

(ROBERT (BOB) JOHNSON) & WELCHY MATHIAS
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TALK ABOUT FIRE DEPARTMENT

Johnson: I'll just show you first here, the records from 1920 to 1957 with that hose team. Welch and I both joined the fire department the same night in June, 1920. And we've been through this together from the beginning.

When did you join the fire department?

Mathias: We both joined the fire department May 20, 1920. How many firemen did you have at that time? Mathias: Well, the town was pretty well down owing to the strike. You could have bought any piece of property here for \$500. Well, the fire department, naturally, was down. So _____, and I and Newt Simons and Walt _____, about 12 of us joined 5/20/20. We started boostin' the fire department up. From then on, it started to progress. And, from the winnings we had in these tournaments, we bought that little chassis, that little Chevy chassis to start with. That was the start of automotive equipment for the fire department. We were instrumental in doing it because Bob was coach and manager of the team, pretty active in the business of the fire department and we started building up little by little. I would venture to say that we are the founders of a progressive fire department, because it was down. They would come and go as they pleased; it was just willv-nilly, you might say. So this bunch came in and then Louie Brugger came in later and really active members of the department that finally made it get along, you know. And after we got that chassis, well it was on the upgrade, naturally. I remember one time - see we used to have a ramp right in front of the City Hall - it was an icy night and we run up there and Carl Woodhead (?) - he wasn't a fireman at the time, but he ran when we had the whistle blow and he broke his leg on that ice. He grabbed ahold of the cart and the cart run over his leg. But anyhow, from then on, we just kept gettin' better, bigger, better, bigger. Now they've got, I think, as good a fire department as anywhere in the state for the size of the town. I really do. They've got some darn good kids in there. They're enthusiastic, that's for sure. Mathias: Yeah, and a lot of them are dedicated.

Johnson: What really started this, I think, was in 1922 and '23, a chief from the Denver Fire Department, who at that time was the secretary of the Colorado State Firemen's Association along with Clint Turnbull and a few of those old timers, came out to our meeting and encouraged us to join in the Volunteer Firemen Association and take part in the annual convention and tournament. Well, it didn't take very long until we decided that we had enough material around here that we could be in the tournament so our first year as 1923 in Sterling. In our first attempt, we did pretty good. We came out tied for first

in the wet test and the next year, in '24, the convention was in Boulder and that's the year that really started the department kinda crazy because we broke the world record in the wet test on July 4, 1924. Has that record ever been tied? Ever been broken? Johnson: No, it still stands. Of course, in '38, '39 - I think it was '39, they discontinued the hose races and started in as truck races. And in those years, the prizes were different from the prizes today because it was money. They gave us \$225. for winning the wet test and the hub to hub was \$200 and the replacement race was \$125. (Hub to hub race - a 600 foot race with two cart teams competing against one another at the same time. It's timed from the beginning until they reach the 600 foot mark. The replacement race - The time starts - and there is only one team at a time - they race 300 feet to the plug. Then they lay 250 feet of hose and it is timed until the water comes out the end of the hose. The whole team then works to take out one section of the hose and replace it as if it had been broken. It is timed again when the water comes out the end of the spout). So we came from Salida after winning the three big races in a few seconds, etc. with \$600. and I think \$600 and I think \$600 and how many dollars - and that was the beginning of our first fire truck. With that money, we bought a chassis - the one that the boys have preserved and taken such good care of - it makes us pretty proud, in fact, that it's still there.

Mathias: The two Nelson boys were blacksmiths and whatever we put on that truck was done by them. If we had had to pay them - well, we couldn't have done it, that's all. They were good; they'd do it on their own time. Johnson: They were firemen, also. Mathias: They had been firemen, yeah, they were ex-firemen. Abby and George.

Johnson: Well, anyhow, down through the years, they all stood up and took a look at Lafayette when they came in. They always wanted to find out what we had. And, of course, they always got the same story - well, just nothin' this year - nobody wanted to come out to train because they used to train six weeks before they ever took the cart out and started practicing. Then we'd practice for about 20 to 23 weeks to 24 weeks out on Main Street with half of the town watching the show. With the result that there was an awful lot of enthusiasm among the citizens as well as the department. And it's built up to what it is today and I think that's partly responsible for it. Well, I don't think the boys have done quite so good in winning first and second places as the old guys did on foot when it took eleven men to run a race. And, of course, you couldn't possibly afford that kind of a deal today because it would cost too much for hotel rooms and take care of feeding the boys and take care of them. In those days, we got about \$300. to take about 14 guys to the tournament.

We had Louie Brugger and Johnny James. Louie Brugger was the best hose puller that ever went to the conventions. And I think he was mostly responsible for our winnings as much as anything else because while the other hose pullers would pull off about 10 feet and sometimes not that much and Louie would have about 50 - 60 feet pulled back there which made it that much shorter distance for the boys to run because they used to run 300 feet to the plug and then lay 250 feet of hose and the time was taken from the time they left until the water come out of the nozzle. And when you have a little time, I'd like to have you see what Lafayette did in the replacement race - I think we have a couple of cups up there that nobody has their name on but ours. We were pretty consistent in winning that replacement race.

Mathias: This is Mrs. Mack (?) - her husband was the secretary of the Colorado State Firemens Association. He died unexpectedly at his desk. So she put out a cup from her and the kids. Nobody else has got their name on it but Lafayette and she wanted it to go to every fire department in the country. That's all that's on it - is Lafayette. Old Ma Mack - she was a wonderful girl. A big heavy girl, but boy, she was heart and soul in that stuff.

Johnson: They gave her the job of secretary for a good many years. And, of course, she was a bookkeeper to begin with and made it pretty handy for the association and economical too. And, also, gave a little respect for her husband. .

Johnson: I was sorry that our department didn't celebrate our fiftieth year in 1974. I talked to the chief a couple of times and he said they was going to do something about it. That was several months before the Fourth of July. And he said he was going to do something, but I didn't happen to be here, I was in Montana or someplace away and when I came back I found out there was nothing - no mention made of it - it made us feel kinda bad about that too. And the Camera said they were sorry they didn't - if I'd just come and talked to them about it, they would have run a story on it because the record was broken in Boulder and it would have been news at that time.

Mathias: We have a nozzle up there called a Fonda Nozzle. He was the captain of the Boulder team that we broke the record. That day, he came down with that nozzle and handed it to us. He said, "You've earned it". That was their record that we broke. So he give us this nozzle and it's on display now in the case up there. Things have changed so dramatically. We're paid to do this now and we do this now and all that kind of stuff and we're not close together like we used to be. I mean, they don't want to get out and train like them fellas did. I even had a dog run between my legs and scratches all over, but back out the next night.

Dedication. Mathias: That's what made this fire department. They may joke and laugh about it - these young punks now - I go over there every once in a while - but the spirit isn't there. The pulling together. Yeah, the pulling together, like it used to be.

Johnson: Effie, I'm gonna tell you how the guys used to get on that hose team - how they used to go, run with the hose team. Those guys knew - the kids - I especially watched these kids when track was on in high school, you know, around the spring of the year - when I was watching those kids pretty close, who was the fastest guy they had - and of course, encouraged them to get out and try for the hose team. And these kids knew, no matter how good you were or what you did last year, they knew that they ran 200 yards to make the team and they knew that the first seven guys over that line was gonna make that team, regardless of what they were last year. They might have been the best last year but they had to that. And those kids worked for it and that's the kind of spirit they had. So the kids got out and trained that wanted to be the firemen and wanted to go to the tournaments; they trained for it. And they really got out and worked for it and they had no problems.

When did you have a building of your own for the fire department?

I know you had the hoses at the City Hall; for how many years did you keep them there? Well, from the time it was inaugurated.

Mathias: We used to have an old rack like that to dry our hoses on. Right in the back where my house is now. And from then we started gradually doing this and doing that - inovations and all to the betterment. So we moved into the little back building where the Council Chambers are now and that was our fire garage. (East Emma). The fact is, Elmo Lewis came out of his house right across the street one time and he come with a screen door around his neck. But that was spirit - we tried to outdo each other cooperatively. We fought lots of fires, too; don't you think we didn't. The old Webber Building, the Green Front Garage, the old place where the postoffice is now - it used to be an old livery barn. Johnson: That was a bad fire and we used to come down the street with that cart too. Sometimes there was only two guys there from the time we started but they knew where that fire was because everybody had a hook-up. They knew where the fire was so they just started with that cart down the hill.

Johnson: We had a ramp there across from where the derrick was - you know where the bell was. And we had a ramp there to drag the hose; that was the purpose. We used to have a bell; that bell's still over there now. And it was up on there and we had a signal. If we had a fire, it was this way and if it was a meeting or anything else, it was one, two, three, one, two, and one, two, three, four, five. That was the signal - three, two, five, two.

Mathias: Boy, that old red-headed woman of mine bolted many a time. Don't think she didn't. That's why that house is right there. We gave our lives to it.

Johnson: Tom Chapman, he was another one that lived right across the street. There was always a fuss between him and Welch who was gonna get - this was after we got the truck - who was going to be in the cart - well, Welch, he was there about 99% of the time. And Tom got there in time to open the door and Welch was sittin' there waitin' to go.

The fire of '36, do you remember much about it? Johnson: Was that the Webber's Building? Franz's? Wasn't that Franz's Building that burned down? Mathias: The Franz's store burned down in 1910. Yes, that's the one I mean. Franz's Store, right across from old John P. Dow's Drug Store; it's a vacant lot now. Johnson: I didn't come here until 1918. Mathias: I helped the firemen. Joe and I helped straighten out hoses and stuff that day.

Lafayette's had several bad fires. Mathias: We've had quite a few bad fires. I used to go to the fire doins before I was a fireman, naturally. But we saved a lot. That was the attitude. But now they try to save everything, see, that's the difference. But if we saved a lot and kept the other house from burning, we done a good job.

Johnson: And it didn't make any difference whether you was in church or whether you was in lodge. I wore many a suit to a fire. There was no uniforms. Mathias: It didn't make any difference when that whistle blew or the bell rang.

You didn't receive any pay at all? It was all volunteer? Mathias: Pay? We didn't even think of pay. There was no pay in mind at all.

Johnson: And the firemen that didn't make the team, and their wives, we always had an annual picnic. And of course, that was a nice deal and it was all paid for. It was free. We didn't pay for it. And when we went to the tournaments, after the race was over, then we really had a party. Everybody got pretty high. Mathias: But anybody gettin' caught having a drink before the last night, whew! No, they held to it pretty faithfully, I'll tell you. Lou Beckett, Skek Beckett (?), Burns, they held to it. And Red Schofield, they'd hold off until the last night.

Johnson: I think I showed you this, Welch, a letter I got, this is the guy, Skek Beckett - he was our postmaster here - he was a braker, wasn't he? Well, Skek, he got an idea he was going to try to get this world's record in the athletic record book. And they wanted proof. That's why I went after this material to try to get something in the paper at that

time to prove that it really happened.

From the letter: "Gentlemen, I'm inquiring if around July 4, 1974, did you have a write-up in your paper in regard to the fiftieth anniversary which the Lafayette Hose Team of the Lafayette Volunteer Fire Department, having broken the previous record on July 4, 1924 and have held this record continuously for fifty years. If copies of such a publication is available, I would like to have ten copies. I do have one copy of your issue of May, 1972. Should you still have some of those issues, also please send me 10 copies. Check will be mailed promptly. I was captain of the hose braker on that team and was postmaster of Lafayette from 1922 to 1930. I have learned that we have a good chance for this record to be included in the record book of Guinness Book of World Records. I have photographs which I can have copies made. I would appreciate any help you can send me. Thank you. Respectfully Yours, Norman P. Beckett"

Did he eventually get in the records? Johnson: He sent me this copy: "Dear Friend, Bob - I was utterly surprised to find that there was no Lafayette Leader any more, as this enclosed envelope will show. I'm sending the letter to the Lafayette Leader to you and perhaps you can give me some further information such as the secretary of the Colorado State Firemens Association to get a copy of their records for July 4, 1924 and also anything that may be of importance whereby we can get this world record recorded in the halls of fame or record books. I can have my photos reproduced as needed but we need factual records and statements as to breaking this record on July 4, 1924 and have held the record for more than 50 years. Please search around for such information and let me know so I can compile the application for World Records in Athletic Events and particularly in the volunteer fire departments. I'm going out to California to visit for a time with Leland (Shorty) who I've not seen in 20 years, just after Xmas and may get to see the Rose Bowl. Best regards to you and Stacia and my existing friends. Sincerely, Norman Beckett."

Did he ever get it in the World Record? Well, he's working on it; I don't know whether he's made it yet or not. I talked to him on the phone.

(Eliminated discussion on pictures copying)

I researched the papers and found there was a disagreement in the fire department. (1939)

Johnson: Yes they did. In fact, I had a heck of a time. I spent 50 years, well after about '44, '45, '46 - well I never missed a fire from 1920 on. Well, I decided in later years here when things got a little bit tougher that I was entitled to a pension. I could have got in 1940 when I was actually

entitled to it because I had 20 years in. But I never did file for it because, well, I was workin' and I didn't need it. Well, I had a heck of a time and finally I got it here a while back after about six months and I got Judge Horn, he was one of the legislative committee for years and years and he and a few more and, of course, these records showed that I had 17 years here, with the department.

Johnson: They have two days of fire college and then two days tournament. We used to just have the tournament but the fire college came in too just before I went out as president. Really, it's something, you know, this convention every year. This tournament and convention every year. The problem is, so many kids go there for the tournament and they don't go there for the college. We always had a couple of our guys at the fire college because, really, they've got the best stuff there is in the United States that has papers on the fire college. They train them and teach firemen how to be better firemen. And it's really worth an awful lot to a small, volunteer fire department. Now then that they've got everything in the trucks and that, well, it's a different story. We've got a good representation there every year, our department goes pretty strongly. It costs a lot of money too to go now to what we used to have to put up. It was seldom that we didn't bring back more money than we took. And we always put it in the department. I wouldn't give anything for the experience and what I got from it but I'd hate to go through it again.

The first time that I saw the picture of the City Hall with that ramp, I was giving a paper on Lafayette. And I said, "This picture of City Hall is one of the older ones and it has a ramp out front. I don't know whether it's to keep of the grass or what it was. And so one of the girls said, "Well, you can tell what time you came to Lafayette because you didn't know where our fire hose came from". Johnson: We put it up there to drain it. The children thought that was really fun when we showed them the pictures of the cart and the men pulling it.

Johnson: I came here late but I'm about the only one living that was around here at that time. Elmo (Lewis) came in quite a while after that. And Greekie Lewis, he's here. He ran a spike. And this Beckett - his brother - the two brothers were on the hose team. Shorty was the younger brother. He was the fastest guy we had. He ran spike all the time. Then of course came Bill Nace, Greekie Lewis.

Did you have names for the positions of the team? Johnson: Yes. I notice you said he ran "spike". Johnson: Well, that's the lead man.

(More elimination of conversation on pictures)

These were swing - they called these fellas - these two are swing men and this is the tongue man. Now, each one of them had a job to do? Johnson: Yes. In this particular race, we ran 300 yards to the plug, 300 feet, I should say to the plug and 50 feet back here. I started out. Louie, the hose puller, he pulled hose. I started to make the connection and this team ran down. And this guy, he broke it and took the flap off of 250 feet of hose and this other guy put the nozzle on. Time was taken from the time they left the start up there - they had a big star up here on a pulley that went around under the cart. And that was a rope on the cart and the instant that thing got off of the rope, this heavy star went down and the timers down here at the race, they started timing it with their stop watches. And time was taken from the time was taken from the time they left until the water came out of the nozzle. And of course, the world record was 27 2/5 seconds.

Then the next race that we ran was the replacement race. They use it now in the motor too, but this took an extra 50. They ran the same type of race, only they took another 50 foot length of hose. Well, then all of the team worked in that because all of this guy here and this here, the rest of these four men, they had to disconnect - they had to get the water the first time and then they had to disconnect that length of hose and bring it back and replace, take this one up, that's assuming the hose had broke and we were making the change, was actually the purpose of it. And we hold the state record on that race too. That's the one we just continually won that, year after year.

The next race was the hub to hub - where two teams - they didn't have no hose and these carts were racin' carts. They were rubber tired, special built. The only time they was used was during the tournament. They were racin' carts. Well, that race was 600 feet - 200 yards - and it started the same way, only they were hub to hub. There was two teams on the track. And the time was taken from the time they left from all the teams which was the best time in runnin' that 200 yards. When they came down here at the 200 yards, the time was taken there. Well, we hold the record on that too - the state record that was. The difference between this was just taking advantage of a few things - we had things in making couplings, connections that nobody got until Bun Graves used to be on our fire department here and when he went to Louisville, he carried our secrets over to Louisville and so they started. They found out in these races there's a system that we used all the time that you just didn't cross your threads. You had to prepare your couplings where they were gonna go when

you put it on. They had to be just right. We had a lipstick; we used to mark it on the hose and then rub it off after we got through so nobody knew what was goin' on. But Poor old Bun, he had to take it over to Louisville so that got scattered around a little bit and that's why, because fractions of seconds win these races, you know. And when you lose them and it's a game that the other guys don't have and that's the way Lafayette done and so we won some races. Well, I think you have about everything you need now.

(Discussions of pictures)