Appreciating a rare breed

Bits and Pieces

By Howard Lee Ball

I could feel the heat on my face as the Klugetown Shopping Center burned Monday. The fire was generating its own draught and roaring through the open truss roof which firefighters had predicted years ago. When the shopping center was built, the volunteer fire department asked that fire stops be installed between each store. They asked for real fire stops which seal off the individual units from basement to ceiling. The building code was less stringent then, and the center was built without fire stops. Monday morning we saw the result of that.

Fire is a wily enemy. It will ignite itself, fuel itself and generate its own wind.

Even though the firefighters had drilled on the shopping center from the day it was built, and though they expected exactly what they got Monday morning, it is still traumatic when it happens.

Pompton Lakes has seen some serious fires in the past.

The Washington Building burned in the late 30's and was reported on page one od the Daily News. There was, of course, no TV coverage. In case you don't know it, the Washington Building on Wanaque Avenue extends from the Shoe Doctor to the bakery. It was fully involved and equipment was a little less developed. The firefighters could not combat the common spaces and many of the stores were gutted.

The town rallied to the burned-out friends. There was a fire sale in the back dining room of the Pompton Lakes (Fritz's) Diner.

The Lakeside Hotel fire was spectacular, but did not have an economic impact on the borough.

One of the most difficult fires to fight before Monday's was the Foodtown Market on Wanaque Avenue. It was an old building on three or four levels. It had seen many renovations. In some rooms, the ceiling had been lowered twice from the original metal ceiling which was still up there.

The fire was called in about 6 p.m. and the entire structure was fully involved by 7 p.m. The flames had all kinds of avenues to travel or hide from firefighters. It burned from the sub-basement to the roof. I was on a cellar nozzle protecting the adjacent building. We managed to confine the fire to the market.

The fire that destroyed the strip mall on lower Hamburg Turnpike was heartbreaking for local firefighters. Their comrade Raymond Cahill was killed while fighting the fire. The building had a common basement with only chicken wire between stores. At one time, I was in the basement of one store looking at the fire coming my way. The fire started in a part of the basement where there was a paper storage area. It was entirely ablaze early on. The fire went up the structure to levels above. When the fire and the weight of equipment collapsed the first floor, the energy it created pushed super-heated air throughout the entire basement and sealed the fate of the building. It was completely destroyed.

One afternoon the vamps (voluntary and mutual protective society) were battling a blaze in the center of Wanaque Avenue (Cardinal Frame is there now). We were making progress on the fire and Chief Bill McColl was busy in charge of the operation when an overdressed reporter from a city newspaper broke through the fire line and accosted McColl. "What is happening here, Chief?" asked the bespectacled oaf.

McColl continued his direction of the firefighters as he gave his answer. "Over there,"he said,"is the biggest damn fire I have seen in years."

The young reporter went back behind the fireline. Right where she was supposed to be was Dorothy O'Connor. Her story would be accurate in every detail, and she didn't bother anyone to get it.

I saw Dottie at the Klugetown fire. Like always she was in the thick of it doing her job.

My heartfelt condolences to my friends at Klugetown (please pronounce it correctly — Kloo-Gee Town). The place was named for the family that operated Artistic Weaving Company, and Willard always answered to Kloo-Gee (G as in get).

I need to express my love and appreciation to the firefighters who put their lives on the line to fight this fire. They are a special breed. It is an answered prayer that there were few injuries and those are said to be minor.

Klugetown is no more. It will be the topic of conversation at recall in a dozen firehouses.

As for me, I have thanks and admiration for all the brave firefighters who answered the call and distinguished themselves.