

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Telephone Interview with Jim Snow
Fort Hancock Fireman
1949-1974
Interview by Mary Rasa, NPS July 21, 2004
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2010



Fort Hancock Fire Department at awards ceremony, c. 1960.



Fort Hancock Firehouse 51 during Fire Prevention Week, c. 1960.
Photos courtesy of NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

MR: Today is July 21st (2004). My name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator. I am on the phone with Jim Snow right now and we are going to conduct an oral history interview. First thing I would like you to do is state your name for the record.

JS: James E. Snow. S-N-O-W.

MR: And when and where were you born?

JS: I was born on the 15th of May in 1928 in Jersey City.

MR: What schools did you attend?

JS: Well, now what's Middletown Township was Leonardo then. I attended about five schools, my Father well, he bumped around a lot. I don't know if you want them all or mainly it was Leonardo.

MR: That's where you graduated from?

JS: That's where I graduated.

MR: Okay. Where did you live at that point in time?

JS: Leonardo.

MR: Okay. Did your Father or Grandfather serve in the military?

JS: Yep. My Father did. My Grandfather, I didn't know that much about it.

MR: Do you know what years your Father served?

JS: He served twice. In '37, '38, '39, '37 for three years and then he went in during the War in '42 until '45.

MR: Okay. Could you tell me how you became involved at Fort Hancock?

JS: Yep. I came out of the Army. I was in the end of World War II. And I don't know if you remember it, well you wouldn't remember it, but we got 52-20. 52-20 which was \$20 a week for 52 weeks (also called the 52-20 club). I don't know if you heard that or not. We got it, not just me but most of the guys got it. And when my money ran out, I used to work on the side, but don't tell anybody that. (laughter) And my time ran out and I went over to the unemployment place and they said, "Well, there a job open in Fort Hancock." Which of course, is Sandy Hook and I didn't have any car or anything like that. I said, "Oh well, I'll hitchhike out. I've got to do something here." So, I hitchhiked

out to Sandy Hook, Fort Hancock and met a Mr. Zilly. Gus Zilly interviewed me and hired me because they needed a male to do inspection of the grounds and etcetera.

MR: And what year was that?

JS: That was 1949. June, May 30th, 1949.

MR: Oh okay. And how long did you work here?

JS: I worked until we got kicked out in 1974 when Fort Hancock closed. I guess you know.

MR: Did you, were you able to retire at that point?

JS: No.

MR: Oh.

JS: I wasn't quite old enough. So, I transferred to Earle, which you know where that is, Navy base. (Earle Naval Weapons Station)

MR: So, you were actually a federal employee that entire time?

JS: The whole time.

MR: Okay.

JS: Yeah, when I got the job and I had my Army time before, so I had 32 years in all together.

MR: Did you have, had you been to Fort Hancock before you started working here?

JS: No. We lived across the bay from it and you could just about see in Leonardo. Like you know what I am talking about.

MR: Yes.

JS: But I never thought I would be working there.

MR: Did you know, what was your actual job title?

JS: I think it was a clerk CAF, GS-1, something like that. You couldn't get any lower. But I had to do visual inspection of toilets and sinks and stoves.

MR: So, it was for the maintenance operations.

JS: Yeah, I didn't do any maintenance work but I had to find out if they were there or not and you know, and I walked.

MR: What was the department that you worked for? Was it the engineering office?

JS: Yeah. That's right. Post Engineers.

MR: Okay. So, how did you end up getting rides out here?

JS: Well, I got a car eventually.

MR: Oh, okay.

JS: I rode with a fella from Fort Monmouth, which is up from Leonardo and he picked me up in the morning and let me off. And there was another lady from Leonardo because I didn't have any money and I had three little brothers a mother and no father. Not to cry or nothing but I got some money now. But I rode with them in and when I transferred to, they put us in Fort Monmouth. Fort Hancock closed if you remember in 1950. And, you know, it closed per se except for a plumber and couple of other guys. And then the Korean War coming along and they opened up again. Boom. So, I shot out there and then I got the firefighters job. That was in 1951.

MR: Could you tell me a little bit more about that? You came here in 1949. They closed the following year and how long were you away?

JS: I was away one year at Fort Monmouth. I transferred.

MR: Okay so then it reopened. Was it...

JS: It reopened and I transferred back. I didn't lose any time.

MR: Now, did, during that time were there any soldiers here? During the deactivation period?

JS: I'm not sure about soldiers except a couple of officers.

MR: Okay.

JS: Like the Post Engineer and I don't know. Really, I wouldn't know a whole bunch of guys I would tell you that. But then they come pouring in when Korea started.

MR: So when you first came back in 1951, there seemed to be a lot more activity going on?

JS: Well, it started a little bit after, about six months later. But see, they needed the fire department because the G.I.'s were... you can't be without a fire department.

MR: Right.

JS: And the G.I.'s left and we took over one minute afterward.

MR: Mmmhmm.

JS: They put the flag up and we took it down. That was part of our duty. So it was protected by fire as long as I was there.

MR: Okay, so during the time period when the soldiers were gone you were working out of Fort Monmouth but it was also protecting Fort Hancock.

JS: Well, that's hard to say now. I think the G.I.'s were still there.

MR: Oh, okay.

JS: Of course, Fort Monmouth was too far away to protect it for firefighting.

MR: Mmmhmm.

JS: Even though it seemed close on a map, I mean, you got a fire, you're not sending a truck down there through that traffic and everything anyway, they were there and we took over in '51.

MR: Oh, okay. While you were there in '49 was the prison still here?

JS: The what?

MR: The prison.

JS: Oh, the prisoners, yeah. Yeah, yes, because I had to, I remember going through there. We used to call it the (US) DB, Disciplinary Barracks. The DB, the DB and the prisoners were there, they just wouldn't let us, I would go in by myself. But I was young and everything. And checked the, I'm trying to think of the word but I can't. But like I said, the bowls and the toilets and the stoves and whatever. (There was a US Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Hancock from 1945-1950 at Camp Low.)

MR: Right.

JS: Most of their property. And I would have my notes and you know put them down and fill out forms that the Army does. So, the prisoners were still there until we left. I guess we left, they all left.

MR: So, when you came back as the fire department were you in the building that was like next to the Rodman Gun? In that firehouse?

JS: Right. There's two there.

MR: Right.

JS: Our quarters were in the one and the firehouse where I guess it still is, I don't know, I haven't been there I retired in '79.

MR: There's two firehouses, I was just curious which one you worked out of.

JS: Well, one wasn't opened the whole time I was there.

MR: Okay.

JS: That was the one by the PX.

MR: Oh, okay.

JS: And the other one was, I'm trying to think of the number. I knew it, 51.

MR: Yeah. It's (Building) 51 and 34 is the barracks.

JS: Yeah. There you go. There you go. See that all these years and I couldn't think of it. But that's see, you know how close they are.

MR: Mmmhmm.

JS: We slept in 34 I guess it was.

MR: Yeah.

JS: 51 was the firehouse. As you can see, it was a hop and a jump and we were there.

MR: And what were your shifts? How long did they last?

JS: Too long. (laughter) No. I really didn't mind it because I worked on the side. 24 hour shifts, three times a week.

MR: Oh, okay.

JS: Start at eight. And of course we always started a little early to get the other guy out and they did the same for you. But it added up to 72 hours a week for 28 years.

MR: Oh, okay. Did you enjoy that?

JS: Yes. I liked being a firefighter.

MR: So, when the Fort closed you went to Fort Monmouth and continued in that function?

JS: No. I went to Earle.

MR: I mean Earle. I'm sorry.

JS: Yeah. It's alright. Yeah. Not happy. No, none of us were happy, because we had it made out there. But it's still a fire department. But you know when you go to a different place...I was a captain, and I got captain's pay for two years and then I was grunt for about six months and raised hell and I got the next captain's opening 'til I retired in '79.

MR: What is the ranking like? Is captain second in command?

JS: Well, there is usually assistant, there's a chief, assistant chief and there's usually three captains because you need three to make the shifts up.

MR: Okay.

JS: So, actually, a lot of the time you are, like me or the other guy we were in charge. Because we had no assistant chief, they wouldn't give the money for it, which was none of my business. So, the chief went home. He worked 8 hours a week... (laughter) Freudian slip. He worked and he went home and the captain was in charge. And the chief came for the next day or was home for the weekend.

MR: So how many people would be in a crew out here?

JS: Four, then five, accordingly, you know, some days it would be five, some days it was six. Trying to get everybody into, not trying it was a regular schedule for the year into 24 hour periods for three days a week so they would get paid.

MR: So, were there any big fires while you were out here?

JS: Well, there was a hell of a lot of blizzards. I'm trying to think. The Nike went up that one time. Not the one that you know of, but it was on fire and we got it out. That was in (inaudible). Well, you know where the Nike pits were?

MR: Right.

JS: Well, something in one of the buildings went on fire down there. That was one of our big scares.

MR: Mmmhmm.

JS: See, a lot of the times after that Korea deal there was hardly anybody out there.

MR: Right.

JS: I don't know why they kept us there, but we didn't argue. You didn't have, the well like in the state park where people go and throw cigarette butts and etcetera etcetera. And we had a couple of house fires, you know, this and that a regular thing. The government, if you check, I don't know where you work or anything, are very fire conscience.

MR: Mmmhmm.

JS: And we inspected every building including quarters. People didn't like it but we were not going to do it, always two of us. And we'd go down in the cellar and you'd be surprised what you find. And they had to clean it up or else.

MR: Well, we still have the same inspections every year, now.

JS: Every month. Oh, you do have them?

MR: Every year.

JS: Oh, yeah, we had them every month. We did them. Like the Officers' Club, oh I guess that's still there?

MR: Yes.

JS: That was one of our big scares because it was so old and you know.

MR: So, tell me a little more about this fire that was down at the Nike site. This was down in the launch area?

JS: It was in the, yeah, down in the thing. I'm trying to think of whether it was a barracks or a what. I wasn't on duty that day. But, we came in and the chief at that time stayed over until we got through. And people say, "Ah the government is slow," and all that. They had a new Nike Missile in there. The missile didn't explode, that was in Earle. That was different.

MR: Right.

JS: And they had one in there less than 24 hours. They don't fool around when it comes to the big time. You know, a lot of times they say, "Oh yeah, we'll do it next week." And all that.

MR: So, it just went on fire and was able to be extinguished?

JS: It wasn't the Nike itself, it was the buildings, right next to the pit.

MR: Oh, okay.

JS: You know they were in pits.

MR: Mmmhmm.

JS: That's what happened in Earle. I was working in Fort Hancock then. But we had to standby as they fixed the rest of them. That wasn't a happy time either.

MR: So, was the fire in the pit or on the surface?

JS: No. No. It was in a building. You know this was thirty years ago.

MR: I'm just curious.

JS: Yeah. That's alright. It wasn't in a pit. The other one, well you know about that I guess in Earle.

MR: The one, yeah I know about that.

JS: It was on Sandy Hook property. I guess you know about that too. We were the fire department that checked that and did inspections on that and all that stuff. And three guys in Navesink and I knew on of them. I can't think of his name now. But they put a screw driver and hooked two wires together and that was the end of that.

MR: Mmm.

JS: Blew the place up.

MR: Let's see, so you were able, once you went over to Earle towards the end of your career then you just retired and you were completely done? Is that when you moved to Florida?

JS: No. Not yet. See my first wife died when I was working at Fort Hancock. And I had a little boy. And then I married, actually my brother's first wife died just before that. And he met a girl...a lot of dying going on... whose husband died. (cough) Excuse me. And he married her and that's how I met my wife who was her sister.

MR: Oh.

JS: So, the brothers married sisters.

MR: Mmmhmm.

JS: And then I had a little boy nine years old, John who today is a millionaire. But, I just want to fill that in. It don't do me any good, but he's my son. (laughter) But anyway, she was a librarian in Christian Brothers (Academy) over there in, where the hell is it, Holmdel or Middletown or something? You know what I am talking about?

MR: Lincroft, yeah.

JS: Lincroft. Lincroft. I ought to know that too. And then we sold our house in 1987 so then we come to Florida.

MR: Okay.

JS: In the meantime I worked in, you remember, Service, not Service Merchandise, I worked there too. In Shrewsbury, I worked in one of those little stores. I worked there seven or eight years.

MR: Okay.

JS: See I like that too because I was retired. Because they don't pay those people money, you know.

MR: So, back to firefighting, were there any military or was it an all civilian operation?

JS: No military when I was there except like the big shot, like the Post Engineer. I forget his name right now. Well, it changed all the time. I was there a long time.

MR: Right.

JS: And they were very good. They didn't bother us. They were our boss. And usually Captains and there was a Major a couple of times. You know their tour of duty is a couple of years and then they ship them out and bring somebody else in. They come in, give us an inspection and forget us, which was okay with us.

MR: Mmmhmm.

JS: And then once in a while they would assign a couple of guys, excuse me, come from Korea. You know, some of the guys waiting to get out. And they were interested and they would assign them to us. So, we'd like that because we had somebody to sweep up and do the windows and then standby for fires. We would teach them, you know how to work the fires. So, that was the only military.

MR: Now, who would be the lucky person in charge of feeding you? Did you go to a mess hall, or did you guys eat right in the barracks.

JS: Well, the lucky person feeding me for a long time name was Dottie. So, that was my wife.

MR: Oh, no. I meant when you were on your 24 hours shifts.

JS: Well, we brought our food.

MR: Oh okay.

JS: You know what I mean, until we got involved with the military there. And then we said how about we eat with them. We didn't eat breakfast.

MR: Mmmhmm.

JS: Because it was a change of shifts and everything. And we didn't have to because some guys didn't want to, but we ate in the mess hall for fifty cents. And we had a fire phone right there. I don't know if it's still there or not. But if there was any trouble. Of course we all couldn't go. And there was always a guy who waits there back in the firehouse and any trouble and that thing would ring. And we had a fire truck with us and we were sometimes closer to emergency than they were.

MR: Oh okay.

JS: You know where the mess hall were?

MR: Yeah.

JS: Right.

MR: Did you ever attend any social activities out here? Did you ever go to the theater?

JS: The movies were right across the street from us.

MR: Mmmhmm

JS: Well, I wasn't interested but some of the guys were. And then the Service Club, I don't know if you remember. I don't know if you know that.

MR: Yes.

JS: You know where that was?

MR: Yes.

JS: Down by the hospital. In fact, that was one of our big fires, the hospital. I forgot about it. But the Service Club, the guys, well a couple of guys, I wasn't interested in that stuff.

MR: Mmmhmm.

JS: But they were in touch all the time. And nobody was out there, no drinking, you know. So that's the social, and the NCO Club was across the street. But you know sometimes you get a sandwich over there that you pay for. Very few, once in while we'd have a beer or maybe two, but you could blow your whole career for nothing.

MR: Sure.

JS: You know.

MR: Did you ever go to the beach out here?

JS: Only off duty. I did off duty, yeah, but not on duty.

MR: Could you bring your wife out?

JS: Yes. Yep. And we didn't have to, see we had tags on our car. And I don't know, you wouldn't remember but they were little white oval tags. Which I think I had number 9. And we had some girl Marge, who passed away now, she made sure whoever was the first one there, I forget who had number 1. Big deal, really, it didn't mean anything but anyway I had number 9. That's how long I was there. And then we'd go. I'd bring my son out and we'd drink beer then. We'd go to the NCO Beach we used to call it.

MR: Did you find this a fun or boring place to work?

JS: Well, it's hard to say in 28 years there was a lot of boredom. We used to play cards a lot. The guys, you know, not your wife.

MR: Right.

JS: But I enjoyed it really. And the big thing was I could go home and work my other job so I could live. You know, I worked in a machine shop in Belford for many years on my day off or else it would be tough because my first wife didn't work. I didn't want her to work. And then my second wife worked but she didn't make a hell of a lot of money.

MR: Did you find anything especially humorous while you were out here? Any good stories about the people?

JS: No. I wouldn't get involved in that. (laughter) You might not think they were humorous. But I really don't know that kind of stuff right now off the top of my head anyway.

MR: Anything really interesting, any event happen that stands out in your mind?

JS: That's what I'm trying to think of, other than fires, you know. There would be barracks fires and stuff like that.

MR: Would they be from just like cooking or a typical fire in a barracks?

JS: Well, there was lightning strikes and people would, well, I don't know what the hell would start them. Well, probably cooking, whatever the hell would start a fire. You'd have to study up on that one.

MR: But there wasn't anything terribly significant, big fires or anything? Well, there must have been a lot of brush fires though?

JS: Well, not too many because there weren't too many people out there. G.I.'s were pretty strict. You know, I was in the Army and if they tell you to cap your butts, baby, you don't throw the butt out. That was a lot of the trouble was cigarettes outside. I know that.

MR: Anything especially stand out in your mind?

JS: You know, that's what I'm saying. The hospital burnt, we had to get Highlands to help us on that. That was when it was a hospital before it was, you know whatever the hell they called it. Now it's burnt down.

MR: Right.

JS: In fact, I could tell you that much too, but I threw my papers away. I'm not too stupid. And I got a little p.o.'d when they closed. And I wrote a big letter to the Coast Guard, and the Army. I didn't go to the Navy. They didn't care. But the Coast Guard was out there. It was a three page, I used to call it an epistle. Explaining the whole bit of why they needed a fire department out there. They said they were going to, well, a couple of them didn't even answer. They said, "Well, it's taken care of, shut up." in a polite way. And then about a year after that they lost like a five million dollar building, the hospital because there were no firemen out there. Highlands was away. I explained the whole thing. If it was snowing they can't get there. And they started the State Park and you know what traffic was. Can you imagine trying to get a fire truck through there for two or three miles? You couldn't do it and they couldn't do it. But that's water under the dam. I'm gone. I've been retired twenty five years.

MR: Do you keep in touch with anyone?

JS: Most of them are dead. I'm 76 and I was the baby. One of the real young guys just coming out of war you know and going to Monmouth. Like I tell you before going to Monmouth and everything. And most of them passed away so, and then you sort of lose touch after that much time.

MR: Is there anything else you would like to say about your time here?

JS: No. No. No. Just like I said I would say I enjoyed it. Now looking back it wasn't a woop-dee-doo time but like I said I enjoyed it because I was a clerk for a couple of years before that. I could type real good so I could do the paperwork. I can still think about them guys, you know when I wrote back. Ah, your done, go, you're finished. Don't worry about it. And then they lose five million or whatever it was. That's all. I'm still burnt up about that twenty five years later.

MR: Okay. Well, thank you very much. I'm going to end this interview right now.

END OF INTERVIEW