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SEPT. 15 - NOV. 19 STATE FAIR PARK

Station 1 reacts to public's demands

By John Payne Staff Reporter

The sign at the City/County Welfare Building read as follows-- "You may pick up food stamps today if the last number of your social security card ends in 1-2." On the floor, in the corner of the office, lay Delbert, an elderly man who was suffering from what was initially thought to be a heart attack. A crowd of welfare and food stamp recipients looked on as the poor derelict was attended to by the men of Engine 2, Fire Station 1.

Joe Millard, trained extensively in cardiac monitor use, was the team's Emergency Medical Team Defibrillation technician. He administered oxygen while his partners Mark Munger and Glen Kempf checked Delbert's vital signs.

By the end of my 12 hours at Fire Station 1 I would be used to the routine. Engine 2 would be dispatched to the scene, assess the situation, gather preliminary information for Eastern Ambulance, who would in turn shuttle the patient off to the nearest hospital assisted by a Lincoln Police Department escort.

My day at Station 1, 1801 Q St., had begun two hours earlier, when Assistant Fire Chief Dale Boettcher introduced me to the men of C shift. They were on their last day of duty awaiting what fire fighters call Kelly Days, an eight-day period of rest named for a Chicago fireman who pleaded with city officials for a pay raise for fire fighters. Chicago legislators refused to grant Kelly the salary increase, but to give at least some compensation for the long hours they gave the firemen week-long furloughs. Today, on a yearly average, fire fighters put in about a 56-hour work week, 24 hours on, 24 hours off for 12 days straight.

The medical call that dispatched our engine to the Welfare Office had come during the Fire Department's semiannual business inspections. Joe, Mark, Glen and I had just payed a visit to "King Tut's," a Mediterranean grocery store at 17th and O streets. Everything seemed up to snuff, fire prevention-wise, and so we were on our way to check out a couple of local theaters.

Proprietors are not always thrilled about these routine inspections, which seems silly when you consider that the recommendations made often save their businesses as well as their lives.

"It's not our job to drive people out of business," Millard told me. "We simply look for hazards and make recommendations. We always give them ample time to fix the situation."

As for Delbert, his ailment seemed to be a little more than an acute side ache, and so as the Eastern Ambulance crew hurried him off to St. Elizabeth Hospital we returned to the station.

Engine 2, Glen told me, was among the 25 busiest rigs in the nation, averaging about seven calls

a day. Glen Kempf is a 26-year veteran of the department, a regular history book of fire fighting tradition, whom Millard claims is older than God.

The fireman tradition of washing the engine's tires, for instance, began in the days of horse-drawn rigs. Horse manure would be picked up by the wheels, so in order to keep it out of the station house, firemen would wash them off in the driveway.

At 3 p.m. we were back at the station, where Mark Munger punched up the afternoon reports on the office computer, while the rest of the crew chatted with me about their jobs. They are family men mostly, who make bad coffee and good conversation. Many have second jobs during their Kelly Days, like Scott Thompson who runs his own house-painting business. Others spend their free time pursuing an education. Munger is finishing up on his degree in business administration while Millard soon will be a licensed real estate broker.

All of the men at Station 1 agree that one of the nicest benefits of the job is the Kelly Days, which allow them to do other things.

It was about 5 p.m. and we were all about to sit down and chomp on some hamburgers when another call came in on the station speakers. The City/County Building, which channeled all emergency calls and dispatched the appropriate engines, gave us the word. A fire at 1915 Garfield St.

This was the one I had been waiting for, a nice juicy fire. Something a big-time journalist could sink his teeth into. Glen, Mark and Joe darted to the end of the dark corridor to the brass poles that plopped them down right in front of their rigs.

I had been briefed earlier on the proper technique for descending the 30-foot poles so it was old hat for me. Besides, the boys had no time to wait around while I took the stairs and this was, after all, big-time journalism. So, with my trusty pad and pen wedged between my teeth like the bit in the mouth of a Clydesdale, I slid with a precision that would be the envy of even Batman and Robin.

Within seconds of the call we were roaring down 16th street's rush hour traffic, the "Stress Express" among firemen. For anyone who has ever thought that a passing fire engine is loud, I suggest riding in one. The sirens are deafening.

But automobiles these days, with their sound-proof doors and Blaupunkt speakers, make it hard for drivers to hear the sirens and so they often fail to pull over.

"Out of the way civilians!" I implored from the back of our rig. "Can't you see we've got a job to do?"

Joe looked a little worried about my overzealousness. He was right, I suppose. Perhaps that eighth cup of coffee had made me a bit edgy. When we arrived at the scene

Engine 8 and Truck 8, from the overlapping 17th and Van Dorn station, were already there and on their way to the second-story blaze. Chief King, from our station, had cleared the way for us. The chief plays a supervisory role in these situations, directing the dispersal of water and positioning the men strategically. King was down the pole and out of sight ahead of us all. Amazing quickness for a man who had played football for Lincoln High School during the days of the single-wing offense.

The fire itself was rather anticlimatic. It seemed some woman had been a bit inattentive with her Teflon skillet and, after discovering that it was on fire, decided to throw flour on it. A bad idea, Chief King told me, because of the flammable properties of flour.

The problem had been extinguished by the fire fighters of Engine and Truck 8 by the time we got there. Still, the excitement was enough to keep me wired all the way back to the station house. The mood between calls is incredibly relaxed, but still there are always things for the men to do.

"The days of sitting around between calls is long gone," Mark Munger said. "Today the public expects a certain amount of performance for their (tax) dollar."

As a result, what Munger calls the fire fighter's "realm of responsibility" really has grown over the last decade, including various fire-prevention and CPR training programs. Station 2 runs much like a regular business between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m., and there is no "sitting around" between those hours.

The rest of the night was uneventful, save for one medical call shortly before the kickoff of Monday Night Football. Engine 1 was dispatched to the Lincoln Plasma Center at 126 N. 14th St., where an unfortunate donor was having a peculiar reaction after having the wrong blood type put back into his veins. We're talking lawsuit. I made the mistake of identifying myself as a reporter and quickly was escorted to the lobby by a very snooty nurse and one of LPD's finest.

Back at the station the rest of the men had begun their Monday night ritual eating up their leftover rations before they went on Kelly Days. They had whipped up several snacks for the game, ranging from hot popcorn to hard-boiled eggs to Salines smeared with vanilla frosting.

As we smacked away during the opening kickoff, a few of the men had decided to turn in early. But as Munger had told me "you never really rest at a fire station, you always wake up tired."

The fire fighters of Station 2 invited me to spend the night, but I declined, feeling secure in the knowledge that my neighborhood, at least, was protected.

By 11:30 p.m. most of the men had gone to bed with only one ear to the pillow, while the Bears had easily covered a 3-point spread, which made me happy for certain financial reasons.



Fireman Art Longoria (left) and David Frediemen show kindergarteners from Helen Hyatt Elementary School the different protective devices used while battling fires.



Dennis Kruse of Station 1 washes down the spilled oil and anti-freeze at 16th & Q streets after a two-car accident.



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