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Ray Foster

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Interviewers: Cole Hollins, Jacob Tibbidough, Baily (Last Name?)

Interviewee: Ray Foster

Disclaimer: This transcription will not include words such as uhm, um, and ah.

Cole Hollins: Okay it is November seventh interview and prospect volunteer fire department. This interview for use by Longwood University any information given made be made public. Okay we're good to go.

Jacob Tibbidough: Okay so nice to meet you ray, I'm Jacob this is Bailey and this is Cole and we would like to ask you some questions for a group project we are doing in our sociology class.

Ray Foster: Go head

JT: The first question is where are you from.

RF: Prospect.

JT: How long have you lived in the area?

RF: Since 1951

Bailey Russell: were you born and raised here?

RF: I was born in Greene County Tennessee, moved here when I was seven years old

BR: Why did you move here?

RF: Sir?

BR: Why did you move here?

RF: My parents.

JT: How have you liked living here? Can you give me some goods some bads maybe some exciting things that have happened?

RF: Yeah it's a good rural area I've enjoyed living here you get to know all the people, it's a close knit community you know all the people around here it makes a big difference.

BR: Now have you met a lot of people through the fire department?

RF: Have I met a lot of people through the fire department? Yeah really I knew a lot of these people before I got into the fire department, I went to school with some of them, grew up with

some of them and like I said some of them are kin to me in different ways and I married a local girl the first time then divorced and remarried another local girl.

BR: when were those marriages?

RF: when? I can't remember dates very well but it's been awhile but I got five kids out of it.

JT: what are their names?

RF: Kevin, Kevin, I got a stepson named Kevin, Brian, Cindy, and Tammy

BR: what's the oldest one?

RF: Tammy

BR: How old is she?

RF: 42

BR: and the youngest?

RF: is Cindy and she is 36 I think and one of the Kevins is going to be the auctioneer here today. My stepson Kevin and the other Kevin is here working. Kevin Foster is here working today. I don't know if he is being interviewed or not.

BR: At what age did you start working at the fire department here?

RF: When I was 18 years old

CH: you've been a member all this time?

RF: I dropped out for about three years and came back when I was 21. I've been a member for 44 years. And right now I'm the vice president.

BR: what kind of duties come with being the vice president?

RF: it's really not a whole lot. There's seven of us on the board including the president, vice president, chief, secretary, and treasurer are on the board, the board of directors and we have seven members there. Any you cant really make the decisions of the company without the consent of the fire department and we try to include them any time we can. If something comes up and it's got to be done know we call a quick meeting and call in the whole company together.

JT: can you give me a rundown of how your childhood was growing up any really fun memories?

RF: not really, I had an older brother and a younger sister and I was the poor middle child.

CH: I know the feeling.

RF: you know the feeling? (laughing) but you know I had a good life. My mother and father both had to work and we were poor I guess you could say in some ways. We were rich in some ways to you know.

BR: happiness?

RF: yeah! You know we grew up in church our parents made us go to church and I done the same with my kids. That was one of the requirements. You may go out and do something silly Saturday night but Sunday morning you were getting ready for church and because of that most of them are in church now. Four out the five are anyway, in church now.

JT: That's good. So I know this plays in with the last question but how did you like your parents, your sister, and your brother?

RF: I loved them all. My mommy and daddy did everything they could to keep us comfortable like I said both of them had to work and us as kids we would come home from school and we had to get in wood and different chores, you always had chores around on the farm because we grew up on a farm you know it's a rural area so you had to do chores which is good for you.

JT: instills character

RF: yes sir!

BR: the relationship between you and your brother, how far apart were you guys?

RF: three years.

BR: three years so you guys were pretty close

RF: and my sister was five years younger.

BR: was it different between the relationship with your brother and the relationship with your sister are they any different?

RF: not really, matter of fact my brother already called me this morning we talk a lot and he lives in Farmville. And my sister lives on over the edge of Buckingham so we're all pretty close.

BR: you guys get together for holidays and stuff?

RF: every year we have Christmas at three different houses you know we take turns so I'm not sure whos year it is to have Christmas but it'll be at one of the three houses.

BR: do they have any kids?

RF: yeah my sister has one daughter my brother has two sons and a daughter.

BR: Did any of them go to Longwood or Hampden Sydney?

RF: my sister went to Longwood and graduated from Longwood and taught school for 33 years and now she retired and took an exam and is selling real-estate she's like the rest of us a workaholic

JT: so where did you attend elementary school or middle school?

RF: we had a school over here in the village but when the high way came through they took it out. I went to elementary school there and went to high school in Farmville and they closed the schools in 1958 and I attended what was at that time was prince Edward academy and I did that for two years then I dropped out of school.

BR: were those schools segregated?

RF: yes

BR: when you saw-

JT: --ask him if he knows about the book we read

BR: have you ever heard about the book called something's got to change about Prince Edward County?

RF: no

JT: well it's about this girl who's growing up with people that want to segregate schools and talks about going to the academy you went to and how like she thought it wasn't right and the people she was raised believed in it and she went against them.

RF: no I haven't had a chance to read the book and haven't heard about it.

BR: when you were younger were whites and blacks completely separated or was it just in school?

RF: the area I lived in north of prospect there was peaks church and that was primarily black and I rode my bike over to play ball and I was the only white face on the ball field and we never had a problem. The kids didn't have the problem.

BR: it was the adults

RF: yes

BR: it was all politics

RF: that's all it was the adults and political crap

BR: so you were against segregation

RF: I don't know if I was against it or for it

JT: you just never thought of it

RF: it never bothered me and I've worked since then with blacks and whites you know I went through the good and bad and all of it you know. I go to Glenn memorial Baptist church and we have- look at these mixed kids right here, they go to our church and you'll see how I play with them when I walk by. They're kids, they aren't colored they're kids.

BR: what else was segregated, were churches and restaurants stuff like that.

RF: they still are, the churches are, the restaurants to some degree but I'll tell you when the blacks and white are most segregated are Sunday morning in church. We worship differently and they don't want to go to our church and we don't want to go to theirs but like I said we have some black people in our church but it'd be few you know eight or ten and I've been to several black churches because I used to sing in a gospel music group and wherever they asked us to go that's where we went you know?

JT: so I know you said you dropped out of school but overall how did you like school? The work your classmates the teachers?

RF: run it by me again\

JT: so I know told me you dropped out of school correct?

RF: yes that is correct

JT: so how was your experience with it? Did you like the teachers the kids?

RF: no I didn't have any problem with the teachers I just dropped out of school to drive my sister to charlotte county for her to finish her education. Then I went on to get my GED

BR: that was nice of you

JT: that's good. Yeah I know a lot of people who have dropped out of school and became very successful.

RF: yeah well you know I've been working for Prince Edward county for 32 years as a chief animal control officer and that's until February. Then I'm going to retire

BR: did you play any sports in high school?

RF: no

JT: growing up you said you played baseball

RF: yeah softball and baseball or whatever and then after I got grown and old and got most of the kids out of the house I played on a couple of volley ball teams at Prince Edward County Recreational Department where they organized some leagues and we played on them.

BR: do you like to watch baseball?

RF: yeah I watch baseball and I watch football.

BR: what are your favorite teams?

RF: Dallas Cowboys and baseball I don't really have a favorite team it's certainly not the Yankees am I going to get a comment out of that one too? (laughing)

BR: I have Yankees floor mats in my car but

RF: I really don't have a favorite baseball team as much as I do football and I can get up and walk out on a football game and half the time I cut the football game on and it ends up watching me because I go to sleep or something you know?

JT: so how do you like your volunteer job?

RF: it's had its ups and downs but I must like it pretty good to be here 44 years and I've had different positions I've served as president and the last president we had before this one passed away and that threw me to be president that year and when we had an election I told them I didn't want to be- it carries a lot of responsibility. You got to do a lot of things. You got to sign the papers and check on a lot of things so it's a lot you got to keep up with. So I said I will accept vice president and stay on the board but with my job there wasn't a lot I could do working at least 40 hours a week. I do a little security work at Hampden Sydney so if y'all ever come to a road block out there I work the road blocks out there.

BR: now we came to the understanding that building at Longwood called Ruffner caught on fire and you guys helped put it out. Were you one of the responders?

RF: yes

BR: walk me through that. How was that?

RF: well you see that guy over there in the red shirt he was dispatching and when he set off the tone he set it off for seven fire company's that's all seven in the county and he said everyone bring everything you got and don't mark up which means don't say nothing on the radio and

don't mark up on scene just bring everything you got. That's what we did. I went in my county animal control truck because it had lights on that and normally I will direct traffic because we have some younger guys that have better training than I do. I'm 71 years old I don't go into burning houses I have in the past I just don't do it I'll work traffic or something like that because these younger guys are in a lot better physical shape and have more knowledge and have taken more classes there's a lot of hours you got to take to become fire fighter one and fire fighter two and stuff. It's time consuming. I have been in a burning house and pulled my wife's grandmother out. I pulled her outside by her hands and when I got her out side her skin was coming off her hands. That's the lovely kind of stuff you see. Then you see some good things. The apartments out there by the county school caught on fire and me and my son rode up there and we pulled some animals out, cats, they through a fit when we pulled them out but that's what it took. You know it's not much but it's something they need saving too. You know different stories like that.

BR: what's that hardest thing that comes with being the vice president? Do you have to turn people down?

RF: no we never have enough help. You have to live a certain distance from the fire house because you know a member from another area wouldn't do us much good. Say the alarm goes off and he can't get to the fire in time to do any good. One thing I do, this doesn't have to be publicized too much, but we got a lot of young guys and about once maybe twice a year I have to preach a little sermon about their driving just because you got red light s on your vehicle does not give you the right away and you have to be careful and I preach a little about that every once in awhile being careful and watching what you're doing. You get on the fire scene and you're excited you're not much good to us if you have a wreck getting there then we have the scenes to work with and we've had that happen. I know people think it's silly but you need to take your time. You get in a hurry you don't do us any good.

JT: working here over the years, what are some of the sacrifices you've had to make?

RF: right now I got a four year old grand daughter at my house and I'm out here working. It's hard on families but my wife is in the auxiliary and my children have been brought up in the fire department like I said my son is a member. My step son is going to be doing the auction and my step sister would normally be here writing everything with the auction but she's in Fayetteville North Carolina and couldn't make sit up this time and my other daughter lives in Florida and she can't make it up as often but she was born and raised up in the fire department. Fire department functions have

BR: it seems to me that this isn't just a fire department-

RF: --that's my baby boy right there

BR: the big yellow-

RF: --yeah the big one (laughing)

BR: it seems that this is more than just a volunteer fire department it's more like a family.

RF: yes and also a lot of us attend the same church the big guy over there and the one with the hat on leaning over there and the one leaning over there a lot of us go to the same church it's like a family thing. There are five churches in the community and we have a joint thanksgiving service. The fire department also does an Easter sunrise service and we host that.

BR: for the whole community?

RF: yeah for the whole community and I'm usually the one that sets that up because I'm the chapter. I'm not the chapter right now but I have always had relations and they'll say you just take it ray and we'll have different preachers from each church that take turns doing that eastern sunrise service.

JT: how are those?

RF: we have some preachers from the Baptist church some musicians from the Methodist church and someone may read scripture from the Mennonite church every church gets a part in the service every year

BR: so everyone comes here to have it?

RF: yes we don't come here to practice but the service is held here and we have had 100-150 people come.

BR: if you had to guess how many people live in the town of prospect?

RF: I really don't know. It would be our fire district is what you would need to know and don't know what that is now Ritchie could probably tell you that. That's that big dude over there selling tickets he could probably come close but you see we encompass part of Buckingham too. And they're working on those boundary lines and wherever we are called we go. We have been to northern Buckingham Amelia. We fight fire wherever they ask us to go.

BR: how long have you had to travel for one call

RF: for me it would probably be a big chicken house fire in Amelia and we have a mini pumper where you can drop three lines in a pond with four inch lines coming out and all it is, is a pumper on wheels and you can pump a whole lot of water and they called us down there because they needed a lot of water and they were trying to pump it a great ways away from the fire and were were pumping tractor trailer loads of water onto the fire.

BR: how far of a drive was that would you say?

RF: it wasn't over a mile but you had to get it there some kind of way but it was too far to try and pump it through lines to the fire. Now they have a lot of companies like I said they have seven in prince Edward and we all work together. Any time Farmville has a structure fire they're first out we're second out Hampden Sydney's third out. Anytime there is a structure fire there is a total of

three companies that get called to it. Sometimes we may get to the fire house and they'll tell us forget it 10-22 we got it under control but you know best to have them all out because you'll never know what you'll need. You may need a lot of water. Out here in the country we don't have a lot of hydrants we do have dry hydrants that are located by ponds. Do you know what I'm talking about? It's a pipe that comes up out of the ground by a pond.

JT: oh yeah I've seen those.

RF: we have to furnish an apparatus that will form suction so we can take water from the lake. That's what we call a dry hydrant and there is nothing flowing to the fire until we can get that suction.

BR: do you guys have to practice procedures?

RF: yes!

BR: how often are those?

RF: once a month we have a drill once a month. I don't attend regularly like I said these younger bucks keep up with it. We practice all the different methods. One I know is a black guy and he is a professional fireman and we've had more than one in here and he is a paid fireman. He does it for a living down in Richmond and he's a volunteer fireman here. Now we have two female firefighters and one of them turned in her resignation Thursday night her husband was a professional firefighter in Lynchburg and they are moving closer to Lynchburg. I mean they're pretty good and we have an auxiliary a lot of people call it a ladies auxiliary and one of the restrictions is you have to live from the fire house like the fire fighter do and we have guys that live ten to twelve miles away, men, that are in the auxiliary and every time we have a fire they are on the scene with coolers of drinks and water and they go to every fire and a lot of fires that the other companies attended. We have a really good auxiliary and they do a lot fundraising.

BR: is that where you guys get most of your funding?

RF: we get some from this thing we are doing today and we get some from the auxiliary and we get some from the county.

BR: how much did you make last fall harvest?

RF: I really don't know I don't get into keeping up with the numbers I'm sorry but we usually make an estimate of around 20,000 but it's not just today. Everyone thinks oh you made 20,000 in just one day, no we collect stuff year round we have four buildings we store stuff in and we put it and people call us saying they got something they want to get rid of we put it in those buildings. Yesterday we had six inmates from the Piedmont Regional Jail and six from Nottaway up here moving stuff and putting in on pallets and tractors and loaders to get it all on the yard and I hope it don't rain too bad.

JT: so you said you worked at Hampden Sydney as a traffic guy

RF: that's when I was deputized I'm not deputized anymore I got too old.

JT: can you tell me how that job went like did you like it?

RF: yeah I liked it most of the guys, no harm towards y'all but most of the guys at Hampden Sydney even when I arrested them they were yes sir no sir and a lot of guys, not you guys but other guys at other schools said yeah no, and that crap you know? Most of the guys at Hampden Sydney well it cost 50,000 to go there so you know it was quite a bit different. It's a different environment really I enjoyed working over there. I worked over there a couple weeks ago for a concert they had that went about 3 or 4 hours and at 71 years of age you can't stand on a road block for 15 hours at a time like I used to.

JT: so like what were your impressions of the fire department so far

RF: in your fire department, the sheriffs department and the church you have good people and you have bad people and some people that get into the fire department with the idea that they are going to get to be a hotshot shot and rip and run and drive fast because they got red lights on their truck and you have the same thing with the sheriffs department and there are people that get into the church and they are not in there for the right reason. Same thing everywhere you go. Maybe to a different scale but about the same thing.

JT: so over the time you've been here what are some changes that happened maybe some you like maybe some you don't like.

RF: training training training and more training. When I came here all you had to do is show up and when I first started out some of the guys that were here before me and my ex-father-in-law were here at the time they said we would put gas in the trucks with our own money hoping we were going to get our money back but I never had that. By the time I got here we had been better than that but the training is something that has changed a lot and needs to be changed you know. I mean it used to be if you go and there was a car fire it used not be a big deal all there was was a gas tank and a battery that might explode on you. But now there are so many plastics in that car when they burn they become toxic and it will kill you. We had a fire one time down here at the _____ recycling plant and some of the guys learned the hard way about that stuff and I could see guys running across that stuff burning and I'm hollering get on the mask get on the breathing apparatus. We ended up with six of them in the ER before the day was over with. That stuff will kill you. They realize it now. A lot of them do. I try to be more on the safety side you know. Like I said I work traffic on the scene, I can go in if I have to I've done it. Done it for years. But they got younger guys better equipment and training now than when I got in here. Am I burning your time up?

BR: no you're fine we are just using this as a time keeper because we were unable to get a recorder

RF: anything else?

JT: out of all your time here what has been your proudest accomplishment?

RF: I guess when I pulled my wife's grandmother out of that house. Dead. And I've been on hunting accidents where people got shot and we respond to that sometimes.

CH: can you walk through one of those calls explain how it went down

RF: I try not to feel too much but sometimes you have to, you have to let it go and sometimes if it's a hunting accident you're thinking how stupid they were to not know what they were shooting because I hunt too you know and I'm president of a small hunting club called Prospect Hunting Club and we have police officer that preach safety there too and sometimes you wonder was it really an accident you know. A lot of the fire scenes you wonder was it an accident or did they burn this house down to collect the money, all that is in the back of your mind. When you go on a scene you got to be real careful we have to preach that a lot too.

JT: you can't contaminate the evidence

RF: yeah when you go into a building you watch people really carefully. We had a firebug around for a couple of years and they would set buildings in town on fire sometimes a few at a time.

JT: it was an arsonist

RF: arsonist, yes. And I'll tell you this is funny I was working security at Hampden Sydney one night and there was this kid down in the corner of the building and he was striking a lighter and I said alright on the ground and I had a few added words in there and he was trying to light a grill. It made me feel like a fool. You know we had all this crap going on and I didn't know.

JT: did you guys ever catch the arsonist

RF: they never did catch him I think one of the firehouses had him on the radio and I always felt that they did.

BR: sorta going back to the accident at Hampden Sydney were you I don't know what the word is like, what am I thinking like on edge about things more when arsonist was going around

RF: yes we were trying to be very alert 24/7 and I was working I was watching them work to you know as animal control working at Hampden Sydney. It makes you watch a whole lot closer when something like that is going on in the area. You never know when you might happen upon him or they happen upon you or something. I don't remember anyone being killed in a house or anything, it was mostly businesses that were being set afire. It was a couple of house trailers burned out near the animal shelter I'm not sure if y'all know where the animal shelter is. It's south of Farmville down 15 there was a couple of houses that was burned out the and strictly businesses that were burned in town. I'm not sure but I think there was ne that was questionable in the high rise dorms in the hallway. It didn't amount to much because they caught it real quick but don't quote me on that one but there were several around town.

JT: who are some of the most decorated fire fighters that have worked here or that you have had the pleasure to work with.

RF: I really ant think other than some of the older guys that should've been decorated my brother's youngest niece was going to Longwood they had a fire down there and she said she herd me and different ones talking about fire fighting and all this and she a had a greater respect after she saw kids that she had grew up with and went to church with going into a burning building and it made her think more about it you know? I don't know if we get people that are decorated a whole lot but we get a plaque, I got one for 40 years and stuff like that. That's about all I can tell you about that.

JT: so working for the department all these years like 40+ years right? What has been your most like proudest accomplishment like the biggest one you can think of.

RF: 44 years I don't know different things that we have started. When we first started this harvest sale that we're having we just collected everything we could and clothing was thrown in boxes and we'd sell the whole box for 50 cents or a dollar and my ex-wife and I started the yard sale part and we had more room. Out here was the firehouse inside those doors was the firehouse until we put this part in and one year we took all this stuff and made like a yard sale out in front and we made more off that stuff than we had been making and after that we had the yard sale for years and now it's gotten so big that we can't do it because we don't have enough man power. Now we rent out a few spaces out front for people if they want to set up their own little yard sale. For 15 or 20 years we had a yard sale to go along with all that stuff and it would take up the whole lot down there and the whole lot over here it took a lot of time and a lot of people and we just don't have the time or the manpower to do that anymore.

JT: I know you've told us what the harvest festival is about why it's here and the origins of it. What do you specifically like about it?

RF: it's a fundraiser and we've been doing it so long it's really like a family reunion. We have people that come back for this. People that grew up here and moved away come back because it's something they look forward to more so than just the sale and he fundraiser and so we make 20,000 but it's more than that it's you know-

BR: -- commutative?

RF: yeah it's a commutative event it's about the only thing that happens in the village of prospect other than something that one of the churches will hold or something like that. Now we have like I said an auxiliary that works hard and they have two children consignment sales annually, and my wife usually collects that up and they collect children's clothing for the spring sale and the fall sale. They do really good they usually make about 1,500- 2,000 dollars. That's like a four day event they get everything out of here and get it all set up and racks of children's clothing and that's like a community event too and it saves people a lot of money it's slightly used stuff you know there's nothing wrong with them. You know most kids you buy their clothes

and in two months they're too big for them so they do a lot of that and they do real good with that. Like I said it's a community event, a social event more than anything.

JT: so we're nearing the end of our time, is there anything you want to tell us or any fun facts you would like to share?

RF: nothing really but I appreciate y'all's coming up here on your own time