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SAVING HISTORY

EMS HISTORIAN

THE JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL EMS MUSEUM

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INSPIRING THE FUTURE



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My First Experience with an Ambulance



Photo reprinted with permission of the authors from 80 Years of Fire and Rescue Apparatus in Fairfax County, Virginia: 1923 - 2003 by Peter West and Mike Sanders. 2004

by Fred Claridge, Paramedic, Editor

My first memory of an ambulance goes back to when I was a little kid, growing up in Falls Church, Virginia. Back then, a red Chevy Suburban ambulance from the Jefferson Volunteer Fire Department over on Route 50 covered the area where I lived. (They're now a part of the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department.) That ambulance had a large response area. You'd see it responding all the time throughout our area.

One afternoon, my buddies and I were on our bicycles cruising around my apartment complex when we saw the fire department ambulance go screaming by on Lee Highway. We gave chase on our bikes, stand-pedaling as fast as we could to catch up. Our version of a "code three" response. As we were flying

down the service road next to the highway, we saw the ambulance pull into a construction site where they were building some new apartments right next to our complex.

We rounded the corner of a building under construction and saw the ambulance stopped, its red beacon turning. We collectively slammed on our bike brakes as we "arrived on scene." There was a small crowd, including some kids our age. The kids were crying. We watched as a young boy was pulled out of a giant sandpile by his feet. Immediately, one of the ambulance men rolled the boy onto his side, scooped sand out of his mouth, turned him onto his back and began mouth-to-mouth breathing as he pinched the boys' nose closed.

The crew didn't stay long on scene. One of the crew carried the lifeless boy into the ambulance through the back doors, gently placed him on the gurney and began rescue breathing again. His partner slammed the doors shut, hopped behind the wheel, and took off for the hospital, siren wailing.

My friends and I didn't know what to expect when we turned into ambulance chasers, but I doubt we expected to see anything like that. An article about the tragedy appeared in the morning newspaper the next day. The boy had died. But not for lack of effort on the part of those long ago rescuers.

Those ambulance attendants with their Red Cross first aid cards were a part of the legacy that made my job as a paramedic many years later possible. Perhaps you have a similar story – something from the “vintage” days of EMS that inspired you or got your attention.

Of course, at the time, I couldn't have imagined ever working on an ambulance myself. That didn't happen until I'd dabbled with a few other career tracks first. I can't honestly say that memory inspired me, but I've never forgotten that scene. The boys' blond hair. The looks of concern on the faces of the adults. How quickly the crew moved. The “ambulance attendant” on his knees, bending over, trying to breathe life back into that little boy.

Years later, after I'd entered the EMS profession, the author of a book about the history of the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department sent me this picture of that 60s era ambulance. It's exactly as I remember it and I'm glad to have it. Those ambulance attendants with their Red Cross first aid cards were a part of the legacy that made my job as a paramedic many years later possible. Perhaps you have a similar story – something from the “vintage” days of EMS that inspired you or got your attention. Or maybe, you never had a job in EMS, but you still have a story or a memory about some long-ago interaction with an ambulance crew doing the best they could to save a life or to help someone. This history - this legacy - is

what The National EMS Museum and our publication EMS Historian is all about.

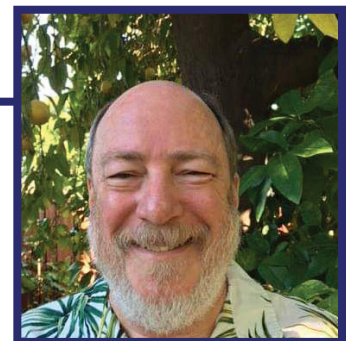
We hope you enjoy this second issue of the EMS Historian as you read about the people, innovations, services, and organizations that helped make our modern EMS systems what they are today. You'll learn about the Freedom House Ambulance Service in Pittsburgh - the first advanced life support system in the U.S., significant changes in EMS technology over the years, women's roles on ambulances over the years, and about “breadbox” ambulances in New York City.

We have several other interesting articles also - including one submitted by a “sister” museum - The National Museum of Civil War Medicine. We're very happy about our collaboration

with them and we're glad to bring this important part of our “shared” history to our audience.

We're a part of a continuum - constantly adding to the impressive story of EMS. Help us to tell that story in future issues! Please strongly consider becoming a member of The National EMS Museum if you aren't a member already. Memberships are a big part of our funding and help us to keep telling these amazing stories - for years to come.

And think about what the people in our EMS systems do every day for their communities. They're vitally important - and work hard to serve you.



Fred Claridge retired in 2020 after a forty-one year career in EMS. He served as a field provider in both rural and urban systems, a paramedic preceptor, an instructor, a paramedic program director, and as an EMS administrator.



The Freedom House Ambulance Service: Pioneers of Modern EMS

By John Moon, Paramedic

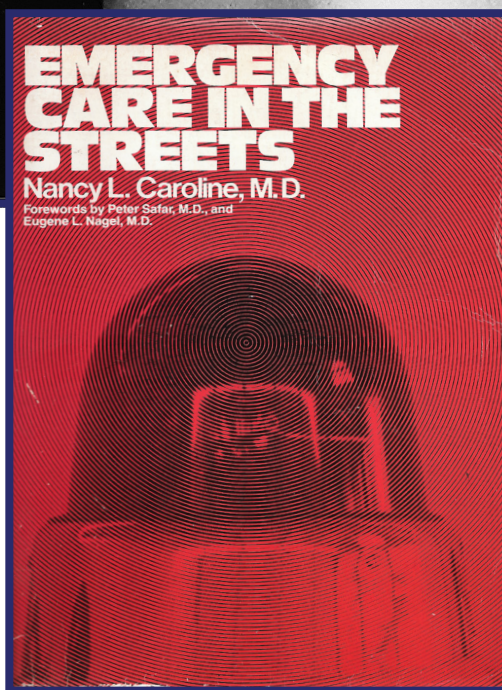
More than a half century ago - long before television ever dreamed of the show “Emergency” - a quiet revolution was beginning in Pittsburgh. An audacious, improbable experiment was begun. That local program would end up providing the national standards for prehospital care as we know it today. This experiment went by the name of “Freedom House Ambulance Service” and embodied the disparate dreams of several different individuals.

The Freedom House Enterprises Ambulance Service was created to deliver high quality emergency medical care, especially in medically deprived areas of poverty, and to create meaningful work for previously unemployed and underemployed citizens. The service answered almost 50,000 calls since it went into operation during the summer of 1968. Its continued growth, from the moment the service

was implemented, was indicative of its worth to the community.

There was a desperate need for emergency medical transportation in poverty-riddled neighborhoods in Pittsburgh like the Hill district. This became dramatically apparent through surveys conducted by the Office of Economic Opportunity during the mid-sixties. It took the efforts of many dedicated individuals, including community leaders, contributing foundations and government funds to create the Freedom House Ambulance Service. It was not easy.

Mr. Phil Hallen, President of the Maurice Falk Medical Fund and former chairman of the Pittsburgh



Office of Economic Opportunity Health Committee, introduced the idea of a black-owned and operated emergency ambulance service. Mr. Edward Norian, Executive Director of Presbyterian University (UMPC) was contacted, and the project began to move.

In the University Health Center of Pittsburgh, Dr. Peter Safar was looking for a proving ground to test new methods of resuscitation outside the hospital and for an opportunity to upgrade emergency care in Pittsburgh. In the community, a biracial group of concerned citizens were looking for a means of encouraging black enterprise. In the ghetto, blacks

were looking for employment. It was out of this mix of needs that the improbable idea of Freedom House Ambulance Service took shape.

Freedom House took forty people off the street corners, out of the pool halls and trained them to provide the most sophisticated emergency medical care possible, and to provide that care not in the hospital, but

at the scene of the emergency. And not just any forty people. Each applicant had to fulfill two prerequisites: he/she must be black; and he/she must be considered "unemployable."

It was madness back in 1967. It was hard enough to persuade anyone that a layman could be trained to

provide sophisticated medical and resuscitative care. Why load the dice against the experiment and choose laymen who were least likely to succeed?

Despite those supposed challenges, that is precisely what Freedom House proposed to accomplish - and did. The position of Emergency Medical Technician to man the ambulances was designed as a "new career" through which individuals could enter the health profession. The technicians were trained to administer a wide range of resuscitative techniques required to sustain life at the scene of illness or accident and during transportation to the hospital. The training was carried out by the Department of Anesthesiology of the University of Pittsburgh at Presbyterian University Hospital and included clinical rotations in the recovery room, intensive care unit and the emergency room.

The service had a fleet of five vans, each equipped with everything needed to support life in a life-threatening situation, including oxygen equipment, obstetric delivery kits, equipment for burn treatment, EKG monitoring equipment, a cardiac defibrillator and other sophisticated tools of modern medicine.

With dispatch headquarters at Presbyterian University Hospital, the ambulances served other hospitals in the area as well as two police districts.

The mobile intensive care units comprised one of the few ambulance fleets in the country that met the stringent standards of the National Research Council and were the first such completely equipped and maintained units in the United States.



Joining Dr. Safar as the Medical Director of the service was Dr. Nancy Caroline. Under her leadership, by January 1975, Freedom House Ambulance Service embarked on an advanced training program, which was to become the official paramedic curriculum of the United States Department of Transportation and the legal standard in more than 40 states. Freedom House technicians were intensively trained in a variety of advanced life support techniques - some of the most sophisticated in the nation.

In 1974, the city decided to launch its own mobile intensive care ambulance service. Freedom House was not part of the plan, and by early August, it became obvious that city funding would not be forthcoming. Freedom House Ambulance Service would have to shut its doors.

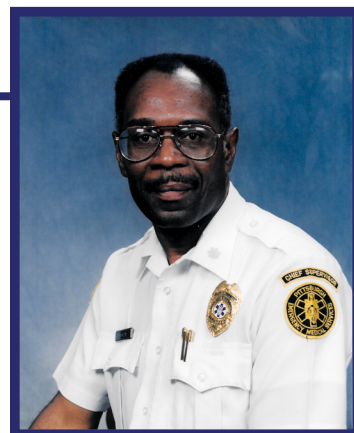
As Dr. Caroline wrote to each FHE employee in her final memo dated: September 12, 1975:



“All of you have reason to be proud of the work you have done here. You have taken a dream and made it real. Through your efforts in the field, you have profoundly affected thousands of lives: the young, and the old, the wealthy and the indigent, the prominent and the anonymous, you have served them all, and for eight years you have provided them with a quality of prehospital care unequalled anywhere in this city. You have weathered setbacks, disappointments, uncertainties and frustrations to build an advanced life support service that is second to none—and no one can take that away from you. Freedom House should remain a symbol to all of you of what you can achieve despite enormous odds and if you take with you into the future the dedication and spirit and pride which you have shown in your work here, you will keep alive all that is meaningful and important about Freedom House. You have proven something during these eight years to yourselves and to the community --- and that is what really matters.”

Community concern sparked the Freedom House Ambulance Service, and community involvement and commitment put it into operation. The flashing blue lights on the orange and white Freedom House ambulances are now synonymous with help and hope in Pittsburgh’s black community areas as well as throughout the city.

John Moon is a former Freedom House Paramedic and Retired Asst. Chief: City of Pittsburgh EMS with thirty-four years of service. He was a member of the Freedom House 2.0 Cohort training program and was a recent guest speaker of the 19th Annual Peter Safar Symposium.



My Part in the Story

As I reflect on my years at Freedom House Ambulance Service, I can’t help but acknowledge how blessed I was to have worked with some of the most warm and compassionate people around. I was blessed to be among individuals who weren’t privileged to have ideal situations in our lives. Life didn’t swing our way - sometimes we didn’t have it all together as we should have. But we didn’t allow it to destroy us. We were determined to rise above it, despite that. I was blessed to work with people who rejected the notion of being victims of our environment, without hope or without a future.

I had an opportunity to be trained by internationally renowned experts in the field of prehospital care like: Dr. Peter Safar, who I accompanied from OR room to OR room performing endotracheal intubations on unsuspecting patients awaiting surgery. Or Dr. Nancy Caroline, who showed the utmost confidence in my ability while directing me to perform one of the very first trachea intubations outside the hospital setting, while she was setting the national standards for the paramedic curriculum. I can’t help but think of how fortunate I was to be a part of groundbreaking pioneers, the standard setters, and the entrepreneurs who gave the nation a vision of how politics, science, organization and deep commitment to racial justice could change history in small though fragile ways. Freedom House will always hold a special place in my heart. We all had one important trait in common - we had a heart for people.



THE NATIONAL EMS MUSEUM

YOUR STORY, IS OUR STORY.

HELP US TO TELL IT RIGHT.

The National EMS Museum is dedicated to preserving and commemorating the history of the Emergency Medical Services in the United States.

Through the study of the past, we inspire EMS practitioners to develop new tools and procedures to provide better and more effective emergency care to our patients and communities.

The National EMS Museum is a Non-Profit virtual and roaming museum that is devoted to the enduring story of EMS, the changes it's made, and the future it is creating.



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