

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSTIY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Fire Department Project

Life As An Arson Investigator

O.H. 61

JOE CESTONE

Interviewed

by

Mike Kurilla

on

July 25, 1975

JOSEPH CESTONE

Arson Investigator, Joseph Cestone, who joined the Youngstown Fire Department in 1943, is one of ten children of Joseph and Carmel Cestone. The children have all become successful and many are engaged in the teaching profession. One brother is an auditor in town, and another brother, Patrick, is a prominent and highly respected surgeon in the Youngstown area. He and his wife Ida, have two daughters, Patricia and JoAnn.

After graduating from Rayen High School, Mr. Cestone went to work for the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company. Seven years later, he joined the fire department and then after twelve years of serving on the force, he was appointed Fire Inspector. In 1964, he became the Arson Investigator, and presently holds these two positions.

In connection with his profession and furthering his knowledge in his field or work, he has attended Arson School, Inspector School, and Bomb School. Joe has also received a Citation of Merit in Transportation of Flammable Liquid School.

Joe is a member of Saint Anthony's Church, and Committee. He is also active in such organizations as the Fire Department Local, the Old Timer's Club, and the Muscular Dystrophy Association. Mr. Cestone enjoys fishing, gardening, and sports of all types. He is currently residing at 637

Carlotta Drive in Youngstown, Ohio.

Becky Pagac
December 27, 1977

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
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INTERVIEWEE: JOE CESTONE
INTERVIEWER: Mike Kurilla
SUBJECT: Life As An Arson Investigator
DATE: July 25, 1975

- K: This is an interview with arson investigator Joe Cestone for the Youngstown State University Youngstown Fire Department Project, by Mike Kurilla, at the Main Fire Station in downtown Youngstown, on July 25, 1975, at approximately 11:10 a.m.
- K: Mr. Cestone, could you provide some information on your family background and schooling?
- C: Yes, I can. I came from a family of ten. I have a brother that is a doctor, a surgeon in town, another brother that is an auditor, and I have school teachers in the family. I had four years of high school and from there I went to work in the mills. Later on, I got married. I have a family of two, who are married now. I joined the Youngstown Fire Department in 1943. At that time, I was assigned to the Number 7 station and I was assigned to the Number 1 fire truck, which was the aerial ladder of 100 feet. Later on, I became the driver on the apparatus and after serving 12 years in that department, I took an examination to become a fire inspector. I was appointed fire inspector in 1955. I took the examination for chief fire inspector, which is also the arson investigator. I was appointed around 1964. Ever since then, I have been the chief fire inspector and arson investigator for the city of Youngstown.
- K: What capacities did you serve in the fire department? Were you a fireman and engineer before you took the exam?

- C: No. I was a fireman, and at that time, on the 100 foot aerial. They did not have engineers. So they used to call on us drivers, but it was not a promotion. It was just fire department and firemen salaries.
- K: Are there any other qualifications for fire inspector besides passing the civil service test?
- C: No, just passing the civil service test and then you have a probationary period to see if you are qualified for that job.
- K: Why did you become a fireman at the time that you did?
- C: I like that type of work and for job security. Every fire to me was a thrill, and the biggest thrill I have ever had was climbing the 100 foot aerial. After becoming the driver on it, I felt like I had accomplished my purpose, up until the time that I thought I wanted to be an inspector, so that more of my time could be spent with the family. We used to work two turns at that time. We worked twenty-four and were off twenty-four. At the present time, you work twenty-four and you are off forty-eight, which makes it a little better to be with your family. Most of the time it seemed as though I was away from the family because our salary wasn't that good and I also had to work part-time. I never really got to know the children when they were young.
- K: What do you remember about your first years in the department?
- C: I remember that I felt I was accomplishing something. When I went to a fire I always felt sorry for the people that had the fire. I do recall one incident where we were called to a fire one night. There were two young children in the bedroom upstairs. I recall raising the ladder to the second floor, climbing the ladder, and entering the building in search of these two children. The buddy that I was working with handed one of the children out. I came across a closet, crawled in, looked around, and finally I found one of the little boys. I carried him out through the window and searched for his heartbeat. He was alive at the time. When I handed him out the window, I hoped that I had saved his life. It didn't bother me until I got home and I smelled the flesh all over my body and on my clothes. It just seemed like I couldn't get rid of the smell of that boy's flesh. Later on he died, and this incident stuck with me. I've had experiences where I carried people out of a burning building, but that didn't bother me as much

as that little boy's life. It still seems to stick with me today.

Children have a tendency, in case of a fire, to crawl in a closet or crawl under a bed. They think that they are getting away from the fire. When you actually fight a fire and know that people occupy the building, even though you don't know if they are in the building, you look in these places, especially for children.

K: What type of training did you receive during those initial years in the department?

C: Well, at that time there wasn't too much training. The only training you got was from the elderly firemen that were in the fire department. Today we have a training course which you go through. Years ago, why, you didn't have that. You just picked it up as you went along.

K: What are the duties and responsibilities of the arson investigator in the Youngstown Fire Department?

C: The arson investigator's job is to investigate and determine the cause of all suspicious fires and with sufficient evidence to prosecute. We have been pretty successful since 1973. We've had a total of twelve convictions. At the present time, we have three indicted and bound over to the grand jury, and one other person in jail for fire-bombing. His hearing has not come up yet, but I think that we will be successful in convicting him, too.

K: What type of working relationship exists between you, the investigator, and the Youngstown Police Department?

C: We have very good relations and we work together.

K: Do you also appear in court as the investigator and testify?

C: Yes, this is court procedure. We have to gather the evidence, present it to the prosecutor, and he then tells us if we have enough to issue a warrant. If we have enough evidence, we then issue a warrant for the parties' arrest. We question him after reading him his rights. Then we take it from there to see if we have enough evidence to prosecute.

K: What type of investigation department does the Youngstown Fire Department possess? How big of a department is the arson department here?

C: The arson department right now is just myself. I have one other fellow assisting me, and the only reason why

he is assisting me is because he was injured at a fire, and for light duty he is helping me at the present time.

We feel that we have had a rash of arson fires in our town. It seems as though there are arson fires all over the country, and more or less, it is for profit of personal gain. We feel now, after presenting this situation to the councilmen, that we possibly will be able to get four arson investigators funded through the government. I think that we might slow a little bit of these arson fires down, even if we don't have convictions, but just by harrassing the people and letting them know that we are taking action against arsonists.

K: Could you describe a typical day of Arson Investigator Cestone?

C: Yes. Many times my day starts early in the morning. It may be one, two, or three o'clock in the morning when I am called to a suspicious fire. When I arrive at the scene of the fire I talk to the chief who is in charge of the fire. He informs me as to what he has found. Chances are he may find some evidence there indicating that the fire was a "set fire". So then I would procede by investigating the fire as soon as I arrive at the scene. Upon finding the evidence, I will call out the crime lab to take pictures of the evidence and of the fire. After we take pictures of the evidence I turn it over to the crime lab and they check for fingerprints. From there on I talk to the owner or occupant of the building. I ask him how much insurance he has on the building, on the contents, the amount of the mortgage, with what bank he has his payments, and if he has any payments in the rear. Then I will proceed to ask him what time he closed this building, if it is a business building, who left with him, where he went after he closed the building, the amount of keys that they have for this certain building, and who has them. If he has any employees, I want a list of them and I want to check them out. I check his financial record.

Later on in the morning I come right back out here to work. If there is any other business to take care of I will have to take care of that first. If not, the first business I have to take care of is following data on arson fires. I will call the person in, read him his rights, and question him. Then we determine whether he is a suspect or not. We also ask him to take the lie detector test. Many times they will tell you that they will take it, but after talking to their attorney they just forget it.

This is the type of day I have. I may be working on one arson case this hour and the next twenty minutes I may be called to another. You just can't keep up. There is no way in the world that you can keep up. We can call for the state fire marshall and have him send out an arson investigator, but that arson investigator has seven counties to cover and he can't keep up. This is what we are getting into all over the country. There aren't enough fire investigators to handle the situation at the present time. I just hope now that they may change their views and hire more. This would give us a lot of help.

Besides being the arson investigator, my job is also to run the inspection department. In the inspection department we have the chief inspector, which is myself, a secretary and four inspectors. Now these four inspectors are assigned to the four north, south, east and west sections of town. Their detail is to inspect all business buildings, nursing homes, schools, rest homes, hospitals, offices, assembly halls where people assemble, conduct fire drills, more or less give evacuation procedures which we have planned for these various places. I have to supervise most of them. I am also asked to keep a record of all the inspections made, and to have knowledge of fire fighting equipment, that is, private fire fighting equipment such as the sprinkler systems, the stand pipe systems, the alarm systems, and fire extinguishers. We also have to keep a list of all the fire escapes and their condition. Besides that, we have to educate the public on fire safety. We have to enforce federal, state and city laws and ordinances pertaining to the protection of life and property. It is a big job. It keeps you going and it makes you rather busy during the day.

- K: Do all of these various elements you mentioned have be checked annually?
- C: Our inspectors make ten inspections a day plus answering complaints such as burning after hours, or this sort of thing as it is accumulated around different buildings. I would say that in their area they would get into a place at least one or twice a month. We are not talking about private homes. If an individual that owns a private home would want a fire inspection of the home he would have to call us and make an appointment.
- K: You mentioned with the increase in the arson fires within the last year and since the first of the year, you have been very busy. Do you have an abundance of paper work that you have to follow up on for a case study also?

- C: Oh, yes. You have to keep a record of all the arson fires, plus the fact that we call the insurance companies in and double check with them as to the amount of insurance. Many times you find that the place is over insured and this is the purpose of meeting with these men. We stress that anytime they insure a building they should double check to see if the owner needs and wants that amount of insurance on the building. We have come across buildings that were insured for \$100,000 for contents alone and after you checking around in the building, you find that you come up with \$25,000 worth of contents. Something is definitely wrong there. What happens is the agent generally calls them up and says, "Your policy has to be renewed, why don't you increase your insurance? For a couple of more dollars you can possibly get twenty of forty more thousand dollars worth of insurance." Naturally the fellow agrees. Business becomes bad, they set fire to the place, and nine times out of ten they will collect. We sometimes can hold them up for two years. Our investigation is always open, but when we tell the insurance company our investigation is still open, it is up to them to decide. If they see fit to pay them, we can't do anything about it.
- K: What is a good working definition of arson? Is there any legal definition of what constitutes arson from a regular fire and how does your department classify arson?
- C: There are three reasons why people start fires: For profit, revenge, and for pleasure. Those that set fires for pleasure are known as fire bugs. Now when you talk about profit, it could a person wanting to get out of business, dissolve a partnership, break a lease or defraud an insurance company. When you talk about revenge, it is a person who wants to get even with somebody and starts a fire, which is malicious destruction of property. When you talk about a fire bug, why, you are actually talking about a person who gets his kicks out of starting a fire. It all boils down to one thing, and any way you look at it, it is for a personal gain one way or the other.
- K: What type of investigation follows after the extinguishment of every fire in the department? Then when are you called in particularly?
- C: The only time that I am called in is if the fire is of a suspicious nature. Otherwise, I do not go to any fire unless the chief that is on duty feels that the fire should be investigated.

K: Could You take us through a dry run of your investigation procedures? Say you approach a house that is two or more stories, like the Bradley Lane house. When you approach a house, what do you look for?

C: Well, the first thing that I do is talk to the chief and he will tell me what he found when he arrived at the scene. In the particular case you mentioned, the Bradley Lane house, he found that one section of the building was burning and flames were coming out of the roof. He also found that there were flammables spread throughout the place, plus a "trailer". When we speak of a "trailer" it means that someone has taken a fluid and run it from one place on the second floor with the purpose of spreading the fire to the other parts of the structure. The chief knew it was a suspicious fire as soon as he opened the door. The door in this case was locked, and there was no forceable entry into the house. These are things we look for. When he called me out I checked the house, took pictures of the door, and took pictures of the "trailers" that led to the different sections of the house. Fires that break out in different sections of the house are known as "one or more fires."

I took a sample of the liquid and then checked with the neighbors to see if they had noticed anything. From there I would either check with the occupant or the owner and the insurance company. Actually, when I arrive on the scene I check to see if the fire was on the inside, or on the outside. I also check the color of the smoke. Black smoke would indicate that a flammable liquid could be used. White would indicate that a sulfur could be used. With all the plastics you have today, and the rubber in the furniture, it would give off a black smoke.

Then I would proceed to ask the first company in how they entered the building and if the fire was on the inside of the building. I might ask such questions as, did they enter through the door? Was the door open or was it locked, or was it forced? Did they enter through the window? Was the window broken, was it locked, or was it forced? I would ask the first company that went in where the fire was. Was it on the first floor, second floor, clear, or attic? Was there one or more fires involved? If it was a

business place I would ask them if the files were tampered with. I would no doubt check the files anyway but I would ask these questions. I also would ask if any business machines were taken out. I would ask them if they found the sprinkler system. If they did, was it working? Was it shut off, was it on? Was the stand pipe tampered with? Was the alarm going off when you arrived at the scene? Had it been tampered with? Did you see anyone leaving the place in a hurry? Did anyone volunteer any information? Well, I could go on and on, but time doesn't permit.

K: Do you believe that there is a strong correlation between arson and periods of economic instability?

C: Yes, I do, especially in the beer gardens today. Actually people don't want to get involved. They know who started these fires, people see who started these fires, especially around home. So people just won't become involved because they think that they may be a target. Lots of times they will say, "Yes, I saw this person," or "This person did it," and they will give you a name, but upon calling them to appear in court, it is forgotten.

K: Is it virtually impossible to catch the arsonist himself subsequent to your investigation?

C: It's not impossible, it depends on the breaks. Many times you will have enough circumstantial evidence to prosecute, but once you get in court, then it is a different story. Actually you have to have at least two persons that will admit that they saw this fellow, or persons starting the fire. Sometimes the person himself will tell you that he did start the fire, or the person that hired that person will tell you that he started the fire. It us just a hard job tracking them down because they know that it is a hard crime to convict in court.

K: What are the penalties for arson?

C: Twenty years.

K: Does that vary throughout the state?

C: You have arson, malicious destruction of property and burning of another person's property. You can have so many categories that you can go to, really I would have to look it up.

K: Generally it would be twenty years?

C

K: Generally it would be twenty years?

C: Yes.

K: How difficult is it to obtain a conviction in court when you have strong evidence?

C: If you have strong evidence there is no problem at all. The courts will convict. We have had very good cooperation with the city courts and the county courts. You can see by the list of our convictions, twelve since 1973. I would venture to say that throughout the whole county 2% of all arson cases will actually be convicted. That is low.

K: That is. Where does Youngstown now stand in relation to the nation, in the increase of arson fires?

C: Right now I couldn't tell you. I think that we are up there the same as everybody else. I think Cleveland, in the state of Ohio, at the present time leads the state in arson fires.

K: Were arson fires as prevalent in the 1940's and 1950's in Youngstown as they are today in the 1970's?

C: No. I recall many times going to fires, and very, very seldom we would come across any flammable liquids in the place. Today a firman has to be very careful. When he is crawling around in a burning building he may kick over a can of gasoline, ignite it, and burn. We have had that situation occur up here at the Sting Tavern on Belmont Avenue where six firemen were hurt. At one time the companies thought that they had the fire out but in one corner of the building there was fifteen to seventeen bags of a flammable liquid stored. Now the purpose, I guess, was for the plastic to melt and then for the gasoline to run and spread around on the floor and then ignite. Well, it so happens that the fire department got in there a little bit ahead of time, but some way or another a spark found its way to the flammable liquid. It ignited and caused two explosions, hurting one of the fellows pretty badly, putting him in the hospital. He is still out of work. I guess you read about that in the paper, didn't you? At that particular place there was an alarm system that was turned off. The doors were locked and there was no forceable entry. The place was locked up about 2:30 a.m. If I recall right, there was not even a span of about half an hour before the fire broke out. The amount of insurance on that place? I would say that it

was over insured. I would say that it was done for personal gain.

K: During your years as arson inspector, what were a couple of the cases that were the worst arson fires?

C: I couldn't pin-point them. They are all bad. The only time it bothers me is when there is an arson fire where somebody is burned or hurt. We had a case up her on Oak Street Extension where two fellows were hired by another fellow and this one young lad, about 18 years old, entered the place. The other fellow was waiting outside for him. He was spreading gasoline on the first floor and it was a first floor home. When he was spreading the gas there was an explosion, blowing him out of the doorway. What ignited the fumes was the pilot light in the furnace. You see gasoline fumes are heavy and they found their way down through the furnace pipes and the air vents to the basement. They blew this house completely off the foundation. This lad ran from the home to the car, on fire, and he was taken to the hospital. When I arrived at the scene of the fire, the chief told me that there was someone that had checked into the hospital with severe burns. I got to the hospital and I talked to the lad. He wouldn't give me any information. I said, "Now, looking at you, I know that you started that fire. We found your gloves at the scene of the fire and that is the only part of your body that isn't burned." Then, he admitted the fact that he was in the building and he told me what happened. He implicated this other person, who a week later, we arrested and we convicted him. This same person implicated another person. We took him to court and he was bound over to the grand jury, and there was no bill. The reason was complicity. We just had one person putting the finger on another person. So who do you believe? In my mind there was no doubt that this fellow that was pin-pointed had done the hiring of the actual guy who was guilty. But you could never prove it.

K: Can a skillful arsonist start a fire without leaving a trace of its origin?

C: Yes. It is very simple. Actually I shouldn't be saying this, but as long as you don't use flammable liquids, you could easily do it. Many times they will. It depends on the buildings themselves. You can have a building set on fire and it will burn down to the ground. The only thing that you will have to do there is pick up some of the charred wood and send it to the

crime lab. They will determine then if there was anything flammable used by the deep charring of the wood. Now many cases they will start a fire by just setting a lot of newspaper on fire. But it depends, too, on the building that they are burning. For example, you may have a vacant building but no utilities on. When I speak of utilities, I mean no electric or no gas. So somebody had to set the fire. Where the gas and the electric is on, it could be a short. You just can't determine the cause of fire. When we come across something like this we mark it undetermined. But we do check with the insurance company to find out the amount of insurance on the place. If he has got it for sale, and he has had a hard time selling the place, plus the fact, the area that he is in, then we kind of lean towards thinking the occupant or the owner actually set fire to the place. There is no way that you can prove it. There are so many different ways that people can start fires, electrically. Lots of times, they will take an iron. When I speak of an iron, I mean what the women use at home.

Just plug it in and leave it on the ironing board. Or they will put the thermostat up on the furnace, and just leave it be, or mess with the controls, or they will leave gas jets open and set a candle in the place with the idea of a build up of natural gas. When it hits the flame, it explodes. There are so many different ways that you can't keep track of them. Lately we have been coming across a lot of plastic bags filled with flammable liquids spread through different areas. The purpose, like I said, is to start the fire, the heat will melt the plastic bags, and the gasoline spreads throughout. You see, when a person is using gasoline, you have to be very careful, because the fumes, any spark, or any pilot light will ignite it. Then you are in trouble. This is when we find most of them there, when they use gasoline. The expert arsonist very seldom uses gasoline. He uses a mixture of an oil or something that is a little slower burning. You could be fifty miles away before it goes off. When an expert burns a building, it burns. He will put it up in the air in no time. Actually a gallon gas is equal to about twelve sticks of dynamite. That is how powerful gasoline it. But if you want the job done right in a hurry, gasoline will do it. You better know what your are doing when you use that liquid.

K: Do insurance companies carry on their own investigations apart from the fire department?

- C: Lately they have been. It depends on the amount of loss. If the loss is pretty high they will send in their arson investigator and we work together.
- K: Is there any way to protect a business establishment? I know that it would be difficult for a private home, but to protect a business establishment from arson, say a big buidling?
- C: Well, you can have all the necessary precautions, such as an alarm system, an ADT system, or a sprinkler system which will put the fire out. When you talk about arsonists, these are the type of fellows that know the building. They know what to do. They will go in and tamper with these sprinkler systems or alarm systems. Well, once they know the system and how to bypass it, you are dealing with an expert. That guy ins't about to be caught. Nine times out of ten he is brought in here from a different town. Actually this type of an arsonist works on percentage. As an example, if you got "X" amount of dollars that the building is worth, he will maybe work on a 10% basis as to the amount of insurance that you are going to collect, but he will do the job. Lately, since people are reading about different types of fire in the papers, you can have a lot of these amateurs that will actually burn the place for \$50 or \$100. How do they do it? Most of them, they will revert to a fire bomb. They will break a window and then throw in a bottle of gasoline or a mixture of gasoline and oil. They will take a railroad fuse and throw it through a window. Then you have an explosion of the fire. How do we know this? We can always pick up the residue of the fuse, and the deep charring of the wood from the flammable liquid.
- K: You mentioned a lot of amateurs starting a lot of arson fires recently. Do you feel that the media has an impact on the arson fires? For example, no matter what detective series you are watching, an arsonist always makes a good story, particularly in the news releases, the increase in arson fires, all of this steady bombardment of the media. Do you feel that this has an impact on the increase in arson?
- C: Sometimes it does. Many times I have caught juveniles starting fires. And I say to them, "Where do you get the ideas?" They say from watching television. Now this is hard to believe, but it is true. I know I sit at home and see these things on television, no doubt you do too. Naturally somebody is going to get the

idea and try it. This is what happens. But the media gives us good coverage. We have had a series here by one of our local stations, the caption was "Youngstown Burning?" They ran a series on the amount of fires we had and what we were up against. Well, this helped us in promotion for more arson investigators which I think we will get in the next month.

K: The people who get a thrill, I think that you referred to them, about setting fires. Is there any follow up upon conviction?

C: Well, this type of person is sick. Many times when we do apprehend them, what actually happens is that they are sent to a mental hospital. Later on they are released. Many times they will start a fire in the mental hospital. This is the type of a person that I don't know how to explain to you. They are emotionally disturbed or something. And like I say, in plain words, they get a kick out of it.

K: Did you have a real problem during the 1960's, during the times when the riots were rampant throughout the country and in Youngstown?

C: We had a lot of fire bombing but the police and the Youngstown Fire Department were really lucky in finding out where a lot of these fire bombs were made. We stopped them right at the scene. But this is where I think they got the idea of this fire bombing, with the wick and the mixture of oil and gasoline, or another type of flammable liquid.

K: Through your years as Arson Investigator, drawing upon your experience, do you have any suggestions to make? Either to insurance companies or any operation of the department?

C: Yes. I would suggest to the insurance companies, like I said before, that they be a little more careful when they are insuring, especially business places, such as beer gardens or night clubs. They should have a follow up on the agent that is selling the policy. See these agents work on a commission basis. They actually don't care how much they insure the building for because they are working on a commission basis. I feel that on a follow up, if they felt that the insurance was too high, send another agent out and see if it needs that much insurance. At that time, they told me that most of their insurance policies were sent out of town to the home

office. They determine whether the place should be insured for that amount or not. I asked them, how they would know just by what the agent sends in? If you have a follow up on it, you can eliminate this. You see many times an insurance man will come in and say, "Do you know that we have \$30,000 worth of insurance on this particular home?" Well, I proceed to tell them what happens if a person gets a life insurance policy for \$10,000 and he dies. Do they pay? Oh, they will have to pay, but it is the same thing here. Why don't they check this before they write the policy up? Lately, I think this is what is going to happen. They are going to be more strict when giving high insurance on some of these buildings because of what is happening throughout the country. Does that answer what you wanted?

K: Right. Do you have any final observations you would like to make or further comments?

C: Yes. I would like to urge the people to become more involved in forwarding the information of what they know to our department. It would be kept confidential. They don't have to give us their name. They can either call us or send us a letter as to what they have seen or what they know. This would help us a great deal. Otherwise, it is tough.

END OF INTERVIEW