

Way We Were

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Title: A Volunteer Force to be Reckoned With

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A Volunteer Force to be Reckoned With

Imagine returning home to Park City after years of fighting fires in Salt Lake City to take part in the Utah State Fire Training program. World War II has long since been over, but, while women stepped into the man's world then, it isn't yet commonplace to see them in traditionally male dominated work environments, such as fire fighting. It's a bitter cold winter morning as you step into an old tin shed awaiting the new recruits. A few men walk in first, and, much to your surprise, twelve women follow suit. "Are your husband's coming?" you ask. "Oh, no, we're it," they respond. You pause for a minute considering this before continuing,

Well, okay. If you gals are willing to come out every Saturday morning we're going to train you and you're going to learn to be fire fighters. I'm not going to be easy on you because the fire doesn't know the difference between a man and a woman. You get on the end of that hose line, you're a fire fighter.¹

It was in this very circumstance that former Fire Chief James (Jim) Berry found himself years ago. Although women in the United States have been in the profession for over 200 years now, women were not officially introduced to fighting fires in Park City until the second half of the twentieth century. Berry recalled his first encounter

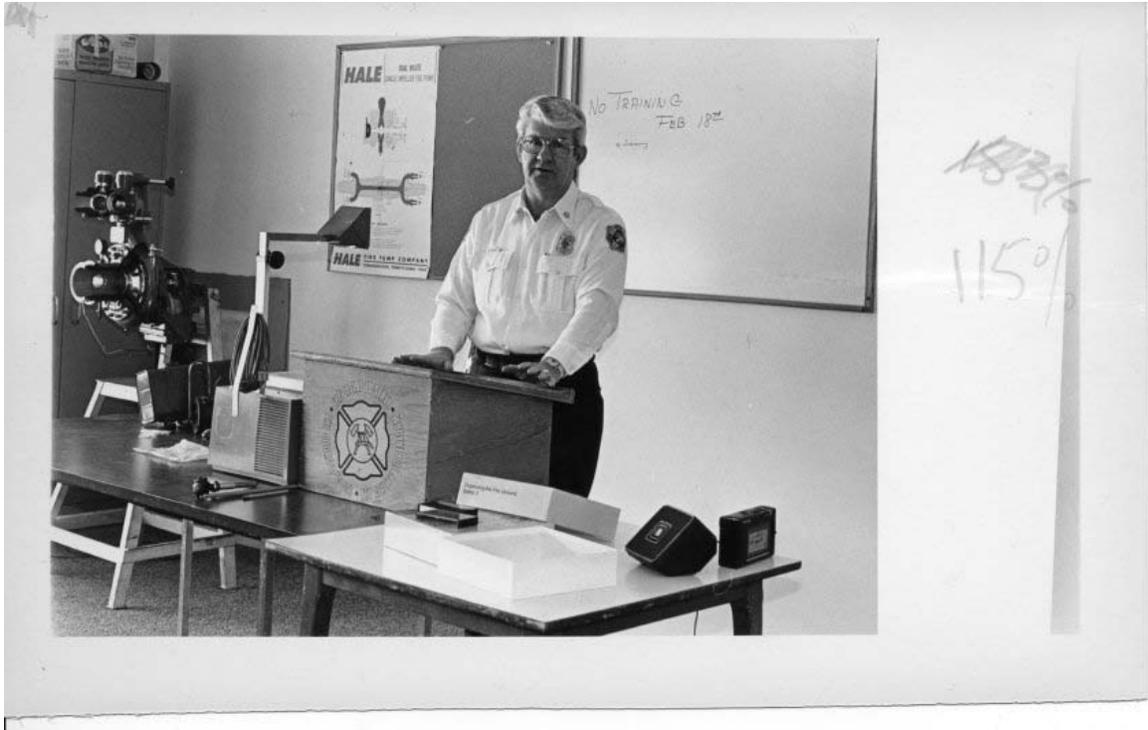
¹ James Berry, Interview with Anji Buckner, Personal interview, Park City, April 08, 2000.

with female firefighters during an interview with Anji Buckner on November 29, 2000. In it he describes his initial trepidation at their first meeting, but calls this experience with the ladies on the volunteer fire fighting force as “one of the highlights of [his] career.” He remembered one woman in particular who went through training nine months pregnant missing only one of twelve Saturdays to deliver her baby. Like a proud dad he spoke of their true courage and strength from the beginning of training to fighting fires around town.

Molly Williams. Marina Betts. Lillie Hitchcock. Sandra Forcier. Judith Livers.² These names don't ring a bell to most, nor do they conjure up women's rights images like the names Susan B. Anthony or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. However, each is credited with taking great steps forward in the women's fire fighting profession. From Molly Williams, the first known firefighter, a slave in New York during the 1800s, to Sandra Forcier, the first known paid firefighter who worked in North Carolina during the 1970s, to the twelve brave women who came out to the Summit Park Fire Training session; these women defied stereotypes and prejudice to protect their communities.

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² Terese Floren, “History of Women in Firefighting,” International Association of Women in Fire & Emergency Services, 2007, http://www.i-women.org/history_women_firefighting.php, (accessed December 01, 2012).



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