

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #1 Side B

Subject: Burns Volunteer Ambulance With Avel Diaz

Place: Quality Cleaners, Burns, Oregon

Date: October 30, 1973

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

Release Form: No

PAULINE BRAYMEN: This is Pauline Braymen, and I'm interviewing Avel Diaz, Chief of the Burns Fire Department, and the Volunteer Ambulance Service, on October 30, 1973, at his place of business in Burns, the Quality Cleaners. Well I'd like to talk about the Burns Ambulance Service. Can you give me a little history on the way it started?

AVEL DIAZ: I think back in 1956, I think it was. Yeah, I know it, '56. Ganger and Grover give us a 1942 Army Surplus Packard Ambulance. And they re-did it for us and we put it in service as an ambulance.

PAULINE: Now by we, you mean the Burns Volunteer Fire Department?

AVEL: Yeah, uh huh. At that time James Richardson was the head of the program and he was trying to establish a volunteer ambulance service. (Richardson was Fire Chief)

So, we run it that winter, the winter of '57. And we broke down, as much as we were on the road with it because it was, it just wasn't made for these long runs. So we decided then, well if we were going to stay in the ambulance service we were going to have to do something about it. So we

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went to the city and asked them if they would give us \$2500 a year for three years to buy a Cadillac ambulance. This \$2500 would be firemen's wages they get for fighting fires and stuff. And sometimes we don't use the \$2500, or at that time, and so we told the city that if the fires run over \$2500 why we wouldn't charge them anymore for it, and if we run under \$2500 we got the whole bundle. So they agreed. So we made a deal with an ambulance company in Portland by the name of Purdy and Sons to furnish us with an ambulance for \$7500, and we was to pay them back \$2500 a year for three years.

So then about that time the county heard what we were doing, and so they gave us \$1000. And before we knew it, why within a year and a half, we had enough money to pay off the \$7500. So then we took the \$5000 we had coming from the city, which would have been \$2500 for two years, and we just put it in a sinking fund for future ambulances. And that was how we were able to build up a reserve for ambulances.

And we found out after we bought the first Cadillac ambulance that there was other things that we needed in the ambulance that wasn't in this one. This was just a bare ambulance with cots, you know. And being in the isolated area that we were, we realized we needed more equipment and we also realized that we were putting a lot of miles on this ambulance. At the end of two years why we had right at 70,000 miles on it and we knew we were going to have to replace it. So we replaced it at the end of two years. And the next one cost us in the neighborhood of \$13,000 and a lot of the increase was the equipment that we put in it, to operate comfortably in the area that we live in.

So we made it a policy of trying to replace the ambulance every two years because of the miles situation. A lot of people wonder why we replace them that often, but when you get something with sixty or seventy thousand miles on it, why it starts costing you money to keep them

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on the road. So we tried to replace them every two years. Then we decided, got a little money ahead and we decided we better buy a second rig. So in 1968 we bought a little Chevrolet ambulance, which we still have. And we used it as a back-up rig. It's not equipped as good as the Cadillac. And then in 1970, we decided the Cadillac's were costing us too much money, so we bought a Chevrolet van for \$13,000 and had everything on it. But it was just too rough on patients, so this year we went back to Cadillac ambulances.

PAULINE: They're heavier, heavier an auto.

AVEL: Yeah, and better on, easier to handle. And so this one here cost us \$19,000, the one we just bought.

And what keeps this thing going, is the county gives us \$1500 bucks a year. Have every year now for the last ten years. We could probably get more from them if we asked them, but we don't. We don't even ask them for the \$1500. They just give it to us. Which isn't a lot of money considering that is less than 30 cents a person in Harney County. But what keeps the thing going is, and then we have the forty drivers at the present time. And these people don't get paid for driving.

PAULINE: They donate their time.

AVEL: They donate their time. They do get their meals while they're gone on trips. And we --- if people have insurance and use the ambulance and have insurance, we try to collect the insurance. Money that --- if people don't have insurance, and they are Harney County people, it don't cost them a cent, if they don't have it. We bill them as such, but we bill them with a little card saying, "This is not an obligation." It's used for insurance purposes only.

But what really keeps the thing going is that people, without us asking, here in Harney County have more or less on a voluntary basis, have set up a donation program in lieu of flowers. And when somebody passes away, and they --- keeps this thing going. We've been able to replace

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the ambulance, keep it in operation, and still have a little money left over each year.

PAULINE: You make a lot of trips in a year's time. Do you have any idea how many you made last year?

AVEL: Last year we made 136 trips out of town. And probably had another 150 trips, accidents and local calls. And the average trip for this ambulance, that's counting local calls and out of town calls, the average trip is about 150 miles. So that puts a lot of miles on it.

And all of our men are trained. They have, hold advanced Red Cross cards and they also have Emergency Technician cards, which is a course put out by Oregon State Board of Health. And it's a federal requirement that every ambulance driver, not drivers, but attendants have an EMT card. So where we switch on driving, in our attendants, why all of our men have a card. We're one of the few departments in the state that have this many people with EMT cards.

PAULINE: Well 40 people, that is quite a training in a community this --- that's a lot of people.

AVEL: Right. And it takes time. And as soon as elk season is over with this year, why we'll have another EMT course. They require us to have them, and then of course we've got a lot of new men. Our men fluctuate. And so we'll spend, probably spend six weeks to two months taking this new course which will be put on by Dr. Bert D. Campbell. He donates his time for this. Otherwise we'd have to bring people in here from Treasure Valley Community College. This course cost, oh, before we get down to it, not counting the doctors, he don't charge nothing. The course costs about \$300 bucks to get it in here, textbooks, films and whatever they send.

We do get some help from the city on it, insurance-wise. The city carries all the insurance on our ambulance. That's their contribution to it. Now you can ask me --- that's the highlights of it.

PAULINE: Well, that really pretty well ---

AVEL: We'll go anyplace within, you know, within Harney County. Well, if anyone in Harney

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County needs you, why it's no problem, we just go.

PAULINE: Well you transport a lot accident victims from out of town too.

AVEL: Right. To their homes, or to better hospital, not a better, you know ---

PAULINE: Not a better hospital, but a bigger hospital.

AVEL: Yeah, that has more facilities to take care of them right.

PAULINE: Yeah, I've --- the article that I'm going to do is, going to be on the fact that there are places, size --- and as isolated as we are, we have first-rate facility.

AVEL: I think we have. I'm prejudice of course. But I really think we have ---

PAULINE: I know I've talked to so many people who have said that they never have got more careful handling than they received from the ambulance drivers here.

AVEL: These people are well trained. And we never send two young guys together, what I mean, two new guys. We always make sure we have somebody transferred, that somebody has been with us for a period of time, go with somebody new. It's really worked out real good so far. Of course right now, what will make us real happy is this helicopter deal that Doctor Campbell has been working on. (The Air Force helicopter from Mountain Home Air Force Base will come in to transfer emergency patients from Burns to St. Alphonsus Hospital in Boise at no charge to the patient.)

PAULINE: That will ease a lot of traffic going that way.

AVEL: Yeah, and we have quite a bit going that way. And we, as volunteer ambulance drivers, we're happy to see this thing come, you know. A lot of people say, "Oh, what's it going to do to you?"

PAULINE: It's just going to be one less trip.

AVEL: Yeah, right.

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PAULINE: You don't get paid anyway. Not really going to hurt you that much.

AVEL: So we're not --- no way are we bucking it. They won't say anything bad about it. Because we think it's a good deal really. I don't think it will help us much going west, but it certainly will going to Boise and that area. And the doctors are getting so they send more people to Boise anyway. They got facilities there that they didn't have ten or twelve years ago.

PAULINE: Well this is true. And even in Bend, you know, the amount of doctors that have come, specialists that have come in there in the last ten years. What about, you know, people I know some of your drivers are people that work just at, are working for someone else. Do employers cooperate in that?

AVEL: Yeah they do. What we try to do is, rather than pull somebody off of a job --- if it's an emergency they are just gone a couple of hours anyway, so it don't hurt too much. But on these out of town trips why I always try to get somebody who is working a split shift out at the mill, or has a day off. And we got guys like Ron Hornbeck and George Sahlberg down at the armory, and Loran Allen he's retired, and so is Hornbeck. And there is myself, I adjust. So very seldom do we send a person who is just going to lose wages. A working person, I mean if I get in a real bind I will. But a lot of the time I will try to pull that person out of the sawmill. Because we do have an agreement with Hines, which I don't take advantage of, really get into a bind I call the mill and the guy that I jerk out of the mill doesn't lose his wages for that day if he has to be gone part of the shift.

PAULINE: That's a real advantage to have the service.

AVEL: So the mill has been real cooperative on this basis. So what I usually do if the mill, if it's one of their people, like somebody has got hurt in the woods, or in the factory, or at the plant. Well then we got to transfer them, and I have trouble, why it is pretty easy for me to call out there and say we're going to move Harvey Mosley to Bend. We'll just use his name. And he got hurt at the plant.

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Can I have Gary Bennison from the factory? And they --- right on.

PAULINE: Right on, yeah.

AVEL: So, I mean, it's flexible. At times, it gets pretty complicated, really. Sometimes I sit there on that phone for an hour and a half getting drivers. I mean a solid hour and a half. Just call, call, call, until I can find someone that can get away without hurting their work schedule.

It's not all just --- well at times you wonder why you are even in it. You just kind of --- of course I'm just ---

PAULINE: Well it's a --- like teaching Sunday School, you know. Sometimes you wonder why, but still you --- feel that obligation to the community. Something that is really worthwhile.

AVEL: But we wouldn't give it up for nothing now. In fact, when this thing first started, I was dead set against it. I didn't think the fire department had any business being in the ambulance business. And there is a lot of communities that feel this way. Like John Day, they just won't, the fire department just won't do it.

PAULINE: Won't do it.

AVEL: And we had a vote and I think there was, out of twenty- three people, I think there was three of us that voted against it. And the other twenty voted for it, so we put it in. And right now if somebody comes to me and says you're going to have to give it up, they've got a fight.

PAULINE: They've got a fight on their hands.

AVEL: Right.

PAULINE: Well is there any danger, I know you read in the papers a lot, they keep trying to pass state laws, they're going to outlaw volunteer services like that.

AVEL: We have state laws now that govern us. And we can live with them. The reason we can live with them is that our ambulances are top grade. We keep them up and we got nothing to fear.

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When these laws really get to you is when you got an old junker that you don't know if you're going to get from here to Crane with it, or wherever you're going. Your equipment, your first aid equipment is not standard, and your men aren't capable of doing the job. So honestly, some of these laws, they have them now --- when we first bucked them, why they was a lot of things we didn't believe in, and we still don't. But we have, the only fear that we have is when it comes to laws, is that one of these days they are going to come out and say we're going to have to pay the state fifty dollars a man, a year. And so many dollars a year for an ambulance inspection. We're not afraid of these inspections, we're not afraid ---

PAULINE: It's just the added expense.

AVEL: Yes. If we have to start paying four or five hundred dollars a year per ambulance, plus forty or fifty dollars for per man you can see what it does to us. So it's things like this that we worry about. As far as patient care, upgrading the ambulances, we're all in favor of those laws. But they usually make these laws so there is always a fee involved. Or somebody's got to come in and inspect. So when they inspect your ambulance, or your men, they get paid for it. We'll continue to fight that end of it. But we can live with the law itself as it is now, because we feel that our men, and Redmond and Prineville and Madras, those people feel the same way as we do. That their men are qualified enough that regardless of what standards they pass for us, we can qualify. Men, and ambulance, vehicle wise, both. But what we really get up in the air about is the finances.

PAULINE: Finances and red tape.

AVEL: Right, uh huh.

PAULINE: Doesn't have anything to do with hauling the patient from here to Bend.

AVEL: So the laws don't scare us as much as this other does. Because usually a law is made to help people really. It's not to hamper them. At one time they were. They were about ready to put

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us plumb out of business. But we fought it. But we have a strong association in the state. It's real strong. The people that we really have problems with, is not so much the state as people in Salem, Eugene, Willamette Valley we'll say, Portland, Gresham and that area. These commercial ambulances they don't like people like us. There's a lot of volunteers in the areas, in those areas. And the commercials do as good a job as we do, but they're awfully high. And so a lot of people in those areas will call a volunteer instead of calling the commercial. These commercials are dependent on this for a living. They got people to hire.

PAULINE: Well we can understand their point of view all right. A commercial concern couldn't come into Harney County and make a living on it anyway.

AVEL: Uh huh. Make a living. So we have no problem there with them either, see. So these commercials come out and force the state to do a lot of these things. They're not after us, but indirectly we get hurt on the deal, see. Just like everything that happens west of the mountain, where the people are, affects us regardless of what it is. So this is our big concern, when we do get to bucking heads with them. Why it is usually, let's have two sets of standards. One for where the commercials are, and then in an area like this, let us be.

PAULINE: Let it fit the community or the situation.

AVEL: Yeah. Because if there is a commercial ambulance that could make a living here, and make a profit out of it, then heck, we'd quit, we'd bow out. It's just like this helicopter. More power to them if they could come in and handle the job. So, of course ambulance service, commercials for instance --- well Mildred Corbett had an accident a couple of years ago this fall near Beaverton. She hit somebody. She needed two ambulances before she got done. They dispatched two ambulances, and they wanted a \$130 from her right there at the scene of the accident, you know. But they gotta have it.

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PAULINE: They got to have it to do it. And actually the community supports this operations through their donations. It's being paid for, but just in a different manner.

AVEL: Right. A lot of people say well they don't do enough. But I figure and so do the men, that if they really get into a bind financially, we got nothing to worry about. All we got to do is say so. Put it on the radio. We don't even have to knock on doors. We'd just put a piece in the newspaper and put something on the air that we are needing \$8,000 or \$9,000 or whatever it is. And I know that within a week we'd have it.

PAULINE: Well I'm sure you would too. Well thank you so much.

AVEL: Okay.

Avel Diaz, at this writing, operates the Quality Cleaners in Burns and is chief of the Burns Volunteer Fire Department and Ambulance Service.

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