Volunteer Fire Departments: A Neglected American Voluntary Association

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VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS: A NEGLECTED
AMERICAN VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION

by

Michelle C. Akers

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Faculty of The Graduate College
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I want to begin by extending my appreciation to the many volunteer firefighters that made this research possible. I thank them for their cooperation during my data collection and for putting their lives on the line to keep us all safe.

I also wish to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Alan Jacobs, for his motivational words. I hope that it does not take another twenty years before someone gets interested in VFDs. In addition, I want to thank Dr. Ann Miles and Dr. Arthur Helweg for their support and patience.

Furthermore, I want to extend my gratitude to the man who not only helped me develop my love of anthropology but also had never-ending faith in my abilities as an anthropologist and a person--Dr. George "Doc" Somers.

Last, but certainly not least, I dedicate this work to my parents. The people who taught me everything I know about being a confident and compassionate human being. I owe everything to them, for without their love and support I would never have gotten this far. Thank You!

Michelle C. Akers
This thesis explores the social and cultural dimensions of volunteer fire departments (VFDs) in West Michigan. Through interviews and observations of four VFDs, important dimensions of social cohesion and variability within and between the departments and communities are revealed. An emphasis is placed upon the gender relations within the departments and their effect upon the relations in the larger community. From these companies, a sketch of a small West Michigan community is derived. If used as a companion with other research of Midwestern communities of a greater scope and sample size, an understanding of social organization and social structure may be achieved.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Voluntary associations (VAs) are important organizational elements of American society (deTocqueville 1899). They not only help to promote unique social and institutional patterns of behavior in American society, but also contribute to creating models for an individual's patterns for behavior. These behavior patterns were differentiated by August Comte. "Patterns for behavior", or social structure, is the framework for ideal behavior. This framework is established by society through the criminal justice system, for example. Patterns for behavior create a common force within a community. This communality leads to cohesion between members of society, whereas "patterns of behavior" or social organization is the real and actual behavior that people exhibit in society (Jacobs 1992:1). The patterns can be revealed through an examination of VAs. On an institutional level, voluntary associations shape patterns for their member's behavior by providing models for etiquette, diplomacy, and leadership. Such models are established and perpetuated both by rules internal to the local organization as well as the external regulations of state or federal government. Within the contexts of these internal and external regulations, social patterns of behavior are created that assist in characterizing the larger national society.
A conspicuous voluntary association in American society that has not received
the scholarly attention it deserves for all the roles it fulfills is that of the Volunteer Fire
Department (VFD). The aim of this research is to ascertain the socio-cultural role of
VFDs in Western Michigan, namely, how they are organized and how they function.
It is also important to examine the extent to which VFDs contribute to the social
cohesion of local communities in West Michigan, especially rural or suburban
communities where they seem to be the dominant institution to deal with fire and
medical emergencies. The extent of cohesion and variability within and between these
VFDs is also discussed. Women and gender relations are also an important subject
within this research. Through an examination of gender in these associations, another
avenue toward understanding social organization and social structure within the
greater community is revealed.

The role of VFDs, or any voluntary association, have implications in the
greater society. Volunteer fire departments have an impact upon the social structure
and organization of the society as a whole. Indeed, more than 80% of all fire
departments in the United States are volunteer (Jacobs 1976; Earnest 1979:2; Perkins
1987; Mahtesian 1993:24). In Michigan, 75% of the 29,823 firefighters are
volunteers. Of that percentage, 26% or 7832 persons are strictly nonpaid firefighters
(Michigan Fire Service). Many of these individuals are not only involved in the VFDs;
they also serve on town councils or city boards. These politically-active persons
create legislation and shape the lives of their local citizenry. Indeed with such an
important portion of society involved in VFDs they clearly play an important role in
shaping local communities and their social patterns. For some, "the fire company was the center of the social and leisure-time activities of its members" (Earnest 1979:58). Often involving most of the community, these activities assist in the perpetuation of distinct cultural patterns for behavior as well as distinct social patterns of behavior.

"The volunteer fire department is, therefore, a social agency and often very much a part of community life. This has been true over the centuries" (Earnest 1979:147). Given its hitherto neglected importance in academia, this research aims to clarify the role of VFDs in contemporary society. It is hoped that through an examination of VFDs in West Michigan, important insights into the social patterns of Midwest America can be revealed.

Historical Research on VFDs

Research regarding fire personnel and their departments has changed through the years. Aside from specific department histories, very little social science research was conducted until the 1950s.

1950-1975

The research that was conducted from 1950 until the mid-1970s, was mainly comparative and based on "organizational" issues, such as specific duties and types of departments. For instance, Arthur Bennett studied 16 fire departments from 1953-1965, of which eight were found to be VFDs, two paid departments, and six were a combination of predominantly volunteer personnel with a few paid firefighters.
The focus of his study was to determine the quantitative differences between the three types of fire departments. His quantitative research measured the financial implication of fires, to which the interviewed departments responded. Such items as, the loss due to fire per $1,000.00 value was the basis of his study (Bennett 1968:36). The conclusion drawn from his data was that wholly volunteer departments were the least effective types of departments. However he acknowledged in his final analysis, that the combined department was comprised mostly of volunteer members. This led him to conclude that the work force of volunteers coupled with the expertise of paid firefighters, created the most effective firefighting unit (Bennett 1968:37).

Research was also conducted by Warren Kimball in 1968. He examined the structure of fire stations composed of 20 male firefighters. Kimball's purpose was to describe the duties and responsibilities of each officer within the departments. For example, he discusses substitute fire truck drivers as recruited from the volunteer members and the training that was required of these members (Kimball 1968: 12-13).

Bennett's quantitative work was coupled with a checklist style, similar to Kimball, of research that analyzed the duties and responsibilities of fire personnel. This type of research is also often conducted in terms of the three types of departments, the purpose being to provide a sketch of firefighting based on tasks and duties.
1975- Present

The research that began in the mid-1970s and continues today is of a different premise than earlier works. Indeed, studies conducted in the last twenty years have emphasized social issues and community development.

Although researchers continued to examine and compare the three organizational types of fire departments, more attempts are being made to determine motivational differences between them. Jone Pearce, for example, focuses on the pattern of behavioral differences between paid and volunteer fire departments. The data for this research was collected through surveys and interviews. Upon the analysis of this data, Pearce drew many conclusions regarding motivations and behaviors of VFDs. VFDs had a lower rate of turn-over than paid departments, apparently because of the strict work expectations that leads to less "busy work" and a greater sense of accomplishment (Pearce 1993:37 & 127). The strict work ethic of VFDs was thought to lead to a more satisfying work environment and a greater sense of prestige for the officers than the comparable paid departments (Pearce 1993:50).

Also, recent research has concerned itself with the impact of VFDs upon community solidarity. Many researchers have tied community events, such as carnival or bake-sale fund-raisers, to the perpetuation of community solidarity. These fund-raisers, while used to financially support the VFDs, are often major community celebrations. Through these celebrations a sense of mutual solidarity between the VFD and the entire community is generated (Lozier 1976:7; Perkins 1987:343;
Thulander 1987:4). The direct interaction between the volunteer fire department and the community influences the societal make-up.

Another avenue examined with relation to social solidarity is the membership of VFDs. Alan Jacobs' work with VFDs demonstrates such an avenue. Jacobs traces the history of VFDs and their social implications in American society. He describes VFDs as contributing to social cohesion in the community. Membership in the volunteer fire department cuts across political, religious, socio-economic class, or ethnic affiliations. Broader community social cohesion is achieved through the integration of VFD members (Jacobs 1976:198). These societal values are perpetuated through individual persons and thereby affect the greater society.

Aside from solidarity within the local community, many effects are felt within the VFDs themselves. Many members are quoted as saying that it was "fraternal solidarity" within the department and the overall feeling of community solidarity sustained by VFDs that led them to join the departments (Lozier 1976:2-6). The fraternal solidarity can be expressed in many ways. For instance, firefighters assist each other in the construction of homes or the borrowing of tools. This same research also states that VFDs influence the community through the accomplishments and actions of individuals (Lozier 1976:3). A case in point involves a senior member of the fire department with influence in the community, who teaches a younger member skills for firefighting as well as skills applicable in the work world. A younger member not only gains the skills necessary but also by allying himself with an influential
individual can gain respect within the community (Lozier 1976:3-4). These actions often lead to an increase of social esteem and status for the individual.

Social issues and changing world views also affect the direction of research on VFDs. For instance since the mid-1970s, and the Civil Rights Act, women have become firefighters. Few studies have been done regarding the effect of women on this previously male dominated community activity. These studies however, utilize survey and interview data gathered solely from paid fire departments. Initially these researchers found that women were considered a disruptive force (Craig and Jacobs 1985:72). However, as more women became firefighters, male firefighters begin to view women as equals (Craig and Jacobs 1985:70-71). In these studies many women conceived their time with the department to be tougher than the male firefighters (Craig and Jacobs 1985:62; McCarl 1985:111). These women did not give up though, because they also noted that some men were meeting them half-way and were becoming more open-minded (Craig and Jacobs 1985:71; McCarl 1985:109).

Although no research has been done regarding female firefighters in VFDs, the arrival of women in fire departments opens up a new avenue for research.

In short, recent changes in firefighting roles and increased scientific interest in social issues has led to new research interests in VFDs.

Inadequacies of Previous Research

Some researchers do acknowledge the impact of VFDs in society. For example, Perkins describes VFDs as important "because of their vital place in
community social life and their premier role in fighting one of the most dreaded and unpredictable forces, are quite serious subjects for examination" (Perkins 1987:343). However, much of the data on volunteer fire departments is composed of anecdotal information and is not based upon detailed studies.

Voluntary associations tend to thrive in small rural or suburban communities, as do volunteer fire departments. It is one of these communities in New England that is the setting for the classic ethnographic work, Small Town in Mass Society. This piece captures the essence of small town American during the 1950s and 1960s. The authors study the political agencies of this rural community and their effects upon the socio-political aspects of everyday life for the citizenry. For example, they examine the town council and what effects its decisions have upon the citizenry. Vidich and Bensman, authors of Small Town in Mass Society, discuss volunteer fire departments as originating as free associations to help the community in fire protection. With the establishment of these companies, the men organize themselves as a social unit of brotherhood. The members of this brotherhood have obligations beyond the duties of firefighters. They gather regularly and treat each other as family, not just co-workers. For example, they will help to support widows upon the death of a fellow firefighter, similar to many cultures in which the brother of the deceased is to care for his brother's family. This bond between the firefighters often surpasses or equals the bond with members of their family. It is within this brotherhood that skills are passed along and values are established for this New England community (Vidich and Bensman 1968:25-27). With only three pages of text devoted to the VFD, the authors did not
expand upon the role of VFDs within the greater society. Indeed, important social consequences were excluded. For example, Vidich and Bensman did not discuss the socio-political implications of the mayor also being the chief of the local VFD. Although the researchers did acknowledge volunteer fire departments as important social institutions, they did not probe or explicate their overall social role or importance to their community.

This lack of detailed attention to fire departments is also evident in many books on Michigan history (Dunbar 1959, 1969, 1970). Although they frequently mention firefighters and their departments, the social importance of VFDs is conspicuously ignored.

When VFDs are discussed and examined in the literature, three components tend to be neglected:

1. The research lacks a systematic examination of the socio-cultural role of women in VFDs, even though women often played a vital part in the department through their involvement in women's auxiliaries or as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) on ambulance services run by VFDs or, more recently, as firefighters themselves. Women, as well as men, have an effect on the social structure of the association and society as a whole. One of the few studies conducted on women in these roles was by Alexander Thompson III, who studied the hierarchy of women and men in local Emergency Medical Service (EMS) units. His research determined that for the most part, both sexes are treated equally. Equality in this study was seen to pertain to: (a) the skills, (b) training, (c) payment, and (d) duties of EMTs. However,
differences were noted when leadership positions were examined. For, like the
corporate world in general, men were more numerous in leadership roles than women
(Thompson III 1994:16-17). Women, although equal regarding duties in minor roles,
are not numerically or positionally equal to men in the leadership of society. As is
illustrated here, without examining women in these associations a vital link in society is
neglected. It is this link that is explored in this thesis.

2. The relations of gender, or the relations between men and women, are
another component that is absent in the previous research. Much of the current gender
research concentrates on women and not gender relations. Therefore, while including
the view of women it is the relations of gender that is the focus of this research. It is
crucial to consider gender relations in order to understand adequately the social
organization of a community.

3. Also, very few pieces of research on VFDs have been done in regions west
of the Appalachian Mountains. All of the previous research in fact, was conducted
east of the Appalachians. This provides only a limited regional view of volunteer fire
departments in American society.

Voluntary Associations Theory

While the typical American spends only 20% of his/her time involved in
altruistic activities and only six minutes a day involved in volunteer activities, there are
others who commit themselves to such actions whenever possible (Smith 1980:13;
Kemper 1980:327). A volunteer, or a member of a voluntary association, provides services to an individual or community while receiving little or no financial compensation in return (Perkins 1987:344). It is the necessity of such services to the growth of a community that is the basis of these associations. Voluntary associations were established in the United States in order to perform such services (Perlmutter 1994:7). The services that voluntary associations provide range from care for the elderly to assistance for single parents. Unique to the United States however, are VFDs which are often referred to as "a characteristically American institution" (Earnerst 1979:1). The development of VFDs, while going beyond the common time that Americans put into volunteer activities, can be explained by the actuality that in emergency situations the occurrence of altruistic behavior, or non-formal acts of kindness or community well-being, increases (Kemper 1980:327). VFDs are a compilation of these volunteer and altruistic acts, as they are described by Kemper and Smith. It is all of these activities that are essential to the development and well-being of society.

In examining voluntary associations, such as VFDs, it is important to recognize that there are a wide variety of theoretical approaches. Many disciplines, including anthropology and sociology, study these associations but only from their particular theoretical perspective. There are, however, some general tenets that appear throughout the voluntary associations literature.

Voluntary associations often are analyzed from one or more functionalist stances (Smith and Freedman 1972:2). All of these associations are seen to have a
purpose within the society, either teleologically as to how the association helps to fulfill the expressed purpose for which the whole is organized, or ontologically in terms of how the association helps to maintain the whole in an enduring state over time, or both.

The establishment of a voluntary association in a community seems to arise from an external stimulus, either a crisis or issue, such as protection from fire (Sills et al. 1983:25). It is this crisis or issue that lends the association its central purpose. Then, the association must gain recognition and acceptance from the community in order to function within it. At this point, provided the association is acting in accordance with the "collective will" of society (Sills et al 1983:27), financial support will be given. This support is provided for the association, not for individuals within it (Sills et al. 1983:27; Ember and Ember 1990:373; Perlmutter 1994:8).

Sociologist, David Sills, describes general principles of voluntary associations on two levels: (1) individual, and (2) societal. Within the individual level, skills and societal values are passed on from the association to the individual. For example, in a VFD, fire training is provided by the association while the knowledge is gained by the individual firefighter. At the societal level, the association mediates between the group and the state (Smith and Freedman 1972:14). At the local level, many community boards work with the VFDs to implement federal and state regulations through reports or inspections.

Expanding upon the ideas of David Sills, many researchers view voluntary associations as "adapters" and "integrators". Through these associations, members
become integral parts of society (Little 1965, 1974; Hausknecht 1962:10; Thomson and Armer 1981:138). These functions are especially important in VAs of other countries. Much of the research on VAs has been conducted in countries such as Africa and Latin America. In Africa, for example, the VAs are organized to integrate traditionally rural values with the new emergent lifestyles of urban centers. Few VAs exist outside of the urban centers, to which people migrated for various reasons. With their arrival to these new urban areas they feel isolated from their traditional way of life. VAs are organized to provide an introduction to urban lifestyles while respecting and celebrating traditional ones. The VAs provide their members a support group based upon common backgrounds or religions (Little 1965, 1974; Ember and Ember 1990). Although these attributes also exist among many VAs in the United States, most American VAs tend to thrive in rural communities and not urban centers. Voluntary associations also function to reinforce societal morals or become vehicles of social change. This change is initiated through the use of political power that the association exercises. These groups become types of political pressure groups, pushing the issues important to the members and the "collective will" of society. For instance, a group like the Disabled American Veterans is composed of individuals whose collective will is to improve the lives of injured veterans. If these individuals wish to change legislation of regulations regarding handicap accessibility, the individuals come together as a unit. This unit then persuades political figures to make
the desired changes happen. The VA has mobilized the individuals to implement changes for their benefit (Hausknecht 1962:9; Thomson and Armer 1981:138).

Some studies of VAs deal with motivation and positive job attitudes. Jone Pearce studied the differences in motivation between volunteers and employees of comparable organizations. A paid and volunteer unit of each of the following organizations was examined: (a) fire departments, (b) poverty relief agencies, (c) family planning clinics, and (d) newspapers. Pearce's study concludes that volunteers reported greater job satisfaction and motivation than paid workers (Pearce 1983a:650; Pearce 1993). The social interaction among volunteer members led to a more positive work attitude (Pearce 1983a:651). It is this type of attitude toward work that is characteristic of voluntary organizations. These attitudes and behaviors affect the individuals as social beings and contributing members of society. It is the patterns for behavior, initiated by the organization, that leads to the patterns of behavior by the individual. A case in point, Pearce discusses the motivation of individuals towards their work and their appreciation regarding the positive social environment of the workplace (Pearce 1983a:649). Without the patterns or attitudes being established at the workplace, these attitudes may not have been fostered. These attitudes make a positive impact upon an individual and will carry into that persons everyday life, perhaps motivating them to spend more time with their family. These attributes can be used in many other arenas of life, besides familial relations and work relations.

Other studies examine different types of voluntary associations. For instance, Aileen Ross studies the approaches that men and women take in volunteering. Most
women become involved in VAs that are tied to family and family values, whereas men become involved in the business aspect or business types of VAs. Women volunteer widely with children or social clubs, while men, if involved in these clubs, are drawn to the business and leadership roles within them (Smith and Freedman 1972). According to many feminists, including members of the National Organization of Women (N.O.W.), these different approaches have led to the exploitation of women volunteers. These feminists believe that because men claim or gravitate toward leadership positions over the women volunteers that it perpetuates a belief of male superiority. Also, since the women are unpaid, the feminists feel that women's work becomes devalued, even though the males are unpaid as well (Martin 1994; Thompson III 1994). The precise roles of individuals within VAs may be seen to have an effect upon the gender roles or stereotypes within the larger society.

Methodology

The majority of the field data discussed in this thesis was collected through informal, open-ended interviews. The 18 interviews are conducted with members of four volunteer fire companies in West Michigan, the total membership of these companies being around 107 persons. For the purpose of this study, VFDs are defined as companies that comprise 100% unpaid to 100% paid-on-call volunteers and any combination of the two. The paid-on-call volunteers receive financial compensation for each fire call that they respond to. Of the companies studied, two are strictly unpaid while the other two were composed mixture of paid-on-call and unpaid
volunteers. Three of the companies observed have female firefighters, while the fourth is composed strictly of male firefighters. The interview sample consisted of fire chiefs, as well as general firefighters of both sexes. Also, the State Fire Marshal office was contacted and a State Fire Marshal Field Officer was interviewed.

These interviews covered many topics while focusing on group cohesion and variability in relation to gender issues. The interviews sought basic information, such as occupation and rank within the VFD, as well as more in depth discussions of such things as recruitment or expectations of firefighting ability of both sexes. Interviews also examine changes within the department brought on by the introduction of women. These changes could include training procedures, departmental hierarchy, or social interaction.

Along with these interviews, several business or general meetings of the departments were observed with the approval of the chief and the fire company.

The identity of the departments and their members that participated in this study are not divulged in the preparation of these findings. All notes are coded on a master list and the companies are referred to as Company A, B, C, and D. The code was based on the sex of the interviewee (Male or Female), the company that the interviewee belongs to (Company A, B, C, D), and the chronological number of that interview (1,2,3...). For instance, a woman in the first company visited that is the 15th interviewee within that company will have a code like this; F(Female) A(Company A) 15(15th person). This provides anonymity for the fire companies and the volunteers. Also, since most of the women interviewed are the sole females of their department,
much of their information is discussed separately from a specific department. Indeed, the data collected from the female firefighters is presented in a separate chapter to insure the anonymity of the data and firefighters.

Problems With the Research

As with any research, there were problems during the data collection. One problem arose from the research design itself. To get more complete data, the research should have been conducted over a longer period of time. This research was conducted over an eight month period, with the actual field research portion limited to a three month period. A longer period of time would have allowed for more departments to be examined and for a wider geographic area to be explored.

Prejudicial data may also arise from the sex of the researcher. For many years, the field of firefighting has been solely composed of men. The recent introduction of women does not change the view of society or some firefighters that this is an "old boys club." As a woman, I was treated differently in this predominantly male field. For example, during the majority of the meetings, the chiefs asked the members to "act right." This led to many members apologizing for their actions, such as using profanity around me. This "special treatment" was stressed because I was not only an outsider but also a woman. Although most of the members were very cordial and cooperative, there were occasional sexist remarks made directly to me or about women in general. Also, since I am a woman I had to surpass my own preconceptions of this "male world."
Presentation of Data

The data is presented in the following six chapters. The next chapter discusses a historical view of VFDs and the previous research conducted about them. Next, in Chapter III, the policies of VFDs will be discussed. This chapter included topics such as finances, recruitment, and the duties of individuals as well as departmental duties to the community. Chapter IV will examine the strictly social aspects of VFDs including competition, kinship, and motivation. Chapter V is devoted to another social aspect, the role of women and gender relations in the VFDs. The final analysis and conclusions are the subject of Chapter VI.
CHAPTER II

AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS

Fire Protection

The protection of its citizens is a concern of all communities. Such protection ranges from criminal activity to fire. Even as early as 732 B.C., citizens of Rome banded together to form fire brigades in order to extinguish fires (Gray 1929:10). Fire protection was an event directly involving the community members in the United States. This involvement went beyond the financial contributions of today to physical exertion. By the late 1600s, major cities, such as Boston, began acquiring fire engines (Morris 1953:379; Zurier 1982:20; Carruth 1987). At this time, other cities, like Philadelphia, began initiating fire protection regulations. These regulations involved the cleanliness of one's chimney and the requirement of all homes to keep a bucket for use during bucket brigades, which was still the basis of fire protection (Gray 1929:12). At this time in firefighting history, direct community involvement was the backbone of fire protection.

Volunteer Fire Departments

The first organized fire department was established between 1718 and 1752.
Although there are conflicting reports, the most widely accepted story states that Benjamin Franklin established the first organized fire department in 1736 (Gray 1929:29; McCosker 1945:40; Morris 1953:379; United Way of America 1978:20; National Fire Protection Association 1995). This department, based in Philadelphia, was strictly operated by volunteers. Franklin was not the only historic figure who volunteered his time at a fire department, however. Other famous volunteers include: (a) John Hancock, (b) Alexander Hamilton, (c) Samuel Adams, (d) Aaron Burr, (e) Paul Revere, and (f) George Washington (Ditzel 1971:13; Jacobs 1976:196; Zurier 1982:14).

For the next twenty years, many major cities went on to organize their volunteer fire departments and fire insurance companies. In this time VFDs became connected to the development and inclination of fire insurance companies. For, by 1752, it had become apparent that families would need financial support following a fire to rebuild their lives and so once again Ben Franklin played a major role in the development of fire services (Gray 1929:42; Morris 1953:380). With this in mind Franklin developed the first fire insurance company, called the Philadelphia Contributionship. This company, however, limited its membership to those that did not have trees in their yards because of the increased fire hazard. In 1784, another company was begun to insure those people that had trees in their yards (Gray 1929:42-44). The advent of such companies changed the face of firefighting. The insurance companies began to maintain their own fire companies. These companies were composed of volunteer firefighters but received equipment and financial support
from their insurance company affiliates. Each fire department and insurance company
had an emblem mounted onto a plaque that was placed on the home or building that
was insured. It was this mark that determined which fire company should attend to the
building, in case of fire (Gray 1929:44). Actions such as this began to bestow power
upon the fire insurance companies. For it was these insurance companies that began to
control and direct the development of VFDs.

VFDs were moving across the country from their beginnings on the east coast.
The growth of these stations was due to their vital role in the communities. For these
stations not only extinguished fires but also provided an avenue for achieving higher
social standing in the community. The firemen were seen as heroes who gained
prestige through their firefighting activities (Ditzel 1971:16; Jacobs 1976:197; Zurier
1982:29). The volunteer fireman was often viewed as, "an active, physically able,
civic-minded member of his community" (Morris 1953:358). This perception of
firemen as civic-minded, heroic individuals bestowed prestige on the firefighting trade.
"The second century [of American firefighting] embraced the romantic age of the
volunteer fireman and his elaborate hand 'musheens'" (Morris 1953:5). This "romantic
age" also led to the establishment of American firefighting folk heroes. The most
popular of these folk heroes was called "Fire-fighting Mose." This character was
based upon the volunteer firefighters of the 1830s. He was portrayed as larger-than-
life, both in physical characteristics and in his actions (Felton 1955; Zurier 1982:54).
His character epitomized the pride and dedication of volunteer firefighters during this
"romantic age" (Morris 1953:5). As early as the mid-1800s, VFDs began developing
in the Midwest. For example, in the city of Kalamazoo, located in West Michigan, the first VFD appeared in 1846 (Dunbar 1959:65).

Paid Fire Departments

Even with the prestige of VFDs, insurance companies continued to control the development of firefighting. It was due to pressure by fire insurance companies upon VFDs, that paid fire departments began to develop. An important development in satisfying the control of the fire insurance companies was in 1853, the first fire company adopted a steam powered fire engine (Ditzel 1971:40; Carruth 1987). This invention greatly effected the future of firefighting and was resisted by volunteer departments. These machines went against their traditional method of fighting fires. However, the insurance companies felt that the machines would be very beneficial in the extinguishing of blazes and lowering the costs to the insurance companies. So in 1853, when the fire company in Cincinnati bought a steam engine, another problem was created. Since the company had given into the insurance companies and the volunteers refused to operate the steam engine, a paid fire department was established (Ditzel 1971:12). With the advent of this first paid department and the growing power of the insurance companies, the urban VFD began to fall by the wayside (Ditzel 1971:40). Shortly after the Civil War, the last major city adopted a paid fire department. Some sources claim the city to be New York, while others claim it to be Philadelphia (Gray 1929:75; Ditzel 1971:12). In either case, the paid fire departments were taking over areas that had previously been dominated by VFDs.
Even though paid departments were becoming common in major cities, most smaller communities still supported VFDs (Morris 1953:357). As years went by, some large cities began to incorporate VFDs in cooperation with their paid departments (Jacobs 1976:197). Fire departments now consisted of both volunteer and/or paid fire personnel. With the continuing growth of U.S. cities, the number of fire departments grew too. In 1995, a total of 30,000 fire departments were in operation in the U.S. Of these, about 5,200 departments (or 17%) have a mixture of personnel while 25,000 (or 83%) are either strictly volunteer or strictly paid departments (National Fire Protection Association 1995). Thus, as American society has developed, so too many new developments have taken place in firefighting.

West Michigan VFDs

Four diverse VFDs from West Michigan form the basis of this thesis research:

1. Company A is composed of approximately 25 members, both male and female. These members are paid-on-call and serve in a small, rural community. This community, of about 3,500 people, is composed predominantly of white-collar workers and business owners.

2. Company B also consists of around 25 members of men and women. These members however, receive no compensation from their small rural area. Although this community of 6,000 people is composed mainly of farmers and blue-collar workers, a small urban region is growing nearby.
3. Company C is the largest department, around 35 members, but has no women in the department. However, unlike the other departments, this company had Chicano or Hispanic members present at the times of department meetings. While the officers are paid for the use of their vehicles, all other members are strictly nonpaid volunteers. This department serves a small, blue-collar rural community, as well. Many members of this department are farmers or work with corporate farmers. The availability of these firefighters is restricted by harvests and plantings.

4. The only company with a paid professional firefighter on staff is Company D. This company's members are all paid-on-call. Company D serves a small rural community of about 6,000 people that are supported by their predominantly blue-collar occupations.
CHAPTER III

POLICIES OF VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS

Federal, State, and Local Agencies

There are many governmental agencies that influence as well as regulate the lives and duties of firefighters, paid and volunteer. These agencies exist on a federal, state, and local level. In most instances, the federal agencies have state or local branches to implement and enforce their codes.

At a federal level, there exists the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and the General Safety Standards Commission that work together to regulate firefighting equipment and training. For instance, the NFPA determines the hours of training that firefighters must have to be certified. Minimally, firefighters must have a Firefighter 1 (FF1) rating, which includes 130 hours of training. To receive a Firefighter 2 (FF2) rating, a total of 240 hours must be completed satisfactorily. Also at the federal level is the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) which establishes laws concerning the well-being and safety of firefighters while using their equipment.

Gathering reports and performing inspections for the federal agencies are the state affiliates. These inspections, typically performed by MI-OSHA, lead to reports
made to OSHA and can lead to fines for the departments that do not conform to OSHA guidelines. State Fire Marshal Offices implement the codes of NFPA and state fire codes. For example, in Michigan 20 hours of training per year is required of all fire departments. It is this office that requires annual reports from the departments regarding the number of fire calls and injuries recorded by a department.

State Fire Marshals also have offices at the local level. These field offices are responsible for collecting and compiling report information from the fire departments. Also, in many communities a local board or city council has an impact upon the fire department. For example, especially in towns with VFDs, the council can appoint officers of the department. In Company D, the chief is interviewed and appointed to the position by the town council. The council and the chief then work together to appoint the lieutenants and assistant chiefs, as well.

Although not directly related to fire service, the Insurance Services Office (ISO) does impact the prosperity of fire departments because of its role in setting local fire ratings. These fire ratings, based on the likelihood of fire, effect the insurance rates of homes and businesses. If a fire department has a good fire rating then insurance rates are lower to the homeowners and the community may be more willing to financially assist the departments. The financial ability to update and maintain equipment is tied into the ratings established by the ISO.

All of these agencies were judged as important by the fire companies, not
because of their actions as much as because of their increasing demands and continuing interference upon the VFD.

Involvement of the Governmental Agencies

In spite of all the regulations and regular inspections, state and federal governmental agencies are not considered to be the controlling bodies of firefighting. In most instances of my research, fire companies considered the state branch of OSHA and the local councils to be their governing bodies. It is these agencies that go to departments for inspections or visit the community to bear witness to their performance. Also, according to one informant (MD1), there is no communication between the department and the state agencies. This sentiment is also supported by members of the State Fire Marshal's Office. One officer (MS1), that I spoke with at a fire marshal office stated that he could not answer my questions because, besides not being a firefighter and therefore not having any direct personal understanding of the job, the officer also opined that the state has no real control over the fire departments. The only explicit control that the state has is in regards to the filing of the required reports. However, these reports come from the VFDs themselves and any information is based solely on their unmonitored records. Similarly, this officer (MS1) could not even estimate the number of volunteer or paid departments within his region because his role is simply to collect and not monitor the fire reports.

Although MI-OSHA and local councils are viewed as the practical supervisors of the fire departments because they are units that enforce the regulations, other state
and federal agencies have many expectations of the firefighters such as complying with these regulations and filing reports. All four companies that I spoke with felt that the reports and paperwork required by these agencies were too much for a VFD. Many VFDs are now moving to a full-time, paid chief because of this. For instance, in Grand Rapids Michigan, a volunteer fire chief recently demoted himself to a general firefighter because of the paperwork required from so many agencies, as well as the firefighting duties were seen to be too much for a volunteer (News 8 1995). Members from all four companies believe that these regulations and excess paperwork eventually will suffocate the VFD. Many stated that the VFD would not die out completely but rather would become satellite stations of a larger paid department, the latter handling the paperwork. Most of the members believe that in a short time fire chiefs of VFDs will be paid firefighters, as in Company D, in large part because of the increasing paperwork.

Recruitment

The perpetuation of VFDs depends importantly on the recruitment of new groups of firefighters (Zurier 1982:38). In all of the West Michigan departments examined a potential recruit must first put in an application and then wait for an opening in the department. Two of the companies have waiting lists for their departments that go back as far as three years. The potential recruits are typically composed of friends of current members. Other VFDs, such as Company D, however have officers appointed by the city council. Company C gains some of their members
through their Junior Squad. This squad is composed of high school and college students. Once these students graduate, they may apply for full membership. Since they have experience with the company and its firefighting strategies, they are often put ahead of other applicants. The applicants must be considered honest and rational. Aside from strong character, the applicant must be "physically fit and civic-minded" (Earnest 1979:145). After a vacancy has been established in department, a new recruit is put on probation for one month to a year. During this time, the recruit must work toward earning their FF1 rating, after which they become a full member of the department.

Gender Issues

Since the 1970s when first women began appearing in fire departments, important changes in recruiting have taken place. Some of the changes involve federal laws, these laws prohibit the employment of a capable person to be determined by the applicant's sex (Lowry 1982:8). The Bona fide Occupational Qualifications (BFOQ) will not allow for a job to be limited to one sex because of heavy lifting, customer preference, threats of physical violence, or unsafe working conditions (Lowry 1982:11). People, including firefighters, must by assessed as individuals and not excluded based upon their gender. In addition to the BFOQ there are approximately 12 laws and regulations that give people of both sexes an equal opportunity regarding employment. Some of these laws are: (a) the Fourteenth Amendment, (b) the Civil Rights Act of 1957, (c) Title VI of Civil Rights Act of 1964, and (d) the National

Although these laws may appear to be a legal liability to only paid fire departments, there are also repercussions for VFDs.

The volunteer fire department is not a place of employment, and because it isn't it does not fall under the same regulations that would exist if a minority group member or a woman was not given the same opportunity as a white male to be a paid firefighter. But your department [VFD] is accountable to state and federal laws on discrimination if some portion of operating expenses, however small, are dispersed through [governmental funds]...[Stewart 1982:155]

Aside from the money attained through fund-raisers, most VFDs rely on local and federal government monies.

Regardless of the laws, all of the companies that I researched stated that they recruit openly. All the chiefs reiterated that it is the capabilities, and not the sex, of a person that determines the person's abilities as a firefighter. However, there are only 40,000 female firefighters (or 4%) of the one million firefighters in the United States (Tower 1995b:D3; National Fire Protection Association 1995).

Problems

Besides conforming with federal laws regarding recruiting there are other avenues of frustration for the fire departments, such as low numbers of recruits. While two of the companies observed have waiting lists, the other two companies are actively searching for recruits. The search for members is typical of most VFDs in recent years. Between 1983 and 1991, the number of volunteer firefighters in the U.S. decreased by 13.8% (Mahtesian 1993:24). This decline in volunteer firefighters is due
to many lifestyle changes. These changes include: (a) less community spirit, (b) fewer employers allowing their workers to leave the job site for a fire, and (c) often working outside of the town in which firefighters serve. This commute to and from a fire cuts down on the response time, as well as the increased wear on the firefighter's automobile (Mahtesian 1993:24). These lifestyle/employment issues impact recruitment adversely and affect the rural and suburban areas in which VFDs numerically out number all others (Mahtesian 1993:24).

Duties

Aside from answering a pager day or night to go out to fires, there are many more duties that every volunteer firefighter must perform. Stations that consist of volunteer and paid firefighters, often use the volunteers as replacements or reserves for paid firefighters. These volunteers are expected to have the same basic training as the paid personnel, as well as be able to operate all of the equipment. Depending on the specific department, some volunteers may even be paid when replacing paid personnel (Kimball 1968:12-14). However, the departments in the current study are all volunteer and therefore treat their members equally in regard to duties. The typical volunteer firefighter attends meetings, maintains equipment, participates in VFD fund-raising activities, and goes on fire calls (Jacobs 1976:200). More specifically, Company C has three meetings a month including a practice and an equipment maintenance session. The other departments have a business and work session each month, and typically have training segments also. These meetings attempt to keep the
members abreast of changing technologies and techniques, along with a chance for a social gathering. Most of the members went together socially to clubs or restaurants after their meetings. Of course this is not the only social activity that the groups engage in during the year. For example, companies A and C plan Christmas or Valentine's Day gatherings for their members.

Outside the firehouse, the departments are also involved in many community activities. Three of the four companies are involved in the town or city parades. Companies A, B, and C are also very involved in community youth programs. For instance, companies A and C assist their high schools with football games and graduation parties. Most of the companies are also involved with fire prevention workshops at the elementary schools. Company C seemed to be the most involved with the community's youth. This department plans: (a) fire prevention activities, (b) sponsors a Cub Scout troop, (c) assists in the construction of a playground, and (d) keeps a Junior Squad. All of these events, at the firehouse or beyond, and their careers keep the firefighters occupied at all times.

Structure of VFDs

The hierarchical structure of a VFD is typically described as being headed by the chief followed by: (a) the assistant chief, (b) lieutenant (s), (c) captain (s), (d) secretary, and/or (e) treasurer. This structure was typical among the VFDs that I studied, except that some did not have a lieutenant, secretary, or treasurer. All of these officers make up the executive board of their VFD. However, Company B has
an executive board and a fire command. The executive board is made of the secretary, treasurer, president, and fire chief. The executive board runs meetings, files all paperwork, and is responsible to the government for the compliance of regulations. The fire command runs practice sessions, performs company inspections, and directs the firefighters during a fire call. All of the VFDs had a six to seven member command chain. This chain of command is respected at a fire and regarding the business duties of the VFD. The officers must attend and run all of the meetings or practices, as well as all additional officer meetings. They must be active in recruiting and training at all times too. Some of these activities however are delegated amongst themselves or to committees within the membership.

At the head of each VFD is the chief. The chief is typically elected by the membership, usually depending on personal experience and willingness to take on the additional responsibility (Jacobs 1976:199). The chief must also be a manager, to motivate the firefighters and manage the many duties (Stewart 1982). A chief runs and organizes all meetings, general and executive. The chief must also make sure that all governmental regulations are met. This involves all of the paperwork and inspections. Although the chief often delegates things like training of new members, it is still the chief that is ultimately responsible for the activities of the company including supervising a fire. The assistant chief is the chief's right hand. In the event that a chief needs help or cannot function as chief, the assistant chief takes on the responsibility. However, in some companies, such as Company A, the chief often allows the first officer on the scene to be the commander.
Some companies also have lieutenants and/or captains. It is these individuals that often train the new recruits, relay commands from the chief or assistant chief, and manage the squad to ready the equipment (Kimball 1968:11).

EMS Involvement

The minimal training of emergency medical personnel is 81 hours. This training includes classes, homework, and clinical experience (Werner and Lemor 1974:69; Metz 1981:69). This training is in addition to the firefighting certification. All of this training time and the additional equipment expense, makes EMS a secondary function to many fire departments (Chaiken and Gladston 1974:8-9). In 1974, 24% of all ambulance services in the U.S.A. were from volunteer fire and police departments (Chaiken and Gladston 1974:8). However, in 1995 even fewer VFDs had ambulance services. None of the departments in the research, conducted any services beyond initial first aid, nor did they possess EMT-equipped ambulances. Although all of the departments must carry emergency kits and members must be trained in first aid with CPR, regulations are too strict for these VFDs to perform full-fledged emergency services.

All of these departments claim that it is the additional regulations and increased training that led to private or volunteer ambulance services separating themselves from VFDs. One of the companies does acknowledge a volunteer EMS unit in its region. Many of Company C's members also belong to this EMS unit, but claim their first priority must be to the fire department. By the 1980s, 60% of all rural EMTs were
volunteers (Metz 1981:2). These volunteers typically have five hour shifts, with three people on shift at all times (Hostetler 1976:11). One such West Michigan ambulance service was begun in 1973 by the local Rotary and Lions Clubs. This EMS unit was operated by 50 or more people, with the local citizens paying an annual amount to be served by this service (Hostetler 1976:12).

In most regions of the U.S. there is actually a competitive relationship between the EMS units and VFDs (Metz 1981:150). These feelings of animosity arise from authority and responsibility issues. Authority at the scene is often left in the hands of the firefighters, rather than the private EMTs (Metz 1981:62). Besides this, EMTs that are involved with fire departments cannot advance in their field without first becoming firefighters (Metz 1981:62). These feelings of animosity, the expenses, and the additional training have left most VFDs in Michigan without an EMS auxiliary unit.

Finances

Besides all of the other duties performed by the VFD officers, they also are concerned with the financial stability of their departments. Without funding the VFDs cannot upgrade or obtain equipment, train members or recruit new ones (Cull and Hardy 1974:6). These funds are obtained in many ways, typically fundraising or local government monies. Regardless of how the money is obtained all of the departments, in this thesis research, have recently built or are building new fire stations. Companies A and B use fund-raisers to get money for equipment and community groups or
charities. In two of the companies, their cities support them financially through a milage. These milages range from one to ten mils and may not require a community vote, depending on the community. Company C also keeps a separate fund to purchase new equipment. Although Company D does not have a milage, it is supported by a town fund. This fund must be applied for regularly and the department is required to have a formal contract with the town. Hence, whether through a milage or direct funding, the local government has an influence as well as an interest in the fire department.
CHAPTER IV

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS

The community spirit of the VFDs shines through many aspects of society. Community-mindedness is apparent in the fund-raisers that they choose to organize and in the strong family ties of the VFDs. Even competition between agencies illustrates the companies desire for community well-being. Although the competition frustrates the individuals and may cause animosity between agencies, it is the well-being of the community and its citizens that is the driving force behind their actions.

Fund-raisers

Without dismissing the financial aspect of fund-raisers, the VFDs studied in this thesis research project also noted the importance of fund-raisers as community events. When companies A and B have fund-raisers, these events prove to be beneficial to the community. For example, Company A sponsors the local high school's graduation party. While accepting donations, the primary purpose of this event is to protect the students by providing a safe party environment. There are other events which are primarily targeted toward making money for equipment but even these events are intended to give something back to the citizens. Some companies
make money through flower sales or by having dinners. Companies C and D do not have fund-raisers, however. Company C does not need the additional funds because of their financial security with their milage. This company still does sponsor many community activities and events though. The members of Company C express their desire to help their community and strengthen the bonds between its members through the community events. Company D is attempting to reinstate their community events and fund-raisers. The community in their region did not support their efforts for many years because of problems with previous volunteers, such as one of the volunteers running off with the monies from fund-raisers. The members of Company D are hopeful however, and feel that they will soon be able to hold fund-raisers in their community. All of the departments acknowledged the importance of their involvement in the community, whether it be through firefighting or fund-raisers.

Kinship

Kinship is an essential aspect of many VFDs. Family is an important element in recruiting. However, family in the VFD goes beyond bloodlines or surnames, for all members of the company are viewed as family. This bond between individual firefighters and entire units reflects itself onto the greater community, strengthening solidarity within the entire community.

For many firefighters, family ties and tradition play a major role in their joining of a fire department. This is clearly illustrated by the four companies I have explored. In the majority of the interviews, the members state that someone in their family had
been or is currently involved in volunteer firefighting. For instance, in company C, MC2's father was a chief in this same department and MC3's father was the city's mayor with strong ties to the VFD. Both gentlemen felt that this had an impact on their decision to join the fire department. This is a normal occurrence for Company C, though. About 75% of the company have had relatives involved in the VFD, according to MC1. The familial ties are not exclusive to the male firefighters, however. The females in all of the companies explained that either fathers, husbands, uncles, or grandparents have been involved in a VFD. Elsewhere, one researcher illustrates this point by way of Beth Murine who is the daughter of a firefighter and sister of a firefighting lieutenant (Earnest 1979:65). Indeed, family ties are important to VFDs across the United States. For example, the Rome family has been involved with VFDs in New York since 1738 (Earnest 1979:64).

The involvement of one or more families in any department can cause power struggles. Historically, to check some of this power, a son was not allowed to succeed his father as chief. The firefighters did not want the office of chief to be an inherited position but would allow a nephew to become chief (Jacobs 1976:200). Companies B, C, and D currently have a family or families that have many members in the department and therefore have power regarding matters that are voted upon, such as the appointment of officers or community programs. Company B has four families currently involved in the department but does not feel that this causes a problem. Part of this security comes because the families would have to unite to exercise a controlling number during a vote. The families do not attempt to band together and
direct the company for their benefit. However, in companies C and D there is a potential for a stalemate or struggle. In both instances there are at least four members of a family in the department. This could lead to the family affecting the department's decisions regarding issues of programs or elections.

Besides affinal and blood relations in the department, many of the members expressed their feelings of kinship with the other members of the department. For example, a member of Company B views himself as a father figure to the younger firefighters. While, members of Company A view their firefighting company as a "family unit". This family unit not only creates a community within itself but projects that sense of community out into their greater community. The ties of kinship, whether affinal or fictive, play a major role in the development and recruitment of VFDs.

Competition

Except for families, there is no sense or acknowledgment of competition within the department. There are, however, many other departments towards which members feel competitive. Historically many VFDs competed with other VFDs to make it to a fire first or to pump the most water, but this type of competition no longer exists (Dunbar 1955:1:276; Zurier 1982:40). That does not mean that certain companies do not still feel that their regions are intruded upon by other companies or that their company gets less respect than another from the community.
Some of the competition and conflict stems from VFDs being called upon to do the work of other agencies. For instance, Company A is often requested by the local board to hand out parking tickets which would normally fall under the jurisdiction of the police department. In other situations, all of the departments emphasized frustration with the private EMS units. In an emergency, they are very limited as to what actions they may take and must, therefore, wait for the EMS unit to arrive. This frustration emerges from the massive amounts of regulations regarding the kinds of involvement that VFDs may undertake in emergency situations.

Many of the departments also feel that they are in competition with the full-time paid fire departments. Some members suggest that the paid firefighter shows no respect to the VFD or any individual volunteer firefighter. These departments are taking over the VFD in many cities and the fear of volunteers not being unable to perform firefighting keeps a competitive edge on any of their interactions.

Some companies, such as Company D, also come into conflict with their town or city council. These councils often try to run the department without any real knowledge of its operations. Their knowledge of firefighting is often limited to the restrictions and regulations handed down by the state or federal governments to these councils and their fire departments. In the case of Company D, the council controls much of its funding. Therefore, Company D must often succumb to the council's wishes and this creates resentment or conflict. In all of these cases, the conflict between two units of public service or government in a community can cause a breakdown in community solidarity.
The Motive of VFDs

Historically, the only purpose of VFDs, other than to extinguish fires, was to organize a social club (Dunbar 1955:1:276; Jacobs 1976; Zurier 1982:20). Many VFDs were compared to athletic teams, for activities such as competing with other units and giving each other nicknames (Zurier 1982:40; Perkins 1987:348). The older members of these clubs often referred to them as "card and checkers clubs" because they spent less time at a fire and more time socializing at the firehouse (Vidich and Bensman 1968:26). Although the younger firefighters were out at the fires, they too spent time socializing at the firehouse (Vidich and Bensman 1968:27). It is this view of the "good ol' boys club" that many people still have of the volunteer firefighter.

The Public View

Although many years have passed since the "good ol' boys club" was a reality, many people still hold that view of volunteer firefighters. In addition, some individuals perceive volunteer firefighters as only "siren jockeys" or "thrill-seekers", with no sense of responsibility towards the community. This view of firefighters and VFDs leaves many people with little respect for their work (Lozier 1976:9). Company A expressed their frustration with the apathy that is expressed towards them in their community. Members of the company feel that only those that they have assisted directly are at all appreciative of their services. Some feel that the volunteer firefighters have secretive informal activities that are intentionally not revealed because they want to protect their
image (Woods 1972:222). These secretive activities, according to Woods, are perceived by the community as dishonorable episodes within the VFD (Woods 1972:222).

Even with these feelings of distrust by the some citizens, others are truly supportive of their VFDs. Companies C, B, and D assert that their community has a positive view of them. Some of these comments are exhibited through such things as newspaper articles. To illustrate, a citizen of Richland, Michigan wrote to the editor of the local paper to express their appreciation for their local VFD. This citizen suggested that whereas the company always had a bad reputation around the town, it was important to recognize that these individuals are heroes and should be thanked, not ridiculed (Lantinga 1994:A11). For some, the reason for the positive feedback has to do with their quick response to a fire or assistance during a fire, but mostly it has to do with the VFD's community involvement. Companies C and B explained that their biggest praise always comes from their work with programs, like fire prevention workshops or Junior Squad. Along with this, the widows and families of previous firefighters are often invited to private social events of the department. This gives the community a view of the department as a supportive organization. Members of Company A say that their image improved with the acquisition of new equipment, namely new trucks. This gives the community a sense of pride as well as security regarding the fire technology. The companies also believe that by having an explicit conduct code for their members, like honesty and civic-mindedness, the public is able
to view them as a respectable group of people and not the rabble-rousing firefighters of yesteryear.

Besides the praise that the firefighters receive, some say that their positive position in the community can be measured through fund-raisers or ease of recruitment. For instance, Company C explains that their department has never been larger nor has it ever had a longer list of those waiting to join. The members view this as a sign of their positive community image, the feeling that if there is a problem then their numbers would be lower.

The Private View

Although there are many different reasons why firefighters choose to risk their lives for others, the reason most often given is "to devote some portion of their lives to serving their fellow man" (Cull and Hardy 1974:5). This sentiment was often expressed during this thesis fieldwork. For example, one informant (FA4) said that her motivation was to "help the community and be a kind of savior to people." Similarly when the motivation for the VFD is explained, it is often declared to be a community responsibility (Pearce 1983b:153). All of the members that I interviewed state that it is a sense of community and the need to help others that has led them to form their VFD. In addition to this community-mindedness, the firefighters also enjoy the rush of adrenaline, pride, and camaraderie with each other and the community (Smith 1988). Most will even admit to the want for respect, honor, and a greater self-esteem from the community (Jacobs 1976:203). However, personal esteem is not their primary
motive or purpose; the security and safety of the community is said to be the ultimate incentive driving them to become volunteer firefighters.
CHAPTER V

WOMEN AND THE ISSUES OF GENDER IN VFDS

Her Story

The first work that women did with VFDs was in the form of auxiliary groups. These auxiliary groups often organized fund-raisers, maintained records, and prepared refreshments for the firemen upon their return from a blaze (Morris 1953:359; Jacobs 1976:201). It was not until 1974 that the first woman became a certified firefighter. She was Judy Livers from Virginia and she paved the way for female firefighters, paid and volunteer alike (Craig and Jacobs 1985:61). By 1975, there were already 250 female firefighters certified nationwide with 73 in Michigan (Earnest 1979:155).

However, at this time women were allowed to work only during the day shifts when men were often at work or school. These women were licensed but were still only utilized as a replacement for their male counterparts (Earnest 1979:157). Though by 1995, there were over 40,000 female firefighters nationwide and 100 female career firefighters in the state of Michigan that were acknowledged as full-fledged firefighters and not just replacements for male firefighters (Tower 1995b:D3). Within the four companies that are a part of this study, there are a total of six female members, four of whom made themselves available to me during this research.
The Views of Female Firefighters

Motivation

For all of the women in this study, family is the greatest motivation to be a firefighter. For two of the women, their husbands and/or sons are firefighters in their company. With the men in their lives involved in VFDs, the sentiment is to join in on the men's activities. Another of the women joined because the VFD symbolizes family to her. Many of her family, father to grandfather, were involved in VFDs. She always saw what a strong impact that the VFD had directly in her family, and when her grandfather became ill it was the VFDs that came to his rescue. The involvement in VFDs was not limited to the men in her family though. Even her grandmother worked in the VFD as a dispatcher. The family tradition and the sense of unity that the family felt with their VFDs inspired these women to become firefighters.

Besides family tradition, the women also commented on the sense of responsibility to their communities. For instance, one woman stated that she often stopped at car fires or accidents to assist the injured because in her small community everyone felt a responsibility to each other. Eventually, she decided that to truly help other members of her community, she should get the proper training and serve with the VFD. These findings are not surprising in light of the results of Ross' study discussed previously (Smith and Freedman 1972). This study of male and female volunteers determined that women are likely to join VAs that tie into family or community life (Smith and Freedman 1972). The general sentiment of these women is
that in their small communities there exists a sense of duty toward the citizens, often inspired by their families.

**Attitude**

Generally the women are optimistic about their experiences in the VFD. They all feel that they are given the same duties as their male counterparts and are expected to perform at the same level as the men. Although there are very few female volunteer firefighters nationally and in local units, these individuals do not feel intimidated or marginalized within their departments. One woman did admit, however, that occasionally a man in the unit would pamper her or that one would expect her to perform at a higher level than male firefighters of the same rating. For instance, some men would try to coax her into a position during a fire that could be unnecessarily dangerous. Unfortunately for women elsewhere, such behavior is not as intermittent as it is for these four local women. Some female firefighters liken their existence to a "fishbowl" because they feel as if they are watched by the male firefighters at all times (Smith 1988:140).

This "fishbowl" existence often stems from the ignorance of less educated people who have had little experience with female firefighters (Craig and Jacobs 1985:71-72). These persons are often older firefighters with the traditional view of firemen that has no place for firewomen (Craig and Jacobs 1985:72). Often this puts the woman on defensive and creates a competitive atmosphere and some animosity within the department. The women of this study stated that they did not perceive
themselves in direct competition with their male counterparts but do believe that they endure psychological hurdles within the community and department that the men do not experience. For although the men in these departments are typically accepting of the women, there is the initial period of adjustment for all parties when women become involved in the VFD. A woman expressed to me that the ideal situation is to be considered as "one of the guys" but still be acknowledged as a woman. She went on to explain that she wants to be accepted by her male peers socially, but that in some situations to remember that a female is in the room.

Interestingly, I was surprised to learn that one of the women expressed a feeling of animosity toward other potential female firefighters. This firefighter admitted to me that her initial reaction to my presence was one of jealousy, a reaction that was not characteristic of the other female firefighters in this research. It was not until she was reassured that I was not a potential member but a researcher, that she could put these feelings to rest. She stated that she was surprised by her feelings too. However, she was glad to be made aware of her territoriality regarding the men in her unit and the jealousy that arose with the thought of another woman encroaching upon that territory.

Another avenue that causes competition and conflict between members of a fire department is fitness testing. Although this testing does not appear currently to be a problem within the VFD, with an increase in regulations the potential development of such a problem does exist. The fitness test is currently causing controversy within paid fire departments across the U.S. Some firefighters feel that these physical tests
are designed to keep women out of firefighting while others feel that if a person cannot pass these tests then they should not be a firefighter. With such a conflict arising, some cities have abolished the fitness testing or have designed a different test for the female candidates (Smith 1988:140; Anonymous 1995:B7). Still others feel that even if women can pass the fitness tests that they are too great of a risk to be firefighters (Stewart 1982:156). Many of these arguments have turned the issue into a battle of the sexes instead of a discussion regarding emergency abilities and preparedness. These conflicts will only be resolved through additional governmental intervention and then this problem will likely to find its way to the VFDs.

Changes

As women have become involved with VFDs, changes have occurred within the departments and the communities. For the most part, the women that I spoke with claim that the acceptance by the department and community is the biggest change. Most of these women are the first ones in their departments. It is these women that must lay the groundwork for other women to come into the department. To illustrate, a firefighter in Pine Lake Michigan told a local reporter that when she joined her department nine years ago the men were totally against her joining their ranks. She had to prove that she could perform all the same duties, such as pulling the hose from the truck. Her determination to prove the men wrong and her skill with the equipment, paved the way for many more women to join the department. This department now has the highest number of female firefighters in its area (Tower
The women in this study feel that they not only need the reassurance and acceptance from the other firefighters but that they must also be accepted by the community as bona fide firefighters. Some of the women hope to gain this respect by increasing the number of community events in their area. These events would allow the women to increase their visibility as firefighters and perpetuate the community spirit that they feel is so important.

**Male Views on Female Firefighters**

**Attitude**

While some male firefighters outwardly admitted that they did not want female firefighters, others expressed their acceptance of the women. However, with every man that spoke of equality or acceptance, he also spoke of protection for these same women. One firefighter went so far as to refer to the women in his department as his "little sisters", without a similar reference for the male firefighters. This is not to imply, however, that the women are not appreciated for their contributions. One individual said that he feels that women handle first-aid situations much better because they express the sensitivity necessary for such incidents. On the other hand, he also said that the fatal incidents are not as appropriate for the women to handle because women are outwardly emotional. He did stress that the men are also emotionally effected by these situations but they do not publicly display such feelings. During these fatal accidents, the men typically make jokes or tease each other to hide their
frustration or pain. Whereas the men are more open about their feelings to their female counterparts. The men feel that they can confide their true feelings to the women in their unit. This sensitivity works against the women as well, however, because then some men do not feel that they can tease them or treat them as part of their group for they view women as fragile and unable to handle such actions (Woods 1972:223).

Interestingly, the all male company in this study (Company C) spoke of female equality and their acceptance of a female firefighter should one decide to become part of their department. But when a woman from their Junior Squad was eligible to become a full member she was dismissed. All of the officers assured me that her dismissal was due to improper conduct and not because they did not want a female firefighter in their department. They currently have another female member of the Junior Squad, whose involvement in the department is also in question due to lack of participation and she may also be dismissed. This could be just an unfortunate coincidence but, perhaps, it is an issue of pride with these firefighters. For many men, it is their sense of pride that prevents them from enduring women as equals in the male dominated world of firefighting (McCarl 1985:110).

Changes

Many changes have emerged as a consequence of the introduction of women to volunteer firefighting, but for men some changes are necessary and entail additional expense, such as of protective gear and clothing (Earnest 1979:155). All of the men
also expressed the need for different accommodations in their new firehouses, bathrooms and/or bunk areas. Some companies have solved these problems by putting a reversible sign on the one bathroom or by initiating a dress code of T-shirts and shorts during any sleeping periods for their single bunk area (Lowry 1982:64). All of these concerns are based on the financial strain that it puts on these growing and developing departments, whereas the concern of the women involves a sense of community and acceptance.

Another major change noted by the men is one of departmental positions. In some of the companies, women are officers within the department and/or members of the executive board. Not only are these women officers in their departments, many are also members of city or town councils. This is yet another change that weakens the previously male dominated community. Women not only belonging to community associations, but also running them and having influence within society changes the range of power that men previously had in these situations. This new found power is also a change for the women that have it to exercise in their communities. The prominent position of women in both their departments and communities is an adjustment that all of these firefighters are learning to cope with currently.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

It has been acceptable for many years to study a group or community as a microcosm of a larger entity, and it is on this basis that the research is presented (Arensberg 1968:II:532). Taking this one step further, Vidich and Bensman insist that it is the institutions that individuals are affected by that determine their patterns of and patterns for behavior (Vidich and Bensman 1968:285). This bottom-up, or individual to community, approach has been reflected in many facets in this thesis research. The male and female firefighters represent gender relations and volunteer firefighters. The VFDs are examples of voluntary associations and the impact upon their communities. Although the VFDs examined are from specific communities, these communities become a microcosm of all West Michigan communities, which may be a microcosm of communities throughout the Midwest.

This research can be said to illustrate part of the base of American society, its Midwestern communities. It not only examines volunteer fire departments but also their impact upon the social structure and social organization of its community. In doing so, it reveals the social characteristics of Michigan and the Midwest, an often forgotten region. Included in these social characteristics is a look into gender relations, based in reality and not political correctness.
Social Impact Upon Society

The variability within and between the VFDs, in such things as finances or sexual composition, compliment the differences that exist in communities. While the variability of VFDs is often based in logistic matters, like the number of fund-raisers, there are areas in which the departments all agree to disagree. For example, all of the VFDs cite their biggest problem as government interference. This interference, often in the way of regulations, paradoxically helps to bring the members of the department and all departments together. Many of the departments have members that also belong to their local city or town councils, this being an attempt to curb the degree of governmental influence. Also, many firefighters belong to county councils thereby promoting interaction between individuals of different departments. The cohesion of the company itself and with other companies to control government influences, sends a message to the community. The message constitutes a pattern for behavior which accepts that there exist differences in groups but that there can still be a common ground by which to come together.

There are other instances of cohesion apparent in this research. The unity that exists between the VFDs and their communities is the ultimate goal and purpose for most VFDs. Many of the companies spoke of the positive reaction that they receive from the members of their community and the personal worth they derive from giving public service. These citizens commend the firefighters not only for their noble work but also for their sense of community. This sense of community is portrayed through
many different projects from fire prevention workshops to graduation parties and many things in between. The admiration of the citizens is often apparent through fund-raisers or long lists of potential volunteer firefighters. The solidarity between the VFD and the community also stems from large numbers of family members involved in firefighting. All of the companies have occurrences of one or more families being involved with their unit for generations. This family tradition lends itself toward the development of a sense of family within the unit and toward an expression of closeness of the department to the community.

When any of these instances are taken out of the ideal world and are put into practice things change, and the best way to illustrate these changes is to analyze the role of women in VFDs. In conversations with the male and female firefighters, the role of women in VFDs appears very clear. These women are treated equally in duties, officer positions, and social events of their departments. The women are, for the most part, happy with their responsibilities and the behavior of their peers. It is this sense of equality that is portrayed to the community and within the department itself. However, beneath the surface many events make the female experience questionable. It is the pattern of behavior, or praxis, that becomes the essential element in this instance. For example, the men who speak of equality are also speaking of protecting their "little sisters". It is the firefighters who speak of open recruitment, that is, the gathering together of one's friends; yet with few women to bring female friends how are more women to become members? Perhaps it is not that the men want to include women in their activities but with the threat of sexual
discrimination, women are perceived to be a necessary element. All of the mixed sentiments in the VFDs regarding women are reflected in the larger community. These sentiments are not solely the responsibility of men but are composed of women's thoughts and actions too. The women and the men of these departments need to work together and acknowledge their variability to form a truly cohesive unit in their communities.

Another common component of all of these incidences is change. Changes have taken place with the arrival of female firefighters and changes have taken place in governmental regulations. The VFD has changed in many ways throughout the years but perhaps it is change itself that the firefighters resist most. The VFDs are however, beginning to recognize that changes are best dealt with through teamwork and solidarity. This teamwork extends beyond just the women and men of the department to all of the members of the community.

Through the actions of the VFDs, their communities reflect their social patterns of behavior and cultural patterns for behavior. It is these patterns that determine the social structure and social organization of society. By discerning such patterns, one can gain better insight into the social make-up of a society. By analyzing the actions and reactions of the VFDs in this thesis research, an important aspect of West Michigan communities can be described.
The Characteristics of a West Michigan Community

While the research base is a microcosm with numerous levels, one can generalize about a small West Michigan community, similar to those in which the VFDs are located. In these small, yet developing, rural communities family is still a very important element. Family extends beyond a genealogical chart, the entire community is regarded as a family unit. The associations and the individuals who belong to them are often very close-knit. The social solidarity and mutual aid among the associations and between their members, goes beyond them to define their entire community. These people believe in the idea of community responsibility and community spirit.

There does, however, appear to be some anxiety brought on by change. Changes can come in many ways to small, rural communities. For some the biggest adjustment comes with the equality of minorities, women included. However, for all of the advancements that have been made and all of the talk of equality, many are still apprehensive to include women in an equal fashion. It is through adjustments in patterns of and for behavior within an organization, that leads to changes within a community.

Along with additional data, this research could be used to compile a more detailed picture of the social organization and social structure of the American Midwest. For now, we must be satisfied to know that small, rural communities in West Michigan still tend to be built upon family and community spirit.
Appendix A

Protocol Clearance From the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board
Date: July 5, 1995

To: Akers, Michelle

From: Richard Wright, Interim Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 95-06-22

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "Volunteer fire departments: A neglected American volunteer association" has been approved under the exempt category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you must seek specific approval for any changes in this design. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: July 5, 1996

xc: Jacobs, Alan, ANTH
Appendix B

Volunteer Fire Departments in the State of Michigan
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(Compiled From: Michigan Fire Service 1994)
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Hostetler, Dave.

Jacobs, Alan H.
Kemper, Theodore.  

Kimball, Warren Y.  

Lantinga, Brenda.  

Little, Kenneth.  

Lowry, James H.  

Lozier, John.  

Mahtesian, Charles.  

Martin, Mike W.  

McCarl, Robert.  

McCosker, M.J.  
Metz, Donald.

Michigan Fire Service.

Morris, John V.


News 8.

Paine, Thomas.

Pearce, Jone.

Perkins, Kenneth.

Perlmutter, Felice Davidson.
Sills, Patrick, Hugh Butcher, Patricia Collins, and Andrew Glen.  

Smith, Constance, and Anne Freedman.  

Smith, David H.  

Smith, Dennis.  

Stall, Susan J.  

Stewart, Rob.  


Thompson III, Alexander M.  

Thomson, Randall J., and Michael Armer.  

Thulander, O. Alan.  
Tower, Chris.

United Way of America.

Vidich, Arthur, and Joseph Bensman.

Werner, Gail, and Penelope Lemor.

Witzeman, Lou.

Woods, Judy.

Zurier, Rebecca.