

Rocky's Achievements Came One Step At A Time

Drawn in part from an article by Irenne Gable, Lakeland Newspapers, 9-20-1979.

Grayslake Fire Chief Rodney (Jim) Rockenbach is at the top of the ladder. On Sept. 16 in Kansas City he was made president of the International Assn. of Fire Chiefs.

One step at a time, since 1945, when he became a member of the local department, he has been climbing the rungs of the fire-fighting ladder.

It was one year before joining the Grayslake Fire Dept., after the death of his brother, Robert, that Rodney, (or Jim as most of his friends and relatives call him), another brother George and their nephew bought the Rockenbach Chevrolet Sales. He started as parts manager and bookkeeper.

Jim sold his share of the business in 1974 to his nephew Douglas Rockenbach, who is now sole owner. With his retirement from business, "Grayslake got a full time fire chief," according to Lillian, his wife and number one fan.

This is only the second time in the 106 year history of the international organization that a fire chief from a volunteer fire department has held the position of president. Usually the honor goes to men from large, paid, professional city fire departments.

Never in his wildest dreams, when joining the volunteer fire department, did Rockenbach ever think he would be president of the most important and influential fire-fighting organization in the world.

When asked if he thought he'd ever hold this position he answered an emphatic and brief, "No."

His speech is identical to his character; businesslike, brief and to the point. He talks in a rapid fire, no nonsense manner. His actions are similar.

It is an excellent quality for a person whose goals are to fight fires and protect lives.

Perhaps his early life was instrumental to this practice. Rodney Swift Rockenbach was born June 5, 1917 in Prairie View. He was the 11th child of Mr. and Mrs. A.O. Rockenbach. He had six brothers and seven sisters.

Strange as it may seem, only two people in his life have called Rockenbach by his given name, Rodney; two very important people, his mother and his wife. Now the Grayslake Fire Chief is also known in different fire-fighting organizations as "Rocky."

His parents were farmers and started him at the Tripp School on Milwaukee Ave., between Wheeling and Half Day. They retired in Crystal Lake when Rodney was in fourth grade. He attended Crystal Lake grammar school and graduated from Crystal Lake High School.

He received higher education at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb and attended night school in Elgin and Waukegan. He's also been a student at the College of Lake County.

Working, attending school while participating in parental and civic duties, was all accomplished in a one step at a time climb.

Practicing this one day at a time philosophy the new international fire chief received the president's gavel and made his acceptance speech before family members and 3,000 fire chiefs and their guests.

Members of his family who attended the H. Roe Bartle Convention Center were sisters Mary Knox of California, Shirley Spear of Elgin, Sarah Belcher of Woodstock and brothers Lyle of New York and George and Ray of Grayslake. Another almost brother; long-time friend and former Assistant Grayslake Fire Chief Clarence Collins was present to witness the event.

At this momentous occasion Rockenbach's bride of 39 years, the former Lillian Jelinek of Algonquin, beamed her approval throughout the important weekend. She was Jim's high school sweetheart.