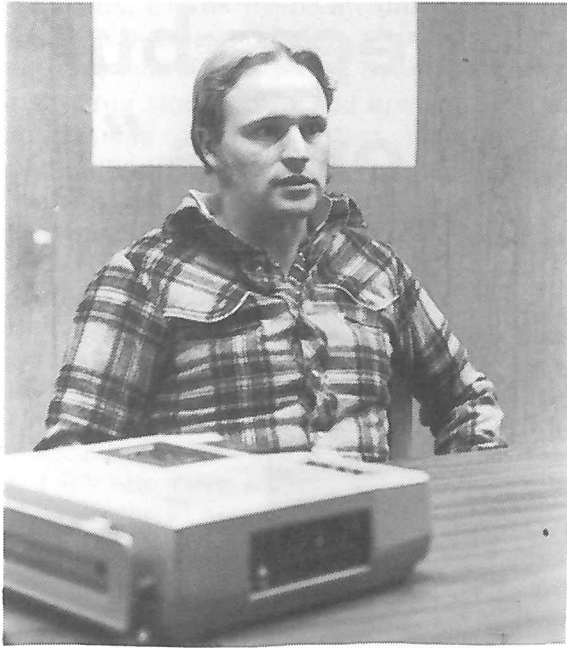
When I was a little kid, I wanted to be a fireman. I was interested in what a fireman's life was like and how the department functioned. When I joined Three Wire Winter, I decided to do my story on the Steamboat Springs Volunteer Fire Department.

First I interviewed Jay Muhme, Fire Marshal. Then I interviewed Del Coyner, who has been on the department for twenty years. Last of all, I interviewed Mike Middleton, who recently joined the department. Jay started his story with how he got involved with the fire department.

"I was born in Steamboat Springs, Colorado on April 20, 1954. I've always been interested in the

Steamboat Springs Fire Department. My father was a fireman and after twenty years he retired from the Steamboat Fire Department. I was 20 years old and right out of high school when I joined the fire department. Back then, the department sort of took the new guy in and trained him as they went. The department had a very limited training program at that time. Today our training program is a thousand times better than it used to be. Our equipment was marginal; we had some fairly decent equipment, but it was old. At that time it was probably adequate for the fires that we were fighting. As the times changed and the buildings changed we

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"I showed up to quite a lot of fires even though I wasn't a member."

had to change the fire equipment to meet the needs of the community.

"The first year I went on we bought our first major pump truck, a 1250-gallon-a-minute Mack Pumper. I believe we paid around \$50,000 for it. The same truck today is worth \$150,000. When I first went on, we didn't have bunker coats and bunker pants. We bought a little red suit from Harwig's — it wasn't even fire-resistant — just so that we had something that kept us warm. Basically we fought fires in our own clothes. And now insurance requires that firefighters have protective gear. Doing the most dangerous job in the world you are going to try to get all the protection you can.

"So we've got more into our safety equipment, just because we demanded it. We have to have it; we're in too hot of an environment to go in and fight fires the way we used to. Fires themselves have changed in the last twenty years. We used to go into a fire where there was a lot of smoke and if a guy could stay in the smoke the longest, he was called a smoke eater. Nowadays a fireman wouldn't last ten seconds, because it is just a different type of fire due to all of the poisonous gases from the plastics, PVC pipes and all. We're fighting a different type of battle than we've fought before. Today we just can't afford to take the chances."

Jay told me about his first fire call. "It was sometime in December of 1972. I went to quite a few fires before I was ever on the fire department. My father being on the fire department, I ended up showing up to quite a lot of fires even though I wasn't a member. I did help them out a lot, though. So far as just exactly what the call was and when, I don't know because I'd been

responding to them for four years prior, ever since I was old enough to drive and I could get there. There were things that I could do such as making sure people didn't drive over the hoses and making sure that the equipment stayed on the truck and that nobody messed with the truck. They knew I was there to help them and they knew who I was so they would give me a job to do. When Ski Time Square burned, I wasn't on the fire department yet, but I spent many hours fighting that fire.

"We as a community have no other choice at times but to ask for assistance from the public. We've got a basic crew of twenty men, not all of them here at all times. You get into some fires that you need more men. You have to try to recruit the public. We try to work with different emergency service organizations that are already on the scene. The ambulance and the Police Department and the Sheriff's Department. We have a reserve fire department that we can fall back on for extra help. We don't have a lot of members on it, but it does give us a few members if we need them in a bad fire. Some have had training, but aren't active members of the fire department."

Jay explained how the volunteer fire department works. "It's all strictly volunteer. We have one paid member of the fire service in the city of Steamboat Springs which is myself. I am a full-time employee of the city now. We've had a person working for the department off and on the last four to six years. It's getting bigger and we've got a lot more paperwork that has to be done, such as inspecting plan reviews. If we're going to build all these big buildings, let's make sure that they're safe from day one in the planning stages. We don't want to hear, 'O.K., here's a ten-story building with no fire safety built into it. You guys protect it.' We've got to step back and start taking a look from the ground



"We basically fought fires in our own clothes."



floor and working our way up.

"We're not a paid fire department that has the time to go to all these schools and learn all the stuff, take time out of the schedule to do all the training and all the practical experience that a paid fire department would do. You start overtaxing the volunteers and they start losing interest and enthusiasm. That's something we can't afford to do in a community like this."

When was the Steamboat Springs Fire Department first started? "I really don't know, but a long time ago. Our meetings are held on Wednesday nights. The men take these meetings very seriously and it is a close-knit organization. The individuals realize that at all times on fires their lives are in the hands of the other men. So they want to make darn sure who it is that is backing them up, and that they are getting good solid men that are capable of backing them up in a stress situation. Through the years volunteers have voted on who would come onto the fire department. We've had all ages, from older people to the younger guys such as myself. I was the youngest one ever to get on the fire department. Twenty-one is the age a person has to be to get on the fire department, but that rule was made after I joined. They never really had anybody as young as myself apply for the department, and at the time it seemed sort of like a natural thing to do. We've had women apply. After just a few meetings some of the people that apply really aren't interested. If they can't show up to the meetings, it kind of takes care of itself by the process of natural elimination. So finding good people is hard, but they sort of find themselves, too.

"Every man is trained to respect the fire service. We don't have any special teams except hazardous materials and the dive teams. Especially in a volunteer department. We don't know who's going to show up at any fire.

Someone may be out of town that weekend so every man has to do the job. I'd like to say we do a good job. We've got one of the best records in Colorado. And probably even the nation. I may be bragging, but I really feel that way. We've saved some buildings that have been investigated by the FBI, CBI, and they said there was no way in the world we should have been able to save that building. But we did, and it makes you feel good when all the professionals say that about the department. They call us volunteers, we call ourselves volunteers, but we are professionals."

I asked Jay if members receive pay for being on the fire department. "We get what is called a reimbursement for clothing, gas and vehicle maintenance. We get paid on a per call basis. It's the same no matter how long you are there. If you're there ten minutes it's the same as if you're there twenty-four hours on a call. No one gets paid for any of their meetings or training and no one is getting rich. But it does help offset some of the time you spend away from home. Right now it's \$20 a call."

In every fire department reaction time is of the utmost importance. Steamboat's fire department has improved its reaction time through the years. "It used to be that when the whistle blew, we would call in two or three phone numbers for information on the fire. I think I'd been on only six months before we received our pagers. Now we are on pager communication. It is just a receiver. When the dispatcher receives a call, she can punch out the fire department pager, page us, and verbally tell us where the fire is and what type. The pagers basically become a part of your body. I've been wearing it for twelve years now. It's just something you never take off.

"People wonder how come I took my pager to Canada, 1,500 miles away. I get nervous when it isn't on me, because I think I've lost it. It's like

you'd cut one of your fingers off. You'd always worry where that finger was. It just becomes second nature to have this stuff and always be thinking about it. It's hard when I'm elk hunting, getting close to a herd, and the pager goes off. I never did catch up with those elk.

"At night time when everybody is in bed the first man is usually at the station in two minutes. We usually have a truck rolling within two or two-and-a-half minutes of every alarm. We've got men that live close to the station. I myself live just five blocks away. The guy that lives in Fish Creek has a long way to come. He doesn't usually make the first truck.

"Not everybody is equipped with sirens or red lights for their cars. By state law we are required to have them. We're in the process of buying new ones now. Some people have bought their own because they like a certain type or a certain brand. I've been on for twelve years and never have had a red light. I've had a siren for the last five years, but I haven't used it more than twice.

"We try to get our guys to understand that even though they have a red light and siren they don't have the right to run the stop signs or stoplights. In the state of Colorado you do not



"Ninety percent of the fire casualties are overcome by smoke."



"Being a fireman is very dangerous."

have the right of way with the lights and siren. You are asking for the courtesy to have the right of way. If you blow through a stop sign and hit somebody, it's all your fault even with the light and siren. So we try to keep our guys slowed down. Time is our biggest enemy. The fire is doubling every minute you're not there. You have to get there safe. Better to get there safe than not at all.

"We are contracted with the Routt County Fire Protection District to supply fire-fighting capabilities for it. A certain percentage of calls are in the district and the district will pay that percentage of our budget. There are more fires in the city. The district has been paying 30 to 35 percent. We've gone as far as Kremmling on occasions. The longer the haul, the harder it is to get the fire out."

I asked Jay about the different types of fires he has encountered. "You've basically got four types of fires. Each fire may be fought differently. You've got class A which is woodpaper or ordinary combustibles. Class B is flammable liquid. Class C is electrical fire, and class D is flammable metal like magnesium. Each one of those takes a certain kind of chemical to put it out. If magnesium gets hit with water, it explodes. It explodes very violently. But water is still, today, the best fire extinguishing agent man has."

Jay then talked about being in a building with the danger of structure collapse. "You get into the bigger fires and you have a chance of structural collapse. That's the most dangerous. The fires where you have victims that are burned, are always tough. It stays with you a long time. Every fire has its potential for a threat on your life, or sometimes to your sanity. I knew some people that were caught in a fire, and it bothered them more than others. It bothers some people to go into a building that is being structurally jeopardized.

"The Shadow Run Condominium fire was a

good example. The main fire itself we didn't even try to fight. People look at the fire department and say, 'Those guys didn't even try to put it out.' We couldn't, there was no way. It was already gone and there was no use trying to save it. The problems we had there were the propane bottles that were inside the building. We had a lot of hazards down there. If something is too big to fight, there's no use wasting your time trying to put it out. Try to protect anything else from getting into jeopardy. Protect your surroundings, protect yourself. Don't try to kill yourself on something you can't win anyway."

Jay talked about being in dangerous situations while being on the fire department. "I think one of the more dangerous ones I've been in was probably the one I felt least comfortable at after looking back at it. That was the plane crash in the propane plant. That happened in 1977. We had a real potential for some hazards there. I didn't realize it at the time, but looking back on it with the more training I've had, there was a potential for getting hurt.

"When Ski Time Square burned, I remember being in one of the units with my dad, before we had any protective clothing, and the whole thing caved in on us. The ceiling started to cave in and my dad and I dropped the hose and dived out. It was pretty scary, especially without the protective clothing on.

"Our equipment is probably the best in our part of Colorado for a city of our size. In my mind we are the best-equipped fire department in Northwestern Colorado. We have absolutely no complaints. The city and people of Steamboat Springs have been terrific with us. They feel that when we ask for something, that we're asking because we feel we need it. They know that the Steamboat Springs Fire Department is hometown people and people that are generally interested. We have lived here and plan on living here for years, and are really concerned about the safety of the people in Steamboat. So when a fireman says, 'I feel we need a new piece of equipment,' that person on the street says, 'I know him and he's lived here for years. He also pays taxes just like I do. It's his money he's spending as well as mine. That's a good feeling.'

"We spend a lot of time on our training. It's all volunteer time. It's tough because you don't get to see your family nearly as much. To a fireman every call is a fire. There's no such thing as a false alarm. There's no such thing as a simple dumpster fire, because we can walk up to the thing and aerosol cans can explode in your face. The public thinks, 'There goes the fire department on another dumpster fire, big deal.' It is a big deal. Even your basic dumpster fire is something we take seriously."

I asked Jay if he has ever been injured while fighting a fire. "I've gotten blisters from fighting



The fire is doubling every minute you're not there.

fire, but not scarring burns. Ninety-nine percent of the time you're in a fire, you've got a hose with you. When it starts to feel like it's getting hot it's time to get out. Victims don't always have that choice. They are caught in a fire. But a fireman, hopefully, if he's doing his job well, will have a way out. We've all had our times when we've stayed in a fire longer than we should have and you pay for it. There's always the chance of getting trapped inside of something, but we've been fortunate so far and nobody has been hurt. A few cuts and bruises, but nobody has been hurt seriously."

I asked Jay what the most common class of fires are. "Most of our fires are class A fires. Ninety-nine percent of them. The hardest fire to fight depends on where you are and what your water supply might be. There are so many variables; there is no perfect fire. They've all got their different problems. I've never been to one that was perfect."

Jay then told me about the most common type of fire in Steamboat Springs. "The majority of the calls are fires with wood-burning stoves. When people light a fire and get to smelling the dust that's settled in them, you get calls that are actual fires and you get calls because people are smelling the dust that's burning. Come fall, we get a lot of calls like that. We're getting a lot more calls on the chimney fires because people are burning more wood. With those come the problems of chimney fire. When you design a new type of stove you get new types of fires."

Since arson is a problem in big cities, I asked Jay if we had an arson problem in Steamboat. "I don't believe we have a lot, no. Every area has its arson, and we have ours. Depends on how far you want to carry the definition of arson. The little boy that goes and gets in the dumpster and starts the dumpster on fire has actually set an

arson fire. And we've got those problems, from kids playing with matches to adults setting fires. We are not immune from the problems other communities around the country are having. We may not have the same numbers, but the problem is still there.

"We've got basic training in fire investigation. Good fire investigation is to have two or three opinions on something anyway. We will call in the CBI. Insurance companies send out investigators because they are interested in how the fire got started, because they are the ones who are going to have to pay the bills."

Firefighting is a dangerous job and there is little room for mistakes. I asked Jay if he has made any. "I'm sure I have made plenty of them. There's mistakes on every call. It doesn't matter whether it's me or someone else, you can always look back and see something you could have done better or a different way that would have turned out better. I just don't think that anybody can ever say that they couldn't have done something better after they've looked back at it. I've had plenty of time to look back and see something I could have done better.

"I believe there were ten of us at one time in the department, now it's about twenty. We've been as high as twenty-three or twenty-four, but we just keep losing men. It's tough to get volunteers. Getting a volunteer that stays and is willing to put in the time and effort is hard. You can spend a lot of money and a lot of time training a guy for the department and he's gone within a year. Then you're back to the same position you started in. There's a lot of good men out there, but Steamboat is a tough place to live. It's expensive and some people enjoy living here, but they find they cannot afford it. It's not because there are not a lot of responsible people. "To find somebody that is solid in the community, that is planning on staying here and is willing to give up the time is tough. Someone that is willing to get up at 3:00 a.m. and go put out a



"The volunteer system is going to be in Steamboat a long time."

They are totally dedicated to their fire department.

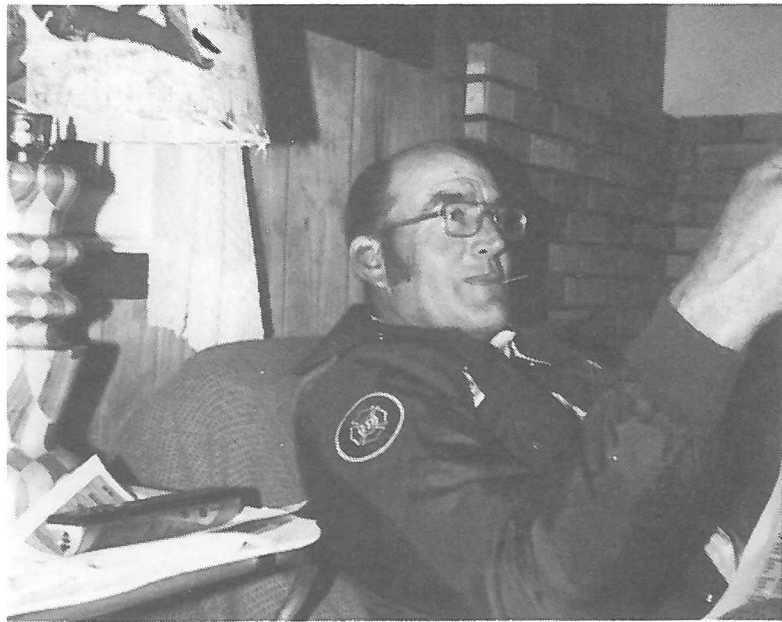
dumpster because somebody that came up here from Texas cleaned the ashes out of his condo, put them in a plastic bag or a paper bag and threw it into the dumpster. It's an aggravating call, but it's part of the job.

"The good thing I can say about our department is even though we are short of men, whenever we get a call you don't have to worry about whether they'll show or not. If any one of those twenty men are in responding distance, they're gonna be there no matter what they are doing. That's what I consider good men. They are totally dedicated to their fire department. It's a main part of their life, not just something they would like to do at their convenience. They've dedicated themselves to the fire protection of Steamboat."

To end my interview with Jay, I asked him if he could see any changes for the Steamboat Springs Volunteer Fire Department in the future. "I believe there's going to be some changes in it. It has to grow with the community. I don't know if we are going to see a paid fire department. Everybody has their own personal feelings on that. I would kind of hate to see it. It's a great expense for one thing, and I think the volunteer service has worked great in Steamboat. It may in the next ten years depend on the construction and build-up of the town. It may have to go to working with both of them — a small paid fire department subsidized by the volunteers. We're just going to have to take a look at the community.

"One of the biggest factors is how long our volunteers are going to last. If we get so big that we're going to have to require so much training of the volunteers they're going to be gone all the time and get burned out and say, 'Hey, I'm a volunteer, I don't have to spend three or four nights a week down there training. It's not worth it to me. I'm not getting paid enough to do this.' And we've come close to that a couple times. Sometimes people just say, 'Hold it, I gotta step back and take a look at this. I'm not getting my work done, my employer is upset, I'm gone two times a day, and I'm not getting any sleep. I haven't seen my kids in a week.'

"Some people have bigger priorities and we've lost good firemen because of it. They've said, 'I just can't do it any more, it's become too much time, and I can't do things that are actually more important to me.'"



Delmar Coyner

The next part of this story is an interview with Delmar Coyner, who joined the fire department in September, 1964.

"I think everybody needs to have some community service. I was interested in the fire service. When I started we had two trucks. Both of them were old, and we worked out of the old livery stable here in Steamboat Springs. The fire equipment has changed a lot over the years. Today we have more and better equipment. The breathing apparatus has enabled us to go into the buildings and get to the source of the fire. I remember one guy one time said, 'All we have to do is fill it up till the water runs out of the windows.' But it was already burnt down to the window anyway. When you get the equipment we have nowadays, it's changed a lot. All for the better.

"When I came on the department it was getting \$500 a year from the city. We bought an old used truck. There were eight firemen at that time, and we each signed a personal note for the purchase of that truck. We had to go out and have a lot of money-making projects to make the monthly payments. We had turkey shoots, and all kinds of things. They were lots of fun, but there was a lot of work too. I can't remember anything we did that made over \$300. The donations people made were our biggest source of income. We would write to every person in the county asking for a donation. It took a lot of time. The last big rig we bought cost \$230,000. Can you imagine trying to pay that off with donations if it had to be that way now? The fire department became part of the county and city tax funded departments back in 1974. It's made a big difference. When we bought that new Mack truck it

was too big to get into the fire station, the old livery barn. So the city had to build this new fire station."

Del talked about the dangers of being a fireman. "I think being a fireman is very dangerous. And being overcome by smoke is the most dangerous factor. I wonder sometimes if it isn't actually more dangerous today in that you can go inside these buildings. Lots of firemen die from buildings caving in on them. Years ago they wouldn't have been able to stand the smoke and the heat and they wouldn't have been in there. They're in a more serious environment than ever before."

I asked Del about the training a fireman receives. "We have a joint training program. The man has to get thirty-six hours a year of documented training. We get a lot more training than what is documented. It's an ongoing thing. You learn a lot just as you go along, and you have to keep up with new developments. You never learn quite as much as you would like to know."

I asked Del if he had ever saved anyone from a fire. "Yes, I had to pick up a boy. We got him out of the fire and had to give him oxygen. He survived. He was overcome by smoke more than fire. Ninety-seven or ninety-eight percent of the fire casualties are overcome by smoke. The initial problem is smoke inhalation."

Hundreds of firemen a year are injured while fighting fires. I asked Del if he had ever been hurt while fighting a fire. "I just missed going into a basement one time. When the Acasia Hotel burnt down I was in with my breathing apparatus and so forth. I was on the ground level trying to get some foam into the basement to help suppress the fire. A major beam or post gave way underneath the floor, and I felt it go. I made a jump for the door and landed in the door and the floor caved into the basement right behind



"I think everybody needs to have some community service."

me. That would have been a serious accident if I would have fallen into the basement.

"Other than that I've got my knee hurt a few times. Slipping on hidden objects underneath snow can be very hazardous also. A piece of tin with four or five inches of snow on it is just about as deadly as it comes when you are around a construction site. You don't know it's there. You're fighting your fire hoses with your airpack on and you step on the piece of tin and there you go. And it hurts like the devil."

I asked Del what his scariest situation was. "The scariest was on a rescue call. I drove up to the scene where the cars were wrecked and there was a car that looked exactly like mine. My daughter had the car out and she hadn't been driving very long. The car was smashed side to side and the lady driving was killed. That was scary because I thought it was my daughter."

I asked Del what he thought the hardest type of fire to fight is. "The scariest kind of fire, as far as safety of the firemen and so forth, is gasoline spills, gas leaks, and that sort of thing. You may not have a problem with the spill or the leak, but you know momentarily that the whole show could blow up. I'm not so afraid of the fires. I can see and know what I have to deal with. If you have a building involved, you know you have that building involved and can plan on how you want to attack it. But if you have a large gas spill or something like this, it's a little tougher. There's a lot more things to think of. I think that's more dangerous."

I asked Del about his hardest fire to fight. "The hardest fire I fought was Ski Time Square. We



"There's a heck of a lot of training that goes into a new member."



"The donations were the biggest source of income."

didn't have the building codes and fire codes that we have today. And the fire started on the ground level. We could never catch up with it. It just kept getting ahead of us. I think the fire department could handle it now. It was at night time and it was cold. Also water was a long ways away."

Then Del talked about how firefighting has developed over the years. "The fires themselves are probably more intense, because of the added fuel loads, the bigger buildings and new materials, especially man-made. Also plastic pipes, man-made fibers in curtains and the finishes on wood. Many of them are very toxic; one good breath of those types of smoke can kill you. I've been laid up several times, because of some of the things I've gotten into. That's one of the reasons we make such strict requirements of wearing the breathing apparatus now. We used to mostly just have wood smoke."

I asked Del about the fire department keeping up with the growth of Steamboat. "That's one of the major concerns. Nationally it's a quarter million dollars a year per apparatus for budgetary purposes. On a paid department that's the national average. So you can see if Steamboat were to build a full-time, paid fire department, we'd be running into millions of dollars a year. In this town I think volunteer service is the answer."

"We just built a new fire station out at the mountain. We use it every time we get called that direction. We have a crew that is assigned to that station and that truck. So they are responsible for responding from that station."

Del talked about the advice he would give to a rookie who just joined the department. "The advice I would have for the rookies would be to ask questions, pay attention and learn from the other men. You get your training and all that, but

I see so many people anymore that just stand around. All it is, is they don't understand or they don't know what to do. I don't think there's a man here that wouldn't explain something to you if he knew you needed to have an answer. Of course, to understand what you have and what you have to work with is very important. Then you can make some intelligent decision on what you have to do.

"For instance, I've seen so many rookies come down and get out there on the pumper truck. They only know where the gauges and levers are. They have no idea what it is they're supposed to do. My advice to them is that I'd get them to start on the same truck for a period of time until they learn it. First thing you have to do is spot your apparatus — whether it will be effective and whether you can get water to it. The second thing I'd do is get somebody pulling lines, getting water to your apparatus. To get water out of your apparatus you have to get water to it. It's a progression we go through with them, so that they start thinking about first things first. Once they get this in their minds, then all at once it starts making sense. To decide which levers they're going to pull, which hoses to charge. But that's not so overwhelming when you know you have water to your pumper and it's ready to put out water wherever you want it to go.

"It's just a matter of doing first things first. The beach is made of grains of sand. Every one of them counts. That's the way you do it in the fire service. Figure out what you do first then as time goes on we teach them to be thinking about going into the building. It's something that just takes a while to get in your mind. You just don't come down here and in a week, a month, a year or ten years know all about it. The first thing we teach on our program is that you don't know everything."



Mike Middleton

"I was born January 2, 1954 in Denver. I've been a wildlife officer for the Division of Wildlife in Steamboat since July, 1980. Prior to that I worked for four years on the division's Bighorn Sheep Trapping and Transplanting Project statewide.

"Before I came to Steamboat I was a full time Fire Fighter for the Westminster Fire Department. Soon after we were settled in Steamboat, I met some members of our department. They invited me to apply for reserve membership. Soon after, I was on the department. The only difference between Steamboat's Fire Department and Westminster's was that Westminster responded to medical emergencies and got a dozen calls a day."

I asked Mike what the process is to join the Steamboat Fire Department. "You fill out an application and the rest is up to the department. They interview you and check your background. If we need new members, and the majority of the department decide you could be a good fire fighter, they put you on reserves. Reserve members go through training but do not respond to fires. This gives members a chance to get to know you. Most new members, that show some interest, are accepted as regular members."

I asked Mike how he felt about learning a new town when he first moved to Steamboat. "I still don't know all the streets around the mountain area. When you're driving the apparatus, it's important not to take a wrong turn. The dispatchers can help with directions. But usually, unless I know where to go, I ask senior members to drive. I know my way around the rural areas better. Learning how to use the apparatus is tough too, you just don't jump in and go. They're big vehicles. You have to drive carefully and know how to get your pumps and hydraulic going."

Mike told me about the scariest situation he has been in. "Almost falling off a roof. That was pretty nasty. The worst that's happened to me is falling through a floor one time. Up to about my waist and being caught by my air pack and hose. Then I had to crawl out. Another time, there were several of us on a roof. The wind changed the direction of the smoke coming out of the roof. None of us had our breathing apparatus on. The dense smoke chased us off to a corner where it was two or three stories down. The only way was to jump or eat smoke. Neither was a good idea. Luckily the wind changed again. I've never been lost in a building. Probably the scariest thing that could happen is getting lost in a burning building and not knowing your way out.

"The worst I have ever been injured while fighting a fire was getting my ears burned. You get in a real hot atmosphere and put water on the fire. First, the steam rises and then it comes down on you. The steam burns any part of your



I tried on the equipment and I didn't realize they had to wear so much.

body that is exposed. If you breathed that steam it would burn your lungs. Sometimes I've been so fatigued, working so hard, you're kind of hyped up anyway. You feel like you can't do another thing, but you have to."

I asked Mike what he thinks the hardest fire to fight was. "We get two or three big ones a year. It's kind of hard to separate them. The Lodge was a real tough one. A dozen or so units burned. I think we were on that fire sixteen hours. We would go from one unit to the next and we couldn't seem to get to the heart of the fire. The staircases were burned out, and that didn't help."

I asked Mike if there are more fires at a certain time of the year. "We always get more fires in the winter. Because you've got wood stoves, electric heaters, etc. The mountain is full of people. The population of Steamboat goes up 2 or 3 times so there are more chances of a fire."

Mike told me about the pager going off in the middle of the night and waking everybody up. "If the pager goes off at night it startles everyone. The thing wakes up the kids and they start crying. The wife says, "Shut that thing off." It's not as tough on me as it is on the family. What makes it tough is when you have to go to work the next day and you haven't had any sleep. Before our false alarm ordinance went in effect, we'd be getting up every night and never caught up on our sleep.

"Being with the Division of Wildlife, I'm especially busy during that time of year. I'm back and forth to the sheriff's office quite a lot. There are a lot of the members that are hunters and we get a little sparse with the manpower in the fall. But we are careful to make sure enough members stay in town to answer calls."

"Learning how to use the apparatus was tough."

I asked Mike how his wife feels about him being on the fire department. "She likes it. The thing we like about it is its diversion. We live and work my job all of the time. People talk to my wife and I about hunting and fishing or some other aspect of my job all the time. It's nice to have something in common with other friends besides the job.

"When the pager goes off she listens to what kind of fire it is, just as much as I do. She wants to know if it's just a dumpster fire, or a structure fire. She's concerned about the danger of the work.

"With Steamboat growing and expanding, the fire department is going to need more members." I asked Mike what he is looking for in new members. "Somebody who's permanent and is easy to get along with. Somebody who's not going to be here for a couple of years and then take off. There's a lot of training that goes into each new member. Men who've been on the department for 20 years are still learning. Our lives and 3/4 of a million dollars of apparatus are at stake. We're looking for somebody who lives and works close to the stations, especially the mountain station.

To conclude the interview with Mike I asked what he feels about the future of the Steamboat Springs Volunteer Fire Department. "I think the city has a good thing going. The cost of having a paid department is prohibitive. We've got a real good department and dedicated members. The volunteer fire department is going to be in Steamboat a long time."



"You get so tired fighting a fire, you feel like you're gonna die."

Some photos in this story by
Steamboat Pilot.