

Abstract**:**

Throughout the course of this project, I conducted nine oral histories with current and former women members of the San Antonio Fire Service from the 1970s-2020s. Then, these nine interviews were used to develop a detailed exhibit outline, outlining the different themes and sections featured in a hypothetical exhibit. Together, the nine oral history interviews and outline provide crucial insight into women’s experiences as fire service personnel in the San Antonio Fire Service. Touching on issues such as access to properly fitting uniforms and gear, male attitudes towards them, access to appropriate facilities, and how women navigated a male dominated profession, this project contributes significantly to our understanding of both the history of our local fire service and how that history compares with other fire services across the United States.

Project Description:

The primary goal of this capstone project was to record the experiences and reflections of current and former fire service personnel to create an exhibit outline using their insights and memories gathered from the interviews. The initial scope of the project was ambitious and has been refined in the two years since its inception to an oral history collection accompanied by an exhibit outline as opposed to the original idea which included a fully complete virtual exhibit and an oral history collection.

The *Women in the San Antonio Fire Service Oral History/Exhibit Outline* Project consists of nine oral history interviews which I conducted from Summer 2021-Fall 2021, with nine current and former members of the San Antonio Fire Service. These members are Lieutenant Bodeil Wigen Burke, Engineer Diana Chapa, Engineer Belinda Nichols, Captain Georgia Rakowitz, Battalion Chief Connie Hall, Engineer Kristy Crenshaw, Battalion Chief Brooke Hildreth, Engineer Chelsea Sykes-Wenske, and Firefighter Stephanie Rico. Along with the nine narrators, the San Antonio Fire Department Museum has also been a crucial partner in this project from the beginning. They have provided research materials which introduced me to the historiography regarding women in fire and to the San Antonio Fire Department’s own history. Additionally, the museum’s staff, including historian Hector Cardenas and 2nd Vice-President Captain Georgia Rakowitz, provided critical support as well. Hector provided relevant material from his archive, and Captain Rakowitz arranged my initial meetings with the narrators, provided contact information for them, arranged interview space when needed, and was also one of the project’s narrators. Together, these stakeholders made this project possible.

I first conceived this project with the fire museum in the Spring of 2021. At the outset, they provided me with initial research resources including two general histories of women in fire that helped me develop a historical background for the project about women in fire dating back to the 19th century and concluding in the late 20th century, as women began entering their professional urban fire departments in greater numbers. The museum also provided two sources about women in the San Antonio Fire Department, including a magazine article containing an interview with the department’s first two women firefighters published in 1980. Additionally, I also provided and/or recommended the Fire Museum with research sources I found while conducting my own separate research including the book, *On the Line: Women Firefighters Tell Their Stories,* written by firefighter and historian of women in fire, Linda F. Willig, who collected the memories and perspectives of women in fire services across the United States. I also gave them several “Women in the Fire Service” handbooks prepared by various authors in the 1990s and an early survey (1980) of women firefighters across the United States conducted by firefighter and historian, Terese M. Floren. I used these resources to develop my oral history questions.

I began drafting my oral history questions based on topics and themes explored in the secondary literature I acquired. For example, in *On the Line: Women Firefighters Tell Their Stories,* Linda F. Willing recalled that when she first joined her fire service in the City of Boulder, Colorado in 1981, she did not have a properly fitting uniform or gear. In fact, she wrote, that it would be years before the fire service provided her with appropriately fitting equipment and uniforms. Additionally, I used Terese M. Floren’s 1980 survey, which covered topics such as access to uniforms and equipment, access to private facilities, and experiences of discrimination, to compare Willing’s own reflections with survey results to better understand general trends among women in the fire service in the early 1980s. After examining these sources, I then developed questions I believed would further our understanding of these issues within the San Antonio Fire Service. I developed the other questions using similar methods. I also drew ideas for questions directly from Willing’s book such as questions regarding station life, memorable runs/calls, and obstacles faced in their careers. Finally, I also collaborated with Captain Georgia Rakowitz, the museum’s 2nd Vice President, and one of the project’s narrators, to review the questions prior to finalizing them. She in turn reviewed them with Battalion Chief Brooke Hildreth, and after their approval, I emailed them to the project’s nine narrators.

The nine interviews were recorded between July 2021 and November 2021. However, I only began editing transcripts in the Summer of 2022. I used all nine interviews to write the exhibit outline featured as an artifact in this capstone rationale. Two complete oral history interviews serve as artifacts in this project as well. Together, the nine interviews contributed to our understanding of the history of the San Antonio Fire Service by revealing and exploring themes such as change over time, navigating a male dominated profession, and the duties and responsibilities of women in the fire service. These nine interviews, and the themes and subthemes they explore, add greatly to our understanding of women in the San Antonio Fire Service. They reveal the different strategies and attitudes women adopted to succeed in their jobs and to get along with their male coworkers, the diverse obstacles they faced during their careers, the many different joys they experienced during their time in the fire service, and how the fire service changed their lives and them as well. The next stage of the project, the exhibit outline phase, was when I began to analyze the interviews and draw out themes and subthemes that I could use to develop my exhibit outline.

The exhibit design period was a lengthy phase, lasting from August 2022 to December 2022. Throughout this phase I read books such as Beverley Serrell’s *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* and John Summers’ *Creating Exhibits That Engage: A Manual for Museums and Historical Organizations* to learn more about the exhibit design process. In addition, I arranged an independent study with my graduate program director to better support my exhibit design process through biweekly readings, discussions, and assignment deliverables. Through the course I developed a big idea for my exhibit, flushed out its themes and subthemes by analyzing oral history transcripts and discussing said themes with my professor, discussed best practices for writing exhibit text, prepared samples of exhibit section introductions, and finally, prepared a detailed exhibit outline complete with sample section introductions as well as oral history quotes and excerpts meant to give readers an idea of the themes and content a fully realized exhibit might have included. However, because a public display was not created as part of the project, and because the oral histories will not be made available via YouTube or other platforms, the public reach of the project is limited.

The public reach of the *Women in the San Antonio Fire Service Oral History and Exhibit Outline Project* was limited by two factors: the lack of a public display and the wishes of the narrators who were interviewed for the project. As explained above, the initial scope of this project was ambitious and included a completed exhibit for the San Antonio Fire Department Museum. However, the project’s scope was narrowed in December 2022 after the completion of my exhibit outline from my independent study course. Additionally, while sharing the oral histories via an online platform such as YouTube or Facebook would have been ideal, I ultimately decided not to post the oral histories online or make them readily available to the public to better protect the privacy of the project’s narrators, many of whom expressed concern about having their interview shared online to my partner, Captain Rakowitz. Therefore, while this decision limited the public reach of the project, it served the greater purpose of respecting narrators’ wishes and protecting their privacy.

Historiography & Historical Context:

Historical scholarship treating women in the fire service is sparse. Many scholars who have studied the subject are firefighters themselves, such as Terese M. Floren and Linda F. Willing. Ms. Floren has written two articles offering a comprehensive overview of the history of women in fire, while Ms. Willing has published her book, *On the Line: Female Firefighters Tell Their Stories,* a collection of short stories about women in the fire service. Like this oral history project, she also conducted interviews with her fellow firefighters, bringing different perspectives to issues such as station life, navigating a male dominated profession, and the rewards and challenges of a life in the fire service. However, while Willing’s book offers an individualized look into women’s lives in the fire service, Floren’s two articles provide a broad history of women firefighters dating from the 18th century to the late 20th century.

The history of women firefighters dates to the 1780s, when Molly Williams, a black woman held in slavery by a member of the Oceanus Engine Company # 11 in New York City began performing duties with the company. According to the article, Molly was considered as good a firefighter as many of the boys in the company. Her work was particularly noted during the 1818 blizzard in which she joined the other company members at the drag ropes to pull the fire engine through the snow and to fires.[[1]](#footnote-2)

The history of women firefighters crossed class boundaries as well as racial boundaries. For example, in 1859 the wealthy San Francisco heiress Lille Hitchcock Hoit became a fire buff at the age of fifteen after assisting a local fire company at a fire on Telegraph Hill. Hoit continued to attend fires until her marriage, in fact she attended so many fires that she was made an honorary member of the KnickerBocker Fire Engine Company # 5, a distinction she carried with pride for the rest of her life. It was not until the 20th century that women began to form their own fire companies separate from their male counterparts.

Perhaps the biggest boon to women joining fire companies was World War II. As more men joined the armed forces to fight the evil of fascism, women replaced men’s roles in society. Many women replaced men in their roles as firefighters for the duration of the war. Women across the world served as firefighters on the front lines of World War II. However, none of these women firefighters were career firefighters, nor were they paid. In cities across the United States, women firefighters would not emerge until the 1970s.[[2]](#footnote-3) Beginning in the 1970s, however, women would begin joining their community fire services in greater numbers.

In contrast to Terese M. Floren’s general histories of women in fire, Linda Willing’s book, *On the Line: Women Firefighter’s Tell Their Stories,* offers readers a personal glimpse into the lives and careers of women firefighters from the early 1980s to the late 2000s. In her book, Willing both reflects on her own career in the Boulder City, Colorado Fire Service while also telling other women’s stories as well.[[3]](#footnote-4) Through interviews with her counterparts, Willing explores issues such as station life, memorable runs, and the rewards and challenges of being a firefighter. Willing’s book is divided into chapters and subsections with each subsection dedicated to telling the story of a different female firefighter. Therefore, when compared to Terse M. Floren’s work, *On the Line* offers a more personal history of women in fire by highlighting the stories of individual firefighters. The Women in the San Antonio Fire Service Project is similar to *On the Line* because it too focuses on 10 individual and unique stories, each of which add to our understanding of women’s lives in the San Antonio Fire Service.

Several themes emerged throughout the nine interviews with fire service personnel. Firstly, the San Antonio Fire Service has changed beyond measure since women first joined in 1979. Particularly, women’s access to properly fitting uniforms and gear and private facilities has increased drastically since the late 1970s and 1980s. Importantly, men’s attitudes towards their female counterparts have also changed since the 1970s as well. These subcategories of change demonstrate how far the department has come in creating a more inclusive and professional workplace for its employees. Additionally, the interviews also revealed that women adopted different mindsets in approaching their male dominated, psychically demanding profession, oftentimes expressing a willingness to accept their circumstances in their job, without loudly advocating for change, while others chose to pursue change for themselves and future female firefighters. Finally, the interviews also delved into the different ranks, and corresponding responsibilities, that women have held during their 40+ years in the San Antonio Fire Department. Firefighters with different ranks and varying levels of experience were interviewed for this project, and each of them shared details about their lives while on the job. The advanced rank of multiple narrators testifies to how far women in the San Antonio Fire Service have come since 1979. However, during women’s early days in the department, they did not have properly fitting uniforms and gear, lacked access to private facilities such as bathrooms and showers, and faced attitudinal barriers to their acceptance in their profession.

The first women who entered the San Antonio Fire Department in the 1970s and 1980s were not provided properly fitting uniforms or equipment. Instead, women who entered the department during this period wore men’s uniforms and gear when training or on the job. Bodeil Wigen Burke remembered that the fire department had neither specially designed uniforms nor gear for women when she began her training in 1979, ““They were not, they were not prepared at all.” She explained further, “They were kind of astounded to find out we needed smaller boots and smaller gloves yet, that was just during the training period.” We wore men’s uniforms. Everything was designed for men.”[[4]](#footnote-5) Women continued to use men’s uniforms and gear throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Captain Georgia Rakowitz, who entered the fire department in 1986, explained her uniform and gear situation as, “I don’t think they were very well prepared…Our station uniforms were essentially men’s clothing. Our structure firefighting gloves were men, the boots were men. It was all men’s sizes, and so, that was a little difficult because it just fits women in a different way.” By the early 1990s, however, some women began to get custom fit for their gear.[[5]](#footnote-6) By the 2010s and 2020s, the San Antonio Fire Department consistently provided women entering the department with both uniforms and gear designed to fit them.[[6]](#footnote-7) Getting properly fitting uniforms and gear was not the only challenge that women faced during their early years in the department. They also lacked access to private facilities such as bunks, toilets, and showers.

From the beginning of their time in the fire department in the 1970s, most women did not have access to private bathrooms, bunkrooms, or showers. In fact, the fire department made few such accommodations for women when they first joined fire crews in the 1970s-1980s. When asked whether the fire department provided private facilities for women, Diana Chapa, who began her career in 1979, explained, “Not at all. Nothing changed. Nothing changed at all.”[[7]](#footnote-8) Private facilities were a rarity throughout the 1980s and 1990s, which meant that women had to adapt to their situation the best they could. Battalion Chief Connie Hall recalled how grateful she was to have a door lock installed on the bathroom door at her first fire station in 1987.[[8]](#footnote-9) It was not until the 1990s that the San Antonio Fire Department, and other departments across the nation, began planning fire stations with separate sleeping and bathroom facilities for both male and female firefighters. Therefore, while access to private facilities may still vary from station to station, depending on station age and renovations, the San Antonio Fire Department plans new construction with both sexes in mind. Additionally, as more women entered the department in the 1990s, and the department changed to better accommodate them, male attitudes towards their female counterparts were changing as well.

Male attitudes towards women in the San Antonio Fire Department have changed in the 44 years since they began joining the department. From the start, however, males’ attitudes towards women firefighters varied considerably based on circumstances. Oftentimes, their attitudes towards women were affected by factors such as her age, marital status, or station. Meanwhile, women’s experiences were shaped by factors such as their prior knowledge of the department and their mindset. No two women’s experiences are the same. Some women experienced hostility and harassment while others less so. Bodeil Wigen-Burke, for example, had an easier time getting along with her male colleagues than her counterpart, Diana Chapa, even though they entered the department together in 1979. Bodeil explained her male colleagues’ attitudes towards her during her interview in August 2021, “I know that there was some animosity about women coming to the fire service. What I can tell you is very rarely did I get treated poorly by anybody at the fire station.”[[9]](#footnote-10) Her experience contrasted sharply with Diana Chapa’s, who experienced hostility and harassment during her early years in the department. She explained initial male attitudes towards her, saying, “It was rough. It was rough because I knew they didn't want females in the department. I just was so naive. I didn't know how bad it was.”[[10]](#footnote-11) In her interview, Diana alluded to mistreatment such as being left rude notes and finding pornographic magazines intentionally left out for her to see.

However, as more women entered the fire department, and it became more common for men and women to work together, males’ attitudes gradually improved. Indeed, women whose careers began in the 2010s and 2020s, experienced no attitudinal barriers to their acceptance in their job. Chelsea Sykes-Wenske, who entered the fire department in 2018, explained her male colleagues’ attitudes towards her in 2021, “They trust you to do your job, whatever gender you are, however big you are, small you are. But personally, I've never run into instances where gender has been a problem for me.”[[11]](#footnote-12) However, for women who entered the fire department in the 1970s and 1980s, navigating a male dominated profession could be challenging. Those interviewed from this period offered insight into the different mindsets they adopted to succeed in their profession during the earliest days of women in the San Antonio Fire Department.

During the oral history interviews narrators discussed the different mindsets/strategies they used to cope with their unique circumstances. One common mindset adopted by women of the 1970s and 1980s was to adapt to the fire department as it was, not make it adapt for them. Bodeil Wigen Burke explained her attitude upon her entry into the department in 1979, ““I was so.... I don't know, thrilled or grateful, I'm not sure exactly what, to be part of that world, I wasn't really trying to change it to make it fit me I wanted to fit into that world. So, at that time, it was, it was okay, you know.”[[12]](#footnote-13) For Bodeil, having her own uniform or gear and access to private bathrooms and bunkrooms was less important than fitting into the department as it was in 1979. Nor was Bodeil the only person to express such sentiments. Kristy Crenshaw, who began her career in 1988, echoed Bodeil’s sentiments in her own interview.[[13]](#footnote-14)

Meanwhile, other firefighters changed their behavior to better fit in with their male colleagues. Chief Brooke Hildreth, when reflecting on her first years in the department in the early 1990s, recalled how she frequently changed her manners to better fit in with her crew, “You try really hard to fit in, and I may have tried too hard to fit in, to be one of the guys. And, you know, the foul language and the cussing and the horsing around the station that we would do and the bantering that went back and forth. I mean, sometimes it could get pretty, pretty raunchy, but you wanted to be a part of that because then that made you part of the crew.”[[14]](#footnote-15) Similarly, Chief Connie Hall recalled the risks she faced when choosing whether or not to drink beer with her colleagues during a shift early in her career. She explained, “So, I took a drink. I said, "Okay." And then they all went and drank their beer. You were in, and I did it. So, I broke the rules. I did it… It's a huge risk to take. One, you do it, endear yourself to the crew and be one of them Two, stand strong with don't break the rules, you have principles, you have this, and then be ostracized. So, there were countless, countless little tests like that if you will.”[[15]](#footnote-16) Both women chose to partake in behavior that endeared them to their male colleagues, even if it was not true to who they were or broke department rules.

However, that was the reality that many women faced in the 1970s-1990s. Their unique situations of being among the first women to enter a male dominated job, as well as their common isolation from each other on account of their small number and different schedules, meant that each woman did their best to navigate their workspace and their coworkers. Chief Hall offered her perspective on the different strategies women adopted in their jobs, saying, “And it’s a personal decision each one of us had to make, you know. We had to decide what path we were going to take with it and how we were going to move along with it…Certainly, we can all look back on our careers and think I should have this, I could have that, I should have been better here, I should have reacted this way. But it is what it is, and we just did the best we could. Make decisions we made. So, I don't fault the women who made a stand. I don't fault the ones who didn't do anything back then. I don't fault the ones who get along, I don't fault the ones who tried to create (a better department), I don't any of that. We all, we were like on little islands.”[[16]](#footnote-17) With each woman on their own little island, they all did the best they could to navigate their profession and workspace. Indeed, many women have gone on to have successful careers in the San Antonio Fire Department.

The final theme in the nine interviews explored the different ranks held by women in the San Antonio Fire Department. In the last 44 years, many women have promoted to important positions in the department. This project interviewed women of all ranks -from battalion chiefs to EMTs, to probationary firefighters-thus capturing a broad spectrum of job responsibilities. For example, probationary firefighter Stephanie Rico described her responsibilities as a newly minted firefighter in August 2021, ““When you come out, you're trying to really learn your job… So, eventually you catch on to it and you learn, but you ask as many questions as you can, you watch everybody around you. You're gonna be the one doing a lot of the work because you really need to learn what you're doing, what you're supposed to be doing, and what the correct way is.”[[17]](#footnote-18) On the other end of the spectrum, this project interviewed two battalion chiefs. Chief Brooke Hildreth described that her job was to oversee an entire district, coordinating its staffing, visiting its fire stations, offering emotional support for district firefighters during disciplinary hearings, and coordinating with the chief’s office downtown.[[18]](#footnote-19)

From probationary firefighters to battalion chiefs, the diverse ranks and responsibilities women have held in the San Antonio Fire Department speak to their success in carving a place for themselves in a profession traditionally done by men. They also speak to the fact that women’s history within the organization is still being written. Indeed, while women have made important progress in the last 44 years, many milestones have yet to be reached. For example, no woman has attained the rank of deputy chief or served as San Antonio Fire Chief. What the future will bring for women working in the fire service today remains to be seen, but there are many women who are anxious to leave their mark on the San Antonio Fire Service in the decades to come.

Best Practices:

The *Women in the SAFD Oral History and Exhibit Outline Project* was a multidisciplinary undertaking. It’s initially ambitious scope required that I study and implement best practices as both an oral historian and as an exhibit designer. As an oral historian, I’ve crafted carefully researched questions, met narrators prior to conducting interviews to discuss questions and/or topics, informed them of the project’s goals and their rights as project participants, and managed the appropriate forms for the interviews, transcripts, and audio files. As an exhibit designer, with the more limited scope of my project, I focused on creating a big idea for a potential exhibit and developing exhibit text of the appropriate length and reading level for a general museum audience.

To prepare for the oral history interviews I delved into various sources to develop my oral history questions. According to the Oral History Association best practices in the pre-interview phase, interviewers, “should conduct background research on the person, topic, and larger context in both primary and secondary sources.”[[19]](#footnote-20) Before I started scheduling interviews, I consulted a variety of sources including the book, *On the Line: Women Firefighters Tell Their Stories* as well as several different handbooks/guides prepared by women firefighters as references for developing my questions. These materials helped me better understand women firefighters’ issues and professional lives, and thus, helped me prepare relevant questions that touched on issues such as uniforms and gear, fire department and fire station culture, career and personal obstacles, and memorable runs or calls. In developing my questions, I took the added step of submitting them to my project partner, Captain Georgia Rakowitz, for feedback. I deemed this step necessary because I wished to involve women fire service personnel in developing my questions to ensure that they were both pertinent to the subject matter and respectful of the narrators. After Captain Rakowitz approved the questions, she and I began scheduling pre-interview Zoom meetings with the project’s ten narrators.

I wanted to arrange pre-interview meetings with all ten narrators because I wanted to build rapport with the firefighters by introducing myself and the project and its objectives and to give firefighters a chance to ask any questions or voice any concerns. I also wanted to give them an opportunity to preview the list of questions Captain Rakowitz and I prepared prior to our interview so that they could raise any concerns they had. Arranging pre-interview meetings is consistent with oral history best practices according to multiple sources. The Smithsonian’s “How to Do Oral History” webpage describes the importance of both rapport and arranging a pre-interview meeting, “Good rapport is established with the interviewee by approaching them properly, informing them of the purpose of the project, and advising them of their role and their rights. A pre-interview call or visit to get acquainted and discuss procedures is recommended.”[[20]](#footnote-21) In addition to a pre-interview meeting I also tried to give narrators as much agency as possible throughout each phase of the project, including during the interview and post-interview process.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I also created a Creative Commons License form which I shared with each narrator 1-2 days before our interview. I designed the form to fully inform narrators of the project’s objectives and to enumerate narrators’ rights as project participants. These rights included the right to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation; the right to review transcripts and request edits after the interview; the choice whether to donate copies of their interview materials to the San Antonio Fire Department Museum; and the choice to refuse to answer any questions asked during the interview. The latter choice is consistent with oral history best practices as described by the Oral History Association, “interviewers must respect the rights of interviewees to refuse to discuss certain subjects…”[[21]](#footnote-22) After the interviews concluded in November 2021, I continued to seek narrator involvement as I relistened to interviews and edited transcripts.

Because this project was initially undertaken with an exhibit component, I wanted to involve narrators in the transcript editing phase to an appropriate extent. I gave each of them a chance to review their transcript and request edits to it. I also told them that they could request redactions in their transcript. Any redactions would also not be featured in any public facing display, allowing narrators to have a say in which parts of their story they would like featured in public. To facilitate the editing and redaction process I created another form where narrators could ‘approve’ their transcripts and/or request edits or redactions they would like me to make. Finally, on March 3, 2023, after six months of making edits to transcripts and communicating back and forth with narrators, I donated the nine transcripts and audio files to the San Antonio Fire Department Museum. All nine interviews will be preserved at the institution, however, in accordance with my and the narrators’ wishes, they will not be made available to the public to protect the narrators’ privacy. I made this decision after consulting Captain Rakowitz and other narrators, many of whom expressed concern at the idea of their interviews being shared via online platforms such as YouTube or Facebook. However, they felt comfortable donating their materials to the museum for preservation only. Therefore, the SAFD Museum will serve as a home for the interviews but will not share them with their visitors or use them to create any public display. The interviews’ preservation in accordance with these expectations is consistent with the sixth principle of the oral history post-interview process, described as, “Institutions charged with the preservation and access of oral history interviews should honor the stipulations of prior agreements made with the interviewers or sponsoring institutions including restrictions on access and methods of distribution.”[[22]](#footnote-23) For the exhibit design component of my project, I focused on writing a big idea and drafting exhibit text of the appropriate length and reading level.

The exhibit design process was limited by the narrower goals of my project over the last six months. However, I did implement best practices where I could, particularly when writing a big idea and when drafting sample text items. Writing a big idea is a crucial task when developing a museum exhibit. Serrell described that the big idea, “provides an unambiguous focus for the exhibit team throughout the exhibit development process by clearly stating in one noncompound sentence the scope and purpose of an exhibition.”[[23]](#footnote-24) With this in mind, I spent approximately two-three weeks developing a big idea for my exhibit. I went through approximately three different drafts of my big idea, all the while discussing it with my professor. Finally, I was able to write a big idea that captured the essence of my exhibit idea and which could serve as a guide for me in my exhibit design journey. My big idea statement is featured in my exhibit outline.

I also implemented best practices while drafting exhibit text samples. For example, I limited the number of words of each of my section introductions to 100 words or below and my broader exhibit overview to under 150 words. While 100 words for section introductions may be too long for some museum writers (Beverly Serrell recommends 75 words for section introductions[[24]](#footnote-25)), I felt that my labels still provided brief, digestible overviews of each section and its themes. Finally, I also tried to write to an accessible reading level balancing concerns such as complex vocabulary with concerns about word limit. I read through each of my introductions and removed or replaced words that might be too complex for audience members with a lower than 8th grade reading level. For example, I removed words such as “probationary” and replaced with “rookie” or “mindset” with “attitude.” While this type of editing may fall short of “core editing” tactics recommended by Serrell, it still helped me create more accessible exhibit text for a general museum audience.[[25]](#footnote-26) Through carefully monitoring my word count and reading accessibility, I have implemented best practices for writing exhibit text.

Artifacts:

This project produced over a dozen artifacts during the last 18 months. The artifacts below provide a history of the project from its earliest days in June 2021 to December 2022. The artifacts include various forms, oral history questions, oral histories, edited transcripts, selected quotes, and a detailed exhibit outline.

Oral History Questions:

These oral history questions were developed in Spring 2021 after I delved into multiple sources related to women in the fire service. The questions were designed to explore certain themes such as change over time and duties and responsibilities of female firefighters. However, they also often uncovered other themes by revealing the different attitudes and strategies women used to navigate their workspaces and their male colleagues’ attitudes towards them. Also, this list of questions was approved by my partner, and project narrator, Captain Georgia Rakowitz prior to being shared with the other project narrators prior to scheduling interviews. Finally, I’ve included comments to indicate changes to phraseology and additional questions I added after the fact.



Oral Histories:

These two oral history interviews, conducted with Lieutenant Bodeil Wigen-Burke and Battalion Chief Brooke Hildreth, respectively, represent just two of the nine oral histories collected for this project. Bodeil or ‘Bo’ reflected on being one of the first two women to join the San Antonio Fire Department in 1979. She also discussed her penchant for optimism and her approach to her job during her first years in the department. Finally, she reflected on her most memorable runs as a firefighter and her decision to leave the department to be a stay-at-home mom for her young children. Meanwhile, Chief Hildreth discussed her own career describing her duties as a Battalion Chief, her fondest memories at Fire Station No. 9, her struggles to fit in with her male colleagues early in her career, and how being a firefighter has better allowed her to make a good living and be a single mom to her daughter.





Oral History Transcripts:

*The Women in the San Antonio Fire Service Oral History & Exhibit Outline Project* produced nine transcripts based on narrators’ interviews. Beginning in Summer 2022, I edited the nine transcripts and sent them to the narrators for review. Each narrator was given the opportunity to review their transcripts and request edits and/or approve or disapprove their transcripts. I accepted requests for edits until March 3, 2023, after which date, I donated all interview materials, including transcripts, to the San Antonio Fire Department Museum for preservation. Finally, I have also left comments on many of the transcripts tracking certain common subjects and themes such as change over time to develop my exhibit outline.





Quote Excerpts:

The nine oral histories explored several key themes: change over time, navigating a male dominated profession, and duties and responsibilities of a firefighter. The quotes, selected from the two interviews above, demonstrate how each narrator discussed these themes in their interviews.

**“They were not, they were not prepared at all. They were kind of astounded to find out we needed smaller boots and smaller gloves yet, that was just during the training period. They sent us to...oh gosh, it's a famous bin store downtown where they fitted us with our boots and our gloves. And they had to go dig through their stock to find stuff that would fit us. We wore men's uniforms. Everything was designed for men.” *Bodeil Wigen Burke***

Bodeil discusses how unprepared the San Antonio Fire Department was when she began her training in 1979. The department made no provision to provide her, or Diana Chapa her fellow trainee, with properly fitting gear and uniforms. Her reflections reveal a department wholly unprepared to employ women firefighters. Bodeil’s interview also revealed that the department did not provide private facilities for women, except in rare cases of stations or buildings that doubled as both fire stations and public buildings.

**“No. 6s upstairs dormitory at that time, was one big U shape. Nobody had a private room; the officers didn't have a private room. Everybody slept in the same room, and I slept right at the bottom of the U. So, everybody could see me, and I could see everybody. There were no locks on the bathroom doors and no doors on the bathroom stalls. So, it was very interesting restroom upstairs. Downstairs was one little, tiny restroom that I would use primarily.” *Bodeil Wigen Burke***

When Bodeilbegan working at No. 6s fire station, her sleeping and bathroom situation was complicated to say the least. She slept in the same room as her male counterparts and, while she had access to a small single restroom, she also had to make do with bathrooms which had no lock on the main door or doors on the stalls. Bodeil’s interview reveals the sometimes difficult circumstances women faced in the 1970s and 1980s. However, for Bodeil she was not too bothered by the department’s unpreparedness when she joined in 1979. As her next quotes reveal, she was so happy to be a part of “that world” that she was not interested in making a fuss about uniforms, gear, or private facilities. She was more interested in fitting into “that world” as it existed when she entered the department in the late 1970s.

**“So, it was just amusing, but at that time, I was so.... I don't know, thrilled or grateful, I'm not sure exactly what, to be part of that world, I wasn't really trying to change it to make it fit me I wanted to fit into that world. So, at that time, it was, it was okay, you know.” *Bodeil Wigen Burke***

In this quote, Bodeil reflects on the department’s unpreparedness when she entered the fire academy in 1979. It adds context to how she approached her new profession in her early years in the department as well. Because she was happy to be in that world, and “wasn’t really trying to change it to make it fit me I wanted to fit into that world,” she never made a fuss or advocated for female focused change, at least during her first years in the fire department. Bodeil’s optimism and her attitude helped propel her through a terrific career during which she attained the rank of lieutenant.

**“The duties and responsibilities of a lieutenant are basically to do what the captain wants you to do. Because a lieutenant is a junior officer…**. **So, as a lieutenant, your job is to file the reports. Make sure your crews, they do what they're supposed to do. That they've checked it off. They're able to operate all the equipment, that your vehicle's in good shape, that you've got enough gas, that your radio works, that everybody's dressed in the stuff they're supposed to be wearing for fires, that they've all got their hoods and their masks and their gloves and their boots and just all that good stuff that firemen usually don't have any problem remembering that stuff because it saves their lives. To make sure your station is, kept up and clean and got staple groceries.” *Bodeil Wigen Burke***

Bodeil’s description of her job duties provides insight into being a junior officer in the San Antonio Fire Department. She mostly worked under the direction of her captain if there was one. But she also handled paperwork, made sure her crew were prepared for their day, that vehicles and equipment worked properly, and she shopped for food items.

**“Okay. So, you know, we did get custom fit for the gear. They measured us, and we did get gear that (fit). So, my gear actually fit fairly well. The boots weren't too bad. The gloves never have done a good job at fitting.” *Chief Brooke Hildreth***

Chief Hildreth’s comments regarding uniforms and gear reveal some progress made from 1979 to 1993. Chief Hildreth recalls struggling to find some properly fitting items such as gloves, but she did recall getting custom fit for fire gear in the 1990s. Like Bodeil, Chief Hildreth also recalled that the department did not make any alterations to the fire stations to provide women with private facilities. According to Chief Hildreth, it was not until she made chief in the late 2000s that she actually worked at a fire station with private facilities built for both men and women.

**“Now, they're all designed to be, but I want to say it hasn't been too terribly long. Maybe 10 years, 15 years, that they've really made a concerted effort to have separate facilities. When I was a paramedic, back in '94, probably around '96, maybe. Well, maybe it was 97-98, I was now at fire station No. 10, which was also built in 1914. It was a sister station to my first station, and they went in, and they gutted the whole thing. And that was the very first time that the city had ever specifically made the bathrooms complete. So, instead of making a boy's room and a girl's room, and the boy’s room, or the boy’s bath, the men's room like a big locker style where everybody went in and there was just like a big shower, and everybody took a shower together. This was the first time that they made a station that was designed with individual bathrooms, and each bathroom had a shower, a sink, and a toilet. So, you could go in, you could shut the door, and you were self-contained, and you didn't share with anyone at any time. And that was kind of nice. And the men at the station really liked it too because they don't want to share with each other either.” *Chief Brooke Hildreth***

Chief Hildreth’s quote reveal the slow process of change regarding separate facilities in the fire department. Women first entered the fire department in 1979, but it was not until the 1990s and 2000s that the fire department began building and/or renovating fire stations to create separate facilities. Today, each new fire station is built with both sexes in mind.

**“And early on, before I had figured out that no matter how much I was accepted as part of the crew, I'm never one of the men. You try really hard to fit in, and I may have tried too hard to fit in, to be one of the guys. And the foul language and the cussing and...the horsing around the station that we would do and the bantering that went back and forth. I mean, sometimes it could get pretty, pretty raunchy, but you wanted to be a part of that because then that made you part of the crew.” *Chief Brooke Hildreth***

Chief Hildreth reflects on how she altered her behavior early in her career to be “one of the guys.” She tried hard to fit in by farting, burping, cussing, and horsing around the fire station. While this behavior ceased gradually as she increased in rank, Chief Hildreth’s strategy reveals how she navigated her male dominated profession during the early portion of her career by opting to change her behavior to fit in with her male colleagues, and thus increase her chances of gaining their acceptance. Like Bodeil, Chief Hildreth also climbed the ladder in the fire department, achieving the rank of battalion chief in the late 2000s.

**“So, we do our staffing, that's the biggest thing… We make sure that they have any the equipment that they need. If that's going to be something that, they're running low on stuff, or a piece of equipment breaks, we can trade it out for them. So, we can keep them where they're supposed to be, and then we can bring them that paperwork… We have the fun things that we do as a chief is that we run the fires or the big traffic accidents. So, if those come in and we get on scene, we'll assume command after we figure out what's going on. And then we help put the firefighters where they need to be to put the fire out and make sure that we're covering all our bases there. Big traffic accidents, that's another thing that I'll respond to. We're kind of a little bit of a liaison between the Administrative Office downtown and the field. So, if something needs to come down, or if one of my firefighters needs to get disciplined, I'll pick them up, I'll take them to get disciplined, I try to go with them, so they don't always feel like they're by themselves. I'm kind of their moral support… Sometimes the personnel issues are hard to kind of deal with. And make sure people are happy and healthy, and if they're not, how do we work on that, to get them happy and healthy? So, they can do their job and be happy and be able to work. Cause sometimes it's tough at the fire stations. We see some stuff that other people shouldn't, that people don't see. We see some really horrible things sometimes and death and destruction and sometimes, over time that builds up, and that's a lot to deal with. So, if we have people who are having trouble trying to chat with them, see what's going on with them. Why aren't they feeling the love for the job like they were before?” *Chief Brooke Hildreth***

Chief Hildreth’s responsibilities are very broad. She handles staffing issues for her shift and the next shift as well. She also check’s on the stations in her district, making sure that her personnel are physically and mentally healthy and that each station has the equipment it needs to do their jobs effectively. She also supports her personnel in disciplinary matters and servers as a mediator between the stations and personnel in the field and the chief’s office. Finally, in what is perhaps her favorite part of the job, Chief Hildreth also oversees big car accidents and fire scenes, placing firefighters where they need to be to do their jobs effectively.

Oral History Forms:

During the project, I created two google forms to better facilitate the pre-interview and post-interview process. The first form was created to reinform narrators of the project’s goals and their rights as project participants. Their rights included, among others, the right to withdraw from the project at any time and the right to refuse to answer any question posed. The first form also gave narrators the choice of whether to donate their interview materials to the San Antonio Fire Department Museum or not. The second form was created to facilitate the transcript editing process. Each narrator was given an opportunity to review an edited version of their transcript and to request edits through the second form. However, if narrators were satisfied with their transcript, they could use the form to approve their transcript.

<https://forms.gle/QXfLs2iMaXEoN6Dd9> (form one)

<https://forms.gle/B1WU2TAA34LCHeJ87> (form two)

SAFD Museum Exhibit Outline:

The exhibit outline linked below represents the culmination of a semester of work analyzing the project’s oral histories for relevant information related to potential exhibit themes such as change over time, responsibilities of firefighters, and navigating a male dominated profession. Information gleaned from the nine interviews was used to craft the outline. However, the exhibit outline is not meant to represent a draft of an exhibit script. Indeed, the exhibit outline is too long to be considered an exhibit script at all. However, it is meant to give readers an idea of what themes and subthemes a potential exhibit would explore and what oral history material a hypothetical exhibit might include.



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