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**Rob Bruxvoort**

Ann Lundberg

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### Recommended Citation

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Narrator's Name: Rob Bruxvoort  
Length of interview: 57:11  
Date of interview: April 2, 2022  
Place of interview: Orange City, Iowa  
Interview's name: Ann Lundberg

A.L.: This is Ann Lundberg, and it is April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022. I am interviewing Rob Bruxvoort, former assistant chief of the Orange City Fire Department. Rob can you give me a little bit of background information about yourself – your date of birth and where you were born?

R.B.: I was born in 1964 here in Orange City.

A.L.: Okay, very good. When did you join the Orange City Fire Department?

R.B.: I joined the fire department in 1995.

A.L.: 1995. And what year did you retire?

R.B.: 2020.

A.L.: 2020. How old were you when you joined the fire department approximately? I know I could do the math, but I'll let you say.

R.B.: I was 30 years old.

A.L.: Okay, 30 years old. How did you becoming interested in joining the fire department?

R.B.: I'd always worked out of town beforehand, and so then in 1993 I got a job back in Orange City where I was going to be at the Orange City Area Health System, so I knew I'd be stable in the community. And I wanted to give back to the communities in some way, and I'd always seen the fire department; I live two blocks away, and I'd always kinda seen it, and I thought well that would be kinda fun to join, and it would be a way to give back to the city. And my neighbor at the time was Stan Van Otterloo who used to be the, actually I think he was chief for a little while, but he was assistant chief also before he retired, and so he kinda talked to me about it too. So that's kinda how I got interested in a way to give back to the community.

A.L.: So he kind of recruited you, told you he'd like to have you...

R.B.: Yeah, he kinda told me about it and stuff, and that this would be a way that I could give back and what they did and things like that.

A.L.: What was the process of joining when you joined? Did you have to fill out an application, talk to anyone or did they just open their arms?

R.B.: Well, you filled out your application, and then they had a meeting about you, I guess, at the department. We didn't really do an interview process. They just, the department must have had a meeting about it, and then they invited me to join at that time.

A.L.: Okay very good, very good. How did your wife respond to your time in the Orange City Fire Department?

R.B.: She was very supportive. I mean she enjoyed going with some of the other women and stuff of the fire department to different events and things like that. She was very supportive of me giving back to the community. There's a lot of time where you spend time away...

A.L.: Yes.

R.B.: ...as a fireman and the education and all that stuff I've done over the years. And there was a few times I was told just to stay sitting right there I didn't need to go. When you're gone with your kids on vacation and stuff and you're still sitting out, and you know technology you hear about things.

A.L.: Yes, yes you do. When you joined the fire department how were you called out to fires? Was there a pager system?

R.B.: Yeah, we had the pager systems, the original pager systems. So they've changed a lot over the years, but the old, I don't remember which one it was, it was just a small, little one at the time, a little thin one. So it didn't have any of the other information. It just paged when it went off.

A.L.: Okay, just a toned out, so you knew to come. Who was the fire chief when you were first a member?

R.B.: My first was Ron Koele was the fire chief at the time when I joined. I think he had just taken over from Fred shortly before that, Fred Dykstra. Ron Koele was the chief at the time.

A.L.: Okay, and what do you remember about him as the chief?

R.B.: He was, I mean he, you kinda understood where he was at. He was a good chief. I think he cared for the community. Yeah, so he was there for I think maybe five or six years that he was chief before it passed on to Ken Meendering I believe took over after him.

A.L.: Sounds about right, and then Denny Vander Wel.

R.B.: And then Denny Vander Wel took over after that. So yeah Ron was a good chief. He knew his stuff, and so yeah was pretty level headed.

A.L.: Good, good. Eventually you became assistant chief. Were you a captain before then...?

R.B.: Yes.

A.L.: ...or were there other ranks that have since disappeared?

R.B.: I was probably...I probably advanced pretty fast in it because about two years after being on I became a captain.

A.L.: Okay.

R.B.: So I've been an officer on the department for almost my whole career, so they kinda at different times, so yeah I've been an officer for a lot of years and then with a lot of different hats that were assigned to me over the years.

A.L.: Okay, can you give us some examples of that? We know you've been captain and assistant chief. What else have you done?

R.B.: Well then, back, I was assigned...shortly after becoming a captain then Daryl Beltman blessed me with the NFIRS<sup>1</sup> reporting.

A.L.: Oh, right!

R.B.: Which is the incident reporting, and that was back before the computers, so we did it all by book and hand written.

A.L.: Oh my goodness.

R.B.: So you know he was doing it at the time, and he said, "Well, you're the new officer. I guess it's your turn now." So I started writing NFIRS reports where you had to go through the book and look up all the codes and write it all down by hand, longhand and stuff. So that was one of the things I've gotten, and then with the training and stuff like that then I became an instructor for the state, so then I started doing some of the training here at the department, helping Denny do some of the trainings and stuff like that. And maintenance, for a short time Denny was gone and they kinda assigned me as the maintenance person to help take care of that, so for a year or so that I did that. And then yeah I worked up to that, when Darrell left and Ron left then the kid became chief, and then I moved up to assistant chief. You know probably, I suppose that was maybe five or six years later. So I've been in, so like I said I've been in office most of my career actually for some reason or another.

A.L.: And to what do you attribute your rapid rise through the ranks?

R.B.: I was there and it was more...they appointed people that, I don't know. I got along with most of the people. I'm pretty even keeled and get along with most people. I think, back then it was more, and I don't know if it still is, they didn't care so much about the training, they more cared about, kinda a good ole boys club type deal. You know, where you know if you were a friend or whatever, they'd vote you in and then you'd stay in. And I suppose I didn't irritate people enough and that other people did, and so they chose me and moved me up. Plus, I was doing the training and stuff, you know, I had been going to do all the trainings and things, so they felt I was qualified, I guess.

A.L.: Right, and I'll add for the record that you also have an amazing array of mechanical skills.

R.B.: Yes, so part of my job you know is maintenance.

A.L.: Right, so when you were doing training what were your favorite kinds of training to do, and how did you see training change over the time you were a member of the department?

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<sup>1</sup> NFIRS stands for National Fire Incident Reporting System, a federal reporting tool.

R.B.: I really kinda gravitated more towards rescue training. It was kinda always, I kinda liked that. I did all kinds of, anywhere from ice rescue to car rescue to rope rescue to trench rescue to...it seemed to always kinda in the rescue form that I liked training at. Ropes, I liked ropes a lot when I was on, you know I kinda took over some of that and liked that. And uh, yeah, so that's...training has changed I think it's getting...it's probably a little more technical now than it used to be. I mean as far as safety wise it's probably a lot better than what it used to be.

A.L.: Okay.

R.B.: You know, but I think technical it's getting a little more cause the cars, cars are changing. Everything is changing. You know farm...even farm equipment is greatly changed from when we started. You know, just learning how to spread a combine cutter apart, you know, with just air bags to now you've got all the computer controls and everything to just shut down the hydraulics to even start operating on it. You have to do a lot of stuff, so it's changed.

A.L.: Yeah, do you have a sense of why you gravitated towards rescue operations?

R.B.: I don't know, I just...it just kind of calls to me I think, you know, and I'm still on the ambulance team. So I've been on the ambulance team for...what 10 years, 12 years now, so I kinda like rescue...rescue, helping people.

A.L.: Helping people, yeah.

R.B.: That's kinda more than the other stuff, you know I've done some officer trainings and things like...but it was more towards the rescue I liked it better.

A.L.: Yeah, are there any rescues that stand out to you that you completed that kind of bookmarked in your memory?

R.B.: Yeah there were a few over the years. I think one of my first ones that I helped with was Leo Siege who passed...he did pass away shortly after we got him out, but it was a tractor...a sprayer and a tractor accident. He got pinned between the sprayer boom and the tractor wheel. And that one was quite...that was one of my first major trauma ones too you know where you get on to that. And those kinda stick in your head more than anything, but we did our...I thought we did a good job as a team along with the ambulance and the medical staff at the hospital and stuff. But it was just, I mean the damage was too great at the time.

A.L.: Sure.

R.B.: But we got him some time with his family to say goodbye before he perished which was a blessing to them.

A.L.: Yes.

R.B.: If you're gonna lose somebody at least we got him to say goodbye and stuff like that, and kept him around...alive long enough for that and stuff. You know and I can remember just down the street here on 2nd Street when that car hit that house.

A.L.: Oh, tell us the story because that one's not in my recordings yet.

R.B.: That one's probably the one that startled me the most. I'll say startled me the most because that car hit the house, and we had a report that the car doing over 100 miles an hour when it flew into town and launched into the house, hit a gas meter, hit the second house, and the house was on fire and the car was kinda impinged on by the fire. And there should've been no way the young gentleman should've been alive. I went up to actually check to see if he was alive or what was on, and he all of a...cause he was laying there just still, and he just picked his head up and just looked at me like, "Oh no!" I kinda screamed at everybody at the time. I said, "Oh my gosh! He's alive!" So then we had to start rescuing while the car...while the fire...the gas...you know he'd busted off the gas meter and the flames from the gas were you know kinda...we were worried about the car exploding or the house getting worse...

A.L.: Sure.

R.B.: ...and the flames and stuff. It was kind of a rapid rescue, but yeah that one...that was you know one of the ones at one o'clock in the morning where you're not real wide awake, and all of a sudden somebody that you would never expect to be alive all of a sudden looks at you. And you think, "How?" And yeah you get him out and do your best and save him.

A.L.: So did you have to use the cutter or the spreader to get him out?

R.B.: Yeah we had to use the spreaders and everything to get him out, to get the door off, to get him out, and then cut the seat belt, backboard him and drag him away. And everybody was kinda worried about the gas meter because it was just flames shooting. You know, it sounded like a blowtorch going next to...

A.L.: Yeah, I could hear it from my house two houses down.

R.B.: So it was quite a loud crash and everything. So yeah. That one sticks out in my mind.

A.L.: Yes it would. Yes it would.

R.B.: It was you know, even like some of the technical rescues you know where we...and it was a minor car accident but the car was down in the ditch, and I can remember having to hook ropes up to the gurney because the snow. And we couldn't get up the ditches because it was steep, and it was slippery. So we hooked the rope up and used it kinda like a toboggan on the stokes basket to pull him up out of the ditch. That was something where the rope rigging we had to do when we first started with ropes you know. When I first started you know the rope hung in the side of the van, and yeah "That's where the rope is. If you ever need it, that's where the rope is." And nobody really cared, and we didn't have a lot of equipment, but with me going to different trainings and stuff and then getting...encouraging the department to purchase some more rescue...

A.L.: Pulleys for example

R.B.: Pulleys and carabineers and things like that and bags to keep the rope in, and so we, they thought, "Ah, we're never gonna use that stuff," and it wasn't long after we got it that we ended up using it on an icy road you know where the car was out. We just needed to move the...

A.L.: Right.

R.B.: ...person up because we couldn't do it physically ourselves. It was too slippery and steep.

A.L.: Too much. I remember one rescue that we did east of town in the northeast quadrant out by Landsmeer where the worker had fallen into the basement.

R.B.: Yeah.

A.L.: Do you remember that?

R.B.: Yeah.

A.L.: Can you tell us anything about that rescue?

R.B.: Yeah we had...he was working in the attic, and he slipped off the rafters, and the basement stairs weren't built yet. So he fell all the way from the rafters all the way down to the basement floor, concrete floor. So it was again, we had him in the basement and now we had...we had to stabilize the patient, load him in a stokes basket, and now we had to get him up out of this hole. And there was...you've got 10 foot of lift, so we had to come up with a way to get him up out of there. So using my training and stuff, and a couple of the other guys had gone, and so I could tell them. And they'd only been there once or so, and they really didn't quite as many times as I did. And they hadn't practiced it as much as I had, so I was able to help them through it, and we rigged up the system of ladders and took...slide him up sideways up, tied it on to the rope up into the rafters and used the rope to pull him up...slide him up ladders to get him out. Yeah he's still out and running around.

A.L.: That's a good thing.

R.B.: That's always a good thing.

A.L.: That's a very good thing.

R.B.: Yeah, so...

A.L.: Any other memorable rescues or should I ask you about fire?

R.B.: I'll switch over to fire if you don't mind.

A.L.: Not at all.

R.B.: Cause the other day I was going down the road, and I was thinking about our interview. And my wife and I were driving out on the gravel, and I road past the house just north...or west of town here, and I said, "Well that was my first fire." I can still remember that house,

that garage. So that was...I think it was only maybe three days after I had gotten on the fire department. I'd really just gotten my gear, didn't know what I was doing, and it was in the middle of the night, and I'd gone to bed not feeling well. I was sick, but the pager went off.

A.L.: Figures.

R.B.: The pager went off, and I thought, "There ain't no way I'm missing my first call especially a structure fire." So I was sick to my stomach, but I went anyway. And I was just a new member, so I didn't know what truck to get in, and they put me in the van. We had a stepside van back then; you remember that.

A.L.: Yes.

R.B.: It was an old '64 stepside. And we drove out there, and I didn't know what to do. And they said, "Well, you just help him drag that hose," and so okay I can do that. So I'm the third person back on the hose, and pretty soon them guys were going up, and I didn't...at the time I didn't have an air pack on because I had not been trained to do air pack. So you know they're going up by the fire, and it's getting kind of smoky, and they said, "Just hold that hose. Don't let it go." Okay, so yeah I did that, so pretty soon I was laying down on the ground trying to stay underneath the smoke with my face in the grass trying to hold the hose, the feet of the hose, but it was so smoky above me that I couldn't breathe, so I had to stay low. So I can still remember that. And then Tanker 64 after they had gotten some knockdown done, Tanker 64...the trucks didn't roll out quite right, and that the first guys went too far in with the tanker. And they started using it as an engine instead of a tanker, and so then they ran out of water because they thought it was just a small garage fire, and it turned out to be...it was a woodshop. This happened to be this guy's woodshop, so it had a lot of fuel in it. So they got pinned back in there by the other trucks and the hoses and everything else, and they ran out of water. So then we relayed a hose from the engine up on the...by the porta tank on the end of the driveway back down to the tanker to fill it with water, so they could at least use it for the engine that it was...you know because the water was out of water. So I spent the rest of that fire, which I was pretty glad of, I spent the rest of that fire on top of the tanker holding the hose in the tanker to fill the tank up. But I was so sick to my stomach that it was really a good place for me to be. But at least I got to see my first fire, and I got to help participate a little bit in it. It's the first ones you kinda remember, you know?

A.L.: Oh yeah!

R.B.: Yeah, so it's been a long time. It's been a lot of fun over a lot of years.

A.L.: Yeah. Any other memorable fires?

R.B.: I can...I don't know if Dan Roghair said it that one fire where we were on Arizona. It was a duplex...it was a fourplex house on Arizona. He rescued a lady out of there.

A.L.: He did not mention that when I interviewed him.

R.B.: He did not mention that one either?

A.L.: Why don't you tell me about this.

R.B.: This was another one of my first fire...you know it was one of the first one on fire calls, and I just learned how to use an air pack, so it was my first one I ever got to go...I ever got to go in on with an air pack. I'd gone down to...I don't remember where I even got my training. I think I'd just completed Firefighter 1. So I'd gotten my training, and I was all geared up and going and ready to go, but I was still just a rookie at the time, so the other older firemen they were all at the door and stuff. And I was backup on the backup line, but at least I was there by the...by the fire. The other guys went, we went to go into the house, and they had an air pack malfunction. Somehow or another his airpack...the gentle...the lead team, their air pack malfunctioned, so they stepped back because they had...they couldn't go in. Well, I was all set and ready to go on the second line, so that was my first fire I charged in with the whole charge line, and we went into the apartment we thought it was in. It was in the closet, so we had to kinda go in and go around the laundry we thought. Went in and found little bit of fire and extension and put the fire out, and then as I was kinda looking at it and overhauling it, and this fire is not in this apartment that we broke into. It was in the duplex next door, actually it was a fourplex. So we thought...cause all the smoke was coming out of this one and the other one...the other duplex we really didn't, I don't know, if they didn't do a walk around. At that time I was just a new member, I know a lot more now than I did then, so I was just doing what I was told. But they...then we...I said, "No, the fire's not in this one. It's in the next one over." So Dan Roghair led a team in on that one. He swept that building real quick while we were backing out with a hose. They swept that building. I don't think they even took a line in with them, but they swept the building looking for a victim, a primary search. All of a sudden, he came out with a little old lady in his arms. And she was just a small lady in her mid-80s I think she was, but he had found her in her bedroom in the back. And he came walking out with her, and everybody just...just their faces just dropped, their jaws just dropped because we never found anybody. The first one you think you look through that one, and nobody was in there. We didn't really think of the fire, but the fire was actually in her apartment. But it had broke through the wall in the laundry, so the flame and the smoke were coming out of this side, but it was actually hers that was fully smoke and charge. Yeah, when she came out then that was quite something. He says, all of a sudden, "I found somebody!" Oh no! Everybody kinda dropped, but then we got in and put the fire out. And yeah, the ambulance had to come up and take her and take her away, but I can still remember that one. Everybody's just in awe, shocked that he comes walking out with a victim in his arms.

A.L.: Yeah, my goodness. Well, while we're on the subject are there any other rescues that I don't know anything about, that I've never heard of?

R.B.: Let's see. We've got that one. Probably...I've been on several of them, so yeah I don't...You were on a few of them with me I remember that, but other houses like that where we rescued people out of the houses, no. But yeah so that's, yeah you always...when you start thinking about it you can remember all the victims and stuff of the ones you know, and there's some tough ones in there...

A.L.: Any fatalities in fires that you remember?

R.B.: This lady that Dan came out with she passed away. And then, you know there was a few that I know about around the area, but that was the only one I think...on my years that was the only one that we had experienced a fatality from a fire.

A.L.: Most of them were car crashes and farm accidents?

R.B.: Yeah car and farm accidents that have had people. Yeah, we've had several people that have had to get out of you know accidents and stuff like that, but fire related deaths the only one was her that I know of.

A.L.: Okay.

R.B.: So, you know we've had a lot of structure fires in the area, but people have always gotten out of them, you know and stuff.

A.L.: Good thing.

R.B.: Yeah.

A.L.: While you were on the fire department, I know that we've responded to at least two arson fires. Any stories you can tell from those fires?

R.B.: Yeah the one...the first one I can think of was down the street here on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street that it was set in arson on. And that one luckily, the way the arsonist had lit the fire, he actually helped us by...he lit it under the sink in the bathroom, and the plastic water lines had broke loose and put out part of the fire, so it would have been a lot worse. Cause he had...we didn't realize until after the fire was out that it was...you know cause when you initially you just think house fire, structure fire. Then when you start investigating and then it's, "Ah, something's not"...now red flags. We found gas cans tucked underneath the kitchen sink, and there was another one in the bathroom. And you know, that he had poured gas out in the house, and then stuck it under the sink hoping that they would re-ig...you know, catch more on fire and ignite more. He had poured some gas on her bed and clothing in her bedroom, and we made a pretty good fire attack on that one, and it saved the structure mostly, but enough for the fire marshal to investigate it and stuff. So that one...cause he had set it the way it was...luckily nobody else got hurt. I would say it that way. The fire we'd got knocked down enough that the other cans of gas didn't explode or anything like that and injure a fireman you know or...that was kinda one of the ones that sticks out most in my head for arson.

A.L.: Rob, am I remembering correctly that you saved the cat in that fire?

R.B.: Yeah we did. I found the cat...

A.L.: I remember you did.

R.B.: Yeah, I found the cat, and when I was doing a primary search then I found the cat and came out with the cat. Cause we had actually had...by the time we set up we had pushed the fire. It was venting out the side window...

A.L.: From the bedroom correct?

R.B.: Under the bedroom out of the east side-v window. It was venting quite heavily out that window. And I was assigned by the chief at the time, I think Ken was chief I believe at the time...

A.L.: I don't...

R.B.: I don't remember for sure the year of that. But then I was assigned to the back of the structure as an officer to monitor the back of the structure. And then as we'd gone in...then after we made a second entrance from the backside because it was easier than from the front closer...yeah and I found the cat inside there and stuff. So yeah saved one rescue. Yeah there you go.

A.L.: Good job.

R.B.: There we go, saved my life. I was...I kinda got a lot of grief over the years speaking on animals because I had gotten the CPR kit for the animals.

A.L.: Right the oxygen mask...

R.B.: The oxygen mask kits to give animals CPR.

A.L.: That was after [Scott] Arft attempted to save the Chihuahua...

R.B.: The Chihuahua at the car fire.

A.L.: Yeah.

R.B.: And I had read online or I had read in a firefighter magazine about a place in Florida that they would send you a free kit if you just had to ask for it. And they had donated...people had donated money to it and they would send...to save animals' lives so that oxygen kit. So I sent off for it, and then brought it to the department, and I got a lot of grief for it saying...you know. It's the worst day of somebody's current time in their life that this fire is happening, and then if their pet dies, and they're losing their stuff, you know, at least if you can try, and you can save their pet. I mean it gives them something because their pet is like their children.

A.L.: More and more.

R.B.: More and more most people their animals are like their kids. And so if you can rescue them by just having something on the truck to help give them oxygen and do CPR, and it's free, why not? I mean it doesn't take up that much room on the truck, and so we have an oxygen bottle or we used to have an oxygen...

A.L.: We do.

R.B.: ...bottle on the truck, and then we have that mask and stuff. And we could use it with an air tank too, I mean, if you needed to just to give them air.

A.L.: Air yeah.

R.B.: But it was better than mouth to snout. I mean that's what I thought.

A.L.: Which is the joke for Mr. Afrit as someone suggested he give the Chihuahua mouth to mouth.

R.B.: Yeah, the Chihuahua was gone.

A.L.: Yep, unfortunately. And the second arson fire?

R.B.: I'm trying to think of which one...

A.L.: And you went to training for arson investigation, correct?

R.B.: Yes, I've gone to several arson investigation classes over the years. I've gone to...my first one was in Iowa State when I kinda got interested in it. Then I signed up and went to the National Fire Academy and went to a week's school on it there, too.

A.L.: And where was that?

R.B.: That's at Emmetsburg, Maryland. National Fire Academy, so that one was a lot of fun. And then I took a two week course in the state, and I always wanted to do another one, a further one down there because you can actually do it. But the state...it's a four week course, and they run it at one time. I said "Well, there's really no way a volunteer can come out and do this, you know. I'm taking time off of work, my own vacation time, and doing it. Nobody's paying me. Nobody's paying for my room. Why can't we..." And I tried for many years to get them to break it up into four long weekends, you know, so you could at least partially work and partially go to schooling, but it's set up more for paid departments and their arson investigators. But I always thought that would have been something I would like to have done more of because I really like trying to figure that stuff out and trying to learn how they did it and different ways people do it. To let you know, I mean you know, we don't know...we're not trained to figure out how these people do it. And working with the fire marshal on several investigations over the years always just amazed me that he could find that out and to watch him work, it just kind of enthralled me or interested me a lot to figure that out with him or learn how to figure that out and stuff. But I never could get the state to change, so I done some week courses. I'm trying to think. I still can't think of the second arson.

A.L.: The second was in an apartment building over on...not Arizona further out like Delaware in those apartments down by Highway 10 and West Side Motors I believe in the night.

R.B.: I'm trying to think which one that was.

A.L.: Yeah, there were people sleeping upstairs.

R.B.: Hmmm. Memories.

A.L.: Yeah, I think he ran his car into a house at the north end of town immediately afterwards...

R.B.: Nope. I don't...

A.L.: Okay, well we'll forget that one. We'll move on to another fire, the Hawkeye Building.

R.B.: The Hawkeye Building yeah.

A.L.: What do you remember about the Hawkeye Building fire? That's one fire...

R.B.: The main thing, I was out of town when the pager went off.

A.L.: So was I.

R.B.: I was just leaving Sioux City when the pager went off, and I'd gotten just a little bit of the page over there, just a tone, so I called. And we'd been planning this fire for...I mean it sounds crazy that a fire department would plan the fire, but...

A.L.: Well we preplanned. It's a good thing.

R.B.: We preplanned this fire for many years because we were always worried about that building.

A.L.: Why were you worried about that building?

R.B.: Just the way that it was built, the number of remodels that were done in it, the compartment, the dead spaces in the building that when it got remodeled they had void space that you didn't know was there, and just size of the building. That was probably the biggest thing is all the remodels over the years and the voids and how many ceilings were above it. You know and because it was an old, old structure in the community, and it was just one that we thought you know could with all the remodels and stuff... And then they had done several...over the years you'd see a lot of extension cords being used in the retail spaces and stuff and the three prong, the white cords with the three prongs at one end and no ground. You know people like to overload them by putting too much stuff on them. And those are...I always worry about those starting fires.

A.L.: Sure.

R.B.: And we had chemicals in there for a while when it was the photo shop. You know you had machines for that which is some of that is flammable and just the construction. So we were always...we had always kinda worried about that one. We were always concerned about the businesses downtown that's why we preplanned them and stuff. But that one was always...we'd talked about it so much that if this one ever happens we had it figured...we had a plan of how...to try to protect the rest of the community, the rest of the downtown businesses.

A.L.: Sure.

R.B.: You know you try to save that building, but lot of times by the time we...the damage is so great that they're going to tear it down anyway...

A.L.: Right.

R.B.: ...so you don't want to lose the rest of your downtown businesses, so yeah that was that one. And like I said, I was out of town when the page went off that Sunday afternoon. We were coming home from Sioux City. I drove home really fast. I broke the speed limit. I'll swear to that. I was about 95 miles an hour all the way down Highway 60, but I got here to town, got my gear and got down there. And then we were just trying to figure out...they had made advances in there before I'd gotten here and were driven back because they couldn't find the seat of the fire and the amount of smoke and the heat that was in there. You know you always...I don't know, I always think I wish I could've been there to try.

A.L.: Yeah.

R.B.: You know, and the guys that went in were well trained and they were real go getters. I mean I know they tried hard.

A.L.: Bruce Schutt I know was on the hose line.

R.B.: Yeah Bruce and Mel were on the first line yeah. And I know them guys. They put a good effort at it, but you always just wanna know if you had enough that you could've found it. You know just one of those things that was in your questions in your mind, but I wasn't there so. And then I got assigned to try to vent the upstairs just to get rid of some of the smoke, so we could make another advance in there while the other communities [note-other towns came to help] were setting up and the aerial was setting up. And they had cement boarded over the exterior windows...

A.L.: of the second floor.

R.B.: ...of the second floor. So we got up there with the ladder, and you couldn't bust through this stuff. It was plywood with cement board in front of it, and it was super strong. So then we tried cutting it with the chainsaw, the K-12, just to try to get a vent hole. And it was taking so much time and so much energy that we just kinda, and the fire was advancing at the time, so at a certain point we just called it a surround-and-drown type operation, a defensive outside operation. And we just set up for defensive aerial bombardment because we couldn't get in to get at the seat of the fire. So at that point then I was assigned the C-side rear of the building, and so I found my best vantage point was on Don's Food Store, the grocery store on the back side.

A.L.: Were you on the roof?

R.B.: I was on the roof of the second story of the building...

A.L.: Yep.

R.B.: ...the adjoining building where I could kinda see up into there, and we could get a hose line up on that second story, and I think from that the smoke was going away from us. I was upwind of the smoke. The wind was kind of out of the northwest or northeast so it was kinda blowing towards the courthouse and towards the treasurer's office there. So I was

upwind of it, so I could see good, and I could relay to the chief what was going on. And we tried putting a two and a half inch line up, and we got that in action, and I had guys down below trying to spray in the back doors. We had the back doors pried open. We had made advances in just a little ways with the hose as far in as we could dare. You know we weren't sure cause we knew the seat of the fire was more in the center, and there was a like a 10-foot, 10 or 15-foot work area in the back, and then the door to the rest of the store was there. So we could stay close enough to if we had to we could bale out quick and we could put water in from there. So I had all those guys and different hose lines that I was in charge of at the time.

A.L.: Okay, okay.

R.B.: I really wanted to cut the tree down in front though. Denny wouldn't let me cut the tree down.

A.L.: Well, and...

R.B.: And then the investigation of the whole thing took days, I mean...

A.L.: Yeah.

R.B.: ...afterwards. Being the assistant chief and helping the chief out with the paperwork and stuff like that and then dealing with all the investigators. And then all the insurance companies, you know everybody that had interest in it they all sent an investigator. Their insurance companies, I should say, all sent an investigator. I think we had 30 of them here at that time when we were investigating it. So there was like two, there was like 15 different entities, and they all had two investigators there, and they were all...

A.L.: And did the fire department have to provide security on that?

R.B.: Yeah, so we...since it was a...we didn't know if it was a crime scene...a criminal act of arson or whatever, so we had to secure the scene for a while, so we spent night...we had to post somebody there outside of it to make sure nobody got in there to tamper with it. I might be wrong in how I say it, but what I was told that the laws are once you leave, once you give it back to the people to get back in there, you gotta go through...if it would've been something criminal, you have to get search warrants and all that to produce the evidence and stuff. As long as you maintain a presence there, and you don't turn around and leave the building to turn it back over to them, it's still your building and your scene until you leave. So we maintained a presence there until the fire marshal showed up and were able to come investigate it and stuff. And then it was a case where the walls were starting to bow some, and they weren't really finding any real, definite clues and stuff. So it became unsafe for them at that time with the wall, since the structure was gone just the exterior wall. Then they had to get the backhoe in to knock that wall down before they could continue the investigation...

A.L.: Investigation. Yeah.

R.B.: ...so that delayed everything. So it was quite a...it was a lot of...I think close to a week kinda that it was kinda all said and done...

A.L.: That you were dealing with that...

R.B.: ...dealing with that different times during the day with different investigators. And we maintained a presence at the building for the whole time with different, at least two firefighters at the building for the whole time.

A.L.: Yep.

R.B.: Yeah, I was looking at the pictures in the Hawkeye the other day. The pictures are still in the hallway over there, and I was "Oh yeah, there I am. I'm in that picture." Cause...Noteboom...I can't think of his first name...Noteboom Electric...he took up Doug Calsbeek in an airplane, in his airplane, and flew over top when it was on fire. That's how those aerial pictures were taken.

A.L.: Cool.

R.B.: Yeah so there are some aerial pictures available for that fire.

A.L.: Okay, I will have to look those up. Any other fires you want to comment on that were memorable for you in some way?

R.B.: I probably...I wasn't on the department, but that might have been one of the things that kinda sparked my interest about it too is when the Vogel plant exploded.

A.L.: Oh yes!

R.B.: I was...it just a few years before I got on, and I remember hearing about it. I worked in Hospers at the time, and I remember hearing about it. And we all went up to the roof to see if we could see the smoke or whatever. Because I was on maintenance there, and we heard about it cause I think they called Hospers over or some reason or another we heard about it over there. So we'd gone to the roof to look, and it was all just a flash fire at that time so I never got on. But there was nothing to see, but you know you always hear about that and the...I've heard the stories of the factory blowing up down here next to Northwestern College that's now a park, you know, when the factory was in there.

A.L.: Vogel Paint Factory

R.B.: Yeah so...and I used...I lived a block away, and that happened '63 or 4?

A.L.: 4

R.B.: '64. Cause I was...I remember it happened, but I don't...I was born in '64, so I remember...my house was a block away, and they said, "Yeah, you could see the barrels shooting up in the air." And I thought, "Oh." Later on when you're older you think, "Ah, them barrels could've been coming down on my house when I was a baby."

A.L.: You might never have fought your first fire.

R.B.: Yeah.

A.L.: In 1991 the Hospers Bank building burned. Were you on that fire? That's where Bomgaars is now or the former Bomgaars now Ben Franklin's and the gray building for the organ across from Windmill Park.

R.B.: Yep, the corner building. I was gone for that fire, too.

A.L.: Okay, just checking. Just checking. Any humorous memories being on the fire department?

R.B.: Oh, we had a lot of fun pranking each other over the years.

A.L.: Any pranks you remember?

R.B.: I remember we had one fireman that was...he was scared of bats, and I don't remember what call we were on, and he found a bat, and he just freaked out and took off. Right? Or was it flying around in his house at home? I think it was flying around in his house at home, and they came and actually stayed in the fire station for a little while while they had the exterminator come. So yeah, we had to put a bat under his helmet. I remember that. The first time he went to a call, and then he lifted his helmet, and there was a bat under his helmet. It was kinda mean. But we had good relations to the Sioux Center Fire Department, and I think they still do. But we poured popcorn in the boots of the guys over in Sioux Center one time, brought a bunch of popcorn over there and filled their boots with popcorn. So yeah you always...just fun stuff you kinda just...you don't remember them, but it's just different things you have fun doing, trainings and stuff like that.

A.L.: Any calls that were kinda wild and crazy?

R.B.: You mean fun crazy or just...

A.L.: I don't know. You know just like "what?"

R.B.: How did that happen?

A.L.: Yeah.

R.B.: Well the car into the house at 110 mile an hour...

A.L.: Yeah that was...

R.B.: That was pretty wild and crazy. And how does this happen that he could still be alive?

A.L.: Yeah.

R.B.: Yeah, there's always those...in a way that could happen, but it does. The young gal, I can remember, getting her out of there. She drove underneath the semi with her car on the road.

A.L.: That...I remember that one.

R.B.: Yeah. Just how she...

A.L.: North of town.

R.B.: ...she survived that. She kinda ducked down, and the car slid right underneath the semi and got wedged underneath it and took the top of the car off.

A.L.: Yeah.

R.B.: Yeah, I spent a lot of time with her underneath that car getting her out of there...

A.L.: Yeah.

R.B.: ...and just talking to her and keeping her calm...

A.L.: Calm.

R.B.: ...and just working on her to try and get her out of there. She turned out good. But that's a miracle that happened. You know you get those. The train accident when the train...

A.L.: At Carnes?

R.B.: ...at Carnes when the two trains hit. Never again will I see a 15-passenger van that small I don't think.

A.L.: No. No indeed. That was in 2000.

R.B.: The train...one of the train cars rolled off its wheels and rolled over top of the van and just flattened it, flattened as a pancake. And I had to extricate the driver out of the vehicle. So I'll never forget climbing over top of the cars cause the tanker cars are made of V or a triangle type pattern and he was in the middle of all...we didn't know where he was at and couldn't find him. We had to climb over top of the tanker, and there was a spot down in the middle where they had gone and Jenga piled and rolled over top of him. And yeah there he...there the vehicle was. Cause we spent a lot of time looking for him. They said, "There's supposed to be a worker in a truck here." Yeah well, we finally found him you know, but a lot of diesel fuel on the ground. And the amazing part of the train accident, and it still to this day it still scares me a little being next to a train that's moving on train tracks after seeing that thick of metal just sheared right... The force that it takes to shear that thick of metal, an inch and a half, two-inch metal, and it's just torn like paper. So you've gotta imagine the force that that would take to do that. And yeah, for a long time...it used to be you'd get up to a flashing train light, and you would almost look to see if you could run around the gate. You know because we don't have patience for anything anymore, you know?

A.L.: Right.

R.B.: And after that accident it scared me enough and impressed me enough that I stay back all the time. Now I don't even like to get close to them because I think, "Well what if that train would derail? Am I far enough back that if that train car rolled over top...tipped over it wouldn't roll over and crush me?" And the one time...it was probably been what seven or eight years ago now....Denny, fire chief Denny Vander Wel and I were on a motorcycle trip over by the Mississippi River. And we were going along the river road, and right where Highway 9 goes across the Mississippi there's a...underneath the bridge there's a train that

goes underneath there. And we were going slow cause it's a 20-25 mile an hour, and they're rough tracks, and we know them. We've been through there several times, and there's a little casino right there. And all of a sudden, I was coming up, and out of the corner of my eye I see the train light. And the train moving towards us, and the arms hadn't come down yet, and it's kind of a blind spot because it comes from behind the casino. You don't really see it, so I panicked. And I slammed on my brakes, and I stopped because I was worried about...cause we were on motorcycles like I said.

A.L.: Yeah, right. No protection.

R.B.: So I panicked, and I stopped. And then Denny stopped, and all of a sudden the crossing arm came down behind us, so we couldn't back up. So the amount of room we had between the crossing arm and the...and we stood there. The train was moving really slow cause they do a lot of switch tracks, so he was only going a couple miles an hour. But just to be that close it just brought back that train accident flashback in your head that yeah just...never want to do that again.

A.L.: No indeed.

R.B.: Nope.

A.L.: I'm gonna ask kind of a tangentially related question. Did you ever feel you were in danger on a call you responded to or were you ever injured?

R.B.: I was never injured on a call.

A.L.: Good.

R.B.: I can't say I ever felt like I was in danger that I was scared of my life...for my life or anything like that.

A.L.: Good.

R.B.: I've helped a few other people that got injured on calls or in trainings over the years, but I never felt in danger.

A.L.: Okay. Good to know. What were the biggest changes you saw over your time on the fire department?

R.B.: Training. The firemen or firefighters are way higher trained now than they used to be. When I first got on you know, Firefighter 1 was good, but it wasn't a mandatory. They said, "You know, it would be good in the first couple years to get that." You know you really...nobody really pushed the training aspect of it, and they were almost kinda frowned on it, doing a lot of training I mean. They didn't really like training. So we were...and they'd all done it. I've talked to the older gentlemen that were on at the time, and they went down to state fire school and things like that.

A.L.: Right, Fred Dykstra took the first group down.

R.B.: Fred and Stan had gone down there, and I'd heard stories of those guys and things like that. So I know they'd done some training, but when I got on, training wasn't really a major priority especially air pack training. I mean it was something you had, but they really didn't...I mean it was more back then it was "Oh, we just eat smoke." You know, you're just smoke eaters. They didn't worry about coughing up your lungs the next couple days. So air packs became a real big thing, and as far as training and even in the fire service in general, I mean, the health aspects of that got to be a bigger thing. But then as...also the furnishings in the house changed tremendously over the years. I mean we've gone from back in the day when I first started, I mean, I was at the end of the real fabric couches and the horse hair and wood couches inside of them, and it was all becoming...

A.L.: Wool and...

R.B.: Yeah, wool and things like that from previous. Now you're getting into the synthetics and the plastics and the, you know. So the smoke is changed so much over the years. Now it's a lot more carcinogens in the smoke and the arsenic in the smoke from the plastics burning. I mean it's way more deadly than it was back. You know it used to be, and the fires...we have a lot more fires. When I first came on we had more barn fires. You know now in the countryside there aren't any barns left. I mean there's still a few out there, but most of them are steel. And you know, but the barn fires we'd have milk house heaters and things like that so you'd have barn and straw fires. Not that that smoke isn't bad for you, but it's not as bad as the household products or the plastics that are...

A.L.: Right. Not nearly as bad as carcinogens.

R.B.: ...the carcinogens and stuff aren't near as bad. So I mean as far as that goes the training really advanced more. And we had a good group. We had a group of four or five of us that kind of started, and then it got to be more and more as the older guys left and new guys came on. They started training more. We were kind of shunned at first I think for doing so much training and really kind of set out or you know, we weren't part of that group cause we were overachieving type deal.

A.L.: Type A.

R.B.: And I don't...if that made them feel bad that they weren't doing it or what? I don't know. I can't say.

A.L.: Yeah, right.

R.B.: You know, but just the way people are. So we were kinda...we had kind of a group of three...four of us that started and got a couple more, and we were doing a lot more trainings. And then more new people came on, and they joined in with us. And it slowly transitioned as the older ones got off that the newer ones and the training picked up and kept going. And I think now we still have quite a bit of training in the fire department. I'm not on for two...couple years now, but I'm sure it hasn't changed that much over the last couple years.

A.L.: No. I think that the sea change must have been happening right around 2000 when I joined, and there was kind of a rough patch in the fire department I think.

R.B.: Yeah, we had quite a spat in the department, a separation from the old way to the new way. The former fire chief was kinda reluctant to come up to the newer ways, accept the changes. He felt it had to be done more his way than the newer ways. They...I really I don't want to speak bad of a person because...

A.L.: No.

R.B.: ...I get it. You know the gentleman's a really nice guy. I get along with him. I think it's just different management style.

A.L.: Right.

R.B.: I'll say it as that, different management style. And so it just...and they had, the current chief and the former chief, they had quite a disagreement, and there was different management style between the two of them, and that was kind of a rub. And it kind of split the department as to which side of the fence you wanted to be on, you know, and we were kind of more of a young, aggressive, more trained department than the old way.

A.L.: Right.

R.B.: So there's always kind of a pendulum swing in anything. And how much time you want to devote to it.

A.L.: Right.

R.B.: And so it...I mean the devotion of time is quite large.

A.L.: Significant.

R.B.: Quite significant, and the older guys on the department didn't want to do it at the time. And that was really part of the reason why I got off when I got off just because I always said I wasn't going to be that person on the department that was just there to have my name...my license plate and my name on the door.

A.L.: Right.

R.B.: If I can't...if I don't enjoy the training and doing it, that the desire just isn't there that really wants to get me out of bed at two o'clock in the morning and run, then I don't want to be on. Somebody else can...a lot younger...

A.L.: Right.

R.B.: ...and a lot more able can take my spot. Cause you know you get some of them, I call it dead wood. You know where they just hang on there. They don't fall off, and they just hang on. They're not really doing you any good.

A.L.: Right.

R.B.: They're just a name on a roster, and they show up once in a while complaining and cause problems and don't really contribute to the advancement of the fire department and the learning. So I...you know I always said I wasn't going to be that person, so when I got to the point in my life and the age that I just didn't...the spark wasn't there, and the desire to get up at two o'clock in the morning kinda went away. And I just thought, "You know, I got my 25 years in. I'm just going to turn it over and give it to the younger people, and I'm sure they'll do a fine job." And I can...I was still on the ambulance at the time, so I could still stay involved in helping out the community, and still... It makes it easier for me cause it's part of my job, you know...

A.L.: Right.

R.B.: ...right where I work, you know, the hospital, so that I could stay with the ambulance and stuff.

A.L.: Good. Thank you for answering that question. I was going to ask it. Is there anything else you want to add?

R.B.: No, just I do...I do miss being on the department once in a while. I don't miss the training and all the time requirements because you know different changes in my life. I wanted to do some other stuff. The time commitment was a lot especially being an officer.

A.L.: Right.

R.B.: I mean like I said all but two or three years I'd been an officer on the department, so I've always had the extra responsibility and the extra meetings and all that. And then I do a lot of it to yourself, you know you want to go to the trainings, and I wanted to be an instructor and all that. So yeah that's...you do it to yourself. You put in what...but you get out of it what you put into it.

A.L.: Yep. Well, thank you Mr. Bruxvoort for talking to me today.

R.B.: Yep, thank you. Hope I answered your questions.

A.L.: You did.