

Him, Me and the MVFD

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I want to dedicate my talk this evening to my father, Kenny Ayers, volunteer firefighters everywhere, and to Indiana's most famous fictional volunteer firefighter, Eliot Rosewater.

My interest in the topic I bring to you tonight was born about 6 years ago when my mother moved from the house she lived in all her adult life to a nearby retirement community. In addition to 60 years' worth of Ayers family belongings, my mother inherited the contents of the homes of her parents, uncle and sister and never quite got around to sorting things out. It took my brother and me almost two years to get up the courage to clean out our family home. Ultimately, it took us an entire summer, but, with the help of my wife, children, family and friends, and under the watchful eye of my mother, we succeeded in moving out the bulk of what was there.

My family adopted some furniture and furnishings. A local antiques dealer took some nicer pieces of furniture and curios. Books went to the library book sale and papers to the recycling bin. Finally, after 25 or so trips to Goodwill, and a 2 day yard sale, all that remained was a tall bookshelf full of music, my mother was an organist, and probably 30 suitcases and boxes of photographs and memorabilia.

I knew early in the process of emptying out the house that there was no way I could just trash those boxes and suitcases. I am a librarian with a strong interest in local history, and I felt compelled to see that the photographs and papers were examined and organized in some meaningful way

I spent another two years slowly going through the photographs and, honestly, I'm still not quite done. I've looked at tintypes of some of my ancestors, box camera photographs from the 20s, brownie snapshots from the 50s and Polaroid pictures from the 60s and 70s. I found postcards and photos of several dashing soldiers from both world wars. Although I have no great interest in genealogy, I was curious about how some of these willowy bearded fellows and stern looking ladies fit into my family.

As I've followed up with my mother and other family members on identifying the subjects of the photos, there were no big surprises; I learned only of hardworking folks trying to make a better life for themselves in good times, and in times of war and economic depression. Of course, I kept many of the photographs and enjoyed the response when I distributed others to my relatives at family gatherings.

Ultimately, and sadly, I came to the less than happy realization that after examining hundreds of photographs, it was my own father I felt like I didn't know well at all. I wish he would have been around to fill in the stories behind the pictures, but he passed away in 2003. My memories of him were largely of his failing years and not of the swimmer, sailor, young father and firefighter I saw depicted in the many pictures of him.

I knew that my father loved his faith, his family and his country. In writing this essay, I saw an opportunity to re-examine and show my appreciation for the institution that was next in line: the McCordsville Volunteer Fire Department.

My father was born in 192, the first son in a family that grew to five children. My grandfather operated grain elevators and often moved his family from one small Central Indiana town to the next.

The Ayers family lived in Pendleton during my father's high school years.

He graduated from high school there in 1941 and then joined the Navy. He served in the Pacific on the USS Ancon in World War II. He saw some combat around Saipan, and was on board the Ancon in Tokyo Bay for the Japanese surrender.

On his return, there was some talk of college, but he decided to apprentice as a tool and die maker in a small machine shop in Pendleton. He married the girl he left behind to go to war, my mother. Then he took a better job at Western Electric, one of the industrial giants that used to line Shadeland Avenue on the east side of Indianapolis. After a brief stay in Oaklandon, my parents moved to a new house in McCordsville, just across the line in Hancock County.

The town of McCordsville my father moved to in 1951 wasn't really a town. It was still known by the Census Bureau as an unincorporated place, probably better referred to as a village. Founded in 1865 by, not surprisingly, the McCord family, the village grew around the wellspring of so many Midwestern places, the railroad, a grain elevator, and a toll road, now known as Pendleton Pike. From the early years until my father's arrival, stores, churches and schools were established, torn down and rebuilt more than once. People came and went, but not in great numbers and the 1950 population was only around 500.

Despite its location barely more than 100 yards from the Marion County line, McCordsville in the early 1950s could best be described as rural in outlook. There were many residents who, like my father, worked in factories, and a few more white-collar workers, but the names of longtime farm families dominated the rolls of many local institutions.

The closest form of local government was the township trustee, whose most important job in the 50s was oversight of the local schools. Beyond participation in school parent teacher organizations, the Farm Bureau, veterans and fraternal organizations, and the Methodist church, opportunities for public life and service

were limited. Oh, yes, the civic-minded could also join the Odd Fellows Cemetery association and help make sure the cemetery grass got mowed.

There was a McCordsville Civic Association that usually met once a year. The main item on the agenda for the Civic association was often to raise enough money to pay for the streetlights in town. It wasn't unheard of for the 20 or so streetlights to go dark around September, after which a cigar box would appear on the counter in the Post Office seeking donations to turn the street lights back on.

While McCordsville in the early 1950s wasn't much different than many other small towns surrounding Indianapolis, like Oaklandon, Fortville or Fishers, conspicuously missing from the public services one might expect to find was a volunteer fire department.

The history of volunteer fire departments in the United States is not well documented. But from various sources, I did learn that from the departments formed in colonial times to the department that was eventually organized in McCordsville; the development of volunteer fire departments reflected the societal and economic circumstances in which they were formed.

Author Ernest Earnest notes in his 1979 book, The Volunteer Fire Company, Past and Present that in the American colonies, "early firefighting was less an organized activity than a kind of free-for-all."⁽¹⁾ Participation in bucket brigades was required of all able-bodied persons even after fire engines; hooks and ladders were required of householders in larger cities.

According to Earnest, despite the "enduring legend...Benjamin Franklin did not found the first American fire company." The first was founded in Boston, "where an engine was imported from England in 1679." Earnest asserts that the first organized volunteer fire company was the "Boston Fire Society", founded in

1717, "19 years before Franklin's Union Fire Company in Philadelphia."(2)

Members of the Union Fire Company "agreed to bring two buckets and two large bags to every fire. The bags were for the purpose of salvage. Due to rampant looting, property recovered during and after fires was loaded into bags and taken to a designated place and put under guard. Members met once a month for a social evening and discussion of firefighting methods and problems."
(3)

Volunteer fire companies attracted upper class gentlemen in the Colonies and in the years following the American Revolution. "George Washington was a member of the Friendship Fire Company of Alexandria, Virginia and in 1775 presented it with an engine he had purchased in Philadelphia."(4) Other familiar names of volunteer firefighters from early American history include: Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams...Paul Revere, Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr and Benedict Arnold. (5) "In New Orleans, where the first the first fire company was formed in 1829, the membership during the early days was composed of leading citizens: professional men, merchants, and public officials."(6) Probably not a body dissimilar to the members of this club.

Putting out fires was never easy. Understand that until the development of steam engines, water from fire engines was pressurized by "brakes", the long handles pumped by the men. Earnest provides details on pumping. "At a normal rate of 60 strokes a minute, a man would be exhausted after 10 minutes of pumping; when the count went up to 120 strokes per minute, he had to drop out after 3 minutes."(7)

Earnest goes on to describe how, by the mid-nineteenth century, volunteer fire companies evolved from prominent citizens who came to each other's assistance into departments who, in the midst of a blaze, often turned their hoses onto each other.

"In an era marked by civic violence, fire companies themselves became a disruptive element."(8) Firefighting had been left to lower classes in larger cities. Groups often affiliated by ethnicity or political views reflected all the antagonisms of the years before the Civil War. Ernest observes that "...the type of prominent citizens who had once belonged now let the lower classes do the dirty work". (9)

Ernest discusses how the steam engine further changed the status of volunteer firefighters. "The introduction of the steam pumper created a second revolution both technological and sociological...they quickly realized that it would make the large and brawny fire company obsolete...a steamer needed only an engineer and a man to fire the boiler."(10) The necessity for trained operators and teamsters to lead horses to pull the larger steam engines resulted in the employment of paid firefighters.

Volunteer fire departments came to Indiana early in the 19th century. According to the website for the city of Madison, Indiana, "citizens formed a United Volunteer Fire Company of Madison, Indiana, in 1821, but town fathers decided to create a paid fire company." Unfortunately, the Union Fire Company lasted less than a year and was disbanded, leaving the citizens on their own until 1841, when "the Fair Play Fire Company No. 1, the oldest fire company in Indiana was founded." By 1873, Madison had three additional fire companies. Madison's Washington Fire Company No. 2, founded in 1847, still "operates out of their original fire station, the oldest active fire station in Indiana."(11)

Predictably, as Indiana grew in population, more fire companies were formed. But, although nearby volunteer fire departments in Oaklandon and Fortville, where there was a volunteer fire department since 1879, responded to calls in the McCordsville area, McCordsville was still without a fire department of

its own in the late 1950s.

Among the reasons why was the tension that remained among locals over an attempt to build a new high school. McCordsville and Fortville schools were consolidated into Vernon Township Schools in 1959. Many, including my father, thought the old high school in Fortville was inadequate, so an attempt was made to form a holding company to raise money to sell bonds for a new high school. A few influential local farmers were not at all interested in paying more taxes and remonstrated legally through the courts and extra-legally with some intimations of violence toward my father and others.

Thankfully, some of those same local farmers who opposed the new school building were supportive of a new volunteer fire department for McCordsville. A fund drive was organized and by 1960, an old fuel oil delivery truck was acquired. The truck was refitted with a farm pump welded on the back and a hose reel, a siren and lights and an array of hooks, ladders and axes. The men, and they were only men at this early date, bought their own protective coats and hats. It took a few years before a tax levy finally was approved to allow the township trustee to fund the fledgling company.

The early years of the McCordsville volunteer fire department were both noble and pedestrian. They responded to an array of house fires, barn fires, field fires and automobile crashes. They also turned out for a plane crash at the nearby airstrip.

Sadly, the first notoriety came to the men in December, 1962, when the firetruck burned up. The department did not yet have a fire station, so the fire truck was parked in Chalmer Swarts's barn. The folklore I remember is that when Chalmer parked his car on that fateful night, he somehow bumped an electric welder into some insulation stored in his barn for an intended renovation of the Swarts home. Source of heat met fuel and oxygen and the ensuing

conflagration burned the truck, coats, hats, hooks, hoses and ladders. The MVFD was definitely out of service.

I remember the morning after the fire. First, I was aware that my father was still at home and hadn't gone to work. He was never at home when I woke up. He had been up all night fighting the fire to save the fire truck he had worked so hard for.

It was a dark December morning when I ate breakfast and still dark when I walked to school. Then I remember standing at the schoolhouse door, waiting on my classmate, John Swarts, Chalmer's son, to arrive. I didn't know exactly what happened, but I did, despite my admittedly sheltered life, have my first sense of the meaning of tragedy. I knew in my 9 year old mind that something awful had happened. I don't recall having that feeling again until November, 1963, when President Kennedy was assassinated.

In researching this account and viewing photographs of the firetruck scorched black against the January snow, that firetruck that the men and women of McCordsville had worked so hard for, I was so impressed to learn that by August of 1963, with used equipment contributed by local volunteer fire departments, the McCordsville Volunteers were back in service.

The following summer, the men and boys of McCordsville went to work chipping old mortar off of a pile of bricks salvaged from area demolitions. Those second-hand bricks would become the facade of the new McCordsville fire station. A two bay station soon housed the restored tank truck and a used Diamond T pumper.

The volunteers were soon on hand for devastating house fires, and deadly car crashes along Pendleton Pike, but were also front and center for one of the strangest events in McCordsville, or any other small town's history. The

story of "The Haunted Trailer" brought about the rare appearance of Indianapolis television news cameras in McCordsville to cover what may have been actual demon possession, mass hysteria or one of the best hoaxes ever.

Mid-20th century McCordsville was a destination for many people from Appalachia seeking better paying jobs, particularly in the factories on the eastside of Indianapolis. They needed inexpensive housing and often found it by renting from a local lady, Miss Cotter.

I don't recall ever hearing her first name; I only knew her as Miss Cotter. She was something of a land baron in McCordsville because she owned a few older, rundown houses and a few house trailers parked around town. Miss Cotter was a familiar figure to everyone as she walked the streets and alleys in her long skirts and straw hat, presumably looking after her properties and collecting her rent money. To my young mind she resembled the actress Margaret Hamilton, the Wicked Witch of Wizard of Oz fame.

In the summer of 1966, Miss Cotter moved a mother and her two adolescent daughters into one of her trailers. Stories started to circulate around town about strange events occurring inside the trailer. The burners on the stove turned on for no reason. Reputable men in town claimed to have witnessed a pillow levitating across a couch and some tomatoes rolling across a kitchen table. There were threats scrawled on the inside of the trailer door that said "I'm coming to get you tonight." Accounts of the strange events spread and, before it was over, the pastor of the McCordsville United Methodist Church was on Indianapolis news stations talking about the events he had witnessed and suggesting, unheard of in McCordsville at the time, the possibility of demon possession.

The pastor's theory on these strange events was in contrast to the

discussion around the McCordsville post office. I remember going to pick up our family's mail one morning. I watched the postmaster unfold a piece of paper and pass it around among a group that had gathered. On that piece of paper was written one word. The word was "poltergeist". The postmaster carefully refolded the piece of paper as if guarding a great secret. I'm reasonably certain no one in McCordsville had ever uttered that word before.

Whatever the source of the events afflicting the family, the volunteer firefighters were there with their truck parked on the street in front of the trailer. The presence of the firetruck on a June night, with its bright spotlights trained on the trailer casting giant shadows on the trees behind it, lent gravity and drama to the scene. Folks sat in their lawn chairs in the front yard of the trailer, and my buddies and I stood nearby on our bicycles, waiting on something, anything, to happen. In the end, nothing else happened at the haunted trailer, except when a couple days later when the water heater caught fire. The MVFD responded, put out the small blaze and ventilated the trailer. The mother and daughters soon moved out of town and no one seems to have seen or heard from them again.

The men of the MVFD, and throughout the 60s and 70s they were still all men, continued to put out for barn fires, field fires, and fires along the railroad tracks started by sparks from passing trains. They heroically pulled bodies from car wrecks and, slightly less heroically, put out a fire in a pot of beans in another of Miss Cotters trailers.

They also figure into a final anecdote from the 80s. Some of you may recall in the late 70s and early 80s when the Indianapolis Police Department and Prosecutor Steve Goldsmith stepped up enforcement of city ordinances against massage parlors. Their efforts pushed the massage parlors into surrounding counties. Soon enough, McCordsville featured such an establishment on the west end of town, a brightly lit sign along Pendleton Pike pointing the way to comfort and relaxation. This was the same McCordsville where you couldn't buy

a drink or a six pack of beer since around 1940. Needless to say, the presence of a massage parlor was controversial.

Local law enforcement finally took action. Wisely, they called out the MVFD to be on hand because it was apparently well-known that when massage parlor management felt threatened, it was standard operating procedure to set fire to incriminating evidence. The night of the raid, the cops went in the front door and the ladies (question mark) and their associates and guests went out the backdoor. After the ladies, et al, climbed over the railroad tracks right behind the house, they found themselves in the cornfield on the other side. The firetruck was pressed into service in the cornfield, its spotlights tracking the masseuses in their efforts to run and hide. The folklore, which I was not able to confirm, is that all the bad girls and guys were rounded up with the MVFD suffering only one broken spotlight.

My father was in the middle of all of this. Tragic, comical, mundane; he did, I now realize, what good citizens and volunteer firefighters do. There were plenty of men who could have served on the department, but only about 25 took the time to fundraise, restore a scorched firetruck, build a firehouse, and be there day or night when somebody's house was burning or somebody had to be painfully or delicately removed from a car wreck.

At the time, all I knew was that when the alarm sounded, my father jumped in our Rambler station wagon and headed for the firehouse. He fishtailed out of our gravel driveway, spewing rocks from side to side. I wasn't giving much thought to saving lives and preserving property. In my limited perspective, a fire run only meant to me, and to my brother, that more gravel would have to be raked back into the driveway.

I took every bit of this for granted. My youth was nearly idyllic; one of hanging out at the Bait Shop and drinking Choc-ola. All I knew was riding my

bicycle on tree-lined streets, around the old school, and down alleyways that barely existed as a soft combination of gravel and grass. You could ride as fast as you wanted because, as long as you weren't anywhere near the highway, if you fell off your bike you'd likely have a safe landing.

I faced all the challenges teenagers face, and with what I now recognize as a healthy amount of patience, guidance, and tolerance from both my folks, I survived to head off to college in the early 70s. At the time, I looked at my father's civic involvement as kind of quaint and parochial. My priorities and values conformed to what could best be described as the "hippie" ideal. My interest was more in communes than communities.

I did, however, have a few reservations about the counterculture. My first concern was about the music. Specifically, who was going to build the guitar amplifiers after the revolution?

I also had a concern about the popular notion of moving back to the country. I was certain that if everybody moved back to the country, it was going to be impossibly crowded and face all the problems that cities faced. And I knew enough about sanitation and geology to know that you never wanted to be downhill from somebody else's outhouse.

But most of all, I realized that despite my cool attitude towards my father's passion for the MVFD, I wondered where the fire protection would come from when we all moved to the countryside and communal living was our future. In researching this essay, I was heartened to read an article I found on the Internet that showed others shared my concern. The [Albuquerque Journal](#) reports in a 2011 article that the Placitas, New Mexico, Volunteer Fire Department began with the purchase of a \$100 pumper truck by hippies in an early '70s commune located there. (12)

The McCordsville of my youth had a population of around 500. After McCordsville finally incorporated in 1988, the town borders eventually took in all the development in Hancock County south of Geist Reservoir. The town borders also extended to take in new housing developments to the south. By 2014, the most recent estimate of McCordsville's population was over 5,000.

The MVFD, now approaching 60 years of service, has grown apace. The McCordsville firefighters now respond to around 600 calls a year. The fire station built in 1963 now has 5 bays and an impressive array of firetrucks and equipment. I was happy to see the roster of firefighters up on the wall of the firehouse still includes my father's name. It also includes the names of the sons of some of the members from my father's era. But there are many names, not surprisingly, I don't recognize.

In more rural areas of Indiana, many volunteer fire departments face a tough time recruiting these days. In contrast, the current McCordsville fire chief, Tom Alexander, reported to me that the department had no problem recruiting and has a current staff of 33. He also mentioned that the roster has included the names of female firefighters since the '80s, and there are usually at least 4 or 5 women on the roster now.

The volunteers of the MVFD bought their own coats and equipment and relied on donations back in the early years. Today, the Vernon Township Trustee, with the oversight of the township board, oversees a budget for the Fortville and McCordsville fire crews that exceed a half-million dollars for fire protection alone.

I digress here briefly to speculate that there are a number of good government types in this audience who think that township government in Indiana is an anachronism that should go away. I also note that according to the website of the Indiana Volunteer Firefighter Association, there are now 837

organizations that qualify for membership. (13) McCordsville is one of those.

In reviewing budgets for Indiana township trustees it's easy to see that, with the exception of urban townships, fire protection is the largest budget they administer. While not every one of those 837 volunteer departments are supported at the township level, most are and, according to McCordsville Chief Alexander, they like it that way. I submit that volunteer fire departments represent a pretty healthy constituency for township government that will make it difficult to legislate away.

The McCordsville Volunteer Fire Department faced a number of challenges in the beginning. Can it get any worse than when your firetruck burns up? But my father and his friends and neighbors persevered, put out the fires, pulled the injured and the dead from car wrecks, helped round up the hookers, and proudly represented themselves and their town in local parades.

In these times of "bowling alone", I think the MVFD and volunteer firefighters represent real citizenship and a true understanding of community. To expand on this thought, I refer you to our own Hoosier author Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.,. When I read his book The Sirens of Titan in high school, I thought Vonnegut was essential reading if one wanted to be a member of the counterculture I then aspired to be a part of. I wish now I would have noted back then Vonnegut's clear appreciation of firefighters in this quote from one of the main characters, the newly enlightened Malachi Constant:

"Welcome, Space Wanderer," blatted Rumfoord's oleomargarine tenor from the Gabriel horns on the wall. "How meet it is that you should come to us on the bright red pumper of a volunteer fire department. I can think of no more stirring symbol of man's humanity to man than a fire engine."(14)

I think Vonnegut said it even better in this passage in his 1965 book, God

Bless You Mister Rosewater or Pearls Before Swine. Eliot Rosewater, the central character of the book, who was an alcoholic and may or may not have been sane, was a devoted volunteer firefighter. Vonnegut's recurring character, Kilgore Trout, who many critics point to as the specific voice of Vonnegut, says to Eliot:

"Your devotion to volunteer fire departments is very sane...for they are, when the alarm goes off, almost the only examples of enthusiastic unselfishness to be seen in this land. They rush to the rescue of any human being, and count not the cost. The most contemptible man in town, should his contemptible house catch fire, will see his enemies put the fire out...There we have people treasuring people as people."(15)

It's good to think of my father and all volunteer firefighters in this light.

Notes:

1)Earnest, Earnest, The Volunteer Fire Company, Past and Present. Stein and Day: New York, 1979. p.12.

2)*Ibid*, p.8.

3)*Ibid*, p.9.

4)*ibid*, p.23.

5)*The History of Volunteer*

Firefighting.www.firehistory.weebly.com/the-history-of-volunteer-firefighting.html.(retrieved11/10/15)

6)Earnest,*op cit*, p.23.

7)Earnest,*op cit*, p.31.

8)Earnest,*op cit*, p.68.

9)Earnest,*op cit*, p69.

10) Earnest, *op cit*, p107.

11) *History of the Madison Volunteer Fire*

Department. www.madisoninfiredpt/history. (Retrieved 10/30/15)

12) Linthicum, Leslie. *A Bunch of Hippies Grew Up to be Placitas*

Firefighters. Albuquerque

Journal. 12/1/11. www.albjournal/72483/a-bunch-of-hippies-grew-up-to-be-Placitas-firefighter.html. (Retrieved 12/2/15)

13) www.ivfa.org/did-You-Know.asp

14) Vonnegut, Kurt, The Sirens of Titan. Dial Press, Delta Trade, 1998, c1959. p.247

15) Vonnegut, Kurt, *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, Novels and Stories, 1963-1973. New York, N.Y.: Library of America, c 2011. p. 333.