

"Old Betsy," the Margate Volunteer Fire Department's first fire truck
(Image previously published, courtesy of the Margate City Hall archives)

CHAPTER 8

THE MARGATE FIRE DEPARTMENT

"I'm tired – some one else ought to have a crack at being chief,
I just want to be one of the Indians."

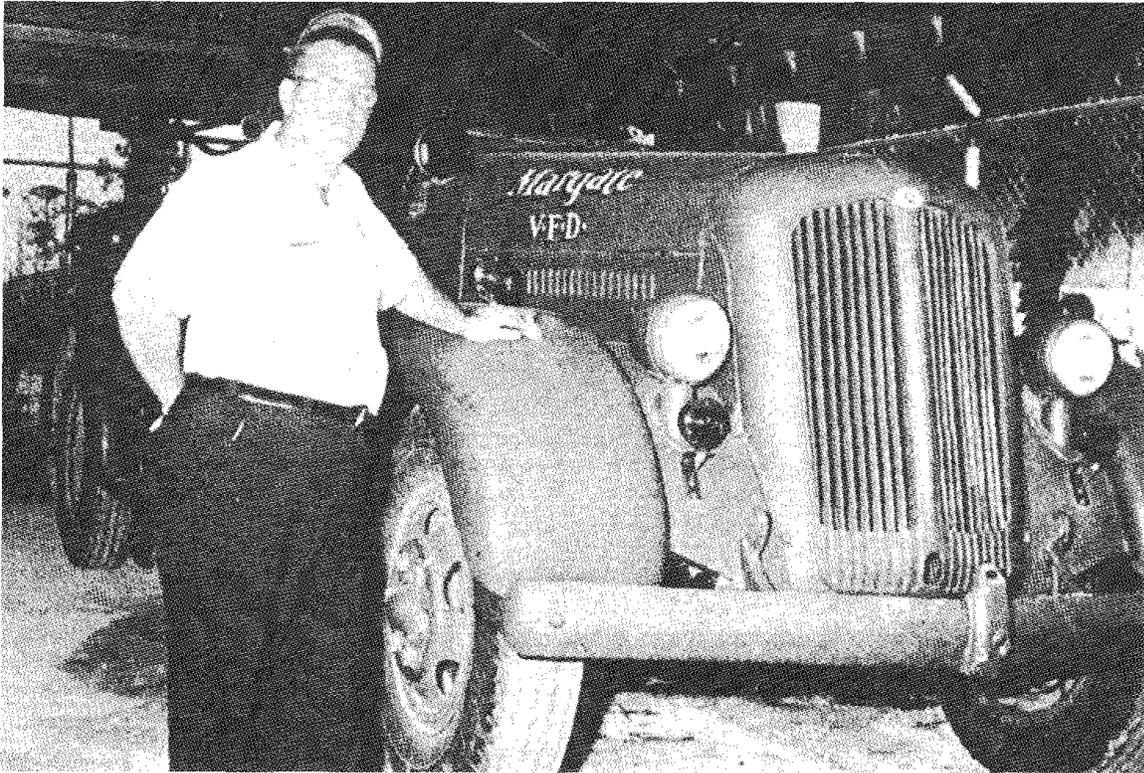
Chief "Bud" Cermack's comment when resigning

"It stinks"

Chief Robert Lindzley's evaluation of the county dispatch system

In the beginning, even when Margate had only a small number of residents, the need for fire protection was clearly recognized and a dozen men came forward to form the "First Volunteer Fire Department of Margate." In 1957 this became a chartered organization, and in 1960 the name was changed to the "Margate Volunteer Fire Department." The siren that would summon the town's early firefighters sat atop the Margate Boulevard Bridge. Records indicate that Charles Bowers was Margate's first fire chief and that after a year he was succeeded by Chief Warren West.

The first piece of firefighting equipment available to Margate's early firemen was a hand-operated high-pressure pumper that had to be pulled behind the chief's car. The next piece of equipment obtained was "Old Betsy," an old military pumper truck. Margate could not afford the \$13,000 to \$15,000 that in the late



Fire Chief John ("Bud") Cermack and "Old Betsy" (Image previously published, courtesy of the Margate City Hall archives)

1950s it would cost for a new firetruck, so in February 1958 the Town Council discussed the possibility of buying a used fire engine. The following month Mayor Semet reported that a 1941 Seagrave fire truck formerly used by the Air Force could be purchased for \$3,200. The price was later lowered to \$3,000 and the Town bought the truck for no money down, with the cost to be paid off at \$125 a month from funds derived from Margate's share of cigarette taxes collected in the town.

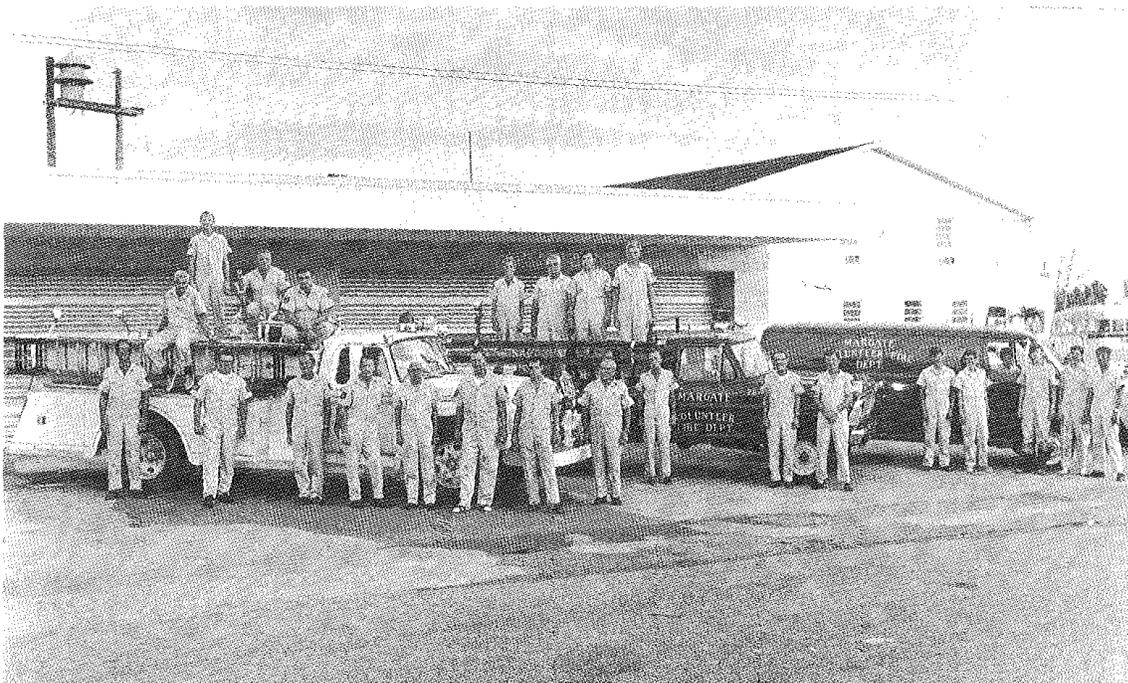
At first the truck was parked in an "open lot station," and then the town got its first real fire station, which was actually just a carport-type shed near the intersection of Lyons Boulevard (today's W. Atlantic Boulevard) and State Road 7. The Town of Margate owned the building in which the fire truck was housed, but Vic Semet owned the land on which the station was built.

In January 1960 Bill Kovach became Chief of the Margate Volunteer Fire Department, replacing Warren West. It was reported at that time that the town's fire department had the most modern alarm system in South Florida. There were seven phones—with no dials—installed in the homes of volunteer firemen, and when a fire was reported, all of the phones would ring. When any one of these phones was answered by a fireman, all he would have to do was press a small button and that would set off an alarm that could be heard all over Margate. The way it worked was that a switch on the phone would then send an

impulse to Southern Bell equipment in Pompano Beach, which would then bounce back a signal to the siren in Margate. However, a year later the new fire chief, John (“Bud”) Cermack, reported that there was a major flaw in this system—“everybody has to hang up their phones and let one person send the impulse or it’s too weak to make it back to Margate!”

Another flaw in Margate’s fire alarm system, albeit a very temporary one, may have caused some people to momentarily wonder whether the entire city might be burning down. One day in February 1962, the fire alarm system went haywire and the city’s fire alarm was set off every time anyone called the fire station for any reason—and each new alarm in turn caused more people to call the firehouse, which in turn set the alarm off again and again. This started at 10 a.m. and fortunately the problem was corrected by noon, but in that time so many alarms sounded that it must have seemed that most of Margate was in flames.

In that year there were 22 men in the Margate Volunteer Fire Department and most worked outside of the city. However, Margate actually did have full-time fire coverage because four of the volunteers, including Chief Cermack, worked for the city. That year there were several significant developments for the fire department. For one thing, the chief announced that all of the firemen, who had already taken 20 hours of firefighting training in an adult education program offered in Fort Lauderdale, would now take an additional 20 hours to improve the rating of the department.



The Margate Volunteer Fire Department (Image courtesy of Betsy Kish)

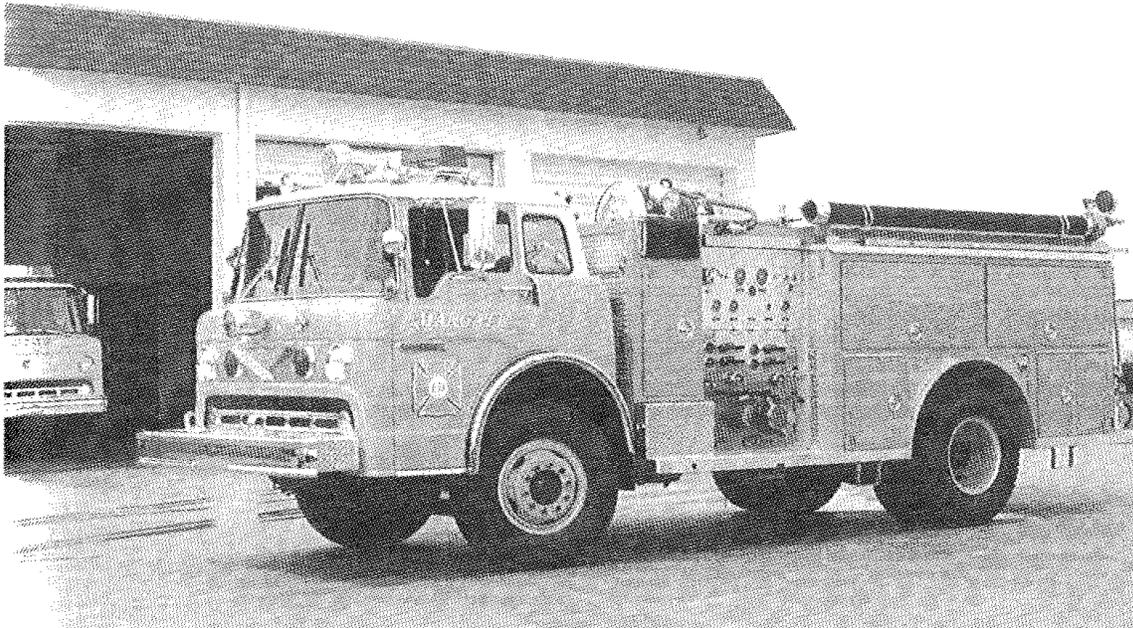
A very happy 1962 event for the men of the department—and for the community they served—was the arrival of their long awaited new fire truck. It was a Central “class A” pumper which cost \$10,700. Chief Cermack proudly announced that now when the firemen manned their truck to go to a fire, there would no longer be a question of “will it make it to the fire?” The new truck replaced “Old Betsy,” which was certainly ready for retirement, having been fighting fires for two decades. The chief wanted to keep the old truck around as a back-up vehicle, but in April 1963 the firefighters were informed by the City Council that they would have to get rid of their original vehicle and operate with only one pumper. This decision was made to save money, but the Council was eventually persuaded to change its collective mind, and not only was “Old Betsy” allowed to stick around, but there was even some funding approved for the antiquated truck to get a new hose.

In 1964, after serving as chief of the Margate Volunteer Fire Department for almost three years, Bud Cermack resigned, saying “I’m tired – some one else ought to have a crack at being chief, I just want to be one of the Indians.” But he subsequently changed his mind and was elected chief once again. At the time, he was also the city’s public works director.

However, for a while in 1964 it appeared that maybe Cermack would no longer be chief of the volunteers after all—not because of his resignation, which he had rescinded, but because the department itself might be disbanded. A dispute had arisen between the City Council and the fire department over the issue of whether the firemen needed to account for the funding they received. The firefighters did not believe that the city should have any say in the way they spent their department’s money because they were a volunteer organization, not a city department. The Council, on the other hand, held that the department was only “semi-volunteer” since it received funds—a total of \$7,076 in the previous year—from the city. Margate officials threatened that they would form their own department if they did not receive a proper accounting of how the volunteers spent their funds. This financial squabble was finally settled when the volunteers agreed that mutual aid funds they received from the county would be used to buy a second new firetruck to fight Margate’s fires.

It wasn’t until 1967 that Margate’s volunteer firemen finally received a two-way radio hookup, becoming one of the last departments in the county to connect with the Broward County Civil Defense system. That year also saw the beginning of a junior fire division, the purpose of which was to interest young men in the welfare of their city, with the hope that some of these “juniors” might go on to later become firemen—an expectation which was, in fact, fulfilled.

In the Fall of 1967 there was a bit of a political flap when Chief Fred Schroeder came up with what he thought was a good idea for coping with the fire department’s lack of volunteer manpower, a situation he declared to be worse in Margate than elsewhere. What the chief proposed, however, sounded to some a little too



Yellow Margate Firetruck in the late 1970's (Image courtesy of the Margate City Hall archives)

much like the “press gangs” used in earlier centuries to man British warships—Schroeder expressed his opinion that the fire department had a legal right to commandeer local residents to help extinguish fires! Unfortunately for the fire chief, one of those who most strongly disagreed with his legal position was Margate’s city attorney, who suggested quite forcefully that the head fireman should do a lot more research before he ventured to express any more legal opinions!

In 1968 poor “Old Betsy” faced an ignominious end. The veteran firetruck, the city’s first, was retired to a spot behind the firehouse, where it was simply left to rot away. Apparently the members of the City Council were reluctant to pay the \$50 which it would have cost to get the ancient vehicle hauled off to the scrapyard, and they were hoping that someone would come along who would be willing to tow the truck away just for its scrap value.

Even though the city’s volunteer firemen had been doing an excellent job for over a decade, by 1969 it was becoming apparent that Margate would eventually need to have a paid firefighting force to supplement the volunteers. The main reason was that their fulltime employment took most of the volunteer firemen away from the city during the daytime hours, leaving Margate without sufficient fire protection. This was brought home one day in November 1969 when the city’s fire alarm blared, and no one showed up! On that occasion, public works department employees were finally sent to fight the blaze that had triggered the alarm.

When back in June 1961 a new charter had elevated the Town of Margate to the status of a city, it had also authorized the creation of a paid full-time salaried

fire department, and eight years later the City Council took the first step in this direction. In 1969 Bill Nickerson was hired as Margate's first paid fireman, and then the following year, when Margate set up a Fire Prevention Bureau, Nickerson served as its first inspector. The year 1970 also saw an additional fireman added to the employment roster—that year the new man would receive a salary of \$6,600, while Nickerson earned \$7,200.

Before 1971 ended, Margate's fire department had a new \$37,000 pumper truck to supplement its two older pumpers, and it also had two brush fire trucks and one emergency first-aid vehicle. The volunteer fire department now had 40 members, and the city fire department had two paid men, both of whom had earlier served for several years as volunteer firefighters. It was also in 1971 that a contract was signed for Margate to provide North Lauderdale's residents with firefighting services, for a fee of \$2189 a year—thus North Lauderdale followed in the footsteps of Coral Springs, which had already entered into a similar agreement with Margate.

The following year the Margate Fire Department bought its first aerial truck, an 85-foot twin-boom unit with a price tag of \$94,000. The cost of this vehicle was to be paid for by a 50% increase in the city's building fees for all three-story buildings. In 1973 the city's firemen also acquired a scanner which enabled them to tune into the radio transmissions of the Margate police, the Broward Sheriff's Office, and other local fire departments in order to get a head start regarding possible emergencies.



Robert Lindley, Margate's first paid Fire Chief
(Image courtesy of the Margate City Hall archives)

Chief Robert Lindley

In July 1973, Robert Lindley, who had served as the elected chief of the volunteer department for four years, became the city's first paid fire chief at a salary of \$15,500 a year. His responsibilities were to include directing the activities of the city's paid firemen and coordinating activities with the volunteer force. That year the number of paid firefighters doubled, going from three to six men.

Technically, of course, Lindley was not really Margate's first salaried fire chief—although he was the first one to command an annual salary that could do more than cover the cost of a single movie ticket. The distinction of first paid chief goes to Chief Warren West. It seems that in 1958 West was appointed to the Town of

Margate's Civil Service Board. After his appointment, however, it was learned that to be eligible to serve on such a board, a fire chief must be an employee of the town—so the Town Council voted to pay Chief West a salary of one dollar a year!

The city began 1974 with only one fire station, located at City Hall, and the paid firemen, working 24-hour shifts, slept in the municipal courtroom on roll-away beds. But in September of that year a second fire station was added, a two-story building on Rock Island Road. That same year the City Council approved the creation of paid lieutenant and captain positions in the fire department, and the starting salaries for firemen were raised from \$8,200 to \$8,700 a year.

The city's paid firefighting force had grown significantly in its first few years, but Chief Lindley was dissatisfied about some things. He was, for example, not at all happy when in September 1975 the county's "central dispatch center" began handling calls for the Margate Fire Department. There were delays in communications and, in general, the county service appeared to the chief to be quite uncoordinated. He managed to express his feelings about the county dispatch system quite succinctly—"It stinks!" Four months later, a reporter asked Lindley what he thought of the poor fire protection rating earned by Margate, something which was primarily due to the city having no back-up water supply. The chief had this to say about the newest turn of events with which he was displeased: "It stinks!"

It would seem that if the Margate fire chief had not already overused this phrase, it might have been more aptly applied to a situation that arose a short time later. In May 1976 one of Margate's volunteer firemen, a 17-year old man, was arrested, along with three volunteer firemen from elsewhere, on charges of arson. This was a terrible situation and surely deserving of reproach, but the chief's hallmark phrase would actually best describe the situation when one of these men came before the judge, who did indeed note an offensive odor about this affair. Actually, what the judge smelled was smoke. Ironically, the defendant standing before him had somehow managed to allow his pants to catch on fire. This is probably the only recorded case in the history of American jurisprudence where a defendant charged with arson was literally "on fire" himself when he appeared in court.

By the end of the year 1977 Margate employed 37 paid firemen, but there were still two dozen men serving as volunteers. In early 1978 the city joined the Broward Emergency Medical Services program when the City Council accepted a county contract to provide EMS service outside Margate's city limits if needed. The city, in turn, received \$122,000—enough to cover the cost of fully staffing Margate's second EMS vehicle.

Things went along fairly smoothly for the Margate Fire Department for the next several years, and the size of the paid force remained about the same. However, that changed in 1984, a year which proved to be quite hectic for the department. For one thing, the city's 39 firefighters had become embroiled in

the controversy surrounding the city manager's plan to merge the police and fire departments, creating a single department of public safety, a move opposed by the rank-and-file in both departments.

Then in September 1984, during salary negotiations with the city, the head of Margate's firefighters union made a very unusual offer -the firefighters, he said, were willing to reduce their salary demands if the city would dismiss Chief Robert Lindley. City Manager Tom Hissom quickly rejected this offer, claiming it was a "regrettable statement," one that had nothing to do with the collective bargaining process. The city attorney subsequently noted that the offer might even have been illegal under state rules. Hissom offered to let union negotiators withdraw the statement, and they did so quickly.

Salary negotiations remained deadlocked, however, despite the efforts of a federal mediator. Then in November 1984 the firefighters proposed seceding from the City of Margate and becoming part of Broward County's fire and emergency medical services system, a proposal rejected outright by the City Commission. A month later, the city gave firefighters a 3.8% raise, but the public safety department controversy remained unresolved and would figure prominently in the following year's elections.

As these elections approached, Margate's firefighters began to circulate a petition in an attempt to force the City Commission either to repeal its decision regarding the creation of a public safety department, or to put the matter to the voters. To get the issue on the ballot for the March 1985 election would require the signatures of one-tenth of Margate's 24,000 registered voters, and by early February the firefighters had gathered 3,386 signatures. The City Commission accepted the petition, but then, claiming that the wording of the proposed referendum item could restrict the effectiveness of both police officers and firefighters, the commissioners decided to table the idea of a referendum until a court could rule on the legality of the wording in the petition. This removed any possibility of a referendum during that year's March elections.

In a strange turn of events, Margate officials then proceeded to initiate a lawsuit against the five members of the citizen's committee that had circulated the petition, claiming that while this action was unfortunate, it was the only way to get the question of the petition's legality before a judge. Not too surprisingly, the citizens who were being sued saw the matter very differently. Said one, "It's just a bully's way of getting back at a guy who stands up for his rights!"

In June 1986 Margate's firefighters voted to accept the terms of a new contract which gave them a five-percent raise but also required them to accept police training as part of their professional skills. This agreement, along with the new contract approved by the city's police department, enabled Margate officials to inaugurate the city's new public safety department. By July 1986 police officers trained in firefighting were patrolling Margate's streets, while firefighters were attending

the police training classes which they would complete by November. The cross-trained firefighters—dubbed “para-police”—would not be carrying guns, but they would be required to patrol the city in special vehicles, charged with reporting to regular police officers any suspected criminal activities that they might observe, as well as taking note of other problems.

In January 1987 implementation of the public safety department concept was completed when firefighters began daily road patrols looking for potholes, overflowing dumpsters and other health and safety hazards, as well as keeping an eye out for criminals. Firefighters were now required to spend eight hours of their 24-hour shifts patrolling neighborhoods in emergency response vehicles. Several months later, when the department lost three experienced firefighters within a two-week period, some attributed this to the requirement that firefighters also perform police duties. Fire Chief Robert Lindley, however, claimed that the firefighters who had left the department had done so more from a desire for career advancement than on account of any dissatisfaction with their jobs.

A bit of drama was introduced into the ongoing controversy over the merger of police and fire departments in December 1987 when four Margate paramedics quit their jobs in the middle of a City Commission meeting, citing complaints about having to perform police duties. Commissioners, in turn, criticized the four paramedics, claiming that their “mass exodus” was simply staged to embarrass the city.

The controversy continued unabated and in January 1988 two more firefighters left. Union officials, in attributing their departure to the creation of the public safety department, claimed that altogether 20 firefighters had quit the city’s employ since cross-training was initiated. Public Safety Director Larry Christopher disputed this, however, saying that his figures indicated that nine firefighters had left, and that only five of these did so because of the new job requirements.

A month later the City Commission once more became involved in this ongoing controversy, when Commissioner Joe Varsallone proposed that the public safety department be scrapped, saying that it was a failure and that the “exodus of good employees” greatly concerned him. Several dozen firefighter and police officers, who had picketed City Hall earlier that day, stood and applauded when Commissioner Varsallone spoke out against the two-year-old program. The mayor and the other three Commission members, however, indicated that they still saw some good in the public safety department concept, although the possibility of ending the program would continue to be discussed.

The public safety department battle continued, with occasional moments of drama. In March 1988 another paramedic-firefighter decided to resign, citing the need to perform para-police duties as the reason. To underscore his dissatisfaction, he chose to present his resignation during a City Council meeting.

However, this was made somewhat difficult because he was on duty when the Commission meeting was held. Since he could not be there in person, he asked another firefighter to attend the meeting and read his letter of resignation aloud. The attempt to do so, however, was blocked by Mayor Mitch Anton, and the Commission as a whole seemed unimpressed by what some considered to be mere theatrics. Commented City Manager Tom Hissom, “If they want to leave, be my guest. We are getting qualified people to replace them, and these [new] people are more ready to support the public safety concept.”

A month later, however, it was Tom Hissom who was leaving. In March 1988 Margate’s first city manager announced his resignation, citing personal reasons. In the elections that month, fire union officials supported three candidates for the City Commission who had come out against the public safety department, hoping to bring about a major change in the makeup of the Commission. This did not happen, although one of the candidates they supported, Arthur Bross, did get elected. And that same month, firefighters approved a new contract with the city that gave them a ten-percent raise each year for three years.

Hissom’s successor, Sam Moschella, held a series of meetings with representatives of the police and fire departments, to discuss possible ways in which the public safety program might be modified to satisfy their concerns. After these meetings, in June 1988 he proposed to the City Commission that the public safety program be continued, but with less stringent requirements. Firefighters were heartened by the changes, which resulted in their only having to learn some minor police skills, such as directing traffic at the scene of an accident. “It’s a big victory for us,” announced a spokesman for the firefighters union. “The para-police description is now gone from the fire department.”



Frank Porcella, Margate Fire Chief from 1988 to 2006 and present Assistant City Manager/Fire Administrator (Image courtesy of the Margate City Hall archives)

Chief Frank Porcella

The City Commission in August 1988 approved the revised public safety department concept, and several personnel changes were announced in the fire department. Robert Lindley was reassigned as Chief of Code Inspection and

Captain Frank Porcella was elevated to Fire Chief, both now reporting to Public Safety Director Larry Christopher, who had been named as the new Deputy City Manager for Safety.

In September 1989 the Margate firefighters' union filed a complaint with the state Public Employees Relations Commission, charging that City Manager Moschella had broken off negotiations concerning work hours and had been trying to make the city's employees absorb a \$230,000 deficit in the city's self-insurance program. Seven months later the state commission condemned the city administration, holding that not only had Moschella failed to negotiate fairly with the city's firefighters, but that he had, in fact, threatened the union's president. (As the story goes, former military officer Moschella allegedly had warned the firefighter that "a grenade has no eyes!") The result was an order for the city to pay part of the legal fees of the union in filing their complaint, and also a demand that city officials stop "making threatening or coercive statements" to union members.

As the year 1990 began, Margate's new Fire Station #1 had been completed, but the building was not opened. In fact, officials had no idea what they were going to do with this \$300,000 fire station that was part of the new four-building City Hall complex. The building was left vacant, with all of the city's firefighters forced to operate out of Fire Station #2 on Rock Island Road.

This situation had many residents quite worried over the lack of an operating fire station on Margate's east side, although the city manager claimed that the city was just as well protected as it would have been if both stations were operating. As firefighters opened contract negotiations with the city that year, they joined their voices to those of the many residents demanding that the city manager open Fire Station #1. They also staunchly opposed Moschella's proposal that firefighters would have to work eight-hour days, five days a week. Adding to residents' concerns about the city's fire coverage, the president of the firefighters' union pointed out that there were now only 30 firefighters in the city, six less than a full complement, and that the experience level in the department averaged just a little over a year. Moreover, it was noted that more than half of the city's firefighters had already applied for jobs elsewhere.

In response to mounting criticism, the city manager made an effort to alleviate some of the concerns of city residents. Moschella had proposed, and the Commission approved, the construction of another fire station in Coral Gate Park, and he now announced that while that facility was being built, a fire engine and an ambulance would be stationed at a medical office building in the north-east area of the city.

Despite the pleas of more than 250 residents attending a City Commission meeting in late September 1990, after four hours of heated debate the commissioners

voted 3 to 2 to support the city manager and keep the new fire station adjacent to City Hall closed. Then, a week later, Mayor Ben Goldner announced that he was changing his vote, conceding that “sometimes we have to listen to what the public wants.”

At the same time that the opening of Fire Station #1 was approved, commissioners also voted to close the temporary fire station at the east side medical building, and to scrap plans for the Coral Gate Park station. Firefighters and many residents were elated, but City Manager Sam Moschella still argued that Fire Station #1 was in the wrong place, complaining that “where the emotion is running so high, logic yields to emotion.”

Ironically, only moments after the commissioners ended their months of debate, and finally decided to open the newly completed fire station, an elderly resident put his car into the wrong gear and smashed into one of the station’s two doors. This caused Fire Chief Frank Porcella to quip, “We told you it was in the wrong place!”

In the meantime, nine Margate firefighters had been offered jobs by the City of Sunrise. Three took the new positions offered to them, and one declined—but the remaining five were told by Margate administrators that they would not be allowed to get out of their contracts with the city. The five firefighters subsequently discovered that Sunrise had rescinded their job offers after Sam Moschella threatened Sunrise officials with a lawsuit for “facilitating a breach of contract.” This action by the city manager enraged the union and at least one city commissioner, and Moschella then requested that the state of Florida send a special master to resolve the ongoing dispute between the firefighters and the city.

Toward the end of December 1990 the firefighters fought back, launching a federal lawsuit against Moschella and the City of Margate for allegedly violating the civil rights of four firefighters by blocking their pursuit of new jobs. The complaint, 18-pages in length, claimed that Moschella and the city had “deprived each and every plaintiff of [his] constitutional right to pursue the occupation of his choosing, deprived each and every plaintiff of the right of freedom of association, and have deprived each and every plaintiff of their liberty interest arising under the due process clause of the 14th Amendment...” In an interview with the press, the firefighters’ attorney summarized his clients’ complaint more colorfully than could be conveyed in stilted legalese—“Moschella was acting as if the firemen were his own slaves and not free to leave Margate and get a better job!” [Of course, given the fact that two of his clients were women, perhaps the counselor should not have left himself open to reprisals from his clearly litigious clients by unwisely referring to them with the sexist term, “firemen.”]

The outcome of the 1991 municipal elections was of crucial importance to Margate’s firefighters, elections that would prove to be a turning point for their department. In that electoral contest, three incumbents faced six challengers for the

three City Commission seats to be filled. Two of the incumbents supported the city manager's proposal to put firefighters on a five-day-a-week schedule, while all of the challengers and one incumbent, Commissioner Arthur Bross, opposed this change. Margate's firefighters mounted a concerted effort to oust the two commissioners who had continually opposed firefighters' requests, and when the voters were heard, the two incumbents supporting the eight-hour day were gone. And less than two weeks after the election, so was the city manager who had promoted the public safety department and had frequently clashed with the city's firefighters.

The despised public safety department was gone, but the city's firefighters would continue to face staffing problems. In 1993 Margate began charging developers impact fees in order to raise additional funds for the city's fire and police services, but the money collected was far from sufficient to ameliorate the shortages of personnel. As a result, early in 1994 the city's firefighters began to push for more personnel and the construction of an additional fire station, claiming that their department was seriously understaffed. Finding the funds to resolve this problem was left up to the City Commission, and how this might be done became a political issue as the 1994 elections approached. When asked his opinion about the situation, Fire Chief Frank Porcella wisely declined to comment, saying "I'm not going to get in the middle of a campaign issue!"

Over the next few years, the fire department may not have gotten all the funding that its members thought they deserved, but it certainly did get a good deal of recognition. In 1995 the Margate Fire Department received national attention when it won the first "EMS Gold Standard Award," sponsored by a major professional magazine. This honor was bestowed in recognition of the department's community involvement, as well as its firefighting efforts. One factor in the selection of their department for this prestigious award was that all of Margate's firefighters had been trained in the use of sign language. Another was the fact that the Margate Fire Department was the only department in Florida in which 90% of the firefighters were CPR instructors. Said the executive editor of *Emergency Medical Services Magazine*: "We were really impressed. They have an above-and-beyond attitude. They live and breathe service."

Then in 1996 the Margate Fire Department was named by the state as "Emergency Medical Services Provider of the Year." Fire Chief Frank Porcella was delighted, exclaiming "What a roll! After last year I didn't think it could get any better. Now we're recognized by our own state!"

That same year the city itself paid honor to its firefighters when it was time to name Margate's newest park. However, the naming of the nine-acre park—construction of which had not yet even begun—was not without controversy. This was, after all, Margate. To begin with, when the City Commission chose the name "Fireman's Park" for this facility, the commissioners soon began to hear com-

plaints about that designation, and it was only a matter of weeks before Margate's legislators recognized that they were a bit behind the times. So they very prudently decided to change the name of the park to the gender-neutral designation "Firefighters Park" to avoid offending women—at the time the fire department had 43 men and two women firefighters.

But this was only the beginning of the controversy, because the naming of the park—whether for "firemen" or "firefighters" was not without strong political overtones. In the eyes of some, it was clearly a very intentional snub for the former city manager, Sam Moschella. Not only had that official wanted a golf driving range built on the property where the park was now going to be located, but he was also continually at odds with the fire department, whose members ultimately played a big role in the election that led to his downfall. Now a park that he had not wanted was to be named in honor of the city employees that fought him at every turn!

In July 1996 the City Commission approved a location for Margate's third fire station, the site chosen being on Northwest 24th Street, at the northwest corner of Copans and Banks roads. However, although things were looking good for the city's third fire station, Firefighter's Park was now in a little bit of trouble. It seems that the nine-acre site had been a dumping ground for rubber tires and other debris, and this trash covered a very large part of the proposed park, with much garbage being buried beneath the areas intended for tennis and basketball courts, and for a clubhouse. Removal of the trash was expected to add about \$40,000 to the cost of the project.

It was not clear who had done the illegal dumping and the matter was referred to the Broward State Attorney's office. However, Margate's city manager informed the City Commission that there was good reason to believe that his predecessor, Sam Moschella, had ordered city employees to haul the debris to the site where Firefighter's Park was now to be built. For his part, Moschella denied that he had any connection with the dumping.

In November 1996, tragedy struck at a construction site in Margate when the walls of a ten-foot-deep trench collapsed and loosened a huge boulder which pinned down several workers and made rescue efforts extremely difficult. Although one worker was killed, three others were eventually saved. After the first man was rescued, the Margate Fire Department sent in a team of specialized rescue workers in an attempt to free the other two men who were buried up to their waists. It took four hours, but the men were eventually freed and then rushed to a hospital for emergency medical care. According to Chief Frank Porcella, the Margate Fire Department was later recognized by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for its handling of the accident scene, and the department's rescue effort was re-enacted for a television documentary.

In July 1997 the City Commission approved the construction plans for Margate's third fire station, and agreed to seek bids for the project. The money was to come from a bond issue approved by voters, monies from those bonds already having been used to replace three fire engines and four rescue vehicles.

In November 1997 a 1,000-pound bronze statue of a firefighter carrying a child in his arms was hoisted into place at the entrance to Firefighters Park. The statue, more than eight feet in height, depicted a firefighter in full gear, an air tank on his back, and a face mask hanging from his neck. A year earlier, when firefighters had prepared a base for this statue, they could not resist taking one last poke at their old nemesis. They engaged in a prank—an “inside” joke in the truest sense of the word—by entombing inside the concrete a few special objects. The items chosen for this inglorious end were a training manual and motivational button left over from the era of the former city manager, a way of showing contempt for Sam Moschella's treatment of them and also a means of symbolically burying the unpleasant past.

July 1998 saw the opening of Margate's third fire station. About a year after construction had begun, the 10,000-square-foot station at 5395 NW 24th Street began operations. The new station was expected to house an average of five firefighters, but was built to accommodate up to seven.

After a number of years marked by turmoil and conflict, the Margate Fire Department had already experienced several years of stability and professional growth, extending the presence of fire stations throughout the city. Now the departments award-winning professional services would be offered beyond Margate's city limits as well. In 1999 Coconut Creek officials entered into a five-year contract to have Margate provide them with fire and rescue services. At that time, Broward County was providing Coconut Creek's fire and ambulance services, and both the Margate and the county fire departments had offered their services when contract renewal time approached. Citing better response times, greater credibility, and larger savings, Coconut Creek chose Margate. As a result, in the spring of 2000, Margate began to provide firefighting services to Coconut Creek and before the year was out, a complete merger of fire-rescue services for the two cities was completed.

Indeed, 2000 was to prove a very good year for Margate's firefighters in more ways than one. In April of that year, a local newspaper article heaped praise upon the Margate Fire Department, saying that it had shown itself as “a top agency in north Broward County, leading an effort to change the way the fire departments north of Commercial Boulevard hire people and respond to emergencies.” It was noted that Margate Fire Chief Frank Porcella had taken a leadership role in the effort to consolidate the hiring practices of local departments. His plan, referred to as MESH—standing for “Municipal Employee Screening and Hiring”—was

designed to save money for the cities involved by pooling the recruitment and selection of job candidates. Instead of each local fire department advertising open positions, then screening and testing applicants on its own, the departments would share the cost of advertising and the testing of candidates would be held in one central location. This would, of course, also be a tremendous benefit to job seekers, because they would no longer have to go through multiple application procedures if they wanted to apply to several cities, which most applicants routinely did. In its first year of operation, MESH saved a considerable amount of money and effort for Margate, North Lauderdale, Coral Springs, Deerfield Beach and Lighthouse Point. [Note: Within five years, the MESH program would grow to include more than 18 members and would be under consideration for implementation in several other areas in the state.]

In addition to MESH, the Margate chief had proposed an “automatic response plan” for mutual assistance between fire departments. At the time he made this proposal, agreements had already been in place enabling firefighters to help out in neighboring cities, but first a request for assistance had to be made. Under Porcella’s plan, a Margate fire-rescue truck would automatically respond to an emergency in another city if the Margate vehicle was closer than any vehicle belonging to the neighboring department. Both of Porcella’s plans were extremely well received by Margate’s municipal neighbors.

Then in June 2000 Margate’s two top fire officials won widespread recognition when they completed four years of training in the Executive Fire Officer Program. Considering that only one out of every ten who applied for admission to that program was even accepted, and that only 1,500 had successfully completed the program since its inception in the mid-1980s, it certainly was quite an honor when Fire Chief Frank Porcella and Deputy Chief Garrison Westbrook were named Executive Fire Officers by the U.S. Fire Administration’s National Fire Academy.

Some time after this, Chief Porcella’s abilities gained still greater recognition outside of the city’s boundaries. For many years, it has been a common practice for one city in South Florida to hire personnel who had been working for another city, particularly police officers and firefighters. Thus it was not at all unusual when a neighboring city offered Margate’s fire chief the job of heading up its own department. What was quite unusual, however, was that in April 2002, when the North Lauderdale City Commission offered Chief Frank Porcella command of that city’s firefighters, he was to be allowed to keep his old job too! In actuality, what happened was that North Lauderdale offered Margate \$48,000 a year for Porcella’s services. Margate’s agreement to this arrangement would mean that Porcella would not only be running fire-rescue services for both Margate and Coconut Creek, but also overseeing the administration of such services for

North Lauderdale as well. This was seen as a possible first step in the creation of a regional fire department covering all three cities. At the time, these three cities—as well as Coral Springs—also shared a common dispatch system. These efforts, Chief Porcella noted, might very well serve as “the springboard toward a regional service for the municipalities in Northwest Broward.”

In 2002, it had been announced that the annual fee homeowners were paying for fire-rescue services would almost double, going from an average of \$33 to \$63. The City Commission had approved the new fee as a way to cover the cost of an advanced communications system for coordinating fire-rescue services for Margate, Coconut Creek, North Lauderdale, Coral Springs, and Parkland. The new system, which was scheduled to start operating at the beginning of the following year, would enable dispatchers to determine where all emergency vehicles were in the five cities and then send the one closest to any given emergency situation.

In the half century since the birth of Margate, its fire department has come a long way. Starting with a handful of volunteers and antiquated equipment, the department has grown into a modern fire and rescue agency that has gained widespread recognition for its professionalism and the quality of the services it provides not only to Margate residents, but to people in neighboring cities as well.

When Frank Porcella was asked recently about the accomplishments of his department during his tenure as its chief, he answered that there were several of which he was particularly proud. One of these, he noted, was winning the first Emergency Medical Services Magazine Gold Standard award for service and community programs in 1995. Another was being named the Emergency Medical Provider of the Year for the State of Florida in 1996. In addition to these, Porcella said that he was very proud of “the continuous achievement of both our Advanced Life Support teams and our Extrication Team, who continue to perform at high levels in each competition they enter.” He added that “these men and women practice and compete on their own time!”