

Then & Now - FIRE and the volunteers fighting it

By Kenneth S. Davis

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WHAT INITIALLY DISTURBED HER sleep—and saved her life— she will never know. Perhaps it was the smoke in the second-story bedroom. More likely what aroused her was the abrupt cessation of noise as the station to which the bedroom television set was tuned when she and her husband fell asleep went off the air. But it was certainly the pungent smell of smoke that jarred her immediately wide awake and caused her to arouse her husband at 2:23am (the alarm clock's illuminated dial told her the time) on that windy, bitter cold morning of Tuesday, January 16, 1979.

Their first thought was that the damper in the pipe that led from their newly installed wood burning stove into a kitchen chimney, downstairs, had been accidentally closed. Flinging on clothing, she went down to investigate while her husband went through the house opening doors and windows for ventilation. She found the damper open. When she touched the chimney bricks she found them merely warm. Yet the haze of smoke was thickening and in the upstairs bedrooms where the three children (Matthew, seven; Christine, seventeen; Suzanne, twenty-one), having been awakened by their father now hurriedly clothe themselves.

At 2:25am she phoned the fire department. She was, as she remembers, perfectly calm; and the tone of her tape-recorded voice (all emergency calls are recorded) reveals that she was diffident, even a bit apologetic for being a "bother," when she spoke to the alarm operator who answered before the first ring ended.

"This is Mrs. Leland," she said. (So small is the population of our town of Princeton, MA, that she had no need further to identify herself nor to give her house number). I think we have a chimney fire. I don't see any flames, but the house is full of smoke.

The woman's voice on the other end of the line was crispy efficient. "Ok, we'll be right up." "Thank you," said Mrs. Leland, still half apologetic.

At once, almost as she hung up, she heard the fire siren begin its eerie wail (four cycles, denoting either a chimney fire or a vehicular one) from its mounting on a wooden platform above Mountain Road, a mile to the east of her. And before the first cycle was completed she went, coughing smoke, out of the house into the bitter cold, the windy dark. She stood alone on the ice-coated snow-banked drive—a small blonde woman of young middle-age (a school teacher, wife of a school executive) whose calm, if never wholly shattered, cracked now to admit an acute sense of danger, of threatened grievous loss.

The house looming over her, home to her and her family for the last thirteen

years, was a huge one. Three-storied, mansard-roofed, containing eighteen rooms, it



26 Goodnow Rd.

had been for sixty years one wing of a summer hotel called the Mount Pleasant Inn. Then, in 1912, this wing had been detached and moved to its present location; the rest of the structure (which contained twenty-two rooms) remained on the original site some hundred and twenty yards up a slope

from the Leland home where it housed, more than adequately, the Leland's' next-door neighbors, the Cronin's. Thus the Leland house, if not among the oldest in a town that boasts a score of eighteenth-century dwellings, was old enough to be highly inflammable once a fire was well started in it, its boards and timbers having been already well seasoned in 1857 when the hotel was built. From every opened door and window and from the kitchen chimney, black smoke now poured in a thickening tide.

To Mrs. Leland, the time of her solitary waiting in the driveway seemed very long. Actually her husband and children in no more than a minute or two joined her there. It also seemed to her during her moment of solitude that never before in her life had she been so utterly alone, so isolated from human community'. She became acutely conscious of the cold light of stars high above the drift of smoke, and of miles of wooded wilderness beyond the narrow back yard. Yet in point of fact she stood just then at the very center of an intense and intensely active community concern. All around her spread the country town, for five miles or more in every direction—thirty-six square (and hilly) miles within whose boundaries reside some twenty- three hundred people. In every inhabited part of it, men had been roused from warm sleep and safety into a bitter night of as-yet-unknown hazards, had scrambled into their clothes, had scrambled into their automobiles, and were now driving toward her and the smoking house at high speeds. As they did so they constituted a kind of implosion, a process of swift convergence whereby they were transformed from widely separated, wholly' discrete individuals into elements of a single-minded, single-purposed, highly disciplined organism. They became the Princeton Fire Department in action.

LIKE MOST OF US, like virtually all in country towns, Princeton has a volunteer fire department (of the nation's approximately twenty-four thousand organized fire departments only two thousand are full- paid, according to the International Fire

Service Training Association, and “volunteer fire-fighters outnumber paid fire-fighters by a wide margin”). Eighty-eight people are enrolled in it. Forty-two are regular fire-fighters, twenty-three are auxiliary fire-fighters, five (all women, operating in their own homes) are alarm operators, and eighteen serve exclusively as specialized technicians—as radio dispatchers, or as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) connected with the ambulance service, which the department also provides. A good many of the regular firefighters are also EMTs. Indeed, of the department’s thirteen officers (fire chief, three deputies, nine captains), all but two are EMTs. Not every fire-fighter is a trained driver, but each, regular or auxiliary, is trained to handle any and all equipment: specialization is ruled out by the fact that not all firemen can respond to every alarm (more than half of them may be unable to respond during working hours; many are employed out of town), and it is essential that each who does respond be able to do whatever needs to be done.

Of the department’s personnel, only six receive any base pay whatever. Each alarm operator is paid \$500 per annum. The chief, Leo Hurme, appointed by the selectmen, receives \$2,000 a year. He is also paid \$3 an hour when actually fighting a fire, as is each of the forty-one regulars for whose recruitment, training, and administrative direction Hurme is responsible. Auxiliaries receive no firefighting pay at all.

No one is paid for performing the numerous other departmental duties. These include standby duty at the central station, during storms, when power failures and snow emergencies occur; educational work in the schools (the chief and his deputies do a good deal of this), answering false alarms, making fire inspections, attending meetings (there is a two- or three-hour departmental meeting every Monday night), training (regulars and auxiliaries spent a total of 7.041 hours in various kinds of training last year). Every firefighter is required to have “first- responder” training in CPR (cardio-pulmonary resuscitation), to attend drills (every regular must attend a minimum of 50 per cent of all drills, 10 per cent of all emergency drills), and to handle necessary paper work (a detailed report on every alarm, reports to selectmen, correspondence, reports to state agencies). For none of these is payment made. Nor are members reimbursed for such public services as filling swimming pools, pumping out flooded basements, and cleaning chimneys—any or all of which the fire department will do for any townsman who requests it. It is customary for those receiving such a services to make a cash donation to the department, but such donations do not go into the pockets of personnel; they are used to purchase equipment.

The department also renders ambulance and rescue service, whereby lives are saved every year, and no payment is made to personnel for this vital service. If, for instance, there is an automobile accident and the department’s rescue bus is summoned to assist someone who is injured, those who respond receive no pay for doing so—unless the car happens to catch fire, whereupon every regular fireman at the scene is paid at the \$3-an-hour rate for extinguishing it.

The kind of equipment these men employ is to a considerable degree determined

by the fact that Princeton has no municipal water supply (each householder must provide his own water supply and sewage disposal system, subject, of course, to town regulation), which means there are no pressurized hydrants to which fire hoses can be attached. It is necessary to transport water to the fire in sufficient quantity to extinguish it if it is small or, if it is large, to discourage its spread until water from a stream or pond, a dug well or water hole can be tapped and pumped to the fire.

Housed at the central fire station, which is a converted highway-department garage located back of the town hall in Princeton Center (it is manifestly inadequate for fire department needs) are a tanker and three engines, each a pumper. The tanker, designated T-1 on department forms, carries 1,500 gallons of water. The three engines are E-1, carrying 500 gallons; E-3, carrying 1,000 gallons; and E-5, carrying 500 gallons. There is also a rescue bus, regularly employed at fires, which was bought by the firemen themselves and, with all its apparatus, remains their personal property. At the department's sub-station, which is a garage in East Princeton (Hubbard's Garage) some three miles from the town center, are the ambulance and pumper E-2, carrying 500 gallons, and pumper E-4, which carries 350 to 400 gallons (the exact amount is uncertain because, alas, it leaks).

This collection of fire-fighting items (men and things) is swiftly transformed into a smoothly functioning and purposeful organism when occasion demands it, by means of a tightly organized internal-communications system—a short-wave radio network that is operated in close cooperation with the telephone company. Fire Chief Hurme and each of his deputies have with them at all times a portable radio transmitter-receiver operating on a frequency assigned by the government for emergency use. By means of it, chief or deputy communicates instantaneously



Dorothy Hurme - Alarm Operator

with the alarm operator on duty.

Every' regular and auxiliary' firefighter has at hand a radio receiver, bought and paid for by himself, which he keeps switched on, day and night, when at home. (I have one at hand myself as I write this: our fire chief, I've just learned, is arranging with our police chief for the security of a house, badly damaged by fire this morning, whose owners are out of town.) When an emergency call comes in, the alarm operator transmits information about it immediately to the fire station, the siren is activated, and the operator tells department members, via radio, what and where the emergency is.

THE ALARM OPERATOR on duty the night of the Leland fire was Dorothy Hurme,



Leo Hurme - Fire Chief

wife of the fire chief, and she took Mrs. Leland's call for help on the red phone beside her bed. While she did, her husband, whose ears are always attuned, even in deepest sleep, to the red phone's ring, sprang out of bed and into the "quick-hitch" clothing he places at his bedside each night, when he retires. It is clothing (boots-trousers-shirt-suspenders all in one piece) he can don in a single gesture, and he was struggling into his fire coat, having already put on his helmet, before his wife had finished giving him the relevant information. By the

time she began to broadcast it to the widely scattered firemen (chimney fire - the Leland's - Goodnow Road), he was on his way out of the house to his pickup truck, parked, nose to the road in his driveway. In the winter, he keeps the motor heated by an electrical device so the motor is ready to start as soon as he turned the key. In the brand new pickup truck (his personal property) equipped with red flasher lights and radio facilities, Hurme was in his element.

He is a blue-eyed light-complexioned man of average height and weight and build, possessed at age fifty of the quick reflexes, the physical stamina, the capacity for enthusiasm of a teenager—possessed also of a temperament that seems more than normally excitable and volatile when the pressure is off, but which becomes cool and calm when the pressure is on. One reason for this is that his reaction time is unusually fast; ordinary time runs too slowly for him, but a time of crisis, when everything accelerates, suits perfectly his natural rhythms. If ever there were a man with a vocation and a mission, it is he. His one great aim in life is to create and administer with maximum efficiency the best fire department possible for his hometown, a town he dearly loves, and to this aim he sacrifices pecuniary interests. He knows he could make much more money doing something else (he's a trained mechanic, for instance), or even doing what he now does, but as a full-time city professional. As it is, he performs a variety of part-time jobs, at an hourly wage, for the bulk of his income.

He confesses frankly that fires and firefighting had a fascination for him as a boy, which he has never outgrown. Firemen remain glamorous, heroic figures to him, and no small part of his strength as leader of his department is his ability to communicate to his men his own sense of the romance and importance of the dangerous work in which they

were all engaged. Stories about him abound in our town. Most are affectionate and admiring in tone, a few are implicitly critical of an alleged officiousness and excess of zeal— but they all testify to his single-minded dedication. A good friend of mine tells how, while fishing a Maine wilderness stream a few summers back feeling remote from his workaday life and his Princeton home, he was startled suddenly to see on the opposite bank a fisherman who, as he cast out and reeled in wore a fire helmet! My friend, however, was not at all surprised when he recognized the helmeted fisherman as Princeton's fire chief. "Who else could it have been?" says he. "No one else in the world..."

The story is typically apocryphal. Hurme tells me he wore, not a helmet, but his red trooper cap bearing fire-chief insignia, and he wore that because the cap is warm and the day was chilly.

His element. . . .

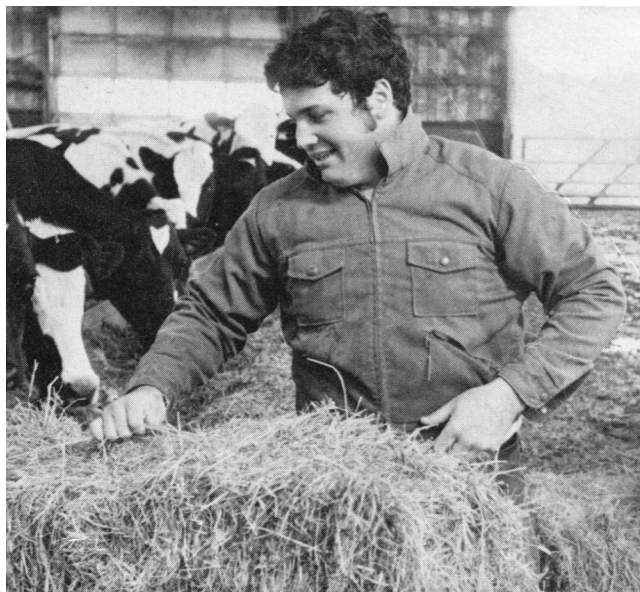
Before 2:26 on that dark, windy, early morning he was turning into the road leading from East Princeton, where he lives, to Princeton Center, a mile beyond which live the Leland's. He knew that what he moved toward could be a major conflagration despite its initial designation as a mere "chimney fire."

He has had a plethora of experience with chimney fires these last few years as soaring fuel-oil prices have promoted heating by wood burning stoves. Often the stoves have been attached to chimneys not originally designed to handle the kind or quantity of fumes produced—chimneys not only too narrow to begin with but also clogged with inflammable deposits. The incidence of resultant chimney fires in town increased three and a third times between 1970 and 1976 (there's been a considerable reduction lately, thanks to educational and chimney-cleaning campaigns conducted by the fire department)—and fully 60 per cent of them became structure fires, some of them serious indeed, as wooden partitions adjacent to the chimneys became ignited. Hurme is acutely aware of the mortal dangers of a structure fire and of the vital importance of what firemen call "response time," meaning the time intervening between the instant a fire is reported and the instant of effective attack upon it. He illustrates them with a so-called six-minute clock. Typically, in just one minute after a fire is well started in a room, the ceiling temperature is 100 degrees Fahrenheit and the supply of oxygen for whatever lives in that room has been reduced 80 per cent. In two minutes, the ceiling temperature is 390 degrees and the oxygen supply is zero. In three minutes, the ceiling temperature is 770 degrees. In four minutes it is 1,000 to 1,500 degrees—and by that time any person in the room, deprived of the breath of life, will be in a state of collapse, unconscious and unable to move. Within two minutes thereafter, or six minutes after the fire began, he or she will begin to suffer irreversible brain damage; the vitality of brain cells is peculiarly dependent upon a constant supply of oxygen-saturated blood, and nerve tissue, once destroyed, is not replaced by new growth. Soon thereafter, if not rescued, the person dies, whether or not he or she has been actually burned.

So on the road that morning, Hurme concentrated on reducing response time to

the Leland call. He drove very fast, well over sixty miles an hour on hilly, winding roads whose normal legal limit is thirty to forty, and while he drove he issued time-saving instructions via radio to the driver of the first departments; unit to respond to the alarm.

THIS UNIT WAS A E-3, the 1,000 gallon pumper. Its driver was eighteen-year-old



Billy "Chunky" Yaglou

Billy Yaglou, whom everyone calls "Chunky" (the nickname was bestowed by Hurme one day years ago when school; Billy was "acting up" excessively on the school bus Hurme was driving). The son of the Wachusett Regional High School Superintendent, who lives on Mountain Road less than a mile from the central fire station, Chunky has become an experienced, efficient fireman under Hume's tutelage the last three years (as all our firemen do, he has immense admiration and respect for Hurme); and on this morning he was into a "quick-hitch" fire-fighting outfit as quickly as Hurme, and into his car as soon. He was the first to arrive at the station. He felt very much alone and a bit tense as he climbed

behind the wheel of E-3 and then broadcast on the radio that he was on his way—this just as Hurme came up Gregory Hill leading to the Princeton Center common where he made swift response to the messages from the E-3 Series.

"Turn into the upper drive at Leland's," he told Chunky, "not the lower."

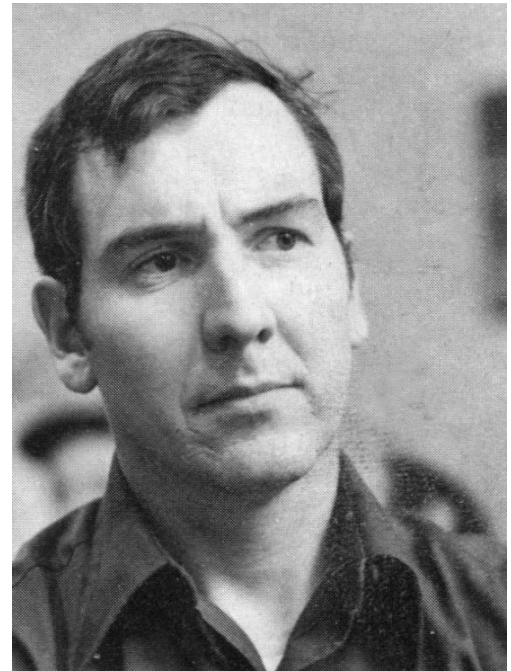
He knew that the Leland drive was ice-coated and from the entrance to the upper drive E-3 would be moving down rather than up an icy slope to the house. Also, when parked beside the house, the engine would be facing Goodnow Road, in good position to receive and pump from a hose bringing water from the nearest in-ground supply, should this prove necessary.

Within five seconds after his instruction to Chunky was completed, Hurme drove past that nearest in-ground supply—a 30,000-gallon roofed cistern on the Al Whitney property on Hubbardston Road, which has a hydrant drawing from an intake valve at the cistern's bottom so that, unlike most of Princeton's in-ground supplies in winter, it can be pumped from immediately, with no prior necessity for snow clearance or ice-breakage. Hurme regretted in that instant that the Leland house had not been among those "preplanned" for fire-fighting at department meetings (the floor plans and construction detail of several Princeton houses have been studied to determine where and how fires in them might be best attacked), but he was gratified that the department had carefully preplanned the laying of hoses from the Whitney cistern in all directions, and had often practiced pumping from it. He knew precisely how water could best be

gotten from this cistern, if the Leland fire required it; although hose from it would have to run uphill and down, then uphill again, to reach the Leland house. This Whitney cistern had virtually the same elevation as the Leland house. This would greatly ease the pumping problem, facilitating the delivery of water at full volume under high pressure.

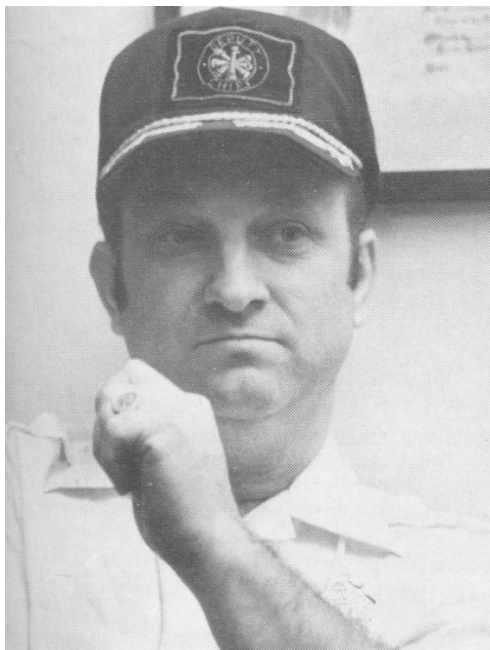
When Hurme arrived at the fire scene, a little more than four minutes after Mrs. Leland's call, Chunky had already parked E-3 in the drive.

Chunky was no longer alone in the engine. At the corner, of Hubbardston and Goodnow, he'd picked up fire-fighter Richard Morse who, driving up from his home a couple of miles to the southwest, had just parked his car there (other firefighters would also park there to avoid congesting the narrow Goodnow Rd., the only traffic access to the fire). It was Chunky who made the first eye-witness report of the Leland fire ("heavy smoke showing; see flame underneath caves and through windows")—a report Hurme heard while parking off the road near the Cronin's, just above the Leland's upper drive. At once, Hurme ordered an up grading of the fire from chimney to structure (his exact words were, "KCN-575, give me a structure box on this'), whereupon the Mountain Road siren was reactivated to sound an eight-cycle



Richard Morse

alarm, alerting alarm operators in adjacent towns for a possible mutual-aid call. As Hurme emerged from his car, his chief deputy (C-1) Lewis White, Jr., pulled in close behind him in a Ford van, and Hurme saw at once that White was in excellent position to view the whole of the fire scene. "Stay here," Hurme said to White. "Set up the command post here and take all orders from me."



Chief Deputy - Lou White

Then Hurme ran up the icy drive. As he did so he heard ominous news from E-3 ("heavy fire . . . mushrooming!"), responded to it with a panted order to Morse ("mask up, pull preconnect line, and go in"), and then, still running, watched Morse don an air mask (every engine carries them) and enter the kitchen door with a one-and-a-half inch hose in hand. Chunky

switched open the tank valve of E-3, and the pump began at once a steady whirring roar. Morse, as soon as he entered, was able to shoot a steady stream of water at high pressure against the

kitchen's flame-shot ceiling. Hurme himself, coming abreast of the Leland family standing in the driveway (they'd all got out safely, thank Cod! they all seemed calm, thank God!), saw flame shooting horizontally across that ceiling from the chimney where the fire had started.

He should have paused at E-3 to mask up. "I was dumb not to," he admitted later, and he would have reprimanded any of his men for doing what he then did. But he saw that the fire was spreading with explosive rapidity. The whole house would be lost if the right attack-point for its containment were not located at once on the second floor. So in he went without a mask, calling out to Morse in the kitchen: "Can you hold it?"

"I don't know," Morse replied, shouting through his mask above the crackling fire, the slap of water, and the hiss of steam. "It's really going."

And Hurme, heading for the stairway, called back, "Do all you can down here. I'll get other lines in as fast as I can."

The second-floor hallway was spooky, even for one who had fought many a fire before. It was hot, and acrid smoke thickened above Hurme's waist: he ducked down to breathe but, even so, took into his lungs what would have been a dangerous if not fatal amount of smoke had that smoke been toxic. Three doors opened through the wall at his left. The knob of the first was hot to his touch, paint blistered on the doorjamb, and flame showed through a crack at the door's top. The second door was the same, but the knob of the third door was not hot, and through that door's top and bottom came no smoke, showed no flame. Hurme felt a surge of relief. It was still possible to contain the fire, and here was the attack point for doing so, though they'd sure as hell need that cistern water as soon as they could get it. Turning back, he ducked down and ran for the stairs, shaping in his mind as he did so the tactical plan whose implementation he ordered while he was descending.

"25-C to C-1," he called into his transmitter, C-1 being Deputy White at the command post. "Have E-1 set the pump at the cistern and E-4 lay lines to Goodnow Road from there. "Have E-2 finish the line to the fire." "Have E-2 officers and crew report for assignment and E-2 supplement water supply."

He also ordered a mutual-aid call.

Then he was out of the house, sucking air into his lungs and coughing out smoke. More units and men had come in. T-1, the 1,500- gallon tanker, and it was now parked in the drive, immediately back of E-3; the rescue bus (R-1) was parked a score across of yards up Goodnow from the Leland's'. And now E-5, with its 500 gallons, pulled in behind the tanker, driven by Brian White, son of Deputy White.

"Connect your line to the tanker," said Hurme to young White, and, to Chunky, now masked up and ready to go in, "Wait a sec. until Hawkins gets masked up. Then, up those stairs, take the third door on your left—and don't let that fire get by you!"

"Don't worry, Chief," Chunky said cheerfully, moving toward the house, live hose

in hand. Behind him, Hawkins put on a mask and turned to follow.

Then the three of them were climbing the stairs—Chunky first, Hawkins second, Hurme third up into what was now total darkness, a hot, palpable darkness of thick smoke in the hall, so that Chunky had to feel his way forward along the left wall until he came to what he thought was the designated third door (actually it was the second door by Hurme’s counting; Chunky had counted as door number one the stairway entrance, whereas Hurme had not)—a door Chunky kicked open simultaneously with his opening of the nozzle to project a hard, flat stream of water before him.

In that instant, Chunky came within an inch of losing his life.

THE OPENING OF THE DOOR FED oxygen into the most furiously burning room in the house, a room filled with superheated gases, producing what firemen know and fear as a “hot-air explosion.” It blew the door off its hinges, it blew out windows, it sent a ball of flame over Chunky’s head as he dropped to the floor, and it would have enveloped Chunky in flame, burning him to a crisp, but for the thick shield of fog formed before him by the instantaneous vaporizing of the water shooting out from the hose nozzle. As it was, he scrambled to his feet and began to advance into the room behind the fog shield while Hurme, a few feet away, called out through the air mask (the words would have been indistinguishable to anyone who did not know what Hurme would doubtless say), “I’ll get another line to you.”

And Hurme rushed again down the stairs.

A dozen or more men were now at the scene, with more arriving all the time, and jerking off his mask, Hurme gave his order to a couple of them: “Get 250 feet of preconnect E-3 and go in the front door and up the front stairs, find Chunky up there and back him with that line.” Which meant that there would be, within a minute, two lines pouring water onto flame upstairs, one going up the back stairs, the other up the front stairs, while Morse’s line extinguished the fire in the kitchen.

Among those arriving in the next few seconds was a sixteen-year-old boy, an auxiliary fireman named Glenn Lyons. A slender, self-deprecating, tensely conscientious youth, he will forever remember the minutes that followed as his baptism by fire.

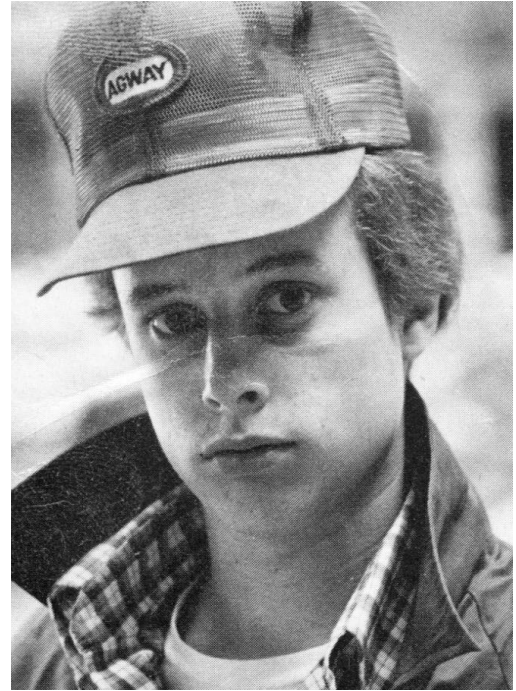
Only recently had Glenn become an auxiliary and, though he had answered several alarms, this was the first major fire he’d ever been called to—also the first to which he had driven himself for only within the last few days had he obtained the driver’s license that enabled him to go alone behind the wheel of the car he had just equipped with a red flasher (he had worked hard at odd jobs, mowing Princeton’s cemeteries and the like to earn money with which to buy this light, a fire helmet, a radio scanner). He was only too anxious to do well as he put on a mask and followed Hurme up into the second-floor hallway. And there, in the narrowly enclosed and total dark, he suddenly “panicked,” as he himself would later say with self-derogatory honesty. Amid the intense heat he was abruptly frozen by claustrophobia. His air mask smothered him. He could neither breathe nor move forward. He managed to indicate as much to Hurme,

immediately in front of him.

“Are you standing on the hose?” Hurme asked.
- Glenn was.

“Ok, follow it out into the yard and help the men there.”

Hurme knew that such a momentary failure of nerve can become permanently psychologically crippling it is allowed to become “fixed” -knew also a number of first-rate firemen who, by their own confession, were paralyzed with fear at their first major fire (he himself had been “plenty scared”)—and so he ordered young Lyons upstairs again a little later, after Hurme had again descended to the drive. That second time up, Glenn did as well as he had desperately hoped he would—working closely behind Chunky Yaglou, lifting and hauling forward the hose whose nozzle was in Chunky’s hands so that bends in it would not impede water flow and Chunky would have full mobility. Chunky praised his work afterward.



*Glenn Lyons - Now Retired
Highway Superintendent*

When Hurme came down from his third trip upstairs he could breathe a little more easily. He went over to householder Jim Leland who, throughout this hectic, crowded time remained in exemplary calm in the drive, lending a hand when he could but otherwise keeping well out of the firemen’s way.

“I think were going to get it if there’s not too much in the attic,” said Hurme to Leland. “How the hell do I get up to the attic?”

Leland told him how, as clearly and concisely as anyone could, but the way to the attic was a bit complicated (the door leading from the second floor to the third opens from inside a closet) and Hurme, unable to find his way through the smoke-filled dark on his first try, had to descend to receive fresh instructions from Leland. He was unable to find the right door on his second try either, though he entered the closet. He felt a renewal of tension as he came down that second time and went over to Leland, spreading his hands in a gesture of rueful exasperation.

“I’m going to have to ask you to go up with me and show me that door,” he said in a tone of regret and self-disgust, since he was bidding Leland into some danger.

For all he knew, flame was about to erupt through attic floors and walls while hot gases built up to explosive pressures in the rooms up there; and the water supply in the driveway (originally 3,000 gallons) was now dangerously low. Each of the three lines playing the fire shot 90 gallons a minute from its nozzle, a total of 270 gals a minute, which meant that in three minutes, if E-2 didn’t arrive with its 500 gallons and, more importantly, the line from the Whitney cistern, those hoses would run dry.

But the following two minutes saw the height and the end of Hurme's anxiety.

Leland showed him the third-floor stairs, and when he'd climbed them he found that, although fumes were dangerously thick, little fire had as yet spread to the attic. The situation up there could be brought quickly under control with a sufficiency of water, and when he came down he found E-2 parking in the snow of the Leland's' front yard! The line had come in; the water crisis was over.

Hurme spoke in happy relief to his son Donald (age twenty-five who had come in on the E-2). "Get up there," he said gesturing toward the third floor. "Take a line in the front door and stop that fire."

Donald grinned. "Okay, Dad," he replied, masking up and going in.

At Hurme's order, fire captain Raymond Wiggins swiftly scaled a ladder to the roof. There, by the best of good luck, he found, almost within arm's length of the ladder top, a skylight that needed only to be opened to release the pent fumes.

By now the tactical plan and organization for fighting this particular fire were in full, efficient operation.

Twenty firemen from the adjacent towns of Sterling and Holden had responded to the mutual-aid call with full equipment: Sterling covered the East Princeton sub-station, Holden the central station; thereby freeing forty Princeton firemen to fight the Leland blaze. Two thousand feet of 4-inch hose had been laid to the corner of Goodnow' and Hubbardston from the Whitney cistern, where E-1, joined now by a Holden engine, pumped water to E-4, parked at the Goodnow corner as relay pumper. From E-4, 2,000 feet of 3-inch hose ran up Goodnow to the fire scene where it was at From E-3 now sprouted four P/z-inch lines, and from these water poured onto the fire at the rate of 360 gallons per minute for the quarter hour or so that the fire-attack was most intense.

By 3:10 A.M. the fire was contained. By 5 o'clock the last smoldering embers had been extinguished.

THE CAUSE of the chimney fire— which spread to the house— had been what it usually is: the ignition of creosote deposits built up in the flue as a result of incomplete combustion in the stove. This occurred even though the fire department, at Leland's request, had cleaned the chimney the previous fall before the new' woodstove was installed, and even though the Leland's had been careful to bum in their stove only wood that produces a relatively small amount of creosote-forming fumes. Without using highly expensive chemical means, it is impossible to get rid of every bit of creosote in a chimney that has been long in use: the creosote becomes plastered as hard as cement on the flue walls, and this particular chimney may have been used for decades without being cleaned, long before the Leland's bought the house.

Nobody knows.

What is certain is that this fire was a very near thing. Had Mrs. Leland not awakened when she did, had she and her husband remained asleep in their room for

another 5 minutes both would probably have perished. The lives of the three others in the house would then have been greatly threatened; so rapid was the fire's spread. Had the eldest son Bruce (aged twenty-four) been at home he would almost certainly have died for it was in his bedroom that super heated chimney brick started the structure fire. If he had been sleeping in the bedroom that filled with smoke and emptied of oxygen, he would likely never have awakened. (Leland has since returned, at least temporarily, to full reliance on oil for heating and has discovered that, whereas his total fuel-oil bill until mid-January of this cold season was \$300, it has since run between \$150 and \$200 a week! He has also done what Hurme insists every householder should do—he has installed smoke-detector alarms, a half-dozen of them at a cost of only \$14 apiece, placed at strategic spots in his house.)

What is also certain is that, had the fire department been delayed only a few minutes in its effective attack on the fire, the house would likely have been totally destroyed. As it was, though some sixteen thousand dollars' worth of structural damage was done, according to contractor estimates, the Leland's did not have to move out of their house even temporarily; and the damage done to their loose possessions in the house (furniture, carpets, and the like), though it totaled many hundreds of dollars, was but a fraction of what it might have been.

At the height of the fire-fighting, Mrs. Leland had been astonished to see how the firemen avoided damaging any more than necessary the floors and walls and furnishings. Loose possessions were stacked out of the way and covered with tarpaulins; floors and stairs were covered with tarpaulins to protect them against water and dirt from firemen's boots. Nor did the firemen consider their job done when the fire was out. They had work to do (for no pay) at the station and the cistern before going home. The equipment they had used, had to be returned promptly to a state of readiness, for another major alarm call might come in at any moment. This involved thawing and drying frozen valves and pumps and tanks, refilling the tanks, thawing frozen hose re-packing that hose onto the engine, and refilling the twenty-seven 27 air tanks used at the fire. And while some firemen were doing this others cleaned up and restored as nearly as possible to their former condition the areas where they fought the fire.

What motivates these men?

Obviously it is not desire for pecuniary gain: most of them pay out more for personal equipment than is returned to them in firefighting pay, and each donates time that might otherwise be devoted to money-making pursuits. The tax savings to the town are considerable. Last year (1978), to protect lives and approximately twenty million dollars' worth of property against fire, Princeton spent \$31,833, or just 3.1 cents out of each tax dollar. Firemen cannot even be sure their efforts are justly appreciated by the citizenry they serve, or even that the general citizenry is aware of them. (Once, recently, when a relay pumper had to be parked by a citizen's house in the night to boost water to a dangerous fire a quarter mile up the road, that citizen telephoned angrily to the

department because his sleep had been disturbed!)

Part of the motivation for some is a desire for adventure, for the stimulating and even intoxicating excitements of risk-taking in an obvious worthy cause. But a far stronger motive, especially heartening at a time when selfishness seems to dominate the national mood, is clearly the desire to be of use—the desire to serve one’s fellows, to give valuable service, thereby enhancing the meaning of one’s own life. Every department member knows that what he is doing has importance, and that therefore, he is important to the town. Finally, the fire department, constituting a close-knit community within a community, provides a considerable and pleasurable social life for its members: there are occasional dinners and parties, and every meeting is in some degree a social event, enlivened by much good fellowship, much mutual well-wishing and affection.

“All my closest friends,” says Chunky Yaglou, “are firemen.”

KENNETH S. DAVIS, the author of three novels and a dozen works of nonfiction, was involved in drawing up the master plan for Princeton’s fire department.

In 2022, this document was scanned, images re-added, and current addresses of places mentioned were added by William “Bud” Brooks.

Since 1940 there have been these major fires:

- The Manor – Mountain Rd.
- The Leland’s – Goodnow Rd
- The Washburn/Old Princeton Inn – Mountain Rd.
- Two hard to fight brush fires along the BB&G railroad tracks.
- The Summit House Fire

This article struck me in 3 ways:

1. Princeton is so lucky to have had and continue to have such a willing group of volunteer men and women to protect the town,
2. As winter approaches, make sure you get your chimney cleaned,
3. I had never really realized how important response time can be to saving a structure or a life. The next emergency might be one of us.

**Below are two more images labeled with Firemen and EMT’s volunteer names
Thank you John Bennett and Richard Hawkins for this labeling**



Peter Morkavitch

Dick Morse

Phil Rand

Scott Chaiken

Charlie Albrecht

Karl Sanstrom

Miriam LaMarche

Anne Eustis

Anne Kilgour

Lawn Eustis

Deborah Hurme

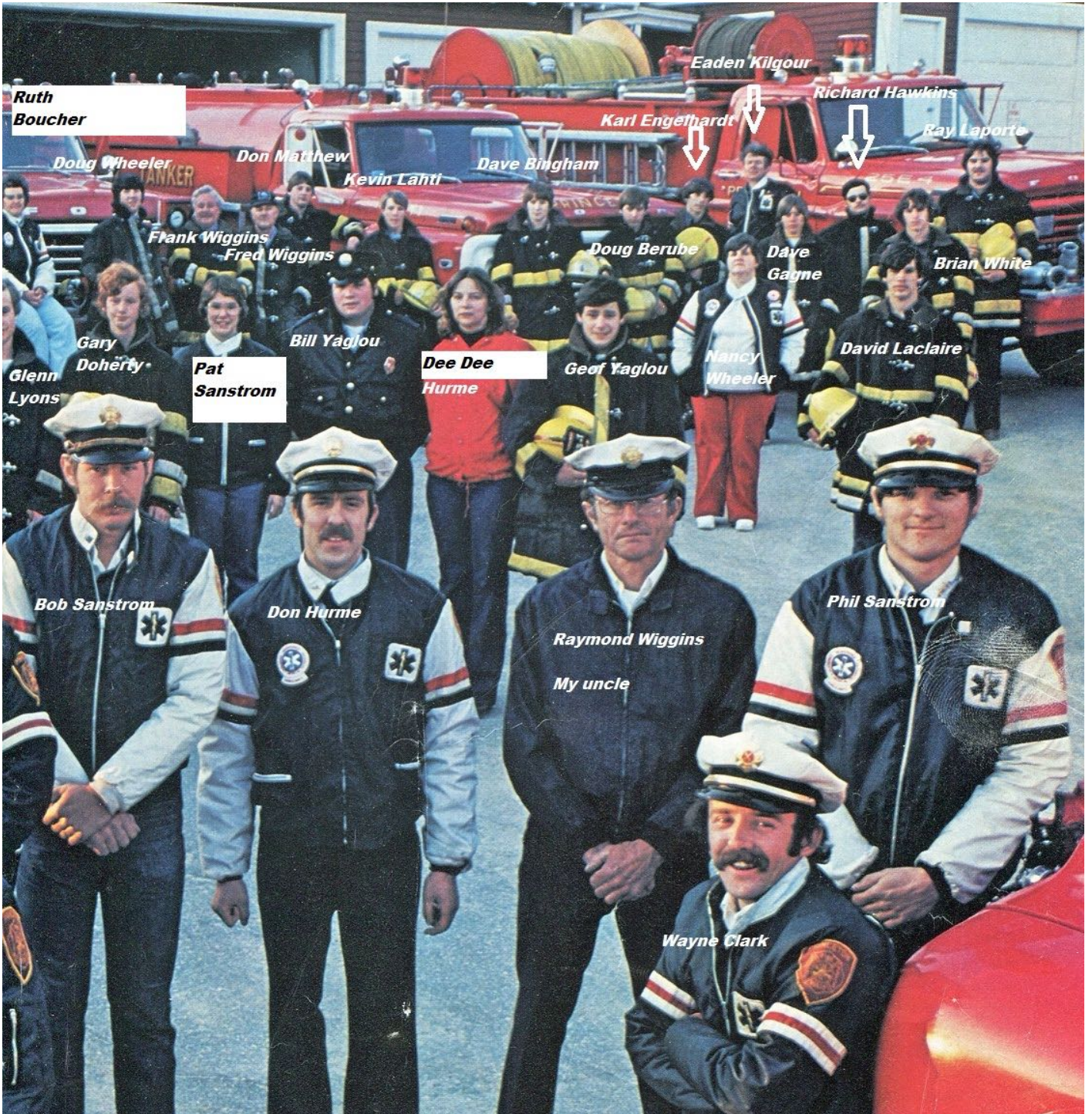
Ken Hubbard

James LaMarche

Tom Smith

Leo Hurme

Lou White



Ruth Boucher

Doug Wheeler

Don Matthew

Kevin Lahti

Dave Bingham

Eaden Kilgour

Karl Engelhardt

Richard Hawkins

Ray Laporte

Frank Wiggins

Fred Wiggins

Doug Berube

Dave Gagne

Brian White

Gary Doherty

Bill Yaglou

Dee Dee Hurme

Geof Yaglou

Nancy Wheeler

David Laclaire

Glenn Lyons

Pat Sanstrom

Bob Sanstrom

Don Hurme

Raymond Wiggins

My uncle

Phil Sanstrom

Wayne Clark