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William Koenig worked for the San Francisco Fire Department (SFFD) for thirty years and co-founded SFFD Museum. In this interview, Koenig discusses his childhood and education, testing for and joining the SFFD, training, working at the salvage company, being promoted through the ranks, roles and responsibilities, SFFD leadership, police and fire strikes, the 1989 earthquake, paramedics merger, the history of the department, working with Guardians of the City, 9/11, retirement, founding the museum, and the legacy of the department.
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[End of Interview]
Interview 1: June 13, 2016

01-00:00:00
Farrell: This is Shanna Farrell with Bill Koenig on Monday, June 13, 2016 and this is the first interview session for the San Francisco Fire Department Oral History Project. Bill, can you start by telling me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:44
Koenig: Sure. I was born in San Francisco, October 6, 1940, born and raised in San Francisco.

01-00:00:57
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about the neighborhood that you grew up in?

01-00:01:00
Koenig: I grew up in the Sunset District. My parents bought a house at Twenty-Fifth and Rivera, just before I was born, and that was my home and continued to be my home into my twenties.

01-00:01:16
Farrell: What were some of your early memories of the Sunset?

01-00:01:20
Koenig: It was foggy. [laughter] It was a time—my parents went through the Depression. Prior to that my parents moved in with my mother’s mother and my grandfather, who was a member of the San Francisco Police Department. They were on Ulloa at about Thirtieth, so they lived in that house during the Depression. And then my grandfather passed away, somewhat suddenly, in 1939. Things were going fairly well then, at the end of the thirties. The Depression is over, but it’s still hard for them to put money together and everything. They were able to purchase the house on the corner of Twenty-Fifth and Rivera, 2201 Twenty-Fifth Avenue. My grandmother came to live with us and she lived with me all during the time that I was growing up.

01-00:02:23
Farrell: How about the community in the Sunset? Were there a lot of people living there at that point? I know it has been developed a lot since the 1970s, but—do you have any memories of—?

01-00:02:34
Koenig: Well, we have to go back to the 1940s for me. [laughing] It was built up, I know, but there were still—it was the building of San Francisco in the sand dunes, and I was at Twenty-Fifth. There weren’t too many younger people on my block, young kids that were my age, so I played on Twentieth Avenue and I also played at Twenty-Seventh, and just two blocks away, as they were building houses there, we used to jump off the houses from the first floor—don’t tell my parents—the second floor, into the sand dunes. So the sand dunes were all around us, even then, 1940s into the ‘50s. Of course, it all filled in after that.
Farrell: Do you remember when it was starting to be filled in?

Koenig: Well, it was pretty well filled in there. I have one sister; she’s eight years older than I am. When she learned to drive when she was sixteen we went out to the Lakeshore Plaza Area, as it is called now. There weren’t any houses out there. That was all the Doelger-Eichler homes there, so that place was empty. The streets were in a perfect place to learn how to drive. I was in the back seat; my sister was driving, of course. That was her training ground of where to drive.

Farrell: How about your parents? Can you tell me what their names were and a little bit about some of your early memories of them?

Koenig: Sure. My dad’s name was Harold William Koenig. He was a plumber by trade. My grandfather was a plumber by trade. My grandfather came to San Francisco—the German side of my family came in about the 1890s, maybe a little bit earlier. He had a plumbing shop at 234 Front Street, 234 Front Street. He did not own the property, he rented. [laughing] So imagine, here’s a plumbing shop in the center of today’s financial district, probably a twenty or thirty or forty floor building built on Front Street today. But my father learned the trade and then later he became—gave up the tools and went into estimating for a company here in the city, Sugarman Plumbing Company. He was in charge of all the plumbers and he did estimating to get the jobs.

Farrell: How about your mother?

Koenig: Well, my mother’s side of the family came to California in 1845, and they left Illinois with $18 in dimes to come west. They came along the Oregon Trail and they got to the point where they could go south into California or continue to Portland, and for whatever reason they decided to come into California. So that side of my family—he was a blacksmith. He found a job with John Sutter. He was at the mill run in Coloma where gold was discovered. They were there at that time. My great-great—I forget the number here—grandmother wrote a diary, very specifically about daily events and things like that. So all of her works are up in Sacramento and it’s been very well chronicled. So that’s my mother’s side of the family and we’ve been here since.

Farrell: Do you have a sense of what your parents’ experiences were during the Depression?

Koenig: Yes and no, because of course I wasn’t born then. We know the struggles that everybody went through, it certainly was, in 1929. It went ten years later and
continued. At that time I’m sure it was a struggle, because still around the house—and I still do it today in honor of them a little bit—is when a bar of soap was getting down to its little tiny little leftover thing, it was never thrown out. It was merged in with the new bar of soap. And I still do that, and every time I do that I think of them and I think of what they went through. I know that I only had one toy. I had a little string with a little four-wheel wooden—there were little sailors in it. The little sailors’ hats came off, the little heads came off, the little bodies came out of the boat. That was my one toy. They couldn’t buy any more.

Did your father work as a plumber throughout the Depression?

Yes.

Did you have a sense of what your parents did for work then?

Yes, he did.

Was he able to float your family during that period with the plumbing work?

You know, probably not, because as I mentioned, they moved in together with his mother-in-law, my mother’s mother. I’m sure a lot of people did that at the time to consolidate housing costs.

Where was she living at that point?

Well, they were all together, the four of them—I don’t know where they were before that time. I know various houses where my parents lived. They were in Noe Valley.

Oh, okay. In San Francisco.

Yeah, it’s all San Francisco. Yeah, yeah, always San Francisco. But they had a home on Hancock Street in Noe Valley. [fire alarm tone in background] Just a fire alarm, folks. [dispatcher’s voice] [siren]

Can you tell me a little bit about your sister and some of your early memories of her?
Koenig: Well, I’d like to finish off with my—

Farrell: Oh sure, sorry. [fire engine siren in background as it leaves station]

Koenig: —grandfather. They had a house at—authentic fire museum, ladies and gentlemen. [laughter] My grandparents lived up on Noe Street at Hill Street, and I went there as a younger. We spent Christmas Eve, every Christmas Eve there. The German Christmas Eve dinner was fresh crab from the wharf with beer. I went, on occasions, with my father down to the wharf. In those days you could get three crabs for a dollar. But I didn’t particularly like crab then. I didn’t particularly like beer then. I was pretty young. My sister and I used to go upstairs to the second floor and sleep during their dinners. But I remember sitting on my grandfather’s lap. I rarely remember ever seeing my grandfather not dressed in a suit. He always had a three-piece suit. As a child I used to sit in his lap and play with his pocket watch. That was my amusement at the time. I was fortunate to be with them, to see their life. They were—that house was out of the fire zone in 1906, so they were able to live there through the 1906 fire. In the basement they had—my grandfather had all kinds of bins of different things, plumbing fixtures and elbows and little short pipes, long pipes, and everything else. So quite a different situation for me to go to see, and the new house that was at Twenty-Fifth and Rivera.

Farrell: Was the Twenty-Fifth and Rivera house new construction at the time?

Koenig: Yes.

Farrell: Okay, and your grandparents’ house was older? It had been built previous[ly]—?

Koenig: My grandparents always lived on Noe Street at Hill—I’m sure that they were there for a long, long, long time. They probably bought the house when they could, in the 1900s and continued to live there forever.

Farrell: Yeah, and so can you tell me a little bit more about your sister, her name and some of your early memories of her?

Koenig: Yeah, my sister is Barbara Koenig, now Mattson, married Don Mattson, her high school sweetheart. So being eight years ahead of me, she—when I was growing up, I was in grammar school—she’s in high school. When I was in high school, junior high, she went to UC Berkeley, graduate alumni. The thing that was really sweet was that she used to handwrite letters to me from
Berkeley—“How are you doing in school, Bill? How’s everything going? How’s your grades?” I used to get these beautiful handwritten letters from her that I still admire. She’s still alive.

Farrell: Does she still write letters?

Koenig: [laughing] No, actually she’s not into email. She never got into email. I haven’t received a letter from her in a long time, but we get beautiful notes back and forth and things, Christmas notes and extra little holiday things come along.

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about growing up in your house? Either maybe some of the things that your parents would read or some of the conversations they had—I guess some of the lessons that you learned from them?

Koenig: You know, I don’t recall that really too much. I know I got in trouble one night at the dinner table. There was five of us at a little dinner table in the kitchen. I liked sports and everything, and of course you had to wash your hands before dinner. I remember one—I guess you remember the things when get in trouble. I told my dad—my dad taught me sports and gave me all that knowledge. I said, “Oh Dad, I was out playing today and I reached up and I caught this ball,” and I put my hands up and he goes, “Go to the bathroom right now. Wash your hands!” [laughing] I think you remember more of the things where you kind of got in trouble than you do everyday life.

But I grew up when TV first came in. We had, our very first set had a little tiny circular screen, a little bit more than circular. But it had a magnifying glass in front of it to make it bigger. Grew up with the radio, really. Everything was on the radio. We used to listen to the radio, family events—well, everything was over the radio then. Newspapers, of course, and San Francisco had four newspapers in those days. Two in the morning, two in the afternoon, and that’s where you picked up all your information from. When I was in high school TV was just coming in more. It was all black and white of course. My parents were wonderful collectors of objects and things. I have the first black-and-white TV, a beautiful RCA black-and-white TV. I still have that at home. That has been passed along to me.

Farrell: Can you—so speaking of school, you mentioned high school, but can you tell me a little bit about where you went to school and some of your early interests?

Koenig: I went to Parkside School for grammar school. That was down at Twenty-Fourth and Ulloa. Now it’s Dianne Feinstein [Elementary] School; they
changed the name. And from there I went to Aptos Junior High, which was quite a distance away, for my seventh and eighth grade. That’s over—the El Rey Theatre on Ocean Avenue. In fact, I used to—in my class at that time was Larry Tribe, Laurence [H.] Tribe, who was—he’s written the constitutional book that’s used in every law school across the country and he makes the news all the time because he’s a Harvard law professor. But I used to travel with him and his father and another close friend, my play friend from Twenty-Seventh and Rivera, and we’d all sit in the back of a step-down, step-into Hudson. His father was so nice to me—and all the kids. We piled in the back and he drove us over to Aptos. I get into school sports, into baseball there. Then I went to the ninth grade at A.P. Giannini High School. That is out along Sunset Boulevard. That was a new school. I was on the dean’s list at Aptos and then we get transferred to Giannini. They opened the school but they didn’t bring books in, so things were pretty, educationalwise, less than what you would like. And then went to Abraham Lincoln High School from ’55 to ’58, graduating in spring of ’58.

01-00:16:15 Farrell: Where’s Abraham Lincoln?

01-00:16:16 Koenig: Twenty-Fourth and Lincoln, and I was at Twenty-Fifth and Rivera and that was at Twenty-Fourth and Rivera.

01-00:16:24 Farrell: Is Aptos down by Santa Cruz? That Aptos?

01-00:16:26 Koenig: No, that’s a city.

01-00:16:29 Farrell: Okay.

01-00:16:29 Koenig: This is Aptos Junior High School.

01-00:16:30 Farrell: Where—you said it was quite a distance. Where was it?

01-00:16:33 Koenig: Over by the El Rey Theatre on Ocean Avenue.

01-00:16:39 Farrell: Oh! Okay, you did mention that.

01-00:16:40 Koenig: So really, halfway across the lower part of the city.

01-00:16:47 Farrell: Okay, I’m trying to—
And the other part would be, that I would mention, that we used to get a ride over there. On occasion we used to walk home from there, a good distance to walk, two or three miles to walk home, but kids were able to walk home in those days.

Why were you going to school that far of a distance?

There wasn’t anything closer. [laughing] Yeah, that was the closest junior high.

Okay. And then did you have any, when you were in school, any mentors or people who were a big influence on you?

No, not too much at Aptos. I remember taking print shop in Aptos, print shop where you do the hand-set typing, put the little, each little letter gets into its rack. So those days are certainly gone. There were other things like that. Played band, was in band, got—your parents put you into different things. Wasn’t too fond of that, wasn’t—music is not my expertise at all. [laughter]

So sports was more your forte?

Yes, I got into more sports, was in sports there. Was on the first basketball team at Giannini. I was interested in playing baseball, but my mother wanted to keep my education going and said, “No, you can’t play baseball.” I really wanted to because the coach at the time was Con Dempsey, who was a pitcher for the San Francisco Seals. When I was in early junior high we used to go out to Seal Stadium and my parents used to allow me to spend ninety cents to go to the box seats, where—that was high-priced ticket in those days, but I was closer to the players. I could get their autographs, and I was with other school friends there that—we had our little autograph books. That was our fun time.

Did you continue playing sports later on?

At Lincoln I played football and during the following six months I was on track and field.

You went to City College. Can you tell me a little bit about what you were studying there?
Yes, during senior year in high school, deciding where to go to school, what to do in school, there were different choices. I qualified to go to University of Oregon. I was thinking about business. My parents thought that would be a good thing for me. I wasn’t quite ready to leave the area. I didn’t particularly want to do that. I was thinking that I would go to school—I always enjoyed history. I liked that very much. I was also into mechanical drawing. My father was doing drafting, mechanical drawing. I took that at high school. I enjoyed that very much. In my senior year at high school, because I was thinking of going into horticulture—that was available at City College also. In my drafting class I was drawing trees. The instructor allowed me to do that. I didn’t decide on that.

With my grandmother living with me—she was always cooking for the family. I always was interested in cooking at home. So then I was able to get into the hotel and restaurant department at City College in 1958, and that was somewhat hard to get into because you needed a recommendation from the industry. At the time there were only twenty-five students in the class. Half were from outside the Bay Area and the other half had come from high schools in the Bay Area. Almost everybody that came from outside the Bay Area, their parents either owned a hotel, owned a restaurant—so I was in class with Sambo’s Restaurants, a couple of foreign students—their parents owned the biggest restaurant in Mexico City. So it was an interesting time, and I did that. I worked in the hotel and restaurant industry for eight years before I entered the fire department.

Back ing up a little bit, can you tell me about some of the meals that you like to cook, or you cooked with your grandmother?

You know, I didn’t really cook with them too much. They allowed me to do little things. She used to make homemade bread that I adored. Always loved bread ever since. But she would do a lot of the kneading and you have to let it sit. Did a lot of baking. They used to like to bake the cookies. They used to like to bake the pies. In those days they used to be in a little rack, but you’d set them up over the sink, open the window, and then the kids in the neighborhood would know when to come by, because they would get the beautiful chocolate chip cookie smell from coming out of our window, and my grandmother supplied the neighborhood.

And was there, when you were starting that program, what were your career goals at that point?

Well, there are two different ways with the hotel and restaurant stuff, you could either—with the program. You could either stay with cooking and
pursue cooking. Everybody—the premise is everybody needed a cooking background, whether you’re going to go into management or not. So everybody, for the first four hours of the day—and it was an eight-hour day of school—did cooking. Everybody worked in the kitchen to supply the cafeteria. The cafeteria at City College was—the food was all prepared by the students. We had the faculty dining room, where it was more of a restaurant setting. So that was the teachings of how to make your way through, be a waiter, be the host, be the congenial person in a restaurant setting. I think the professors liked that. [laughter] They had all the good food. It wasn’t the cafeteria. But the other part was that in the afternoon you could take management courses, and I decided to take the management courses rather than the cooking courses. So of course I had the background in food, and once I was into the fire department that was pretty valuable to me also.

Farrell: You mentioned that it was difficult because you needed to get a letter of recommendation.

Koenig: Yes.

Farrell: Who ended up giving you a letter?

Koenig: There was, a few houses down on Twenty-Fifth Avenue, the Gilt Edge Market, which was over here, just two blocks away from the firehouse here, where we’re sitting today, at 655 Presidio Avenue. That was one of my first jobs. I was their delivery boy when I was a senior in high school. He wrote a letter and that was good enough to get me into the City College hotel and restaurant department.

Farrell: You mentioned that you were in hotels and restaurants for eight years before joining the fire department.

Koenig: Yes.

Farrell: Can you tell me about your first job out of City College?

Koenig: The first job, I was the receiving clerk at—they’d just changed the name. Sheraton just bought the Palace Hotel, and it was the Sheraton Palace. It was pretty interesting, and actually, I think back during my restaurant time was that I probably learned more there in a year, in a certain way, because I received everything for the hotel except for luggage. Everything that went to the kitchens, I inspected. I inspected the meats—I inspected everything that came into the hotel. And that was really a lot there, because if it wasn’t good
quality—of course we had good quality merchants and vendors, otherwise it wouldn’t be coming to the Palace, the best hotel in the city at the time. That was pretty interesting.

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about what it was like to receive things, like what you were looking for in food versus cooking ware or something?

Koenig: No, we didn’t particularly get supplies. It was all food items. It was all freshness, especially with the meats. How to examine meats, how to examine prime rib, how to look for marbling, how to look for weight, how to look for quality, how to look for color of meats and all those kind of things. There was one potato vendor that would come with hundred-pound sacks of potatoes, and one driver, dressed in leathers, and he’d throw these hundred-pound bags of potatoes all over the place and we’d push them into the storeroom and load them from there. It was all those kinds of things, freshness of produce, a special vendor for mushrooms only—that was pretty interesting. All the flours for the kitchen, for the baking—just all those multitude of things.

Farrell: Do you remember how many vendors you were working with at that point?

Koenig: Oh, twenty to thirty to forty.

Farrell: How often would you get deliveries?

Koenig: Every day. That was my job every day, would be from seven to three, and you’d be busy all day long doing that, get a half an hour for lunch.

Farrell: How did you end up getting that job?

Koenig: Through City College. They had—they want to hire graduates. City College—in a way the hotel and restaurant industry was a little bit behind, because the industry wanted people that were over twenty-one so that they could serve alcohol, but the entrance requirements, as I mentioned, had to be with high school graduates, so we were all under twenty-one. At the time the draft was in, the industry wanted somebody that had their military service completed. They didn’t want to take a chance hiring somebody and all of a sudden that person was drafted.

Farrell: Well, yeah, that’s—and so in terms of that, where were you with the military service and the draft when you got hired at the Palace?
Koenig: Well, I was nineteen at the time, I guess. So I guess—I don’t recall. You had to register with the draft when you were eighteen, I think. But the draft didn’t get close to you until you were in your twenties. I only had that job for a year and I went back to San Francisco State for a year and studied for a year, and during that time was when I became close to draft. I was I-A. You knew you were getting close when you were—you were always I-A unless you had something physically wrong with you to change you. IV-F was somebody that couldn’t get in because of physical disqualifications. At the time I had friends that were in reserves, different reserves, navy reserve, army reserves, and I was supposed to take the draft physical on Saturday and I was able to get into a reserve unit on Friday. I raised my right hand and became a—once you took your draft physical you couldn’t go backwards and enter a reserve unit. It was good because I knew what I wanted to do. I was twenty-two at that time, so I joined the army reserve. It was six months’ active duty and five and a half years of meetings. I knew I—I finished my obligation in 1969.

Farrell: You mentioned that you stayed at the Palace for a year. My last question about that is: do you feel like City College had prepared you for that job?

Koenig: Sure.

Farrell: Yeah. When you went back to San Francisco State what were you studying? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Koenig: Just general business, trying to get through business, and I only stayed there for one year. I found I wasn’t a particularly good student. I took zoological—I can’t even say it—zoology twice and got a D twice. [laughing] I didn’t like dissecting little frogs.

Farrell: What was the reason for you wanting to go back to school?

Koenig: Education. Education is, the same as today, you have the education and you’re going to get along better in life.

Farrell: And so after—were you working while you were at San Francisco State?

Koenig: Yes, I was in fact, because I had been at the Palace Hotel in—that was then the early ’60s. The Sheraton Palace was converted into a musical theater, so they made it into a dinner theater. So I had a nice two-hour job—maybe it was four hours a day—that I made salads first, in the kitchen, and then during the dinnertime that the restaurant was open, in the courtyard, I handed out the
desserts and cookies. It was a little frozen ice cream and you put a little cookie on. The waiters would come over, I’d fill up all their trays. But it was pretty interesting because all the stars of the show would come by there, and their little hands went into the cookie bin. I can’t remember his name. He was a great singer, Forrest—oh, I forget his last name, Forrest Tucker maybe? Oh, he was great and very nice, said hello to me all the time and those kind of things. It was interesting to be with another section of the world.

01-00:31:18
Farrell: After you left San Francisco State, what were you doing? Or how did—I guess how did you fill those last, the other seven years before you started?

01-00:31:26
Koenig: Yeah, the last—well, then I’m two or three years along before the fire department. In the last three years I worked for Lyon’s Restaurants for three years as assistant manager. I took the fire department test in 1968. I was still working for Lyon’s at that time. I was the assistant manager in Westlake.

01-00:31:52
Farrell: How did you get involved with Lyon’s?

01-00:31:59
Koenig: I guess, again, through being with the hotel industry also. In between there I worked for Frank Martinelli, who had restaurants in San Mateo County. I was a manager for him. He had two different restaurants. He had a restaurant in San Carlos, right next to Belmont, and he turned that into—at the time there were go-go places then and they had rock bands then. Rock and roll was just coming in, so for anybody, the quiz that I have for you—does anybody remember the Warlocks? So the Warlocks played the last four months that our restaurant and bar was open. They closed the restaurant because our bar sales went down. After the Warlocks closed the bar they changed their name to the Grateful Dead. So I worked four months with the Grateful Dead and I knew them all somewhat fairly well, and it was quite an experience.

01-00:33:02
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about that, what that experience was like?

01-00:33:05
Koenig: Well, they were into their own world and they were all so talented. They were so far ahead of their time that—their music was there so early, and to make it go on—I guess if I—I’ve always thought, in talking about it now, is that if I was closer to them I probably could have become one of their roadies—and that didn’t happen. [laughing] Who knows which would have happened, but I’ve always thought, you know, when you go along with life—well, what if I did that? What if I did this then? That kind of stuff. But it was pretty interesting. It was a very nice experience.

01-00:33:44
Farrell: Did you have a sense that they were going to go on to be something so big?
Koenig: No, not at all, because they were still doing Bay Area gigs here and there and not too much. Here they played with us for four months. They were happy to be getting income at that time. But of course Jerry Garcia was there and Bob Weir was there, and I became closer to Bob Weir—and then Pigpen [Ron McKernan]—I didn’t even know his first name—he played the piano, electronic piano at that time. He was just as talented as Jerry Garcia was. He was writing just as much as Jerry was writing at the time, and then he left us early. He only lived for a couple of years.

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about striking up a friendship with Bob Weir?

Koenig: Well, just that it was a daily work relationship. They would come in, they would do their practice. We didn’t go out and have a drink anywhere or anything like that. A couple of times we’d go over to where they were staying. A coworker who was a bartender at the time, he was closer to them and I would tag along with him, and things like that.

Farrell: Did you ever go see the Grateful Dead later on?

Koenig: No, you know I actually never did. [laughter]

Farrell: I guess you’d spent some time with them before, so you got to see them. What was your—how did you originally think about taking the civil service test in ’68?

Koenig: Well, at the time—even mentioning before, all through the hotel and restaurant period—long hours and low pay. It took you time to—kids that were in my class, a bartender from Paoli’s downtown, he was a bartender down there and he went into management for two or three years. He went back to bartending because he couldn’t make that money. At the time that I was a receiving clerk at the Palace Hotel I was making $300 a month. The Teamsters were moving boxes around in warehouses for $600 a month. So it was always low-paying and the hours were long.

I had friends in the fire department, friends that I grew up with. My friend that I had mentioned, that I played with at Twenty-Seventh and Rivera, he was in the fire department. He entered six years, seven years before I did. They were always saying, “Bill, come on. Get in the fire department. You know this is good.” The last couple of years—and I was coming to them and my father had—was friends with many members of the fire department and they were helping me. In fact, one of the firemen that helped me, he was an officer at the time, but he ended up number two in the fire department, Deputy Chief
Clarence [G.] Rosenstock, guided me in 1968 and ’69. “Here’s what to do on the test.” You might have it on your notes about the different testings and things like that, but they were all after me to take the test.

I was very fortunate to take the test when I was twenty-eight, because at that time you had to enter the fire department before you were thirty-two. I took the test when I was twenty-eight years old. There were over a thousand people, men, taking the test at that time. Women didn’t take the test at that time. I turned out to be number 130 on the list, and I wasn’t particularly happy with that. I went back to, that day, after I’d visited the posting area where they put the list up—no email or notification by any means at that time. You had to go to the civil service office and look to see if your name was even on the eligibility list, which was quite an achievement. I went home and [said to my father], “Oh, I only passed 130.” He says, “Wait, how many people took this test? Just realize what you’ve done here. You’ve passed in the top 10 percent!” And that, I still—it stops me. “How nice, Dad. Thank you.”

Farrell: Do you—a couple of questions on that—do you know what the cutoff for the eligibility was at that point?

Koenig: How do you mean?

Farrell: Did you have to rank a certain number to be eligible? How did that cutoff work?

Koenig: No, everybody who passed the test—there’s a scope out before you go in. Here’s all the things that are going to happen during the test. At that time it was—I don’t remember the percentages. It could have been 75 percent written and 25 percent physical agility. You get points on each. It could have been fifty-fifty. You do both of those sections and then your grades on each are merged, and that’s how I ended up at 130, so there’s a long list of—I don’t know how many eligibles were on that list, maybe—at least 300, maybe to 400. Probably not more than 500. At that time the department was testing somewhat regularly, but in my case I would have, if I wasn’t hired—like you were just saying, because at that time the merit system was in and you go right down the list in order. They would know how many jobs that they would have projected of how many retirees are coming. It was at a good period, because I replaced all the World War II guys that entered the department in 1947-1948, so there were a lot of openings coming up. Our list went down pretty far, I guess. I was just explaining how far down it went. But as it turned out, if I would have passed number 300 or 400—and say the final job was given out at 300, I would not have been able to take the next test because I would have been over thirty-two. I was very lucky that I was able to pass the last test that I was eligible for. Am I—is it clear?
Farrell: No, that’s very clear. I’m just trying to think of how I want to ask my next question. [laughter] So with the tests, did you know how often they were being held? If you were twenty-eight and you would have been over thirty-two, that’s a four-year window.

Koenig: Yes.

Farrell: Did they say, at that point, with the civil service testing, was it once every four years? Or once when—?

Koenig: Generally.

Farrell: Oh.

Koenig: In the three- to four-year range.

Farrell: Okay, so you knew that it was going to be a period of time. It wasn’t—well, we have this wave of hiring coming up so we’re going to do another test?

Koenig: No, no, it’s pretty standard, because they would do the testing, they would make the list, they would project a course—it’s all the business side of it to project the test. I missed the test earlier, because I passed on it. My friend said, “Well, you know, you should take the test.” I said, “No, no. I’m happy in hotel and restaurant.” Well, as I mentioned, the long hours and the low pay, that made me kind of unhappy the next few years, so when the next test came up, yes, I did take it.

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about why you had to be under thirty-two years old to enter the fire department—or to take the test?

Koenig: Well, that was—I think that when I was in the fire college—I was hired on July 7, 1970, so at that time to train a firefighter was about $25,000. That’s still true today. Now, of course the amount that it takes the city to make a person qualified to be a firefighter—and you have to go through the fire college with—Chief Murray began the fire college in the 1950s. Prior to that, in 1903 was the first civil service test. You were hired and you went to a firehouse. If you entered the firehouse, five minutes later you could have gone on your way to a fire. It took them until 1950 to get a fire college and to get people into training. At that time they started on an eight-week course. Now it’s—in fact, I was just there the other day. They’re up to sixteen—I think
they’ve just moved it up to nineteen weeks to train somebody. Well, training anybody to be a firefighter costs the city a lot of money. They wanted to have everybody come in before they were thirty-two, because everybody would stay—you could get a little tiny pension after ten years, but the pension would usually be twenty-five years of service and you would get something. You would have to be fifty-five years also before you could retire. In my period, if I had had my thirty years in, I would have a full pension. That’s a benefit of getting everybody in—the city would get their money’s worth out of every employee. That’s totally changed today, which is really a different subject.

01-00:42:56
Farrell:

Yeah, which I want to talk about eventually when we—well, we can even talk about that now. That’s interesting. Why was it so expensive to train new firefighters? Or why is it so expensive? What does training entail?

01-00:43:22
Koenig:

I don’t think it’s that way when you think about it with money. How much is any business, no matter what business you’re in, if you have somebody come into your business, you’re still going to go through—even with the trades—you’re going to go through a probationary period. You’re going to be paid while you’re—my father’s side of the family were plumbers. They never had a bigger business themselves, but with my father, he certainly had hired plumbers to come in. Most are qualified, but even if somebody goes into a law practice, they’re a qualified lawyer, but there’s still that learning period for the business that they’re in. The business is spending some money to integrate new people into the business, and that’s the same thing with firefighting.

And of course—well, today you can, across the country, firefighting wise, there’s lots of places that allow you to transfer in from other fire departments and you can do that. There was a period here recently, within the last fifteen years, because they wanted to get paramedics into the fire department, so they would allow paramedics to transfer in because they were trained, so I think until just recently, because they’ve just changed the different grades here this last year. San Francisco has become, whatever they call the highest range of college, by our training section. It takes longer to train everybody.

But previous to that, if you were a paramedic then you didn’t have to—the first two weeks they used to make everybody EMTs. That was the first grade up from firefighting into medical practice, was emergency medical technician. We had that in the department for many, many years before paramedics came along. That was just the evolution from—we weren’t even called first responders then, where we could do everything. When I first came in we were trained with basic first aid. We had a breathing apparatus, but certainly not what they’re using today. It was—talk about moving back to medical crudeness. [laughing] It was quite a change for me to see how the fire department transformed from, basically, fire prevention/fire suppression into being medical units—and rightfully so. There’s more fire engine companies
around across the city than there are—San Francisco had little medical clinics, little hospitals that the ambulances ran out of. There were only five or six of them in San Francisco, for ever and ever.

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about what your training entailed, including learning first aid?

Koenig: Well, the other thing is—and we’re kind of talking about it in the past, is that—90 percent or 95 percent of everybody in my class was new to firefighting. There are certain things that you have to do; there are certain things that you have to do on the fire ground. How to couple hose—the simplest things. How do you hold a nozzle? What do you do with a nozzle when you get it? You attach it to what? Then you go here and you do this and then here you—so it’s all learning a profession, whereas there wasn’t even fire colleges.

Now you can go to City College of San Francisco and get a two-year degree in fire science. In a way it’s one thing that I believe that the fire service is behind, because the poor kids that are into getting their two-year degree in fire science—they’ll have this degree, but at the end of that time they don’t know if they’ll pass high enough on a test to get hired. They don’t know if there’s something physically wrong with them, inside their body, that’s going to prevent them from joining a fire service. It’s firehouse talk; we solve all the problems of the world in firehouse dinners. In high school, if they took high school graduates and said that, “We’re going to hire you when you complete your two-year fire science, there will be a job for you when you finish your fire science degree,” that would work out much better for everybody. The fire department would know that they would have trained people coming into the fire service—same thing with the kids that are in the fire service. They would know that they would have a job getting out.

The possibility—I have no idea of knowing how many of the graduates of fire science are actually hired somewhere. It’s probably real high, because you can travel somewhere and get a job somewhere. Naturally, everybody wants to come to the bigger departments for salary, for one reason; for activity, for another. The two companies in San Francisco that are downtown, Engine 1, Truck 1; Engine 3, Truck 3—they’re the highest run companies in the United States. They’re in the top five of runs, alarms, fires. They’re constantly out of the firehouse and a lot of people in the fire service love that. There’s others that want to be in a little firehouse somewhere and rarely go to an alarm, but the majority of people that are in the fire service want to go. That’s the whole deal of it. Go put out a fire.

Farrell: Do you feel like training equipped you to be able to do that?
Koenig: Definitely, because you just go out and do things. Firefighting is a dangerous job. Nationally, it goes back and forth between the miners of who has the most line-of-duty deaths across the country. Firefighting always leads everybody, unless there’s one mine accident where they lose twenty, twenty-five miners in one accident. So you have to be trained and you have to know your training. You have to believe in your training, because you just go do things, because when you get on the fire scene you just go do things. We never really think about it too much. You just go do it. We get back to the firehouse, it was the time to kick back and relax and get things over with, and then you talk about—what did we just do again? You recall about actions that you, if you walked on just by yourself, without being trained or whatever, you go ooh, wow—I’m not sure I ever want to do that. Well, you just go do it because you’re so well trained. Everybody is that way. Everybody that you’re working with is that well trained. You work as a group and you protect each other as a group and you work together as a group.

Farrell: When you were training, you had said that you were learning a profession.

Koenig: Yes.

Farrell: How much of that was procedural versus learning about fire science?

Koenig: Both.

Farrell: Okay.

Koenig: Equal, because there’s everything that’s outside the classroom. Inside the classroom there’s all kinds of bookwork. There’s all kinds of things. There’s tests every week. You have to—so what you’re saying with that is that there’s the educational side. You’re tested every week. If you don’t pass the test, you’re gone. And then, of course, on the action of the fire ground service you learned how to be the pump operator of the fire engines, how to work the aerial ladders. If you can’t pass the pump test, you’re out also. [a clock chimes in the background] There’s testing all the way along too, to make sure that you’re learning, that you’re growing, that you understand everything, that you’re qualified to know everything.

Farrell: Do you remember what the retention rate was in your class?

Koenig: As far as flunking out?
Farrell: Like how many people started and how many people finished?

Koenig: In the seventies—I’m saying, I would think all through the seventies it was very rare that anybody [didn’t] pass, because everybody wanted to be proficient. Everybody studied more. Going through the fire college was forty hours a week. You went home and you studied. When you went home on the weekends, you studied. You made sure that you passed. You don’t step into this and say—well, I hope everything goes well, and if I drop out, I’ll go do something else. The other thing that happens too is that the brotherhood of firefighting envelops you as soon as you get there.

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? About how that camaraderie was cultivated, especially even starting in training?

Koenig: Well, it just grows on you, because there’s a training engine at the fire college. But then the various companies come down to do various evolutions. You watch the evolutions and then you take part in the evolutions yourself. You meet members of the fire department through that door opening. They’ve changed it a little bit, because I had a friend who just graduated in the last class and they want all the students they’re taking—when I went through there were about twenty-five in my class. Now there’s fifty. And then he was told that he couldn’t talk to anybody and he couldn’t do this—well, when I went through I had a lot of friends that were in. They would help me if I had different questions. There was a little bit of both ways there.

Farrell: So you said that you stopped by recently. What are some of the differences in training then versus now?

Koenig: Well, the medical training is a lot longer. That’s for sure. I don’t know—I don’t know how they’re running the classes now. I know that they have longer weeks, longer times.

Farrell: At that point—I know that hiring is much different then than it was now. People will take the test and they’ll wait for years to get hired. Can you tell me about some of the—maybe some of the reasons why that’s different, and we can get more in-depth later, but just basically what some of the reasons that the hiring is different now than it was then?

Koenig: Well, the merit system is gone. Now San Francisco is part of a national testing, which is in a Bay Area section. You take—I don’t think you take the civil service test anymore. You take a national test and you get on this list. It’s funny—I know some kids that are doing it. They get their score, and if you
don’t like your score you can take the test again, to get a greater score. But if you turn out with a lower score, you have the chance of going down. [laughing] So it’s kind of a harsh decision for them, what to do. I really can’t speak about how they’re getting hired off this list now or how they’re being chosen off this list. It’s a totally different situation.

Farrell: I guess moving back to your experience, so you took the test in ’68 and then you got hired in 1970. Can you tell me about that couple of years between taking the test and starting? Were you—?

Koenig: Well, I guess I took the test in ’69, because when the list came out I was hired within nine months, which went pretty quickly.

Farrell: Oh, okay, okay.

Koenig: They projected that—it was funny, because the fellow that I met, Larry Scharman, was 129. They went from zero to 129 and gave that first 129 the physical test, and they thought that they would be hiring that 129 within a year. I was put into the next class. Larry and I were not in the same class, so just before my class I had to go get the final physical and things like that.

Farrell: What do you feel like you took from working in the hotel and restaurant industry? [Koenig laughs] What did you bring into the fire department from your time there?

Koenig: [laughing] Well, firefighters still work twenty-four hours a day. Firefighters cook their own meals. Firefighters go out and shop, spend their money to buy their food. There’s ten people in for dinner, lunch and dinner. Usually lunch, but everybody’s usually in for dinner. You do your shopping and you get your bill, you divide by ten, and that’s equally paid among everybody who’s there. I was well liked in the firehouse because I could cook fairly good meals, and that just makes everything more enjoyable, in one way. The other side of it is that there’s a lot of guys who can’t cook. You have to cook. There’s a chart. You go down the list, it’s your day to cook. If you don’t know how to cook, if you try, if you do everything, then people will help you. Your other members will help you. If you don’t want to try—then okay, you’re on your own now. But you’re not going to last very long doing that till you come around and go I think there’s a better way here for me to get along.

Farrell: What were some of the meals that you like to cook then?
Koenig: Well, it was—I didn’t really stay with a lot of menus. I just made common foods nice. My fun thing was that I used to have a Thanksgiving meal. We would have turkey in July sometime and everybody liked my Thanksgiving meal, because it was a little bit bigger and there was more things to it. Everybody likes turkey and it made it a little bit more fun type of thing to have Thanksgiving in July. In my class at City College, during restaurant school, was firefighter Jim Neil, who came in the fire department before me, and he became San Francisco’s fireman chef. He was on with—oh, I forget the name of the show. They did a little cooking segment that he was in. He’s written a couple of cookbooks and everything. He loved French cooking and he carried that through his fire service. He was making French meals all the time. He took—what I had mentioned earlier was that he took the cooking side of hotel and restaurant when I was in the management side.

Farrell: Can you give me another example of how you made common meals good?

Koenig: [laughing] Well, the biggest thing with cooking, the biggest thing you learn in hotel and restaurant—and you want to do it at your home parties—make everything come out of the oven, make everything come off the stove hot. Make everything get onto your plate hot and serve it. That’s just the general rule, and that’s hard to do, especially if you’ve got different things. If you’ve got—you’re watching your time in the oven, you’re watching your time on the stoves, you’re watching the time here and there. Knowing when to put it on, knowing when it’s going to come off, knowing when you want to serve it. Does your roast have to rest ten minutes before you carve it? It goes on and on and on and on. So—do you want to come to my house for a party?

Farrell: Yeah, see how it’s done! [laughter] Can you tell me a little bit about—so you took the test and got hired nine months later. Can you tell me a little bit about your first assignment—your probationary period, I guess. That comes first, right? Before your first assignment?

Koenig: Yeah, at that time you were on probation for a year before you—and that was another thing with your testing. You had to finish your probation. If you didn’t finish your probation satisfactorily, you could have been let go there also. I was twenty-nine when I came into the fire department and my very first day I was assigned to Salvage Company Number 4, just for the day. It was at 2300 Folsom Street and there were too many men at that station, so I was detailed to Truck Number 11, and I showed up at that firehouse. The officers at the time, I don’t particularly remember them—I was only there the one day. I was on the truck and they said, “Bill, you’re assigned—you be with Bob all this day.” So through fire college you learn that you’re always going to have a
partner no matter where you go and no matter what you do. You’re always going to have a partner. I said, okay. So they didn’t tell me anything.

Well, it turned out that the badge that I had was pretty well worn, and the fireman that had it before me carried it home a lot in his wallet and it was somewhat well worn. So that night at dinner, I was sitting at the dinner table, and the driver of—the deputy chief came back, because is was Keith Calvin who lived—it was the closest firehouse to his house. So Chuck Krieger came in, who was my high school classmate in Lincoln High School, came in and said, “Hey Bill, how’s your first day in the firehouse?” Everybody turned around, not knowing that it was my first day. [laughing] I was just quiet, I was just listening, I was following. We didn’t have any alarms. I think we had a run or two but no fire alarms or anything. That was kind of neat and it was kind of nice, just to do that. I don’t think we had a run at night either.

The next day I was—you’re unassigned during that time and you go for vacation reliefs here and there or even days or whatever, and I was assigned to Salvage Company Number 1, which was down on Sixth Street at—close to Brannan, I think, or Bryant. And the salvage companies aren’t around anymore. They came into the fire service even in the 1800s when everything was horse-drawn. They were paid by the insurance companies and they would go to the fires and they would put out large covers and tarps underneath the fire floor to save, fire insure, to save equipment, to save things. The first duties were to go into the office and save all the records of the companies, see if everything—secure it there or if there were any things out in the office that were bookwise, ledgers, books, things like that, so once the fire was over that the business could get back into service right away.

So they—at one time San Francisco had—well, they had quite a few and they kept on getting less and less. There were four. We lost one in 1970 to a budget cut. They kept on budget cutting, budget cutting, and the last one was—Salvage 1 went out of service in 1976. Now those duties are taken over by the truck companies and they don’t quite do that at all anymore. There’s more truck duties than there are salvage duties.

Can you tell me what the reason is for that?

They’ve really combined all the jobs. Like the truck companies—when I first came in there was one officer and six firefighters with them. Now there’s one officer and five firefighters. And that one firefighter makes a difference. On the engine companies in 1970 there was one officer and five firefighters. Now they’re down to one officer and three firefighters. With one officer and five firefighters, you can get a full 100 percent use out of your piece of equipment. You need six people to get the full benefit of what that piece of apparatus can do, and when you only have an officer and three firefighters, it drops down
to—I think it’s around 60 percent. In a way, the city’s not getting their full
dollar out of that piece of equipment. [crows or ravens cawing in the
background] So we’re talking about with the salvage and the truck companies,
by putting the salvage covers onto the truck companies, and by putting various
pumps to pump out basements and different things like that—nobody goes
into the office anymore to look for ledgers or to protect property in that
section, that description that I just gave you.

Farrell: What did you like about working with the salvage company?

Koenig: Well, it was different, because even—and they would do everything. It was
interesting to learn another side of the fire service. We were taught the basics
of it in the fire college, but not as much when you get to the job. The salvage
companies, if they went to a greater alarm—and this would be a warehouse
fire—there wasn’t anything to protect there after the office was checked out,
so they took a fire line, and usually this big line, large lines, large hoses used,
two-and-three-quarter-inch hose rather and inch-and-a-half hose to give you
more water onto the fire. So that happened on several occasions when I was
there.

Farrell: Did your first impressions of being a firefighter change from what you—how
did your experience align or misalign with what you expected?

Koenig: You don’t really have any expectations, because you’re trained. You get the
training and you can’t—you partner up with your partner. [a clock chimes the
hour in the background] Your officer always has their eyes on you. Follow me
is usually the officer’s command. [laughing] And you go, you follow along,
and you just learn by that experience.

Farrell: What were some of the things that you learned while you were working at a
salvage company?

Koenig: Well, different things. It was funny. At the time they had the big salvage
covers, which were quite heavy. You could carry two of those. You’d carry
them up ladders, you would go to a roof. You’d be called on to—at that time
the fire department would go out and cover roofs of houses if there was a big
storm and somebody’s roof was damaged. They’d put the salvage covers up
and then you could have them for a period of time, and after thirty days then
there would be a rental charge for them. They were—also we used rolls of
tarpaper at that time, to cover roofs and to do different things. Plastic was just
coming in. Rolls of plastic was just being introduced into the fire service in
1970.
I remember one time we were up on a roof and we were covering skylights, because one of the duties of the truck companies is to ventilate, and you ventilate the skylights first. Very easy to do with your pike pole or with your axe. But then they have to be covered after, to protect the building after the fire is out, and the salvage companies had that job. I was with another younger member of the department and the other senior members of the crew—there was an officer and four firefighters on the salvage company at that time. We had covered up our skylight and we turned around to see how the senior guys did it—we were in trouble! We turned around and the senior guys made their skylight look like a Christmas present. All the plastic was neatly tucked in. There was nothing hanging out. Ours looked like a ragamuffin thing and we just went okay, here we go. [laughter] So you constantly learn, you constantly learn, you get embarrassed. You’re allowed that embarrassment once; you’d better not do it again.

Farrell:

After that, where did you finish your probationary period?

Koenig:

I guess here at Truck 10, because I was only on the salvage for about six or seven months. Less than a year. Maybe I was there for nine months, and then I came here to—I was assigned to Truck 10, Captain John Thomson.

There were great captains in the fire department in those days, because again, we’re on the merit system and every promotional job, promotion that comes along, there were members of the department—Chief Joe Medina, who ended up chief of the department—when he first came into the fire department he studied with Jim Olson, who became his deputy chief—in the eighties I think they were appointed. There wasn’t a day that they didn’t, the two of them, did not study. They were study partners. If you wanted to really get into the books really, really hard—and Joe Medina and Jim Olson did it at the start. When they went to a firehouse they were constantly studying, and they were always in the top five of every test that they took, because they knew that so much. The joke in the firehouse, with Joe Medina, was that he’d go home, he’d read his books, his wife would give him the questions. His wife knew more about the fire service than half the guys that were working! [laughter]

But that was one part of it, and the other part was that members wanted to get experience first, before they took the test. When I first came in it was unheard of that anybody would make a lieutenants list with under five years of service. More like in the—at least eight years, maybe to twelve years before you had enough service to become a lieutenant, and lieutenant to captain to battalion chief to assistant chief. All those were testing promotions. As you went up, there were less jobs, so the testing became even harder. Again, like you mentioned at the very start, “Where were you on the entrance list?” Where were you on the promotional list—very, very important.
What was the percentage of people who got promoted over time? Was it very low?

Hard to describe that way. It’s not particularly low. I don’t know the amount of—like I just mentioned, captains, lieutenants, there’s always less. I don’t know off the top of my head how many jobs there are in each. I think we had sixty to eighty battalion chiefs. Maybe 150 captains and you’d double that, you’d get to 300-450 lieutenants. Basically, a thousand firefighters and five hundred in rank.

Can you tell me a little bit about what you learned from your first captain, Captain Thomson?

Yes, it was John Thomson who was here, and I mentioned the other captains in town. It goes back a little bit to what we were just talking about, as far as getting promotions and being promoted. Because at the time there was such competition in getting promoted, the captains stayed in their slots for a long period of time. In the 1970s, the captains were extremely well known for their expertise, their quality of work. The captain of 1 Truck and 3 Truck, it was Captain Sullivan who was down at 1 Truck. He was The Cruiser, for some reason. Everybody had a little nickname. But John Thomson, who was here at Station 10, his deal was that he knew ladder work so, so well, that if an airplane could fly slow enough, he could ladder it. That’s how well these captains were respected at the time and how well they knew the job, and they passed all that knowledge on to everybody.

What were some of the calls that Truck 10 was receiving at that point? Some of the runs that you were going on?

Well, in the 1960s, the Fillmore District was burning quite well—that’s one way of putting it. [laughing] A lot of greater alarms in the Fillmore District. This firehouse here, there’s only twenty trucks in town compared to at one time there were forty-nine engine companies. So the trucks have a wider range of response. It’s a nice area here, that if we went east we’d go into the Fillmore District. If we went south we’d go into USF, into the Haight-Ashbury District. To the west, it was all the way into the Richmond. At one time the truck went out to Fort Miley Hospital, out at Forty-Eighth and Clement. Then to the north we would go into Pacific Heights, into the expensive homes of the city, down into the Marina District. So a wide range, different types of fire load, different types of—a lot of hospitals around this area. We’re surrounded by five hospitals. I remember going with John Thomson, going out California, passing Children’s Hospital. For two blocks he wouldn’t put the siren on. If he had a driver that put the siren on he would
just say, “Come on, Charlie. You can’t do that. The patients are inside.”

[laughing] There were all kinds of little things along the way besides doing fire ground activities.

01-01:16:00
Farrell:

What were some of those activities? If they weren’t fire calls, what were they?

01-01:16:09
Koenig:

Well, they were almost all fire calls then at that time. There’s the duties between, the difference between the engine companies and the truck companies. The truck companies, their first job at fires is to rescue. Their second part is to ladder the buildings to let people out and to let firefighters up. They also go to the roofs, to ventilate the roofs, because in San Francisco ventilation is prime. It’s not as often used in the small departments, or they just don’t have the manpower to get up to the roofs, to open the roofs, to get the proper ventilation to save the firefighters that are crawling inside the first floor of a fire or into the second floor. You need that chimney to go out the roof, the chemicals that are in there are out of the building by having proper ventilation on the roofs.

01-01:17:06
Farrell:

Can you tell me about the first fire call that you were part of?

01-01:17:12
Koenig:

No. [laughing] I don’t particularly remember. I do remember, I guess, oh, my first greater alarm was with the salvage company, because we came out this way and I had a lot of friends, high school friends, that worked at the firehouse on—it’s the 2100 block of California. You go do your duties, but then there’s time to overhaul and there’s time to see who’s there, and all the smoke was gone out of the floors and things and you could actually see people. Here I am, standing with all my high school classmates—not all, but quite a few. There’s four or five guys that I was in high school with. So I thought that part was pretty neat.

We had a fire department photographer, Chet [Chester O.] Born, that became nationally and internationally known. When I was here at Truck 10, one of my first months here, one of the older guys came over to me and said, “Hey, Chet Born is here. Get your clothes ready. We’re going to be going to a fire soon.” Chet had this reputation, wherever he was at, he was first at the fire. He took fantastic fire photos because he was there to catch them so early and he knew where to take pictures from. He just wandered around and he would come back to the firehouse with photographs. He was pretty good with that, to show guys what they were doing and pictures of themselves and things. We’d see him up, like the fifth floor of a—how did Chet get up to a fifth floor in the next-door building to get that picture? This kind of thing. But anyway, he had a little thing that if he came in the firehouse, he was always—you knew that you were going to go out, because he brought the fires with him. Now, however that happened we don’t know. Here we’re having a cup of coffee
with him, ten o’clock in the morning, and about three blocks away we get out, it’s a second alarm. We’re right there at a fire and he comes back four or five days later to see us again. We said, “Chet, you’re not taking us out to another fire are you?” [laughter] There were things like that.

Even now I don’t particularly—I’ve certainly had memorable fires, horrible fires. They’re in my system; they’re there. I’ve seen them. There’s a lot of guys who love to tell fire stories. I have a close friend that put out every fire in San Francisco. Just ask him. I don’t particularly do that too much.

Farrell: How did your relationship with San Francisco change once you started working at the fire department?

Koenig: Oh, I don’t think it changed at all, because I’m a San Francisco native. This is my city. I love my city, love everything about it. Everybody that’s in the fire department are givers. We’re not takers. It’s nice to be protecting your hometown. It’s all of that, if that—

Farrell: One thing I think is interesting, as somebody like myself, as a civilian, I don’t particularly think about city blocks as—like the 2100 block. Was that something that you were doing before, the way that you mapped out San Francisco? Did that change at all or develop?

Koenig: Yes and no. Certainly, it’s—well, as kids we used to go all over the place on the Muni. The swimming place was down in North Beach and we’d hop on the Muni Railway and go pfft—you could go anywhere you want, and your parents would—it’s so totally different today. The kids don’t even play in the streets anymore, and we had the whole city to play in, and we would do that. You had to be home though, of course, at five o’clock, otherwise I’d get in big trouble. [laughing]

But the other thing is that, like leaving this firehouse here, and I can’t do it really now, after being retired. But turning left here you go up Presidio Avenue and it’s California, Sacramento, Washington—I forget all the, as it goes here—Jackson, this and that, whatever. As you go up there, because you’re getting your calls and your call goes to an address, and especially your first new address, you’re going to know everything in your first alarm area quite well, especially if you stay at the house. It’s beneficial to stay that way because you know the addresses. I know going up Presidio—and I used to drive quite a bit, especially on the engine.

When I came back here in 1976 I made the engine by seniority, so I was on the engine until 1995 and then my last five years I drove the aerial ladder, Truck 10. But engine driving, your first calls, especially for medical calls, you
want to know where that address is. The even numbers are on the northern side of the street, the odd numbers are on the south side of the street. There are all those things here. Going up Presidio Avenue, I know when I get to 3100 it’s going to be a left turn or a right turn, so you do learn the street addresses. When you go up—if there’s an address on Washington, you want to get up on Washington as soon as you can, so that when we turn left and we’re going out west on Washington, you count the blocks off. We’re at 3100. Oh, the address we’re going to is thirty-four—okay. And you clock it off, you clock it off, so that you know when you get to that block it gives you, for you and the officer, it gives you a better sense of what you’re going to be doing, especially if you see flames coming from a building. you could be the first engine there.

The general rule is that you take your own water in, especially if you see fire. You would know to stop at the hydrant and make a hydrant-to-fire lead, which would be a short area. Or if you thought that the fire was in the middle of the block you could drive to the fire, drop off all your equipment, drop off the crew, and then drive the engine further to the hydrant down on the next corner. There’s a lot of different things like that, that come into your fire choices, of what to do once you’re on a fire scene.

01-01:23:38
Farrell: How long did that take you to develop?

01-01:23:42
Koenig: You just learn it, and you learn it here by doing that, especially the various taller buildings that have standpipes. You know where the standpipes are, so you know where to stop your engines, especially at the hospitals. The battalion chiefs would have hospital drills, so we were assigned to a certain place at the hospital to take these standpipes first. The engine was always parked within a hundred feet of that, usually fifty feet to get one length of hose into the standpipe. You would purposely park within, stop your engine within fifty feet of the standpipe so that you could make water, your water connection from the fire engine to the standpipe, within fifty feet.

01-01:24:32
Farrell: When you were first, when you were on your probationary period, were you doing a lot of hands-on learning?

01-01:24:39
Koenig: Of course.

01-01:24:40
Farrell: Okay.

01-01:24:40
Koenig: Every day, every second.

01-01:24:42
Farrell: And that was encouraged and supported?
Koenig: It just happens.

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about the culture of the firehouse, of Truck 10 when you first started?

Koenig: Well, I just mentioned it quickly, was that I didn’t realize that I was replacing all the World War II guys. I never knew that, because I think actually the World War II guys, it’s commonly known, they never really talked about the war very much. I didn’t really learn about them until they passed away and you see their obits. There was one fellow that I worked with was just spectacular. He had three army stars, and all the purple hearts—I was just like holy smokes!

I do a lot of—in 1973 we started a historical group within the fire department, and I love being with the museum here right next door. I’ve been involved with the museum for quite some time. I’ve given countless tours in the museum on the fire department history. I tell people that when I was replacing all these World War II guys, I didn’t realize that. But here they come back after a war—pretty easy for them to put out fires. You know, it’s just—and they really built up the reputation of the San Francisco Fire Department in the ‘40s and ‘50s.

San Francisco became internationally known for its, ladder work, which you need in this town because of all the buildings being so close together. But at that time everybody on the engines, they jumped off their rigs—no one had breathing apparatus, no one used breathing apparatus. We had breathing apparatus on the rigs, on the engines and the trucks. You didn’t need to put it on unless you were into a greater alarm. So everybody that was there first, we had pocket breathers. They were little pocket breathers that gave you some protection—not very much. Of course, no one knows, until recently, especially now we have a cancer group that has just been tremendous, you don’t know what you’ve been breathing all that time. I think firefighters’ life expectancy—

Farrell: Expectancy.

Koenig: Yeah, right. [laughing] Thank you—is lower than probably everybody else, just because all during this period you don’t know—you didn’t know what you were breathing. You just went and did your job. But—and I got offline here of where we were a little bit—but I guess the line where here are these guys coming back from the war that are firemen that just went and did it.
Can you tell me a little bit more about them, both building the reputation, how they were able to do that, and a little bit more about ladder work?

Well, San Francisco is a wooden city, and you’re back to when they were working, forties/fifties/sixties—even into the seventies—no smoke detectors. Fires have gone down tremendously just by every home having a smoke detector. But it’s very easy to put out a fire when it’s small. If we can get there when your smoke detector goes off, we’re doing a good job. Somebody is always happy with the fire service, because I mentioned with the engines having an officer and five firefighters—five firefighters, when they first arrive, can do an awful lot of work. At that time they could put out a fire in your living room and your kitchen. When you have less, with an officer and three, you do less. Maybe we save the front part of your house, maybe we save your whole first floor. We save—oh no, you mean maybe the whole floor, of a fire building, the first floor burns, there’s some damage, but then on either side, especially in San Francisco, there are two houses. Those two people are very happy, because the fire didn’t get into their house. Well, maybe if the fire is a little bit bigger, somewhere along the line you’re going to reach somebody that’s very, very happy. There’s always happy people somewhere along this line. There’s certainly devastated people if something really goes wrong, but that’s unusual, in a way.

Can you describe, I guess, the nuances of ladder work?

Well, it all depends on the building. It all depends on the fire. You’re going to put a ladder to a roof first. Usually the second truck puts a ladder to the roof. The first truck there—there’s always two trucks coming to a fire, almost everywhere. Out in the avenues there’s only one, so if you see the need—well, wherever you see somebody hanging out a window, you’re going to put a ladder to it. That’s automatic as soon as you first get there you’re going to ladder the window that has somebody that needs to escape. That means that they’re trapped inside. They can’t go down their stairway. You’re going to do that. The taller building have fire escapes. You’re going to put a twenty-two-foot ladder, maybe a twenty-four-foot ladder, a very few places a thirty-five-foot ladder onto a fire escape. We’re talking about knowing the—once you’re in an area you know, truck-wise, you know what fire escapes take what ladder. All these things save time. The most important thing in any fire situation is to save time, no matter what you’re doing, save time. Because the fire is always advancing.

The big example of that was in the 1906 fire here, because it was so huge and so big that the fire controlled everything. We didn’t have enough water. We had cisterns. The engine companies went to the cisterns—steam engines in those days. One report of the second assistant chief was that he had a single
engine on a cistern and they had one big line off. He said, “We needed twelve big lines off. One big line off was like putting a thimble of water on a fire.” So that corresponds with most everything that you’re doing, even at a house fire. How fast was the first? Did you get your water supply—all the fire engines carry 500 gallons of water with them. Being a driver, you know that if you have an inch-and-a-half line off, that only lasts for—it’s a test question—a certain amount of minutes. I think it’s only two or three. If you hook a big line off, it’s less than a minute. So you can’t put much fire out in a minute. Even with your small line, I think it even goes to three or four.

When you’re retired, you get to forget all these things. [laughter] But it’s a limited amount of time, and the more people that you have, the more people that you get your supply line from the fire hydrant into your engine, that you get your engine into full operation, all these things add up and it all boils down to time and how quickly and efficiently you can use that time to keep the fire the smallest, to make sure it doesn’t get bigger on you.

Farrell: Can you tell me about your favorite aspects of working on Truck 10 when you first started?

Koenig: Well, I was here for the engine first, for twenty-five years. From 1976 to 1995 I was on the engine, so I was doing engine work. But then it’s the same thing, that you’re in the firehouse, if there’s—so on certain days the engine staffing was an officer and three firefighters, and there could be certain days that there were—showing up at eight o’clock in the morning, on Engine 10, an officer and four firefighters or five firefighters, so two of us would be detailed to other places. Sometimes the truck didn’t have enough people so we would be able to stay in this house. At other times, if everybody was here and there were extra people in the house, with the engine and the truck combined, then we would go to other houses. That’s where you really met different friends of the fire department. You always saw them at fires, because you’re always seeing them at first alarms. You have three engines, two trucks, you have a battalion chief, you have an assistant chief. You meet everybody at fires no matter whether it’s a fire or not a fire, a fire alarm, car accident, you need more people, you need different companies to come to help you for different things. With all these inter-station details you’re meeting everybody, you’re working with different people in different houses all the time also. Usually you stay within your battalion district. If your battalion district is full you could go somewhere else in the division. If the division is full—rarely would we ever receive a detail to go from here to, say out to Hunter’s Point. Extremely rare, but that could happen.

Farrell: I think because now we’re at a transitional period, this is probably a good place to end for today, and then we’ll pick back up after your probationary period ended next time.
01-01:34:28
Koenig: Okay.

01-01:34:27
Farrell: Thank you.

01-01:34:29
Koenig: Yeah, there really wasn’t too much in the probationary period at that time. It was really a diploma. [laughing]

01-01:34:38
Farrell: Yeah, yeah, just learning the ropes and—yeah, your on-ramp period.

01-01:34:41
Koenig: Yeah.

01-01:34:43
Farrell: All right, well, thank you!

01-01:34:44
Koenig: Well, thank you. It was fun.
Farrell: Okay, this is Shanna Farrell with Bill Koenig on Wednesday, June 15, 2016. This is our second interview for the San Francisco Fire Department Oral History Project. Bill, when we left off we were talking about the end of your probationary period. When you joined the department, Chief Bill [William J.] Murray was the Chief of the Department. He was chief from 1951 to 1971 and really influential on the department. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about him and maybe some of the things that you saw his influence in the department?

Koenig: Well, Chief Murray did swear me in, which was quite an honor, with his stature and everything. He did serve for a long period. We had—there was Chief David [S.] Scannell, who was Chief Engineer of the volunteers, Chief Engineer of the paid department, and he served for over twenty-five years. He is the longest-serving chief—I think it almost could be twenty-six years, so he had the longest tenure, and I believe Chief Murray was after that in length of service.

But when he was chief it was a time of change in the fire department, in the 1950s. I think I mentioned that the first civil service test was in 1903, and even prior to that, from December 3 of 1866 on, when you joined the fire department you went to the firehouse, you were assigned to the captain, and the captain trained you how to be a firefighter. Well, Chief Murray realized that times were changing and he was the first to institute the fire college. Everybody that came in—I believe he started this in 1956, almost as soon as he became chief—was that everybody that was appointed to the fire department went to the fire college. I believe it was eight weeks at that time, but it was a training situation where—it’s kind of obvious that prior to that your first day on the job at eight o’clock in the morning, or whatever time they started, would be that if you walked in at eight o’clock, five minutes later you could go to a fire—“Okay.” [laughing] So obviously, a great change for the department, and it continues today.

San Francisco has just been given—I don’t know the exact wording of it—but it’s one of the highest ratings that you can receive for training in the fire department, and they’re extending from eight weeks. I think my time at the fire college was twelve weeks. It went to sixteen weeks and I think today they’re up to eighteen weeks. Now, the next class will be there for eighteen weeks. Chief Murray was responsible for making the fire college so great at the start, and it just has expanded since then. Of course, when he was chief there was no fire science degrees in community colleges either. We talked about that in the past there was no training. You need to have your training, you need to be schooled. People that are not in the fire department, walking down the street, are [not] firefighters. You have to be trained how to do that profession.
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about fire college, what kind of things were being taught?

Koenig: Well, we mentioned that. It’s hands on, you’re on the training ground, you learn how—the proper techniques of what you’re supposed to do, where your feet go, where you place the ladders, where you place this, where you do that. How you work over a hose. You have certain positions around the hose, when you’re coupling hose, when you’re uncoupling hose. Everybody is pretty well trained with that.

In 1973 I was one of the four founders of the St. Francis Hook & Ladder Society, and in May of 1973 was the first time that the SFFD went to a muster. We went to the Columbia [Firemen’s] Muster, one of the most famous in the state, and we had about seventy-five members go and we took a lot of equipment up there. Our trademark at that time, and still today, is the hand-raising of a sixty-five-foot wooden ladder, but we were going to musters throughout the seventies and eighties.

I was the—we had our own little titles. I was the chief engineer at that time, which—way above my rank—but I was head of the muster team for a while. The other departments would come to us, and I know that the chief from Elk Grove came and said, “You know,” he said—and we didn’t practice. It could be very competitive on the muster course, and we didn’t particularly practice but we just went and did it and we always had fun. The Elk Grove chief caught me one day, after the muster, and he said, “You know, I know you guys don’t practice. But I love to see you on the course, because everything that everybody from your team does out there is absolutely firefighting correct. I have been training, training the members of my department, and it’s very hard to reach that expertise that you show out there, and I know you do it naturally.” It was just—I still get a chill over that, because—what a compliment. [voice quavers]

Farrell: Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit more about musters? What they are, what you do, and who is involved?

Koenig: Well, firemen’s musters go way back. The first one was in Bath, Maine in 1849, and it was the first competition between two cities. The fire departments from the two cities got together with their hand engines. With hand engines, the older way that has been—and is still used sometimes—you pump for distance. There’s a line. You make your hose come out of the outlets of the hand engine, usually a fifty-foot length, and you have a nozzle on it. The nozzles, in those days, were three feet long, and that was to smooth out the stream to the fire. But at musters then, a measuring point from the tip of that nozzle to the furthest drop of water, was the winning distance. On the East
Coast—and they did out here in the 1860s when they first started here also, they were playing for money. It was a highly competitive event, not only the competition between the two towns, but also—you might as well play and get some money out of this.

In California, in the 1860s, the San Francisco Fire Department would travel to the state fair, and they were mostly in Northern California at that time. I know they had the state fair in Marysville/Sacramento/Stockton. Various companies from the cities would travel to the state fair and they would play for money too.

When we went to the muster in 1973, it was the first time that the SFFD had been in a muster since the 1880s, so that was kind of neat too, that we were back in this. And 1973 was at the height of mustering in California. There were ten to twelve musters in the year that you could choose where to go to. It was—somewhat, in a way, hard, because the smaller towns were losing money because it takes money to put these events on.

In 1973, after that first muster that we went to, there was one fellow from Benicia at the time, Lieutenant Ron [Ronald G.] Rice, who had the idea to organize a state mustering association, so in November of 1973 he made a call to the fire departments that mustered. Thirty-nine departments came to Benicia and he was elected the founding president of the California Firemen’s Muster Association. I was at that meeting; I had the honor of being elected a founding director of the CFMA.

They sanctioned various musters. We took the musters down to five per year and that allowed everybody to go to the five musters. It helped out all the cities. We had a scoring system that would make state champions out of each event, hand-pumping, hose-cart racing, for men and women. Bucket brigade for men and women, motorized competition for men and women, and steam-engine pumping also. We had five major events that state championships were given out—that’s part of that. I slid way off of what we were talking about, but it gives you the feel of what mustering is and what it’s about. It’s friendship, and the motto for the California Firemen’s Muster Association was “Fellowship through competition.”

Farrell: How did you originally become interested in musters or get involved?

Koenig: I was at Station 19, at Third and Fourth Street, Engine Company 19, a single house, and there were four members there that had the idea that at that time there was not a historical organization in the fire department. In the 1930s there was a San Francisco Department Historical Society which was led by Battalion Chief [Frederick J.] Bowlen, who when he retired in, I believe 1941 or ’42—maybe in ’44—he had twenty-thousand pages of handwritten,
typewritten documents on the history of the San Francisco Fire Department. We have some of that material there at Bancroft Library in Berkeley. They’re also down at the Huntington Museum down south. He made sure that his studies, his paperwork, his history knowledge, was expanded to get out to make sure that it wasn’t lost. Real happy that we do have that. We feed off of his material to do what we’re doing today.

02-00:10:26
Farrell: So speaking of history, in 1973 you started the historical group. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

02-00:10:33
Koenig: Sure. There were—it was lieutenant, Jerry Cullen, firefighter Jack McCloskey, myself, and our district was the fire prevention—oh, excuse me, I forget the title [laughing]—inspector. He would drop by the firehouse and the four of us had the idea, since there wasn’t a historical organization, that we should start one and we did. We put the troops together, and the very first muster that we had was up to Columbia. I mentioned that we had seventy-five members go there, competed in all the events. Everybody had a good time and it just grew from that. The mustering in California continued until—into 2005, 2010 and then it has slid off recently, for a lot of various reasons.

02-00:11:31
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about the recognition of yourself and others, by yourself and others, to start a historical group? A little bit more about how the history had been documented or what you felt needed to happen?

02-00:11:55
Koenig: Well, there were a couple of things with it, is that the museum itself is just a building. It’s a building with apparatus, a building with photographs, a building with various objects from the department. One of the best things that the muster team did was that we also retained the physical techniques necessary to use all the apparatus that we have in the museum, and it’s a wonderful situation, because it makes us a living history museum. We can take any piece of apparatus out of this museum—we want every piece of apparatus to operate. It’s the purpose of raising funds to bring all our equipment back. We have two steam engines. One is preserved, the other one is restored—but the boiler’s not restored, and some day we want to get the boiler into operation, so that we don’t lose the history of how a steam engine operates. There’s only about fifty steam engines in the United States that are capable of pumping.

02-00:12:58
Farrell: So Bill Murray is the one who founded the museum?

02-00:13:07
Koenig: Yes, he did, in 1964.
Can you tell me a little bit more about his founding of the museum and what that’s done for the department?

He came up with the idea of—it’s time to start a museum. He came into the fire department in 1920. He was appointed in 1920, and at that time the department was changing over from horse-drawn apparatus—that occurred in a ten-year period from 1912 to 1922. So every member of the department knew how to drive a horse, could drive a horse team, but they didn’t know how to operate motor equipment. Prior to Chief Murray’s appointment he was a mechanic, and he knew how to drive those newfangled automobiles. He was placed in charge of training firefighters into operating one of those brand new motorcars, one of the new motor fire engines/trucks.

He went from there—one of the first units that he drove was a chemical unit. We talked mainly about trucks, and I was going to get back into it today too, I thought. Also—that basically the truck companies carry ladder and axes. And they go to a fire—they’re either going to throw their ladders up to rescue or they’re going to take their axes with them to ventilate the building, whether it be a window, whether they go up to the roof and put a hole in the roof to ventilate. That’s their main purpose, and we also mentioned that rescue is at the top of the list, whether you be on a truck company or whether you be on an engine company. The engine companies are—carry hose and they carry water and they have the pump to make the water go through the hose. Their first job, too, is rescue. If there’s numerous people hanging out of buildings, the first job is not to put water on the fire; it’s to go rescue everybody.

In the early days they had chemical companies also. They were horse-drawn and they were giant, basically giant fire extinguishers. They made—these hose wagons, these carts, these chemical wagons, would carry two 100 gallon chemical tanks that acted just like a big fire extinguisher. They were on a one-inch hose. We only had one or two chemicals that were 100 gallons. Most of them were eighty, two twinned, they called them doubled, double-eighties, for two chemical tanks on a unit. They were horse-drawn then they went to motorized.

When Bill Murray first came in, he drove one of those chemical units, and when he had the idea to start the museum he was looking for the chemical unit that he had driven. As it turned out, excess city apparatus, fire department apparatus, it goes to public auction and is sold. Six months prior this chemical unit was sold. He searched through the rest of the department and he found the oldest fire engine that was still in use. It was down at the airport. It happens to be the engine that is behind me. This is a 1914 American LaFrance. It came to the department as a hose wagon and a small chemical unit. It had a thirty-five—only one thirty-five gallon chemical tank on it, so it had a little chemical hose that they could—which was good for small fires. With the thirty-five
gallons you could put out a small fire. Then in 1922 the unit was converted into this water monitor, which is on the top of the unit, so it has three inlets on each side of the unit. A lot of water can go in, a lot of water can go out. Well, it turned out that this was in a reserve status at the airport and Chief Murray found it. When the museum was put together in 1964—and the opening day was October 7, 1964—they were working on it for six to nine months prior, but this was one of the first units that was brought to the museum.

02-00:17:23
Farrell: Do you have any sense of what some of the other first pieces were and how it was that Chief Murray was able to acquire some of them?

02-00:17:33
Koenig: Well, what we have on the floor here are hand-drawn—everything in this museum are hand-drawn and horse-drawn apparatus that we have, except for the motorized unit behind me. The hand-drawn equipment came from the Veteran Firemen’s Association, and the Veteran Firemen’s Association was organized in 1889. They had their own hall at 368 Fell Street, which is still standing. They had their meetings there and they also had a collection, because at that time their membership was—the members of the department, maybe even from the 1870s, but certainly from the 1880s, nineties, and all these members had various artifacts and memorabilia that they gave to the Veteran Firemen’s Association. I don’t know why, but in about 1965-67, the Veteran Firemen’s Association slid away. There wasn’t interest in it, and that was one reason there was about a five- to seven-year period where there wasn’t a historical organization in the fire department, and that’s what gave us the impetus, the four founders of the St. Francis Hook & Ladder Society, just to begin a history organization in the fire department. Anyway, all the veterans—there’s lots of artifacts and memorabilia from the veteran firemen here also.

One steam engine was always kept on the department rolls, the one that’s preserved. It’s an 1897 LaFrance. In 1988 we were able to purchase back an 1893 LaFrance, fourth-size engine also, from the Simpson family of Hood, California. They had purchased it at auction in 1922, and Hood, California, is just south of Sacramento. They had vast pear orchards. They wanted a pump to take the water from the Sacramento levees, over the levees and irrigate their pear orchards. Well, it turns out that the family were collectible people and they had artifacts, and they realized that the steam engine was something that shouldn’t—it probably was used for a few years, but they retired it early and put it into their collection. I was fortunate to go up there when we purchased it, and they had other objects that were just absolutely gorgeous antiques on their property.

02-00:20:04
Farrell: I know that you have some other things from different places, like SFMOMA, and some things are on loan—is that right?
Koenig: I’m sorry?

Farrell: Some of the other artifacts—are they from SFMOMA?

Koenig: No.

Farrell: No? Okay.

Koenig: Nothing.

Farrell: Is it just the veterans that—?

Koenig: No, we have about two hundred objects that are on loan from de Young Museum.

Farrell: The de Young. That’s what—okay.

Koenig: Yes, right. We’ve always had a good working relationship with the de Young, and it happened for several reasons. About 1960 de Young converted themselves from a history museum into a cultural—the main thing, as we have now, a museum. I had heard, at one time, that they still have about a third of their collection on loan. It’s all the things that they had before.

One of the most famous pieces of equipment that we have is the 1855 James Smith—he was a builder in New York, builder of hand engines. He built the Knickerbocker 5 engine, which we still have. It’s on display at headquarters. Our current chief likes it, because it was Lillie Coit’s hand engine, that she rode as a young—even before she was a teenager. She was young enough to be the mascot of Knickerbocker No. 5, and they would put her on top of the engine and she would wave to everybody in the parades. That led to her really adopting Knickerbocker No. 5 as her company.

She became an honorary member in the 1860s. Not exactly—you can go to our website at—SFFD Museum will reach to our website. We have a long section on Lillie [Hitchcock] Coit [“Firebell Lil’]. It’s a myth that she was the nation’s first woman firefighter. She had strict rules as a member of Knickerbocker No. 5. She had to go to fires during the day, if she could, if she wasn’t in school. At night, her job was to turn on a light in her bedroom to show the passing Knickerbocker company that she was paying attention to the alarms at night. So she was really—not restricted, but she never carried a nozzle, she never had a hose. She never put water on a fire. She never helped
them pump the hand engine, because it’s very grueling to pump the hand engines, so there’s a lot of myths out there about what she actually did and didn’t do in the 1850s and [18]60s. But we’re honored to have her hand engine here, and it’s probably one of the top five hand engines in the United States as far as history.

Farrell: Have you continued to grow the collection over the past couple of decades?

Koenig: Yes, even when we started in 1973, the formation of the historical society was to always bring back artifacts, memorabilia, apparatus that have left the department. We don’t know where they come from. Just within this last couple of weeks I was in contact with the former mayor of Nevada City, and Nevada City has a hose carriage from our Pennsylvania No. 12. We never knew that. We have a list of existing SFFD apparatus that are still around somewhere. They’re scattered all over the place; we keep on looking for them. Hopefully, we always try to get them home, but the people that have them now usually like them. In the case of Nevada City, it became their first hose carriage there, so more than likely they would like to keep it, but we always have our hopes up.

We just found a salvage unit, a 1929 REO that was in the Underwriter’s Fire Department. It was a separate unit, and that’s another thing to mention, is that the Underwriters Fire Patrol was horse-drawn. They were the salvage companies. When I started I was sent to a salvage company. Prior to salvage companies it was the Underwriters Fire Patrol. They weren’t paid by the city, they were paid by the insurance companies. They worked closely—they went to every alarm fire in the city and they worked under the direction of the Chief Engineer, but they had their own captain also. The same thing, they would throw these canvas tarps, usually underneath the fire to protect the business office, et cetera.

Farrell: What has the founding and development of the museum done for the department, in terms of its relationship with the public or making sure that things are preserved? What has been the legacy of the museum?

Koenig: Well, it’s a wonderful extension of the department because it definitely shows that we care. We definitely care about our past. We definitely want to preserve it for the future. As I mentioned, we continue with the physical techniques of how we used all these things. That’s going to continue. This last April 18, on the 150th anniversary, that we’re celebrating all this year, for the hundredth anniversary of the paid department, from the date, of course, December 3 of 1866—the fire department was really actually organized on December 24 of 1849. On April 18 we hand-raised the sixty-five-foot ladder. It weighs 550 pounds. It takes six firefighters to raise it. We raised it in a church, raised it in
an auditorium—it goes up to the vertical and one member of the team climbs it, and usually they’re climbing it fifty feet or so, fifty-five feet.

We’ve had the honor of raising it all over the state. We’ve had the honor of raising it down at Fisherman’s Wharf in front of sixty-five special need children from the Sunshine School. We had the honor of raising it in front of sixty-five thousand people at Candlestick Park, and we dropped the first 49er Super Bowl flag. Pretty neat—I’m a big 49er fan. That was a great day! So we’ve raised that all over the place and that just shows how the outreach is—like I mentioned, we’re not a building. We outreach to the public and we take apparatus to various civic fairs, civic parades, neighborhood events.

Everybody likes to see an old engine. They don’t know where it is—even when we have our hand-drawn equipment here, which are hand-drawn apparatus, everybody, most everybody who comes into the museum will say, “Well, where did the horses go on this unit?” Well, this was before the horses, so we’re constantly educating the public about the days gone by. We have school groups that come here fairly often. That’s cut down because the schools don’t have the traveling money anymore, but that can be arranged and we do that.

02-00:27:12 Farrell: When you raise a ladder, what’s usually the reaction of the public like?

02-00:27:19 Koenig: Oohs and ahs. [laughter] Because it—I’ve been announcing the ladder. I did climb it once, and actually the foreman at the time that raised it, he raised it all the way up to sixty-five feet and that was quite a climb for me—a whole different story. When we raise the ladder to the vertical and we do it for a public display, it’s actually a firefighting technique, and it was used inside fire buildings, inside a large auditorium. If we went to the civic auditorium, if we were in a large church—if the fire was up in the ceiling of that church or in that auditorium, the only way to check for fire extension is to raise a sixty-five foot ladder or a fifty-foot ladder—both are carried. Those are the longest ladders on the truck companies. One member climbs, takes the ax up there and works his axe into the ceiling looking for fire extension. We’re showing part of the fire history as well as putting on a demonstration.

02-00:28:20 Farrell: I want to get back to Bill Murray a little bit.

02-00:28:24 Koenig: Sure.

02-00:28:25 Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about the sort of environment or culture that he created within the fire department when he was chief?
Well, he somewhat modernized the department also, because at the time San Francisco was very late in placing in service triple-combination pumpers. Prior to that they used to call it double combination. It would be the hose and the pump. A triple combination would be, an engine company, it would be the apparatus that you see today out on the street. They’re all triple-combination pumpers. They carry hose, they have the pump, and they also have a water tank. The water tanks in San Francisco are about five hundred gallons.

Outside city areas you can have engines that have a thousand gallons of water. Depending on various cities’ water source is how they choose the size of their water tank. San Francisco, having a wonderful water supply system—we have the Bay to take water—which people don’t realize, but we have cisterns all throughout the city. We had cisterns—that was the first means of getting water in the 1850s, was that the city built cisterns in the Financial District, which was the main heart of San Francisco, and the cisterns have continued and continued. We still keep building cisterns throughout the city today, so we have that source. We have the low-pressure system. Those are the small hydrants that you see around the city. That’s the domestic water system. We use that.

Chief Dennis Sullivan, in 1893, and even Chief David Scannell began pressing the city that they wanted to have their own separate water system, which is known as the high-pressure water system. Dennis Sullivan began pleading with the city fathers to have this, to have this, to have this. It didn’t happen. It cost too much money, cost too much money. Well, the 1906 fire as enough to wake up the city that we needed this system. There was a big bond issue put together after that. In 1909 the bond issue came out, and in 1911 the high-pressure water system went into service. It’s all gravity-fed. There’s a ten million gallon tank on top of Twin Peaks. It flows through the Ashbury Tank, which is another test question. That’s a reservoir of water there. It goes to the Jones Street Tank, which is near Leavenworth and Jones downtown. Down at the waterfront you’ll see blue-top hydrants—the Ashbury tank has red-top hydrants. They’re bigger; they’re rounder, with three outlets on them. The Twin Peaks, way up high, there’s black-top hydrants.

But down along the waterfront, you can supply 390 pounds of pressure. Well, that’s way too much pressure for any hose lead to be made off of them, so each high-pressure hydrant has to have a Gleeson valve. A Gleeson valve is a pressure-reducing valve that was invented by a machinist, William Gleason, at the Central Shops, City and County of San Francisco. They were connected to the fire department originally and then they branched out into being city and county central shops, and we had wonderful inventors that worked there. William [H.] Gleeson was one. He made this fantastic valve that they’re having a hard [time] today to reproduce because of the cost and the extravagance of what they made when the high-pressure [system] first came out. It’s absolutely amazing.
Also at the Central Shops was Henry [H.] Gorter, who invented the water towers. They are, when you see today at fires, the aerial ladders and they put a hose up the aerial ladder and there’s a firefighter at the top of the ladder with a big nozzle going into the large warehouse fires, et cetera. Well, the water tower was the same thing, but it was a unit in itself. It was raised and we have, in our collection, the largest water tower still in existence in the United States. There were only five built over seventy feet in height. Ours was seventy-five feet in height. All the other four are all gone. We still have that, it’s still operational. You can put a stream of water into a seventh-floor window, so that’s the purpose of the water towers.

Where were we? I’m flying! [laughter]

Bill Murray, how his—the kind of culture that he created.

Yeah, so when Bill Murray was the chief—I slid way off of that. Excuse me. There was the engine companies that were dual combinations, hose and a pump. We also had tank wagons. They replaced the chemical tanks. I mentioned the chemical tanks being big extinguishers and then they were converted into tank wagons, and the tank wagons were a motorized piece of equipment that carried five hundred gallons of water. They had two hose reels of rubberized hose, one inch in diameter, and they were manned either by an officer and a driver, or a driver and a firefighter. They had a special pole that the officer or the one firefighter would go into the fire building, especially everything at two-story buildings, that firefighter would come out the front window and receive the nozzle from the driver to get it up there or he would drop a length of rope down and then the nozzle was pulled up to the second floor. Or of course they could take it into the first floor very easily, but that was for a quick attack on a fire.

Every firefighter wants—the purpose of every fire department across the country is to get there as soon as they can. It’s much easier to put out small fires than it is large ones. Kind of simple. That’s the premise of every fire department in the country, and these tank wagons did that job. Also, they were called to automobile accidents, they were called to wash-downs, if there was oil in the streets, various things, they were doing all the odd jobs where you didn’t have to send out a full company of an engine company.

Well, San Francisco was very late into changing over into triple-combination pumpers. Most of the other fire departments in the country did, so Chief Murray made the decision to take all these tank wagons out of service. At the time, the engine companies were manned with one officer and five firefighters. He made the promise to the union, with Local 798, International Association of Firefighters, that the engines will never run with less than one officer and five firefighters. Well, now they’re down to one officer and three,
because it’s all budgetary cuts, projections, the yearly thing—it’s the biggest expense within the fire department. That has always been a problem with the fire department. How much money is the city going to give the fire department to operate? How much money does the fire department need to operate? How are these going to be combined to save the city and protect the city?

02-00:35:51
Farrell: How do the roles of each station in San Francisco vary?

02-00:35:56
Koenig: None.

02-00:35:57
Farrell: Okay. So everybody is on the same playing field.

02-00:35:59
Koenig: Absolutely.

02-00:36:00
Farrell: Everybody has the same—okay. Does it vary at all with the types of calls that different stations are getting?

02-00:36:11
Koenig: Only by the unit. I’m not sure of the year—I believe 1988 to 1990 the Department of Health, prior to that, ran all the ambulances. And then, I think I mentioned that—well, when I first came in in 1970, everybody in the department was qualified in first aid and then that progressed. That progressed into the eighties. The emergency medical technicians—that job slot was invented: EMTs. Almost every engine company—now every engine company has to have an EMT, and I believe today every engine company has to have a paramedic on it, an assigned paramedic. The medical staff, basically, has improved over the years, so as you just mentioned in your question, it went from firemen with first aid to firefighters with EMT, to firefighters that are paramedic-qualified.

The job of the fire department has changed tremendously, because it’s more medical calls today than there are fire calls. The reason to have the paramedics and to have the separate ambulances in the firehouses—there’s not as many ambulances, never has been, when the Department of Health had it, was doing all this. There’s more engine companies and they can get to the patient quicker and faster than the previous separated ambulance response.

02-00:37:58
Farrell: Do you think that you’re receiving more medical calls now because there is a paramedic and an EMT in stations?

02-00:38:05
Koenig: No.
No, it’s still the same. It’s still the same amount of calls, whether it be 1970 with first aids on board of every rig that, as an example—this is a double company here, where we’re sitting. This is the home of Engine 10 and Truck 10, so the engine goes to the medical calls, but if the engine is out, if they’re at a fire, if they’re at an auto accident—if they’re anywhere and they’re not available, then the truck company, being the closest unit to the house where the call comes from, the truck company will respond. They will also send the nearest engine company available to back up the truck company.

Has that always been protocol?

Always.

Okay, okay. Well, we’ll get to the EMT, paramedic merger a little bit later, because that comes a little bit further in time.

But I’m wondering if you could walk me through a—when you had first started in the seventies, if you could walk me through a day in the station, what that was like. I know every day is different, but if you had to—

It’s—we didn’t talk about that and it’s not on your list is the working hours of the fire department. So December 3 of 1866—a couple of different things that were kind of funny about it. We started that department. All the hand engines were gone, all the volunteer companies are gone, and in December 3 of 1866 the SFFD began with six steam engine companies, two ladder truck companies, and four hose companies. They carried hose only. If you had a horse at that time you could enter the fire department. They didn’t care about the man—they wanted the horse! [laughing] That’s kind of funny in a way, that they needed the horses. So for a while, if you had a horse and if you wanted to be employed, you could—you needed the horses to pull the steam engines. At that time, each steam engine, all six, had—it was a two-horse hitch, so they needed twelve horses and they probably needed relief horses somewhere along the line there too.

But the hours on that very first day, on December 3 of 1866, the firemen worked twenty-nine out of thirty days. And this—I had a hard time following it along. I don’t know how long that went. It went for a long time. One thing that they had during that period and into 1900, I believe, or at least into the
1890s, was that each firehouse had a meal book, and it was a ledger that the firemen would sign out on their, into this journal, and they would be allowed home, to go home for lunch, they’d be allowed to go home for dinner. It was on a rotating system so that they could track everybody through this book. That was one thing. Along the line I know that they worked six out of seven days and then—so they worked six out of seven days one week and then the second week they were given two days off.

In 1914—I’m not sure of the hours that they worked, but they wanted to go on the ballot to make a two-platoon system, that they would work, each platoon would work twenty-four hours and have a day off. In 1914 they put that on the ballot and they lost. Right after that they founded the David Scannell Club, which was basically the first union in San Francisco. They went back on the ballot in 1917, well organized, and they passed. So in 1917 the department went to a two-platoon system and they worked their hours differently.

I know in my high school class, in 1958, they were working a ten- and fourteen-hour shift. They worked ten-hour days in the morning, from eight a.m. to six p.m. and then from six p.m. to eight a.m. the next morning. One of my classmates who entered the fire department also—he retired as a captain—he said that when we were in high school he never saw his father, because his father was coming and going, so they were on that shift. Then, at that time, when I first came in—oh, in the 1960s, I just missed, but they were working a fifty-six-hour work week, and now we’re down to a 48.9 hour work week. It has been standard across the nation to work a fifty-six-hour work week. I haven’t been up on the other fire departments, but there’s probably a reduction there. But generally there has always been a fifty-six-hour work week in the last forty to fifty years.

So I slid off your question. When I arrived at eight o’clock in the morning—and you always come before, well before—you can always jump. You can always jump on the rig, let somebody go home early before eight o’clock. Your day starts at eight o’clock. You’re on duty whenever you arrive in the firehouse, whenever you can change with somebody. 9-11, as an example, happened so early in the morning in New York City that it was on a shift change. They almost had a double fire department response on 9-11, so that can happen at any time too. It happens here in San Francisco if there’s a greater alarm going on, you’re going to get leftover people, new people, you’re going to increase the staffing at these—it can happen at any time. SF from eight to eight thirty is your time, have a cup of coffee. Officers call roll at eight thirty in the morning. House duties are assigned. You become a janitor. You clean your firehouse. You sweep, you mop, you clean the toilets—you do everything to keep your home clean. That lasts until ten o’clock.

From ten o’clock to noon is drill time. The officer conducts drills. The engine companies have their own drills. Usually the double houses have their
combined drills. Visiting engine companies here—there’s more engine companies than truck companies, so the neighborhood engine companies here will come to drills with Truck 10. Those happen—every Sunday is truck drill. There’s truck drills besides the individual day truck drills. The truck drills on Sundays are more ladder work—ladder drills, actual physical techniques of moving ladders, raising ladders, making the aerial work, climbing, taking small ladders up larger ladders to take the roofing ladders to the roofs of buildings, so it’s all training, training, training, training.

In the afternoon you go for home inspections, various things. That’s changed over the years. There has been more things changed. In the 1950s, ‘60s, and even into the ‘70s, battalion chiefs did school drills, and now that has been passed over to companies. The companies go to your neighborhood grammar schools, junior highs, high schools, private schools, and give them fire-alarm drills. It’s all on time, there’s a certain amount of time that all the students have to get out of the schools. Constant training, training, training.

And you get back to—oh, you get back at four o’clock, basically, and from that time on you’re basically on your own. I think we mentioned that in between all of this is food preparation. You get your lunch when you can. That depends on each house. Some like having dinner at six o’clock. Some like having it at seven o’clock. So then you get into that.

All during this period there’s at least one member of the company that is standing watch. He’s in the communication rooms, he’s receiving alarms. She can—today we have women in the fire department—I keep on using “he.” [laughing] The firefighter that’s on duty has a watch, and the watches go from eight to twelve and twelve to six, six to ten, ten to two. They used to have this at night—the double houses—and there’s even double and triple houses. The assistant chiefs’ houses in the city, they would have two people stand the watch all night long, and they were downstairs on the floor where the other members can be upstairs in the dormitory. There’s always somebody next to the alarm system in the communications room ready to answer telephones, ready to answer the alarms, ready to pass all that information on to all the house members.

As far as work hours go, do you think that the system that’s in place is effective, the length of shifts?

Sure, because what happens is that, like I mentioned with my high school friend. With the ten and fourteen system in they had a lot of problems with it, in a way. A lot of departments liked it. The fire department in New York City ran it for many, many, many years. Here in San Francisco with it is that they found out that the men that were working, what they would do is they would work two ten-hour shifts and then they would have a day off and come into
the night shift. Monday and Tuesday would be two days. On Wednesday you’d come in at six o’clock at night. Well, the first two days when you got off at six p.m. and you had to come back in the morning, a lot of guys stayed in the city or didn’t go home, or they had their drinking problems, or whatever.

It created its own problems and then it was decided—it had to be voted on, I believe. Everything—all our working conditions in San Francisco are through the ballot. It’s a popular misconception that oh, all those firefighters are getting this, all those firefighters are getting that, and we’re giving them this and we’re giving them that. It’s not true, because every working condition that we have in San Francisco has been given to us by the voters, by a ballot on election day.

Anyway, we converted to the twenty-four hour shift. Even if you have a twenty-four hour shift—I can’t tell you how many times I got off at eight o’clock and as soon as I was home I was back in bed again. You never know when that’s going to happen.

On the other side of it is that doing the work is physical. When I first came in 1970 it wasn’t required to use breathing apparatus. That really didn’t happen till about 1985, that everybody in a building carried breathing apparatus, always had to work in breathing apparatus. The other thing that has spun off of this is that we now have a cancer prevention association with the fire department. It wasn’t really known what everybody was breathing, and it takes a toll on you no matter what the fire is—it takes a toll on your physical exertion that you use at a fire, before or after. Our line-of-duty death list has many firefighters that died of heart attacks. It’s all included in this. I mentioned before, about the fire department leading the nation in line-of-duty death list—or against the miners it’s one and two, back and forth. So all that comes into play. Your work schedule helps you recover and helps you put your body back in the condition that it should be for your next shift.

02-00:50:42 Farrell: Speaking of labor and all these things that are changing, the hours, the breathing apparatus that’s introduced, people paying more attention to what’s physically happening, were you involved in the union at all?

02-00:51:04 Koenig: Yes, when I was at Engine 19 our Local 798 has a system of a station steward in every house, and I was the station steward at Engine 19 at Third and Fourth Street for two years. During that period I was involved in the union.

02-00:51:23 Farrell: Was the union active in trying to advocate for firefighters at that point?

02-00:51:27 Koenig: Always.
Farrell: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about what some of the issues that they would—that they were trying to push forward?

Koenig: Well, there would always be ballot measures. There would always be—a fight at city hall, but it was always city hall that would come out with here’s how we can save on this, we can do this, we can cut this, we can cut that. Well, the union is there to go, “No, no, no. That’s not good for everybody. That’s not going to work.” It’s that balance of reaching an agreement between what city hall would like and what the fire department would like. Of course the chiefs are placed right in the middle of that and they have to balance that closely also.

Farrell: What were some of the measures that they were trying to get on the ballot?

Koenig: You know, in a way, there’s so many I can’t even remember. I know one year, about 1975, the retirees went on a ballot to increase their pension and that was passed. So it’s a combination of different things that go along. Basically it’s all working conditions.

Farrell: Do you remember, even with the breathing apparatuses, was that something that the union was involved in and trying to push forward?

Koenig: Not particularly.

Farrell: Okay.

Koenig: Because it was Chief Murray—we had a fire down on Market Street, and there was a time when breathing apparatus wasn’t in use. It was only on the rescue companies. The rescue—we didn’t even mention them. We have the engine companies, truck companies, chemical companies. We had, I think in 1920, the first rescue company was called the Flying Squad, because they went all over town. They went everywhere. That was their little nickname, the Flying Squad. There are still two in service today. They do a tremendous amount of work. They’re the best firefighters in the department. They go, they do everything, they do extraordinary things. I could talk about them for quite some time, if you like. [laughing]

But this fire in—and I don’t know the exact year, about 1957, was on Market Street at Land Brothers, which was a big sporting—the city’s biggest sporting company. They called it the ping-pong fire because [it was] very popular in the 1950s to have a ping-pong table at home, so they had thousands and thousands and thousands of ping-pong balls inside the building. The fire
burned right through them all, all the little toxins that were inside the ping-pong balls—they had more than a hundred firemen laid out on Market Street.

Chief Murray noticed this; it’s time to make this change. At the time it was Supervisor Clarissa McMahon that took it through the Board of Supervisors to get the fire department breathing apparatus and it went from there. Because of that, because she carried it through there, Chief Murray made her the first honorary woman to hold the title of Chief of the Department. Did I get all that right? Honorary—she was given an honorary chief of the department badge. She was the first woman to receive the honor of receiving an Honorary Chief-of-Department badge.

02-00:55:19
Farrell: And that was in the ‘50s?

02-00:55:20
Koenig: Yes, that was about 1957-58.

02-00:55:25
Farrell: Okay. So one thing—

02-00:55:26
Koenig: The other thing to finish that off, it was a struggle for Supervisor McMahon to carry that through the supervisors, and she accomplished it. It wasn’t an easy ride for her to get that through.

02-00:55:40
Farrell: Do you have a sense of why that wasn’t—why people were pushing back on that?

02-00:55:45
Koenig: Usually it goes to money.

02-00:55:45
Farrell: Money.

02-00:55:48
Koenig: “Well, you never had to do that before. Why do you have to do it now?” [laughing] And it’s hard, when I say it with history and we use—you cannot use 2016 thoughts to solve the problems of what happened along the way. We like to use our 2016 thoughts to say, “Well, why didn’t they do that in 1957?” It’s just a sign of the times that it wasn’t happening at that time. Look at all the inventions that have come along the line, the same thing—“But why didn’t we have that earlier?” [laughing] And it all goes back with history, it all goes back with what actually happened when and where.

02-00:56:33
Farrell: Were there any other issues that you remember it being that the fire department felt really strongly about that had to fight to push through? [a bell clangs once in the background]
Well, you mentioned before, that’s on your list, in 1973—the only time that firefighters went on strike. What happened then was that there was a—it gets back into the labor situation—was that we were trying for a pay raise. We were negotiating with the city. At the time our pay raises—this was already passed and into the city process—that our pay raises were the average of the top three fire departments in the state. We had parity with the police department at the same time. It also could have been that we would receive a pay raise from the top three police departments in the state. Well, it turned out that usually it was the fire departments that were receiving a higher wage than the police departments were. But in any case, with parity with the police, after—I’m trying to think of the month. I’m guessing that we were supposed to get the raise June 1—the negotiations prior to that didn’t solve anything.

Two to three months later—I don’t know the actual month when the strike occurred, but I think it was in the fall, in September, that the police decided to go out on strike. Well, they didn’t have a union. They were just an organization. Because we had parity, our union—fortunately we were AFL-CIO International Association of Firefighters, so we had more pull than the police departments did as far as union backing. It was voted by the fire department, went through our union, that we should follow our brothers wearing blue and join them in the strike. Three days later we went out on strike.

In fact, I was the station steward at Engine 19 at that time. So the engine company there, the captain was Captain O’Looney, Jim O’Looney—great, great captain. We got together and we met at the firehouse that day, because we had all walked out and it hadn’t gone to—we had on strike signs later that came along. But what were we going to do? We were going to picket the firehouse and we would walk outside the firehouse. We still—because this thing had never happened before—we didn’t know anything about this at all. We agreed on different things to happen at that time and that’s what we did.

But fortunately, within those first hours—because I was the station steward, I went to the old Vets hall [Veteran Firemen’s Association] at 368 Fell Street—that became our headquarters. I was mansing the phone calls with Captain Harry [F.] Brophy, who was a great, great firefighter. He was taking all the calls and I was his relief, so we were cataloguing, charting every phone call that came in, giving answers to everybody. We were the information center and we went from there.

Well, Mayor [Joseph L.] Alioto was the mayor at that time and he had a tremendous labor background in solving national labor cases across the country. He was called for that on many, many occasions. Fortunately, he was mayor at this time, because he knew what to do. Within hours—I remember that I was there at about six o’clock in the evening, five o’clock in the evening. I’m pretty sure that it was about eight o’clock that Mayor Alioto
gathered all the unions together—not only ours but all the other unions. I know that there were other unions in because they all sat around and got into this process, and of course with—the police department was there also. The negotiations went on and within four hours—because at the same time, because we were AFL-CIO, our fire union decided to close SF Airport. We could do so by picketing in front, because all the Teamsters would recognize our picket lines and not cross the lines and the airport would basically be shut down. Well, that was enough for Mayor Alioto to solve this strike very quickly. He met, and within four hours he had the solution and then it had to be voted on.

But basically, for the fire side, we were only out for a day and a half. I know that the next shift at eight o’clock, when they came to work, had to be on strike also. As it turned out, for me—it’s not really a big thing—is that I was off duty when we went on strike, I was off duty the next day, so I didn’t particularly go on strike, but I’m one of 1500—we were on strike. The other thing that happened with that was that after that, because we did go on strike, I mentioned how we’d always had to go to the ballot for approval for everything. That cost us ten years. We did not get back in the good graces of the city for the next ten years.

The other thing that’s involved with that is that nationally that gets brought up, that we can’t have firefighters and police officers go on strike. But there has to be some kind of solution to solve the problems when city hall and firefighter[s] or police officers are at a standstill. Binding arbitration is one solution for that. If you don’t want your safety officers to go on strike, there has to be some kind of solution for them. I think that problem has been solved now, because there are various types of binding arbitration. Besides binding arbitration there’s another labor solution which I don’t recall the title of, but between those two things, then your problems are solved. There is an answer to solve—both sides don’t like the results of those things that happen sometimes, but they happen and you have to go on.

02-01:03:48
Farrell: When did those solutions—when were they implemented?

02-01:03:53
Koenig: Which solutions?

02-01:03:54
Farrell: The fact that—the term that you weren’t able to—I don’t know the term either, but—so if you can’t go on strike you have these other options.

02-01:04:04
Koenig: Oh, immediately after that.

02-01:04:05
Farrell: Oh, immediately after? Okay.
Immediately, yes, in 1973, that came to San Francisco. There was a solution for that, but it was always a tough thing before that. The other thing that happened was that when Mayor Alioto made the settlement, he gave us a pay raise that started in October, not June 1. There were various stipulations in there, but basically we received a wage increase from October to June 30, and then we went back to—the city was working on fiscal years, they just changed from July 1 to June 30, was the fiscal year until just a year or two ago.

You had mentioned that you had lost good graces with the city. Can you tell me a little bit more about that, about what the perception was around the fire and police department after that strike happened?

Well, it’s a very simple answer. Why did you go on strike? You let us down. You didn’t protect us. You weren’t there. There were a few fires while we were on strike. A lot of members that—there were, not 100 percent of the fire department went on strike. There was one house that didn’t go on strike. They stayed in service the whole time. There were various sections of officers—all the battalion chiefs did not go on strike. Two went missing. They had the chiefs’ officers, they had the battalion chiefs that became drivers and engine officers. They had a few pieces of equipment in service during that time. But there were also—there were a couple of fires. Well, they were joined by strikers also, because obviously, we didn’t want to see the city burn down. That was one of the questions when we gathered together at Engine 19, was what are we going to do if there’s a fire down the street? Fortunately there wasn’t a fire down the street for us. We didn’t have to come up with that solution. But I’m sure that there were members of Engine Company 19 that would have gone. We would have gone and assisted to put out a fire at that time.

The other side of it is that when Pete Wilson was mayor of San Diego, the San Diego Fire Department went on strike. Well, they didn’t really. They went on strike so they said, “We’re not going to wear the uniform and we’re not going to clean the firehouse.” That didn’t make any difference to anybody. [laughing] Nobody’s living inside the firehouse, nobody cares what you’re wearing. They were happy wearing their Hawaiian shirts, whatever they were doing, my San Diego brothers, but they were on strike, if you can call it that, for a year! I don’t know what they ever solved; I don’t know what they ever did. But if you go on strike, you stop working. It didn’t happen in San Diego. [laughing]

Then you said it took ten years to repair the relationship with the public?

Right.
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about what was done to repair that relationship, how it was repaired?

Koenig: We were back into the community again, and very much so, doing various different things. Of course all during that period we’re going to fire calls and doing different things, and the public realized what we were doing. It faded away from them that we actually went on strike.

Farrell: So just sort of time healed?

Koenig: Time healed. Yes.

Farrell: What about—so after that, I’m also curious about the fire department’s relationship with different political folks, so the mayor—so George Moscone was the mayor from ’76 to ’78.

Koenig: Both of them were wonderful.

Farrell: And then Dianne Feinstein from ’78 to ’88. Can you tell me a little bit about what maybe their relationship was with the fire department, how involved they were, how much they cared, I guess?

Koenig: Both of them were wonderful.

Farrell: Okay.

Koenig: I knew Mayor Moscone when we went to the first muster in 1973 in Columbia. We came back with the best unit award, a great big trophy. I still have my picture with myself holding the trophy and—I went to the mayor’s office, had my picture with Mayor Moscone and the trophy. I still have that hanging on my wall. I love to have it hanging on my wall. The other thing we mentioned was with that—and then Dianne Feinstein, who was fabulous with the fire department. We had two firemen’s musters in San Francisco. One in 1976 and another one in 1981, both when she was mayor. She helped us so, so much with those two events.

I have a personal story with it is that my niece was working for a senator from Oregon back in Washington, DC, and there’s the little trolley that runs between the senators’ offices to the senate chamber, and the senators are called from their office to go on the little trolley four-seaters that run
underground in a tunnel. My niece was on one of the little carts one time—I
don’t even know if I can get through this. [voice quavering] My niece is
sitting there and Dianne comes along and hops on the little car, and my niece
was brave enough to say, “I think you might know my uncle, Bill Koenig.”
Dianne goes, “Bill Koenig!” [laughing] Yeah, that was just so neat, so really
nice. She was wonderful, she was very—she did everything she could for the
fire department.

The other thing that happened with her is that—and Bill Murray helped us
too—we get back to him—is my friend Dianne lived very close here to the
firehouse. She was up on Lyon Street and she had two police officers that
drove her in her limousine, a Lincoln. Ford Motor Company gave her a limo
for free that became her limo, a donation to the city. It was parked here in the
firehouse, so during that time we would keep the—the police officers loved to
stay to dinner with us, so we were getting all kinds of different stories from
her and everything, just about the city, in general, and everything. She moved
to Presidio Terrace and we were first due out there—one time, for some
reason, something went off at her firehouse and she happened to be home. “Hi
Bill, how are you doing?” I wasn’t even the officer at that time, but—and now
she’s up on—she’s still first due here for the engine company up on Pacific
Avenue.

02-01:11:13
Farrell: Did either Moscone or Feinstein advocate for the fire department in any way,
anything that they put on the ballot or tried to help move forward?

02-01:11:26
Koenig: I would think so. I can’t recall those kind of things, but certainly they did. The
other thing that I mentioned, with Chief Murray, was that when we started the
historical society we became the sponsor of the museum almost right away.
We worked with him and he was here. He was a founding director when we
organized and incorporated the historical society, the St. Francis Hook &
Ladder Society, a nonprofit 501(c)(3). He was on our board and I certainly
had a wonderful working relationship with him. He was just spectacular all
the time.

But even when he was chief—I think I mentioned Chet Born, one of our
photographers. Chief Murray established a photography unit, and it was only
one member—it was Chet Born, who always carried a camera around and
everything else, and loved photography, had the darkroom, in those days,
where he would come back and make the prints. Chief Murray would say
that—in a way Bill Murray was our first—they have public information
officers these days. Well, at a fire, Chief Murray would basically hand over
the fire to his deputy chief, and the deputy chief would run the fire. He’d be
called on, the deputy chief, would certainly call on Chief Murray on different
times and things like that. But Bill Murray was in charge of the fire and he
was also the public information officer at that time—in a way. He always took
questions from the press—TV was just coming in and TV was coming live from the fires and things, so he was always who they called for at these fires.

Chet Born said, “I’ve never photographed somebody who always knew where the camera was on him.” Chief Murray would always have a knack of turning to the camera—my time for a photograph. [laughing] He just knew that all the time, so by doing that—and the purpose of the photo unit was to take all these photos, just like the football teams today, with their plays and—where did you go during this play and that play? That was all transferred into the fire college that he had established, that these photographs would go back and they would be used at—this engine should not be parked here. We should have had this engine over here, we should have had this truck here. It was a photographer, Chet Born, who—and became internationally known for great, great fire photography. His real purpose was education.

Anyway, my father was a mason. I remember going to his lodge one night. Chet Born was always out in the community giving slide shows of giving fires—a member of my dad’s lodge who helped me, was always after me to get into the fire department—I think I mentioned—retired as a deputy chief. I remember—I think I was in high school at that time—Chet Born coming to do a slide show. It’s the same thing then. It was almost like we’re doing now—a huge community outreach.

02-01:14:53
Farrell: Yeah, that’s—well, I guess as it pertains to the city of San Francisco and the public, I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about the city in the seventies and eighties, about how you saw it change a little bit, whether that be culturally or physically, about the things that were going on that in general were—?

02-01:15:22
Koenig: I just—I saw that on your list to ask about, and I just believe that it has nothing to do with it. Because we’re the fire service—we go help everybody, anybody, anytime, anywhere. It doesn’t matter who you are, what you’re doing, what your political background might be, what group you’re in—we’re not going to go to that church, we’re not going to go—it doesn’t matter. It just doesn’t matter. We take care of everybody at any time, no matter what they’re doing. That’s the purpose of the fire department, to be that way. Certainly there was nobody in the fire department that thought any differently than that. It’s, in a way you’re asking a huge subject, but it’s a very small subject, because it just doesn’t affect the fire department. It doesn’t affect the police department.

02-01:16:15
Farrell: If the city is changing physically and there’s more—Potrero Hill was more industrial, now it’s more residential, that’s going to affect things a little bit.
As far as—you were talking about traffic patterns. So I’m just wondering if you saw a lot of development in the city, how that—were things changing then?

Sure. It happened—Emmet [D.] Condon, who was chief ’82 to ’87, I believe. He was the fire marshal when Mayor Alioto was mayor, and San Francisco went through a tremendous change of high-rise building during that period. Emmet Condon became nationally known for putting in fire prevention/fire regulations into high-rise buildings. He became the national expert in high-rise fire regulations, needed fire regulations, and that’s about at the same period.

Even with that—so with all the high-rise buildings, I know that they had floor monitors that were fire—I don’t know the right titles for them because I wasn’t assigned downtown that much, but I know that they had their own drills how to evacuate floors and they had various members of that business that was on that floor to be, basically, the floor foreman to help everybody out of that floor, get them into the smoke towers for—use the stairways, don’t use the elevators, all those kind of things that we’re all used to today. When that big change—I know that they’re still doing that today, that all the high-rises have floor monitors/fire protection things.

At the same time, I think I mentioned, that was when smoke alarms were first coming in, when even the smaller apartment house buildings were coming in with their own fire alarm systems.

How did that change—the implementation of smoke detectors and fire monitors?

Well, it allowed us to get to a fire immediately, rather than no one noticing that somebody’s room is on fire, that the smoke goes through the building. Smoke doesn’t travel that fast, depending on what the ignition source is for the fire. Usually it’s not big. There’s not very many arsonists running around. Maybe you have a little fire on the stove—you usually get that by a smell rather than by a fire. Everybody knows that around the house—hopefully. There’s those kind of things. But by having smoke detectors and by having fire alarms in all these apartment buildings, everybody gets out faster, everybody—the fire department is given notice of a fire, it gets us out of the firehouses quicker. We’re there much quicker, and again, we’re back to putting out small fires rather than big fires. By doing all the combination of
things, whether it be high-rise or in the apartment houses or in your own homes, totally, totally has reduced the amount of fires per year.

Farrell: Was there any civilian education that you had to do around fire detectors or monitors?

Koenig: There’s—our fire prevention officers that are the inspectors, they do that.

Farrell: Okay.

Koenig: They go out into the community to—it’s, again, an extension. We always talk about the extensions and where we’re reaching into the community, and they have that program. The other thing that was established after—the need we found out was after the 1989 earthquake—was that there was a need for a separate unit. San Francisco was one of the first—we call ours NERT, Neighborhood Emergency Response Teams, and that has grown and grown and grown, so that, if you like—shall we talk about 1989?

Farrell: Yeah, that would be great. I’m also curious what you, if you could clarify what you mean by a need for a separate unit. What kind of unit? How would that be separate? If you would just explain that a little bit.

Koenig: I don’t know what you—I’m sorry.

Farrell: You said after you—the fire marshal does a lot of prevention and then you said that after the ’89 earthquake one of the things you learned was a need for a separate unit?

Koenig: Yes. Right. What the separate unit was, that—and I don’t know who—but we established the NERT program, which is the Neighborhood Emergency Response Team, and we were one of the first in the nation to organize this group.

It basically goes back to World War II. We had a civil defense unit in San Francisco for World War II. There were ten thousand members in it, throughout San Francisco. We had block lieutenants, we had block captains. A lieutenant would take care of a block, and it’s easier to get your thoughts together—and well, most of San Francisco is built in square blocks, rectangular blocks. So there would be a—this is a great little story all itself. A block lieutenant would have a little cart that he could push, maybe about twice the size of a shopping cart, but it was flat, it had two different places to put things. [laughing] A table with a shelf underneath it. But they would carry a
length of large line, that would be a fifty-foot length of two- and three-quarter-inch hose, a length or two lengths of small line, inch and three quarters—San Francisco always had—I made a mistake using inch-and-a-half hose. Inch-and-a-half hose is national. San Francisco always used inch-and-three-quarter-inch hose. That quarter inch gives a lot more water. You don’t realize what a quarter inch will do, but it gives you a lot more water to put on a fire. They had two lengths of hose, they had the nozzles, they had the shutoff things, they had a fire extinguisher. They had spanners. They had a little extinguisher. They had first-aid equipment on it. There was one of those to every block and we still—I have a friend who still has one. They’re pretty hard to find these days. There was a captain that was in charge of four blocks.

We had over a thousand trailers, two-wheel trailers that had a Chrysler pump on them—and there’s not too many of these left either. I wish we had one. They made an agreement with Yellow Cab, and Yellow Cab put a trailer hitch on all the cabs, so if there was an emergency, the Yellow Cabs would pull these Chrysler two-wheel trailers around the city. We had auxiliary pumps that were 1940 one-and-a-half-ton trucks with a pump on them, with hose on them. They would be used. There were also additional pumps besides—I think we had forty-two in service at one time. Another history check for you all to check out.

But anyway, so that was—I only recently found out that there were ten thousand members of that civil defense organization during the war, and at the same time, this year we’re celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the San Francisco Fire Reserve. They were organized in 1941 to augment the fire department and to augment these ten thousand volunteers in the civil auxiliary force.

So like that, that auxiliary unit, was NERT also an auxiliary unit or was it part of the fire department?

Well, it was, but it didn’t have—we always had the fire reserve when times calmed down. They continued it, somewhat, during the Korean War. There were more civilians involved, basically on call, and that slid away. We always had the fire reserve and those numbers went up and down. For some reason, the fire reserve is only allowed to have forty-five members now, right now, which I don’t quite understand. But anyway, they’re there. So it slid down to that group.

And then with the ’89 quake, we’re back to a 1906 style, large city catastrophe. In ’89 all parts of the city were affected. There were small fires here and there and of course the Marina fire was big, and that’s where the need for another group of people, which we now call the NERTs—there’s different titles for them in different cities, acronyms for them in different
cities, but they’ve stretched out now across the country to have these people, especially in California, earthquake land, that we have this group. If you like, I was working October 17, 1989.

Farrell: Yeah, I’m wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your memories of the day.

Koenig: Well, they’re pretty good, but because that was recently.

Farrell: Yeah.

Koenig: I was working here at Engine 10. I happened to be the driver of the engine that day. What time are we on for the quake? Five-ish? I forget the actual minutes. Five in the afternoon. Well, when did the baseball game start, the World Series start? [laughing] But anyway, so I was working here, the tiller operator in 1989 was Joe [Joseph R.] Conway. We both happened to be right outside the museum here. We have a small pathway around the firehouse. We’re one of the few firehouses in town that has parking on it, and there’s a driveway around Station 10, and in this back it’s a one lane. When the earthquake hit—you always hear these stories how the ground moves—it was like a wave that went through this one lane back of the firehouse—I witnessed it! I can’t believe that I saw it. It was a wave at least a foot high, if not even higher, of three to four to five waves that came along and then they settled back down again. It was a quake that lasted quite a few seconds, and in California, or when you tell the rest of the country—well, the quake lasted for thirty seconds. “Oh, that doesn’t sound too long.” Well, go put that time in your microwave and you see how long thirty seconds is. In 1906 I think it was more like fifty-eight, fifty-nine seconds. The ’89 quake was less, but even so—hey, big, big earthquake.

Joe Conway and I ran around the apparatus floor. We gathered up all the batteries that we could. We didn’t know how long we were going to be out. We knew that we needed batteries for the flashlights. We put on all kinds of extra equipment, because we weren’t called out immediately, but we had enough time to throw extra equipment onto the rigs, and both he and I—and there were others, of course, that did this, but basically Joe and myself were putting everything we could onto the engine and the truck. The truck was called down to the Marina and we weren’t. They went down there—that was a whole separate story what they did.

But then we were called to Gough and about Union Street. I mentioned before, about if there wasn’t an available company, the next available company would go on a response. We would get down to Gough and Union on a third alarm, not on a first alarm. That’s way out of our first-alarm area,
and we went there for a heart attack. Well, it turns out it was an older woman that was shaken up by the quake. She was fine. But it was all that nervousness of the amount of time that the earthquake went on. We found ourselves down in the Marina. We didn’t realize that the communication system went out, just as it did in 1906. I know, hearing stories later—I had mentioned Harry Brophy before, being a captain. In 1989 he was an assistant chief, and when there’s a—we had three divisions at that time—and one of the assistant chiefs was assigned to go to fire alarm. So Chief [Frederick F.] Postel, the chief of the fire department, was out of town. He was at a conference in Boston on that date. Deputy Chief Mike [Michael T.] Farrell was in charge of the fire department, so he went to fire alarm also. So they’re watching the TV and they’re getting the reports off the TV that there was a fire down in the Marina.

So Battalion 4, which is in—we didn’t really talk about this—Station 10 is part of a battalion and it’s been back and forth. We’re splitting on the line between Battalion 4 and 5, it has changed over the period of time. But more often than not we’ve been in Battalion 4, which is headquartered up on California Street at Buchanan. So that chief went down to the Marina, and I know his name, a great chief, so he’s down there and he calls for two more engine companies. We were within blocks from there. We were available on the air. We weren’t in the firehouse, and when you’re outside the firehouse you’re always available on the air, and fire alarm will call you. When they give out a box alarm they will still say Engine 10. You have to respond afterwards, “10 Engine responding,” because they know that you’re on the air, they want to know that you’re responding.

It was Battalion Chief Vic [Victor M.] Shannon that was in charge of the Marina fire, and he said, “I need two more engine companies down there.” And the call didn’t come, the call didn’t come. I told my lieutenant, I said, “Bill, we’re a couple of blocks away from here. We’ve got to—“ we were doing a few other things in between there before we got the call for that, before that call came along, we were on Francisco Street and we were just walking our ways down that street. At the corner there was a large apartment house and there was a woman up on a fire escape with a Dalmatian dog, of all things, and she couldn’t get to the ground because the ladder to drop down to the ground was broken by the quake. So we threw up our ladder there and we got her down. I climbed up there and helped her with the dog. I’ve always been a dog person, so I had the dog, I go get the dog. It turns out I’m telling this story to my neighbors, and my neighbor’s father owned that apartment building—a private story, way offline here. He said, “She wasn’t supposed to have that dog in the apartment.” [laughter] It was a dog-controlled apartment, but whatever, so we saved that dog.

But the other thing we’re doing along that street was that all the gas valves that are in the sidewalk, in that little circular receptacle, they were leaking and there were several that were broken. When you have natural gas like that, you can almost see it with a ten-inch opening, twelve-inch opening, whatever they
are. You can certainly feel it. We were trying to close off the streets, because there were still people literally motoring around, trying to get home. It’s—you can’t control that, people. That’s where you need the NERT people to come in, if there’s a large catastrophe, to close off streets immediately. So it was a pretty dangerous situation.

We had to leave there and we went to the Marina fire. We came in by the Palace of Fine Arts. We came along Beach Street and we didn’t quite get to Divisadero where the corner of the fire was, at Beach and Divisadero. We’re the only engine on that side of the fire. We came in a block away and we talked about whether you make a fire-to-hydrant lead or—we’re back and forth. This was definitely a hydrant-to-fire lead, so we stopped at the corner of Beach, and I forget the next street over from Divisadero. But in any case, we’re a block away from Divisadero.

On the left corner there was a high-pressure hydrant. On the right-hand corner there’s a low-pressure hydrant. We go to both hydrants and we test them and we’re all laughing. There’s four of us: Bob Malke, Jim [James C.] Duensing; Bill [William P.] Shore, the lieutenant; and myself. We’re all talking Yogiisms, because it’s déjà vu 1906 all over again. We’re getting some water out, but we weren’t getting too much. We got more water out of the high-pressure hydrant than we did the low-pressure hydrant, so we made a single large-line lead, the two-and-three-quarter inch hose. It was more than seven hundred feet down to where the fire was burning. We made that connection. We only had enough water to get our multiversal, which is a large nozzle on top of each engine company. We didn’t realize how far back the apartment house went, but we only had that one line going there and it wasn’t doing too much. We were doing something. And the fire is advancing to us.

There’s a lot of officer decisions that were made, by officers. Engine Company 21 is the closest unit south of here, and the officer, Captain Guido Castelli, went up to the top of Pacific Heights and could look down at the Marina fire and he said, “Come on. Let’s go. We’re going down there. They need us.” Well, fortunately, he had made the right call there, is that he took Engine 21 and drafted from the Marina, Palace of Fine Arts lagoon—a great water supply. So he set up a supply line from there, he drafted from there. They relayed it to another engine company, Engine 14, which is out at Twenty-Fifth and Geary Street. They came to the fire. And then they relayed their water into us. Well, by then we had water, and I had every—I was the driver of Engine 10. We had every outlet into operation, and it was really amazing that—I know every line that we had. Truck 5 was with us, Truck 16 was with us, and we had our own line off, 10 Engine had a line off. And we had another big line off, but we still didn’t have enough water.

We were very, very fortunate that the fire didn’t jump to the building to our right-hand side, to the south. It was on a big—it was a three-story apartment house. All the windows were broken out by the heat of the fire and we could
see the curtains catching on fire there. I had to shut down, which was agreed to [by] everybody. All the various lines were off and Truck 5 had a line with Lieutenant John Donham on it, that he had to have enough water pressure to reach the third-floor window and we put the curtains out. I don’t know how that happened. Somebody up above was watching us, I guess. We didn’t have to take a line, a fire line, hose lead, into that building to put a fire [out]—the fire never jumped into that building. It sure had a good chance to, because we saw the curtains on fire three, four, or five times. Only fortunate enough that we were able to put the curtains out so that the fire didn’t extend into that building. If the fire extended into that building, we would have lost another block, because we didn’t have enough units down there. We didn’t have enough water down there.

It wasn’t until way later that the fire boat came over and—there’s all kinds of film on—we had tremendous civilian help during that time—of the companies going down to St. Francis Yacht Club, the fire boat pulled right in there at the foot of Divisadero, all the citizens running hose up to the street. It wasn’t until way later that—at that time we had five-inch hose on hose tenders—that we could set up a portable water system. That came way, way later into the night. They finally—as I mentioned, we were the only engine company on that side of the fire, where normally, at a greater alarm, there would be three to four engines there, so we were very, very limited. We were fortunate enough that as the Marina fire progressed westerly, one of the big apartment houses that we were first putting water into, that whole line, that big rectangular building fell to the east and it made a fire break. And then, as I mentioned, we had all these various lines off. We were able to throw enough water down there to stop the fire from getting into the next apartment building, which was quite big also.

The other thing that’s quite historical about it was that we saved Joe DiMaggio’s house. He was only five doors down from where—on the Beach Street side of where the Marina fire was. So I saved Joe DiMaggio’s house—myself and a few others. [laughing] But then the five-inch hose came around and by that time we had stopped the Marina fire from progressing westerly. The hose tender came on, and then with their big water monitor they put a tremendous amount of water onto the fire. We were told to pick up our hose line at two o’clock in the morning and we were back in the firehouse by three o’clock in the morning.

Farrell:

It sounds like there were a lot of successes that day, that the fire department was able to do things that really saved a lot of the city. You just described a lot of it. Can you tell me about how the preparation and everything, and the drills and everything, how that set you up for success that day? Or do you feel that it was successful?
[laughing] I mentioned my other story—there’s always somebody happy when the fire goes out. So my other little joke—maybe I shouldn’t even tell this joke. I don’t want to tell this joke. [laughter] There’s not a fire burning—I can tell the joke this way and it’s not a joke. There’s not a fire burning anywhere that you know about, is there? We always put our fires out. Sometimes it takes a little longer, but we always put our fires out. In fact, when I used to do my muster announcing, I was thinking about that, it’s a competition—the same thing that we’re talking about, with fire evolution, dropping three or four lengths. They dropped four lengths of hose from the hydrant to the fire. You had to go through the pump and then you take a lead off and then you knock down a plastic cone and time stops. That’s the evolution for mustering, for the motorized section. There’s times when teams can’t do that. Something goes wrong, they don’t make their hose connection correctly. It throws the team off, somebody gets upset, and I would just announce, “Come on, come on. We’re always going to put the fire out. We’re in the fire service. We’re always going to put the fire out.” It doesn’t matter where you are. We’re always going to put the fire out. It doesn’t matter the length of time—we’re always going to put the fire out.

That happened in ’89 certainly, because the Marina fire was certainly contained. It was certainly a large fire. In a way, not much different than warehouse fires. Warehouse fires—you’re talking about the south side of the city being industrial, the Hunter’s Point section of the city being largely industrial, fourth and fifth alarms, especially in the 1950s and sixties. We have notable fires, fourth and fifth alarms—there was a fifth alarm in Treasure Island, 1947, that leveled maybe a quarter of the buildings over on Treasure Island that went through the [World’s] Fair. San Francisco has always had large fires. The other thing that falls in place with that is that the—[fire alarm tone sounds] Just a fire alarm. Hello! [speaking to someone who is approaching] How can I help you? Oh, it’s you! [interruption in recording]

Let’s go back to it again, because there’s one thing that’s really amazing about it, is—I’ll have one more story for me to tell you about.

Yeah, I just—you’re—we can do that.

Because we put in a piece of equipment from the museum. [a fire bell clangs in the background]
Farrell: Oh! Well, yeah, let’s talk—we can wrap up with that. I just pressed record again, so we’re back on. [a siren in the background]

Koenig: Yeah, we’ll let them go. [sounds recede]

Farrell: Yeah, whenever you’re ready.

Koenig: Thank you. We were—just a little break there, excuse us. We’re on the 1989 earthquake. So what happened was, that day being of such magnitude, total recall was given to every member of the fire department. Everybody came in. Every member of the fire department responded to their firehouse. [a loud bang in the background] So every member of the fire department came to their firehouse, and the captain of Engine 10 was Rich [Richard D.] Bracco. Rich Bracco was on the muster team and we had been taking a 1960 American LaFrance pumping engine to musters throughout the state. Well, it was on the apparatus floor of Engine 10. It had a thousand feet of hose on it. Captain Bracco knew that the pump worked. We could have water in it. It was ready to go into operation. He called fire alarm and he placed a museum piece of equipment into service, and it ran for the next thirty-six hours as Engine 10-A. During that period of time, especially when they first went into service, everybody was involved in a situation somewhere—especially down in the Marina.

When Captain Bracco put Engine 10-A into service, there was not an available engine between the Fairmont Hotel and the Cliff House. For a good twelve hours, it was the only engine on the northern part of San Francisco that was available for fire calls—and they were called. They stayed in service for thirty-six hours. They were sent on—we called fire watch the next morning. The fire down in the Marina was still burning. There was a fire watch down there that didn’t end, probably for another twenty-four hours. I know that at least it went into—well into the evening of October 18. Probably they had a few, a couple units down there until October 20.

But there were a lot of calls after that because what Captain Bracco did made national news. It wasn’t received so well by the chief of the department. But again, we get back to having everything in the museum collection ready to go in service. We laugh among ourselves that the 1902 water tower could be taken out at any time and put into service if they wanted to. We received calls that, “Oh, they took out—the museum—they went to the San Francisco Fire Department Museum and they took a piece of equipment out there. They took out the steam engine, and the steam engine was down there at the Marina fire.” Wait a minute—the steam engines went out in 1922, not at a 1989 fire. So it—that’s how stories grew and everything else. But it was only another—
here’s an officer that knew what he was doing and placed an engine into service for the fire service at the San Francisco Fire Department.

02-01:46:19  Farrell: Well, thank you for sharing all that. That’s probably a good place to leave it. It’s getting a little loud, so I just want to—that’s a good place to leave it and we’ll come back on Monday. Thank you.

02-01:46:26  Koenig: Thank you.
This is Shanna Farrell with Bill Koenig, on Monday, June 20, 2016 and this is our third interview for the San Francisco Fire Department, California Firefighter Oral History Project. So Bill, today I wanted to start out by talking about the EMS merger that happened under—it officially began under Chief Demmons and it’s still—the details I think are still being ironed out right now. I know we had briefly touched on training that you received as a first responder and safety and emergency response, but I’m wondering if you could talk about, in the seventies and eighties, a little bit more about what your role would be when there was a physical emergency that would warrant the response of an ambulance. Before that merger happened, what was it like for you when you would get a call?

I don’t know what year to start, really. It goes way back. It’s pre-World War II. The Department of Public Health was organized in San Francisco in 1850. The first doctor that was appointed, and it was him alone, in 1850, was that—he went to all the ships in the bay that were arriving and he checked all of the arrivals. Now, how he did this, with the amount of people that were on each boat and that type of thing, but that was the beginning of the Department of Public Health. It took a few years before they established a city hospital, and there’s a big gap then, in between.

But I remember, growing up in San Francisco, that there were only five, six public health clinics—I don’t think they used the name clinics—Park, Alemany, there was one over in North Beach, Harbor Emergency. In fact, in the thirties, forties, and fifties, if a firefighter was hurt at a fire, they were transported to one of these mini-hospitals, and that’s where they received treatment. Well, during that period, the ambulances ran out of those individual—I could be wrong calling them clinics—the little mini-hospitals, so they were running out of there and there wasn’t too many ambulances either. Maybe there’d be two or three. I don’t know that exactly, assigned to each little hospital.

But in any case, it’s a situation where there were more fire companies in the city. At one time we had forty-nine engine companies. It ended up with twenty truck companies, so you can see that there’s almost sixty units that could respond on a medical call, and more often than not, they would arrive earlier to whoever calls, because there wasn’t that many ambulances in the city.

Then the ambulances grew, grew, into the eighties and nineties. There were more of them, there was more need in San Francisco on medical calls. We ran with the Department of Health paramedics, at the time, and that was a whole new world into the 1980s and nineties. Only two members on each
ambulance, and boy, did they run! They never stopped. They would take a call, they would go back in service, they’d get another call—and they had a tremendous burnout rate also. It was obviously a need for more, they needed more, you get back into city budget, you get back into how many is the city going to provide? The city needs them, and they have to match that with the city needs.

It came along, it came along, and at the same time, the fire service side, when I came in in 1970, I was trained for first aid, and we mentioned that it jumped to EMTs, emergency medical technicians. Five, ten years later it jumps from—in about, I think it was 1980, there was one EMT required on every engine company, and five to ten years later there was a paramedic required on every engine company in the city, so the fire department was increasing its firefighters in the training of medical assistance, and that really changed the fire department, because at the same time there were less fire calls. The fire department thought it was better to have this medical system into the firehouse, so that’s where the merger came. Maybe the Department of Health took all the amount of ambulances that were on their budget—it could have been a money transfer.

The other thing was that with having less calls to fires and all the other little incidents that happened too—water leaks, car accidents, any type of thing—that having the medical services in the fire department would make the entire fire department more active. That’s certainly one reason for the merger, so there was no animosity when all these ambulances joined and were stationed in the firehouses, at all. The same thing happened; they were hardly ever in quarters. I mentioned we had, usually, two meals in San Francisco, a lunchtime and dinnertime, and they didn’t make many meal calls. They’re always out—they’re still always out.

You mentioned that there was more of a need in San Francisco for medical calls. I understand why there were less fire calls, because there’s more fire safety, there’s more fire prevention, there’s fire alarms now, smoke detectors. Why were there more medical calls?

The population of the city grows all during this period. The downtown financial population, with commuters coming in—I don’t know exactly. The population of San Francisco now is 800,000, and I don’t know—that’s for the history buffs here, go find out that number—but I think it’s double that in the Financial District, maybe even triple that, the amount of people that are working. Certainly not all the calls are coming from there, but just the amount of people that you have.

People are—there’s the advancement in the medical services, that if you can—an example, anybody who has a stroke, if they can reach a hospital
within thirty minutes—a tremendous difference in how that person is going to be saved and what’s going to happen to them later on in their life. They can recover pretty well from a stroke if they’re in a hospital thirty minutes or sooner—the sooner the better with a stroke victim. It’s all medical advancement. We know different things than we had many, many years ago. There’s more reason to call. There’s the people that can’t afford to get to a hospital. Maybe they don’t have cars. Maybe they don’t have any vehicles to get there, so there’s more calls to the ambulance. All this factors into the amount of calls that they receive.

03-00:09:05
Farrell: You also mentioned that “paramedic” was a new word. How or why? Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

03-00:09:10
Koenig: I have no idea. [laughter]

03-00:09:11
Farrell: Okay, fair enough. And you also mentioned that there was a high—

03-00:09:16
Koenig: You have to go back to “para” is part medic? What’s “para”? Break down “para,” that’s all it means.

03-00:09:26
Farrell: Oh, I just—was it not something that was being discussed in the fire department very often?

03-00:09:31
Koenig: How do you mean? Just the terminology?

03-00:09:33
Farrell: Yeah.

03-00:09:35
Koenig: No, it’s a word that comes along. It’s a job slot. I’m getting way off here, but it’s what their function is, because they’re not doctors. You have “para” legal people.

03-00:09:51
Farrell: I guess what I meant was paramedics weren’t a part—it was new to the conversation. That role was new to the fire department.

03-00:10:00
Koenig: Yes, and the other thing that happened was that when they first joined, when the paramedics were first merged with the fire department, they had no fire training whatsoever, so there’s a long period they were cross training, so that they had some fire service capability also, besides all their medical—a huge medical background. I mean, they are doctors—almost. They have their protocols that they can go to and only so far up, but they’re tremendous.
They’re just absolutely tremendous about what problems they can solve medically.

Farrell:

You also had mentioned that there was a high burnout rate. Can you tell me a little bit more about that? Why there was a high [burnout rate]?

Koenig:

Oh, we talked—I just mentioned about how often they’re responding. It gets tiring. It gets very, very tiring. The majority of the time they’re seeing the lower life in the city. They’re seeing the homeless people, they’re seeing—certainly, drugs comes into this. They knew the drug addicts by name, because they’d see the same people over and over and over again. It’s almost like, “Hi Harry, how are you doing today?” “Oh, okay.” They knew their clients—not the best of life to keep on going and going and going with that. So time to change their profession, unfortunately.

Farrell:

When the paramedics and EMTs were required to be on the trucks and in the stations, did that change the dynamics in the house at all?

Koenig:

No, not at all.

Farrell:

Okay. So you had also mentioned that—so administratively they thought that it was better for the fire department to house the EMS—emergency medical services in the fire department. Do you have a sense of, aside from being more active, do you have a sense of why they thought it was better?

Koenig:

Well, it showed that the fire department was in business. That with less fires—oh, you don’t need that amount of—it always has been city-wise, and we used to talk about it in the firehouse, that they would try to get by with less people than they could. These cities are really rolling the dice with how often they were going to be called, how big emergencies are they going to have?

In 1906, the 1906 fire, there were 584 members of the fire department. I think at that time they were working on that six- to seven-day shift, but in any case, they all lived in the city, they were all close by. They all immediately went to work. I’ve seen reports where they even—all retired members of the department joined their old companies to increase the staff. Oakland sent over two engine companies and a hose company and they augmented with another thirty-five members.

So today, in San Francisco—of course the equipment is much more efficient, you can get there faster, this and that, but there’s—I don’t know the exact number—there’s about three hundred on duty. The population in 1906 was 400,000 and now the city’s population is double that, at over 800,000, but
there’s less working. Basically the fire service today relies on a tremendous amount of mutual aid from other cities. The forest fires that happen throughout the state of California, they call in strike teams. They put together five engine companies and a battalion chief. San Francisco has been to San Diego! San Francisco has been almost to the Nevada border. Every city is helping out everybody with a tremendous amount of mutual aid.

I don’t know how we got so far off of that, but it’s all staffing, whether it be for medical or whether it be for fires, it’s all decided. The city fathers depend on our choosing how much they want in each section. We talked about now having the Neighborhood Emergency Response Teams. They might help put out a little fire thing, but they’re not really—they’re more neighborhood control people than—they wouldn’t turn all those people into active firefighters. They have that technique, maybe they could help. But it’s all—again, it’s all just rolling the dice of what’s going to happen and where and when, and it’s a balance of what does the city—how much money is the city going to put into every agency that they have?

03-00:15:27
Farrell:
Did you regularly go to commission meetings?

03-00:15:30
Koenig:
No.

03-00:15:31
Farrell:
Okay. Do you have a sense of how this merger changed the public perception of the fire department? Or did it?

03-00:15:42
Koenig:
Well, sure, because it’s the fire department that is arriving rather than the Department of Public Health, which is a little bit confusing. Everybody—and again, back to my childhood. I knew that it was the Department of Public Health, I knew that it wasn’t the fire department that was arriving. The fire department did arrive, of course, but only to give first aid. Everybody that’s been born since 1980, 1990, realizes it’s the fire department that comes now, so it’s a whole public change of 30 percent of the population knows, 50 percent of the population knows, that the fire department is first responder for medical assistance also.

03-00:16:39
Farrell:
Another thing that happened with Chief Demmons was the consent decree. There was a lawsuit in 1988 that led to this agreement that the department would start to focus on hiring a more diverse workforce, so going from the merit system, which was based on rankings with the civil service test, to a different system that was more inclusive diversity-wise. Can you tell me a little bit about moving from the merit system to the quota system?
Quite a big section here, because—well, the merit system is fairly easy to understand. You study, you pass the test if you can. The highest person on the list is hired, and I think we mentioned it before how many—they make a list up of projected jobs that they will have over a year or two period. Even when I first came in, in 1970, the first lieutenant’s test that I could have taken was in 1974. In fact, I was single at the time and I had a roommate who had been in eight years prior. He was taking the lieutenant’s test—he studied for a year, constantly. That was the usual average. I think I mentioned that Chief Joe Medina, and it turned out to be the deputy chief, Jim Olson, studied every day upon their appointment—study more/pass more. Joe Medina passed within the top five of every test, if not one or two on the list. So the merit system is the merit system. The more you put into it, the more you’re going to get out of it, of course. That worked and worked and worked.

In 1988, there was an incident in a downtown station, about a swastika that was discovered by two members of the department. Well, that was big news for a year, but it turns out that those two members of the department that brought those charges forward, Louise Renne, who was the city attorney, announced that that was a complete hoax, that what happened there was definitely not true. But with everything going on at the time, it was accepted as true, and that’s where this consent decree came from, because in 1988, 1989, then-chief Ed Phipps was only chief of the department for one year because of it.

Then the consent decree came in, and I don’t know all the details with it. It basically said that on any future promotional—also for the entrance list, is that there would be one person from each group. There were white, black, women, Asian, and Hispanic. If you appointed one white, then you would have to take—five people would be appointed before you would get to the next white. So that went on. In fact, I don’t know when they really stopped it, because they’ve had a different system in after 2000. For a while it was wide open. All the promotions were selected by the Chief of the Department.

The other thing that happened with the entrance test was that all during these testings, whether it be for promotion or coming in, usually white males are at the top of the list. To get women, they were having the entrance list of over 3,000—3,000 to 4,000, so the women would be way down on the list. But using the consent decree, of one of this, one of this, one of that, and then we have to have a woman. It took them some time to find out, in the fire college, was that when they were mixing these classes they could have somebody that passed on the list that was within the first fifty, at the top of the list, but to get to a woman they would have to drop down to number 3,000 on the list. It was that way all along, with—there wasn’t four groups equal, they all had their own little groupings. That’s a different subject too, with how they did that. It was crazy at the time.
But by mixing all these different placings off the list, they found out that they had trouble training everybody, because before, with the merit system, if they had—the first class was the first fifty, then the next class was fifty to 100, then 100 to 150. Even that would progress downwards, because the further that you got on the merit list, those people were not as qualified as the first fifty. Well, they found out, when they mixed all these groupings of everybody together, having to go so far down on the list, they couldn’t train everybody equally. They found out that they were having trouble training because one-fifth of the class was getting it better than two-fifths of the class, to the third-fifths of the class, to the fourth-fifths of the class, to the fifth sections of the class. That is really kind of surprising, something that they didn’t know. As I mentioned, it took a couple of years before they realized that there was something wrong with this. It wasn’t wrong, but it wasn’t functional.

The other thing that I think we mentioned too—we slid off before, maybe we mentioned it, was that the other thing that happened, maybe a little bit prior to the consent decree or with the consent decree, was they took out the age of—anybody could enter at any age. The height and weight requirements were taken out. They were letting in small women, but they were also letting in small men. There’s members of the fire department, that are working now, that are basically—can weigh from ninety to a hundred pounds. There was a reason before, to have everybody within a weight category, within a height category—to have four members of the fire department carry a ladder. By having everybody the same height, [it] allows that ladder to be moved properly and easily, whereas if you have somebody that is now five two and another member on the team is six five, the ladder gets lopsided. There’s a lot of different things with it.

They changed a lot of things with the entrance test. There was—we have a ninety-pound-Gleeson valve we mentioned. It’s the high-pressure valve that goes on every—high-pressure control valve that goes on every high-pressure hydrant in the city. It weighs ninety pounds. It’s a little bit hard to put on and it takes technique to use that, to do that. They found out that, when that was part of the test, that small men, small women couldn’t do it. They took it off the test. They used to have, on the entrance test, that part of the physical was to take a ladder and pull a twenty-four-foot ladder at least five feet out from the ladder rack. It turned out, by not having the height anymore, there were members of the incoming testees, people that wanted the job, that they couldn’t pull the ladder out. They wanted diversity, they wanted everybody to have a chance with it. That ladder test was thrown out. There has been many, many changes to both entrance and promotional tests.

Farrell: What was the general reaction of the department when these changes happened?
Well, in my final year I was—I passed two, oh, I started—in 1974 the first test of a lieutenant came up. It wasn’t another five years until the next test came up, and just in my personal—and the other thing, with the first year, within five years, nobody made the lieutenants list with less than five years of service. [telephone ringing] Who’s calling? [laughter] [pause in conversation to let phone ring] I think it goes to eight before it goes to message.

Oh, there we go.

Yeah. With the first chance that I had to take a lieutenant’s test, I was only in for four years, and at that time, nobody with less than five years made a lieutenants list. I didn’t think it was time. I didn’t think that I had enough qualifications then. I wanted more training. Then the next test came along at eight years, and I went to eight years of service, and I still didn’t think that I was ready to be promoted from fireman to lieutenant. It was another five years. Well, finally, I took the test in 1990, and at that time the consent decree was in, and I passed, number ninety on the list. If the merit system was in, I would have been appointed. With the diversity section in with the consent decree, they were taking people behind me. My easy answer for it is that I didn’t pass high enough on the white list, and that was the section that I was in, so I can’t complain about it. That’s what it was. You go with what is happening at the time.

The other thing that doesn’t get out in the public was that that was in my twentieth year. I had ten more years to go to receive a better pension at thirty years. Well, the pay between firefighter and lieutenant is $10,000, so my family lost out on $100,000, maybe even more, because I could have taken the test during that ten-year period I had the opportunity to have a chance to be promoted to captain or even to battalion chief. Those are just the situations of the days, of the time, but I hope that explains it a little bit.

Was there pushback from some of the firefighters against the change in systems?

Well, when the consent decree came in and when the women entered the fire department, the department headquarters thought that the women would receive—it never entered into harassment, but there would be, even like the cold shoulder—would be from the older members of the department. It was not that case at all; that never happened. The older members were willing to train everybody, because whoever comes through the door is going to become a member of the fire department. The biggest problem that they had was from all these people—these five different groups getting along. Because it fell into their age range, so they saw an opportunity gone, because not having the merit
system, again, getting back into one of five, how that was going to affect them for the rest of their career. Does that make sense?

Farrell: Yeah. Well, on that note, it might be a good—I want to talk about San Francisco leadership, and heritage versus tradition. Can you tell me a little bit, historically—the Catholic Church was involved in choosing chiefs in the early 1900s. Can you tell me a little bit more about that and how that evolved and changed over time?

Koenig: That was always mentioned, about who would be the chief. I would say that went up until, maybe the 1980s. It probably stopped in 1980. How big a vote did the Catholic Church have, to choose a chief? Certainly not 100 percent. I think—it would just be guessing that prior to that time it wasn’t particularly political. The chiefs were chosen because they had the qualifications to become the chief. Then there’s always a little bit of—in fact, the other part of it is becoming political, when it became political assistant chiefs would choose somebody that was running for mayor, hoping that if their candidate won, they would have a chance for chief of the department. There was that part of it. That became very political with it, and the Catholic Church slid away during that period. I think that still goes on a little bit today. I don’t know exactly, since 2000, I don’t exactly know. That’s part of it.

Farrell: One of the aspects of the legacy of the San Francisco Fire Department is how influential and historic the 1906 fire was. Can you tell me a little bit about how that has affected or influenced the department since?

Koenig: Well, any city that has a huge fire like that—1906 was the largest disaster to date, only to be surpassed by Hurricane Katrina. I think I mentioned, the fire service always put the fire out. It only took us three days in 1906. In 1906, I was just mentioning, the manpower came in and Oakland coming over. The other thing is a little bit crazy, that on April 19 a battalion chief sent all the Oakland contingent home, because there wasn’t any water on April 19, and that battalion chief didn’t see the reason to have them here, because they were running out of water everywhere. In 1905, there were 4,213, I believe, over 4,200 fire hydrants in San Francisco. Well, not all of them were within the fire lines; maybe 75 percent of them were. We found out, with the historical section of the Guardians of the City, that there were about forty-five hydrants that had a usable water supply. There were three fire hydrants that had an extraordinary water supply, and we still honor those. Since the late 1960s we’ve been honoring the hydrant at Twentieth and Church Street. It’s painted gold every year in honor of the work that it did during 1906.

One thing that happened, historically—people don’t realize. You think of fire engines getting around today and everything like that. In 1906, everything
took time. Everything was much longer. How did they move the equipment around? A lot of companies lost their horses. They escaped. To work a steam engine you normally just—you would detach the horses from the steam engine. The department lost half the hose because they couldn’t pick it up fast enough, because the fire overran it. Moving all this around—and I slid off here. I forgot where I was going. [laughing]

But getting to the Mission District, was that they found the hydrant at Twentieth and Church had this water, and it supplied water for more than thirty-six hours. They ran the hose leads, two of them, down Twentieth Street to Mission Street. They eventually got to Mission Street. That hydrant supplied engine companies coming in from the other side, that were working on the other side of Mission Street. That hydrant produced a lot of water and it stopped the fire from advancing further southerly into the Mission District. The fire department extinguished the fire there. Then we found out, just within the last five years, that there were two hydrants in the Hayes Valley area, and we are now painting yearly those two hydrants, one at Buchanan and Hayes. Again, another hydrant that had an extraordinary water supply for more than thirty-six hours, and another one at Van Ness and Ellis, and we paint them silver, not to have three gold hydrants. We decided to have one gold hydrant, continue with that, and then two silver twin hydrants. The public is encouraged to come out and paint them. Everybody comes to gild them, as we might say. Those two hydrants saved the fire from advancing into the Richmond District, and further, into the Western Addition. Again, the fire was extinguished.

The afternoon of April 19 and on April 20—again, you have to think—there were no radios, there’s no communications between the—how did the chiefs get around? We lost Chief Dennis Sullivan. He was in the hospital. His first assistant chief and the second assistant chief—I wonder how they even moved around the city. It must have been on horseback. We had five chief buggies, motorized at that time. We lost four of the five of them because they were abandoned and the fire passed them. How did they give commands to everybody? A lot of walking, so it all took time. It all took time.

Anyway, the word was given through the whole fire department that all available engine companies should proceed to Van Ness Avenue. In 1906 we had tremendous support from private vessels that were in—navy tugs, there was a US cruiser in, there were several destroyers in. The navy tugs took positions all along the waterfront. They took one over to the foot of Van Ness Avenue, and lines were led, hose lines, two-and-three-quarter-inch hose again, was led up Van Ness Avenue. Think of—from Van Ness, the foot of Van Ness Avenue—the hose lines led to Sutter Street. The hydrant at Van Ness and Ellis went northbound and put a line up California Street. Again, there’s a large fire break there across Van Ness Avenue, but the fire was extinguished.
Well, within the last five to ten years, being that I’m a history buff, I’m in this section, so my friends that I call the so-called historians, get quite a bit of newsworthy—not newsworthy, because it isn’t, but every April 18 they explain how the fire burned itself out. Well, it’s pretty simple to understand that it didn’t, because the population was 400,000 and we ended up with 200,000 people being burned out of their houses. Wait, half the city wasn’t burned, which means it was impossible for it to burn itself out. Half the city was still standing. That’s my little 1906 story. [laughter]

Farrell:
On that note, speaking of—you have the public coming out to gild the hydrants and paint the hydrants, the fire department does a lot more outreach than that. Can you tell me about some of the outreach activities that you were involved in during your tenure?

Koenig:
Local 798 of the IAFF began a toy program in the 1940s. There was a house, 4 Engine, down on Howard Street. They had a big basement down there, and they had all the toys down there. In the early days, the members of that firehouse would repair the toys, repair bicycles, and then they were given out. Well, it progressed, it progressed, it progressed, and the toys are not repaired so much, these days, especially within the last twenty-five years. Basically now, within the last five to ten years, twenty thousand families in San Francisco are benefiting from a gift of toys at Christmas time, all of this through Local 798.

Farrell:
How have you seen that benefit the community? Can you tell me a little bit more about that, or what the reaction has been to the people who receive this?

Koenig:
Aren’t the firefighters wonderful? [laughter]

Farrell:
You had also been involved with some of the sports teams that the fire department has. Can you tell me about the hockey team that you were on?

Koenig:
[laughing] Well, in 1973, the Chief of the Department—he was captain, he ended up Chief of the Department—Ed Phipps. He was the captain of the 3 Truck then, at that time. There was another member of his house, Al [Albert R. Gughemetti]—they began an inter-station softball tournament. Each firehouse in the city, or by battalion, would have a sports team playing softball and it was great fellowship within the fire department.

Captain Phipps realized all this, so much sports activity, and it’s another reason to keep in shape while you’re on the job. He was one of the founders of the California Firemen’s Athletic Association. That took all these sporting events, the same as they’d have in the Olympics—they had to call them a fire
Olympics, not to jump on the Olympic—what is that, just a little word, don’t infringe. They had that—anyway, the California Firemen’s Olympics were established and organized, and they had a summer Olympics and they had a winter Olympics. The winter Olympics, the first one, was up in Squaw Valley. We went to Squaw Valley for three years and it was pretty nice to be skating on the Squaw Valley ice rink where the US beat Russia in the 1960 Olympics, on that ice. That’s where the San Francisco Fire Department hockey team was born. Then we found out that—oh, and then the fourth year we went to Mammoth Mountain ski resort, and the hockey rink was going to be outside and it was really, really warm and they couldn’t make an ice rink, so it was decided to move the ice hockey to the summer Olympics. Well, all the teams were out during the day, doing their—every Olympic event. You name them all. Anyway, they were all daytime events.

There was nothing to do at night, except go watch the hockey teams. It ended up, it was San Francisco versus Los Angeles County Fire Department. We had three games in San Francisco and three games down in Southern California. I was one of the first members of the team, in 1973. I continued on the team for the next fifteen years. Basically, all during that time, I was the goalie. I didn’t know how to skate. Nobody in San Francisco knew how to skate. It’s kind of warm out here. There’s not very many ice rinks. We’re not on the East Coast, where hockey is so prevalent. But what happened was that we turned it into a fundraiser, so at the Olympics we charged a small admission fee. We had raffles, we had silent auctions, we had fundraisings, we had program advertising. For a ten-year period, each year we would give more than $10,000 to the local burn unit. Over the ten-year period we raised over $200,000 in San Francisco [for] the Bothin Burn Center. In LA County they gave it to their burn center also. Quite nice.

Farrell:

Another activity that you’ve been involved in, and I don’t know if it qualifies as outreach, but it’s definitely an activity, is the Guardians of the City. Can you tell me about how you got involved in that and what your role has been?

Koenig:

Well, it’s a definite outreach. In 1973, the museum was organized by the Chief of the Department, Bill Murray. The doors were officially opened on October 7, 1964. There was no historical section of the fire department at that time. I was stationed at Engine 19 at 1300 Third and Fourth Street [Engine 19, 1300 Fourth Street at Third—draw a straight line from the 3rd and 4th Street bridges and they intersect; today the streets have been changed and redesigned]. And I think I mentioned before there were four founders there who organized the historical section for the fire department, and we took the name of the first truck company in San Francisco, the St. Francis Hook and Ladder. We started off as St. Francis Hook and Ladder Company No. 1. We expanded it into the community to let membership from the community. We became St. Francis Hook and Ladder Society. We went through a twenty-year
period. That was continued until about 2000, and for some reason that organization burned itself out. It was taken over by San Francisco Fire Department Historical Society, which was organized by firefighter Paul Barry, and then that was still assisting the fire department. The Guardians of the City was formed late in 2010, by the merging of the historical sections of the fire, police, sheriff, and EMS departments. The Guardians of the City has become the sponsor of the museum.

During my time with the St. Francis Hook and Ladder Society, I was also assigned, my fire department slot, was either on Engine 26, which was later changed to Engine—the numbers were changed to Engine 10, to correspond with the truck companies. Here and now it’s Engine 10 and Truck 10. So I stayed here for twenty years of my fire service time. It was next door to the museum, which I enjoyed, and I became very active within the museum. During the period I volunteered, at that time, I was the director of the museum. In 2006, the historical society bestowed upon me the honorary honor that I am the San Francisco Fire Department [Museum] director emeritus. I’m very proud of that.

03-00:47:48
Farrell: What kinds of things have been important for you to preserve as part of this work?

03-00:47:58
Koenig: Well, it goes to history. Every class that comes through the fire college, we go to the class—we don’t have enough time. Just this last month, with the graduating class, we were given a half an hour to discuss the history of the fire department. That’s impossible. We try to encourage the students to join with us, into memberships, to become more active. We hope that by keeping the history of the department alive, that future firefighters will also keep it alive. You need to pass all of this wonderful, wonderful history, generation to generation down, so that it stays.

We have a wonderful outreach in the community, so that they can help us with this, and it falls into what we’re doing this year. The fire department museum is the base. The Guardians of the City is the base as a 501(c)(3). This year we’re [celebrating] the 150th anniversary of the paid department, from December 3, 1866 to December 3, 2016. This whole year we’ll be celebrating the 150th anniversary. There’s something going on almost every month. The Guardians of the City, having the 501(c)(3), act as the donation center for donations for write-offs for any corporations, for any individuals who want to donate to the 150th activities.

03-00:49:45
Farrell: Are there any—in your involvement and doing the work—are there any physical objects that you feel are really important to be preserved or that the public should know about?
Koenig: Well, it’s a combination of that.

Just to fill in a blank here, is that I retired in 2000 and my wife retired at the same time. We were thinking of RVing the US and we weren’t—we had an RV at the time, but it wasn’t falling in place with us. One day we were walking our dog, and we had been on vacation to France quite a few times during the 1990s and we said, “Hey, do you want to go to France and buy a canal boat?” So we did. This is way off—this is my personal story. [laughing]

Farrell: That’s okay.

Koenig: And off we went. We thought we were going to go to France for two or three years. We bagged up all our belongings, kept our house in California, fortunately, because we only were going to go away for two or three years—and we ended up staying twelve. It was a wonderful, awesome experience to live in a foreign country. We traveled—the canals and rivers of France alone, there’s five thousand miles of canals and rivers in France. We bought a 1902 boat that was used to deliver fruits and fish and everything in Holland. It was converted in 1980 into a houseboat. It took us six years to get a mooring in Paris. We received the mooring in Paris—that was just a fantastic experience, living in Paris. San Francisco is the Paris of the West, so we have a combination there.

But then when I came home from that, the Guardians of the city asked me to become involved with them again, to get back into the history section, so that was a nice honor also. So I’m a trustee of the Guardians of the City, and for the last two years I’ve also served as treasurer. So now I’m the treasurer, we have an assistant treasurer that’s taking care of the 150th anniversary account, so we’re following all that. One of the next functions coming is on August 23, 2016. We’re having an event at Washington Square, because there’s a statue there of the volunteer departments.

A short story on Lillie Coit. When she passed away, she bequeathed a third of her fortune to San Francisco to beautify the city. It was $250,000. A commission was formed, and within a couple of years—and I don’t remember his first name—but the architect was [Arthur] Brown, [Jr.] who designed Coit Tower. It has become somewhat publicly acknowledged as, “Oh, Coit Tower, that fire nozzle.” Well, architect Brown said absolutely not. It’s not—I believe he describes it as a flute, kind of a tall one. With that—if people want to call it a fire nozzle, everybody in the San Francisco Fire Department is happy about that. Well yeah, we’ll take that. [Farrell laughs] But the other thing that happened was they didn’t spend $250,000 on Coit Tower. There was money left over, and there was enough money to build a statue in Washington Square. It’s on a base, a high pedestal. It has three firefighters on it, one holding a child in a rescue, and they’re all—the firemen are copied from the
volunteer period of San Francisco. Prior to 9-11, that was one of the few statues in the US that was dedicated to the fire service. Now there’s 9-11 memorials throughout the country, of course.

In September, on September 24, I think I mentioned that the objects in the museum, while they’re here, we preserve the physical techniques. Also, we take out the collection and actually demonstrate the techniques that were used. In September, we’re having a 150th anniversary grand parade and we’re also following that with a weekend event, a Saturday and Sunday, with living history days. During the living history days we’ll have evolutions—we’re advertising it as a 1900 fire department. It’s going to be all horse-drawn steam pumper. They’ll put the hose out in the street, they’ll pump the steam engines as they did in 1900 and we put a fire out!

We’re going to follow that with a 1910 first alarm, with a group from Sacramento that performs a rescue. So they bring their hose wagon, they put the hose out. They bring a ladder wagon. They take the ladders off the truck and they put them to a building and they raise them to a building—Oh! It’s on fire! There’s smoke coming out of it—and they make a rescue. They do this every year in Sacramento on the anniversary of Labor Day weekend. In Sacramento, they call it a brothel rescue, because they have screaming women up on the top of the balcony that a fireman will go up, a firefighter will go up and grab them and save their lives. You know, we do save lives.

Then we’re going to have another section of 1930 pumping engines that will pump into one of our older water towers. We’re going to show the public 1900, 1910, and 1930, how the fire service happened during that period. It’s 150 years of service to the city, and we’re going to show how things happened many, many bygone days ago.

Farrell: I just want to clarify. Did you mean that you were in Paris—you lived there for twelve years?

Koenig: We lived in France for twelve years. It took us six years to get a mooring in Paris, so we lived for the first six years—what happens in boating is that you move your boat around the canals and rivers of France. We went to Belgium twice; you can go into Holland. We have English friends that sailed from Roanne, France, which was our first winter port for six years. It took them three years—and they don’t move too fast. In fact, you’re speeding if you go more than six miles an hour on the canals and rivers. It took them three years to go to Berlin. You can go all through the waterways of Europe and have wonderful travel adventures. We found a homeport, an hour west of Lyon, in the center of France and we stayed there. We were able to get the mooring in Paris—one became available after our application was in. We thought we’d go to Paris right away, but there’s a waiting list. You can’t get in this port right
away. It took us time to get that, and then we lived there, a wonderful time there, for six years.

Farrell: What brought you back? Oh, and sorry—was this between 2000 and 2012?

Koenig: Yes.

Farrell: Okay.

Koenig: Yes, we sold the boat in 2011, in November. We put it on the market at the end of September. After 2008, the boating market fell out, slid way downhill. We thought we might have the boat on the market for a year or two, and as it turned out, being from San Francisco, there’s quite a few houseboats over in Sausalito, and the Parisians want a, as we call it, the Sausalito lifestyle of living on a boat in Paris, and we sold the boat within six weeks! We had to gather all our belonging and move off the boat real quickly. Well, it turns out that the square footage that we had on the boat—we lived at the Bastille Circle, at a port off the Seine on the Canal Saint-Martin. The square footage that we had on the boat—right above us was the Fourth Arrondissement, and what they paid in rent would be two or three times higher than if you lived on the boat.

There’s more than two hundred boats in the Port de l’Arsenal at the Bastille. We didn’t know the people that—we lived on that boat particularly—we didn’t become French. We always knew that we were tourists and we always knew that we were a guest of France. There were people that did so many things. We used to have movie nights, and twice—every month it would be a movie on boating. Jack Lemmon and Marilyn Monroe was a big hit—the titles are going, but that was great. And then the next year it would be somebody from the port. There were a lot of people that lived on a boat that were artists—the artistes, in the movie industry in France, TV. It was really interesting to be with this group of people.

Farrell: How were you, during that period of time, staying in touch with the fire department and the Guardians of the City and the museum?

Koenig: Well, I mentioned Paul Barry, and this is a funny story. A funny story with it is with the age of the Internet—I might have mentioned that I do a tremendous amount of research on the California [Digital Newspaper] Collection. I go back and get 1845 newspapers. So I was doing that, and then I mentioned Paul Barry. He was sending me over materials, and especially during the winter—our wheelhouse had a large amount of windows, all the way around it upstairs,
and we liked that part. We liked—it wasn’t boatish, in a way. We weren’t looking out through portholes.

We didn’t have a computer station downstairs; we had it upstairs on our kitchen table. Our French neighbors would walk by all the time, and especially—they’d speak to my wife and go, “Oh, Bill is on the computer so much!” We were a little embarrassed that we were always up there using our computer, especially, as I mentioned, during the winter. Well, my wife would explain that, “Bill came to Paris to write a book.” “Oh! He’s an artiste, oh!” I was in favor with everybody, because whenever they saw me, being in Paris and writing a book—that’s where you have to go to write your book. They really adored me more. [laughter]

Farrell: Another thing that you were in Paris for was September 11. I’m wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your experiences of that day, especially being abroad, but also having worked for a first-responding team of a city for so long.

Koenig: Yes, we were actually moving that day. We were moving through the canals and we were coming to a small city, Briare, which is two/three hours south of Paris by car, maybe a month south by boat. So we were coming into a mooring. We squeezed into a mooring. Right behind us was a small English boat, very small, a single man on the boat. He had a TV. We had just put our mooring lines down. We had a dish on a TV that we could receive our TV. He came running out and said that an airplane had just flown into a New York skyscraper. We quickly got our TV working. We had it in operation by the time the second plane flew into the Twin Towers. It just stopped us, of course. There are hotel boats that take people, different size hotel boats, maybe four couples on, maybe up to twenty couples. Some of them—to go through the canals, maybe ten couples. One of the hotel boats came in with many Americans on board, and of course we were glued to the TV. We were getting CNN at that time. We could follow it. When the hotel boats came in, we put up more American flags. [briefly unable to speak] [overcome with emotion] Sorry. [pause]

Farrell: Do you want to take a break?

Koenig: Yes. [interruption in recording]

Farrell: Okay, we’re back.

Koenig: One of the things that continually stops me is the 343 New York firefighters that lost their lives on that day. It’s not often mentioned, but that is the
greatest rescue in the fire service history—25,000 people saved. [loudspeaker announcement] [“Chief’s in quarters, Chief’s in quarters.”] Oh, just write chief’s in quarters. [laughter] The battalion chief is visiting.

I’d been to New York. The firehouses have beautiful tributes to the firefighters that they lost. It was basically eight o’clock in the morning for them, during a shift change, so—I think I mentioned before, it even happens here. With the shift change in New York, they not only lost the off-going crews, they lost the ongoing crews, because everybody pitched in, of course, of course. Across the country, in firehouses, there’s pictures of the 343 men—I think they were all men—that passed away on that day, that lost their lives on that day. The other thing that happened—and there’s little stickers on rigs, on all the apparatus. It’s not going to go away. Station 10 here has a picture, photograph of the 343.

The thing that happened to me in France was that fall, we continued to travel around—or no, it actually was the next year, but still, of course in everybody’s mind. We were in Épernay, and I happened to have a very close friend, one of the founders of the St. Francis Hook and Ladder Society with me. Jack McCluskey, who retired, came over to visit me. He retired as a captain. He and his wife were with us. July 14 is a national holiday in France for the fête nationale. We go to the little roundabout in the center of town of Épernay, and they were having their parade. When they have most of the parades in France they have a military—maybe a third of it is military, a third of it is the fire department, the other third are veterans. All the veterans are surrounded by their monument in the roundabout in the center of town. We had gotten there early, we had a little cup of coffee, and we were sitting in there and we noticed that there are the French military in their beautiful uniforms. The French military has beautiful uniforms. They were still having their coffee—well, the parade’s not going to start yet. We didn’t know when the parade was going to start. Well, they’re still sitting here so we don’t have to get out real fast.

We get out and the fire department’s forming. We went over and said hello to one officer, off of one of the engines of the fire department and said hello to him. I’ve always carried my badge with me and so has Jack McCluskey. We always thought if we got in trouble in France we could at least show a fireman’s badge and get help. [laughing] Never had to do that. After the ceremonies—and one part that’s beautiful about France is that the army wasn’t staged. They stage a few blocks away. The French army sings. So they start the ceremonies—here comes the French army and they’re singing. [laughing] Where’s this? Where are we now? So anyway, then the fire department comes in review and then they have the flags and everything.

After it was over—it’s kind of funny. I’m six feet, Jack McCluskey is six three, so we’re kind of tall with all the other French people, that’s somewhat common. So this officer comes back and finds us and he said, “Hey, can you
come to the firehouse? Because we’re having a reception there. The Épernay fire department has thirty paid and about forty-five volunteers. So Jack McCloskey had a rental car. We go back, we pick up the car. There’s one big firehouse in Épernay—it’s out of town. We walk in this—and I’m going to have trouble getting through this again. [voice quavering] Just amazing.

We’re both with our wives; we walk in. We’re in the center of the Champagne region of France. Here’s so many members of the Épernay Fire Department, and the man who we met who I became very, very close friends with, still am—Daniel, who was a sergeant of the Épernay Fire Department, so they’re all gathering, chattering away, all his brothers. He says, “I want you to welcome two firemen from the United States.” The room stops, goes silent. They raise their champagne, they put their champagne down and they’re cheering for us. [overcome with emotion] It stops me, because it’s the international brotherhood of firefighting. It doesn’t matter where you are; it doesn’t matter what you’re doing. It’s only a little piece for me to get that reception—because 343 members of the Fire Department of New York died in the line of duty, that I could receive that reception in France. One of my all-time best stories about being in France—obviously, right at the top, the best one.

03-01:08:58
Farrell: Thank you for sharing that. It’s a great story.

03-01:09:01
Koenig: It was just amazing. Just amazed. It’s nice to bring it up here in this context, just because there is the international brotherhood of firefighting, and it’s huge. [laughing] I had fun with Daniel. It turned out, we asked, we said, “Gee, we’re interested in champagne.” Here we are in Épernay. We’re looking for a champagne maker. They called back Daniel, “Daniel!” he was a volunteer, but he owned twelve hectares. Now he owns about fifty. He was growing for one of the better champagne houses in Épernay, and now he does his own labeling. It’s kind of amusing in a way—as an example. Say he makes a thousand bottles of his own label—we think that he sells five hundred and he drinks five hundred. Because everywhere we go, all his friends are the little boutique champagne makers. Every time we would walk in, somebody would open a bottle of champagne.

We came back a couple of years later, to Épernay, and we went out to dinner, we left—a beautiful French dinner. Three hours of course. We arrived at eight, left at eleven, had to go see the house of the second couple that was there. We walk into their winery at midnight—open a bottle of champagne. [laughing] He has his cave, his cave [French pronunciation]—it wasn’t below the house, it was actually built into the hill that they were on, and they kept on digging, digging, and digging, and it was pretty moist where they were digging and we found seashells there. We still have them. We brought those
home. How did the sea get into the middle of France, how many thousands of years ago? It’s kind of neat. The reception was just great through that.

That’s one part that we missed. You asked how we got home. It was time to come home for a lot of various reasons. It was really kind of funny. My wife is Nancy, married her with two daughters and they’ve adopted me just wonderfully. They used to say, “Oh, my mother lives in the center of Paris! Oh, she’s on a boat in the center of Paris!” They used to get applause from that from their own friends and everything else. But we told them that we were coming home and it immediately flipped into, “Oh, we missed you so much!” That was one reason we wanted to get back to the States. We wanted to get back to reestablish our lives here. Also, we saw Europe falling, and here we are, almost six years later—this is going to be on the record forever, of this little recording I guess. Even so, for someone watching this in the future—how’s Europe now? But that was another reason, just a lot of little reasons, pluses and minuses.

A lot of fun on the boat, but boats are maintenance. I spent a lot of time giving it maintenance. One thing that’s kind of funny with it was we had six very interested French couples wanting to buy the boat. I made the mistake of handing my flashlight, while we were downstairs, and I gave it to a man who knew about boats. He was gone for about five or ten minutes. I’m going, oh, my goodness. He’s got the flashlight. He’s going to see all the little problems with it. He came back—I forget my French now, I think it’s, “C’est nickel!” Where—it’s spotless!

One reason that I kept the boat spotless is that I used my service and my training from fire, because one of the things to throw in here that’s kind of nice—everybody thinks that the fire engines are bright and shiny and red. Well, they are, but there’s a reason for it, because the drivers of the engine and the other members of the department, they keep everything clean: inside, outside, and underneath, especially in the motor, especially in the pumps, because while you’re cleaning, while you’re maintaining, you’re making sure that everything on the engine is in perfect operation working order. No holes, no drips, no oils—nothing wrong with that unit, because somebody, with an engine, with its water, with its hose, there’s always going to be a firefighter at the end of that nozzle putting water on the fire. They could be inside the building, and you don’t want your pump to fail, so that’s the unknown story about why fire engines are so shiny.

03-01:13:56
Farrell: Speaking of fire engines, we’ve been—the fire engine behind you has been the backdrop—can you tell me about this engine?

03-01:14:04
Koenig: [laughing] Yeah! This is a 1914 American LaFrance. It came from Elmira, New York. It was originally ordered to go to the Panama-Pacific International
Exposition. They had about fourteen or fifteen pieces of apparatus. American LaFrance won the bid to have their apparatus at the international fair. The amount—they just had the hundredth anniversary of the fair. The amount of people that came in 1915—and I don’t remember the number, but it was huge. They had fifty thousand people. It was held in our Marina District, where the Marina District is now. There’s fifty thousand people down there, or more, every day, and they ran that for a year. Anyway, American LaFrance had this bid.

Well, this engine arrived later, and they decided that they had enough apparatus for—it was a [world’s] fair fire department. It was staffed by the San Francisco Fire Department for the year that it was in operation there. There were three houses, fire houses down there at the fair. So this engine came into—it was accepted into the San Francisco Fire Department. Its registration number, 549, came as a hose wagon and as a thirty-five-gallon chemical tank, so it’s a combination chemical and hose. Then in 1922, it was converted to the Gorter monitor that’s on it now. It became a hose tender, and this was the engine that Bill Murray found that was still the oldest in the fire department, that he moved to the roster of the fire apparatus collection of the San Francisco Fire Department Museum.

I want to take a minute to reflect on your time working with the fire department, and since. We were just talking about brotherhood and camaraderie. Can you tell me about what the brotherhood of the San Francisco Fire Department has meant to you?

Well, it is just a wonderful organization. I think I might have mentioned that your training carries you through everything that you do. You never know what you’re going to be subject to when you leave the firehouse. It could be anything. It could be anything, where you need it to accomplish whatever you see when you arrive. One person doesn’t do it. It’s all teamwork—always. Because you go through those kind of situations, those kinds of incidents, with every member of the department—you never know who you’re going to be standing next to at any time, working anywhere—if you’re crawling down a hallway of an apartment house to reach the fire, you’re going to be with your company. You’re going to be with other companies. You’re with a group of firefighters in that situation to extinguish the fire.

When you leave that fire building, you have to get everything ready for the next fire, for the next call. You’re reloading your hose, you’re getting your engine back together again. There’s time to let your adrenalin charge down from that. There’s time to reflect on what just happened, especially when you get back to the firehouse. What just happened, what did you just do? As I mentioned, your training carries you through that. But then you’re sitting next to the person that might have grabbed you, that dragged you out of a fire at the
same time, and you never know when that might happen. So it’s brotherhood, and now brotherhood carries over to the women that are in the fire service. It’s not brotherhood and sisterhood; it’s just brotherhood. That word carries for everybody; if you’re in the fire service, that’s everybody.

I didn’t particularly know that before. I had a lot of people telling me, “The fire department’s wonderful. You should like it, if you do that.” But I never knew how much I would like it. Having my history connection involved with this makes it even richer.

**Farrell:** What has—in terms of thinking about the history. What do you think that the public can learn, or even firefighters can learn, looking at the history of the department?

**Koenig:** Well, one of the things that almost every group, whenever I give a group tour in the museum, we have your hand-drawn equipment—basically seventy-five years in the fire service, an age of hand-drawn equipment, hand-pumped equipment. Seventy-five year age of the steam engines. Steam engines, you connect your hose to. It’s the steam, the coal, converting the coal into the boiler, into making steam to make the pump operate, a motorized piece of equipment, still with a hose on it and a nozzle.

All during this whole period, there’s a firefighter at the end of the nozzle putting water onto the fire. It doesn’t matter if it was hand-pumped, driven by a steam engine, driven by a motorized unit—it’s all the same, always has been all the same. That’s, for me, that’s something to instill upon the new firefighters when they come in. You’re not joining something that’s new. It has been going on since man invented fire—it escapes. How to put fire out when it’s too big. You never really hear of the cavemen rolling the sticks together to make their fire, about all of a sudden they have too much fire. But obviously, it must have happened at some time.

**Farrell:** What has it meant to you, personally, to have played a big role in preserving the history of the department?

**Koenig:** It’s just my passion. I’m going to continue to do it. I still am learning more and more and more—always learning more. I enjoy that part of learning more. I’m a detail guy. We have the dates of when each company in San Francisco is organized. Some companies have them only by year, and I’ve been able to find months. I’m very happy to find a month, and I’m extremely happy when I find the day that they came into service, because it’s a big birthday party for every house, firehouse, every company.

**Farrell:** What are your hopes for the museum?
Koenig: Well, we have been, especially with the Guardians now, it has been—we’re on top of that a little bit more. Ever since we started the St. Francis Hook and Ladder Society, the museum here is just a little building attached to Station 10. It’s only 2100 square feet. It’s way, way, way too small. It’s not in the best location. We’ve always known that we need a bigger museum. We’ve always known that we need a better location. Right now the apparatus collection of the fire department is over twenty-five units. That takes more space. We know that. We’re constantly looking for someplace in San Francisco to make a bigger museum. We have our eyes on a couple of places in town, at present.

Farrell: So stay tuned? [laughter]

Koenig: Yes, please stay tuned.

Farrell: What are your hopes for the department in the future?

Koenig: Well, the fire department’s always going to be here. I hope that the members that come in will grasp the history of the past to build their careers onto. I think they will find it more heartwarming.

Farrell: Do you want to add anything else?

Koenig: It has been wonderful. Thank you so much.

Farrell: Thank you! [interruption in recording] Okay, we have one more story. We’re back on.

Farrell: Well, we haven’t mentioned the line-of-duty death list in the San Francisco Fire Department. We’re up to 149 members of the department losing their life in the line of duty. The first eleven on the list are from the volunteer fire department. The last member that’s on the list is Anthony [M.] Valerio, who’s number 149, who five years ago lost his life with his lieutenant, Vince[nt A.] Perez, at a fire in Diamond Heights on Berkeley Way. A terrible, terrible fire. They had to go down from street level, from the hills on Diamond Heights to the fire that started basically two stories down from street level. And those are really hard fires to fight. Maybe it’s even more than five years ago now, because we were in France at the time. We were in France at the time that this happened.

We were away from our port in the Arsenal and we were out in the French countryside, all by ourselves. There wasn’t another boat near us. But we were
able to have a satellite connection. We might have been close to somewhere—in France it’s not wi-fi, it’s [pronounced] wee-fee, in French. We had a connection, and my wife was online and we found out that two San Francisco firefighters lost their lives. We’re out in the middle of nowhere [voice quavering]. Anthony Valerio had been to France three or four times to visit us. He’d been on our boat. We had a beautiful mooring in the Paris Arsenal that looked at the new Paris Opera House and the Bastille, with the beautiful angel on the top. I never knew that Tony was interested in boating until after he passed away. I was in email contact with his sister and his mother, and they told me about that and we didn’t know. He never mentioned it. He loved to be in Europe. He was a bicyclist. He traveled from Spain to Italy on his bike one vacation.

But to get notice, on the other side of the world, that somebody that I knew, somebody that I worked with—I worked with him when I was going out as a lieutenant, the several times that he was assigned to Engine 18. Then to have him come visit me after my retirement, while we’re in France, and then to have that loss—just means a lot to me.

With my history of the fire department not only—my passion is the apparatus, but I have also, right next to it is keeping up on the line-of-duty death list. I’ve been researching and researching to find out as much information we can about how every member that’s on this list, what situation that they were in, about how and when they lost their life. The department doesn’t have all that information. We’re gathering and gathering and gathering. It’s on our website. We have the list of all the 149. We have their rank, we have the date of their passing. We have the company that they were with at the time. And we have just a couple of words of—it could be at—a couple on a ship fire. We’ve had multiple deaths of two. We’ve had a couple—I think there’s two, maybe three deaths of three: the Herbert Hotel fire, in 1946; we lost four. The only time we lost four members of the department. Fortunately, fortunately, fortunately. So that has been my passion too.

What has happened with that is that besides the list that’s in fire department headquarters, a beautiful piece of marble that was put in by—either Chief Murray or Chief Calden had the idea to do that—was in the headquarters at 260 Golden Gate Avenue. Now it’s moved to Second and Townsend. Each firehouse, Local 798 put up a project of—there’s a plaque on each firehouse for any member from that firehouse who’s lost there in line of duty, so it’s public awareness also. We’re back to fire service being the number one leading occupation in the US [in terms of the rate of on-the-job fatalities]. Nice passion to have. We need to honor these fallen firefighters.

03-01:28:54
Farrell: Thank you for sharing that.
Koenig: Thank you. [brief interruption] [recording resumes]

Well, one of the things that when I married—I was single until I was forty-eight and then I was married. I married Nancy Joyce. Her grandfather was a Collins. Her grandfather, [Thomas F. Collins], died in the line of duty in 1925. And it’s a little unusual story, because I heard from my mother-in-law that her father was always on the line-of-duty death list. I came to find out that he wasn’t. So then, being a researcher, what had to happen was that—he was sent to the drill tower and he had to carry a large line, a two-and-three-quarter-inch hose with water in it, and when you add water to hose it becomes quite heavy. He had to carry that up a ladder, for a distance, and normally there would be three to four firefighters with him at the time doing that job. He had to do it by himself and he had a heart attack on the scene and lost his life. He had seven children; my mother-in-law being one of them.

I found out on the line-of-duty death list that there were ten members on the line-of-duty death list that are there because of accidents that happened to them not at a fire, but maybe at a fire situation, for training, so I applied to Chief of Department Demmons to make that correction. I didn’t hear back. Nancy’s first cousin is Kevin Starr, California historian, so he took all of my paperwork to then-Mayor Willie Brown and Mayor Willie Brown added my wife’s grandfather to the line-of-duty death list.

Farrell: That’s fantastic.

Farrell: Thank you. 

[End of Interview]