

# Beyond smoke and fire

## An inside look at the firehouse culture

BY KATHLEEN CRAVEN

To outsiders, the world of firefighting is one of heroism and macho pride, where men and women put their lives on the line daily for people they don't know and may never meet again. For Boise State anthropology professor Bob McCarl, it's also a world filled with camaraderie, shared val-

ues and a firehouse culture distinct from that of society as a whole.

McCarl has spent years studying and documenting that culture — both its traditions and its changes. “A firehouse is like a family,” he says, noting that, like a family, firefighters tend to stick together out of the public eye.

Unlike police officers, who are encouraged to mingle in the communities they serve, fire-

fighters tend to separate themselves. They're most often in the firehouse waiting for a call or training with new equipment and not out socializing. Because of this, McCarl contends, the public has a romantic view of firefighters that feeds into the stereotype of firefighters doing little more than riding in a truck and wearing protective gear.

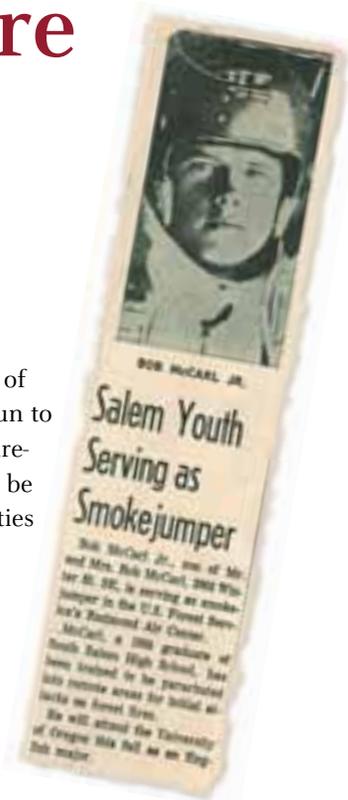
The relatively recent inclusion of women into that culture has begun to change that view, since women firefighters generally have proved to be more involved in their communities than men. This has “opened the doors of the firehouse” a little more, McCarl says, increasing interaction with the public. Even so, the idea of the firehouse as a distinct microcosm of society as a whole survived pretty much unchallenged until Sept. 11, 2001.

“Since 9/11 there's been more adulation, but also more scrutiny,” says McCarl. That scrutiny has raised interesting questions both within and outside of the firehouse. People from young children to older adults have a romantic view of firefighting — and do we really want to trade that for the more pragmatic view of human beings having to make choices between saving themselves and saving others, McCarl asks.

Other issues raised include the increasing risk of fighting fires laced with chemicals and more dangerous materials; the role of first responders in a situation where they may not have all the facts; the competition — real or implied — that exists between different emergency personnel; and the demographics, both gender and race, that define crews in specific neighborhoods.

As a former wildland firefighter, McCarl bases many of his views on personal experience. From his first firefighting job at the age of 16 to a four-season stint as a smoke jumper beginning at 18 and another as foreman of a rural fire department as an adult, McCarl experienced both the ups and downs of what was, until recently, an almost thankless job. But he says the people he worked with, those he interacted with day in and day out, made it all worthwhile.

“You share an experience,” he says, recalling his days as an 18-year-old smoke jumper. “A guy hits you on the shoulder and you have to jump through that door ... you have to prove yourself. I'm a little scared of heights and pushing through that threshold was an important thing for me.” It also built bonds that no other experience could.



CARIE QUINN

McCarl's scholarly investigation into the world of firefighting was kindled years before as a teenage smoke jumper (upper right) and later when he was in Washington, D.C., documenting the work of firefighters (opposite page).

"The Vietnam War was a big part of the culture back then," he says. "A lot of the guys I was jumping with were having to make a decision about going into the military or protesting. It was a big issue on all smoke jumping bases in the '60s; we had many late night sessions on it."

After McCarl earned his doctorate, he spent more than a year in the mid-1980s documenting the work of urban firefighters in the Washington, D.C., area, looking at how firefighters working within that culture viewed themselves and others. He published the resulting ethnography in 1985.

Since then, he has taught a course on wildland urban interface, or how man-made structures affect wildland fire patterns, and the resulting questions of jurisdiction. He has also worked on the gender issue in fire departments and, with a student, did a study related to the 20th anniversary of women in smoke jumping.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB MCCARL

## Fiery prose

Boise State anthropology professor Bob McCarl spoke and moderated a panel of firefighters at a conference in Salt Lake City in December. This conference was in conjunction with a project by Utah's Art Access, which organized a firefighting exhibit that opened last year.

The materials from that exhibit have been compiled into a soft-cover book of 36 firefighter interviews and an essay by McCarl showing firefighters to be part of a distinct culture. The book is titled *24/7: A Portrait of a Contemporary Fire Department Through 37 Voices*. The book is available through Art Access at (801) 328-0703 or [amanda@accessart.org](mailto:amanda@accessart.org).

In addition, *Forged in Fire*, a book of essays edited by Mary Clearman Blew and Phil Druker due out later this year, includes an essay on smoke jumping written by McCarl. The piece is titled "Black Butte Jump." *Forged in Fire* covers topics from escaping forest fires and smoke jumping, to fighting house fires and making campfires.

It is available from the University of Oklahoma Press for \$16.95.



## LAURANCE TO HEAD BIOLOGY ASSOCIATION

William F. Laurance (BS, biology, '82), a world authority in tropical conservation biology, is the new president-elect of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation. The association is the world's largest scientific organization dedicated to the study and conservation of tropical ecosystems.

Laurance is a staff scientist at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama. He is a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and was recently recognized as the most productive scientist in the Biological Dynamics of Forest Fragments Project, a long-term study of forest fragmentation in the central Amazon.

## BSU'S STEPHENSON CONDUCTS RESEARCH ON YELLOWSTONE SNOWMOBILE EMISSIONS

Dale Stephenson, director of undergraduate environmental health at Boise State, with graduate student Wendy Campbell, is collaborating with researchers from Montana Tech to study snowmobile emissions in Yellowstone National Park.

Stephenson's research measures how the use of snowmobiles affects air quality, focusing particular attention on how the gases, vapors and noise affect both park workers and the general public. As snowmobiles move from two-cycle to four-cycle engines, the study will help determine whether or not the change also decreases unwanted emissions.

The study is funded by a \$35,000 grant from the Park Service.

## ART DEPARTMENT RECEIVES ACCREDITATION

Boise State's Department of Art was granted accreditation by the National Association of Schools of Art and Design's Commission on Accreditation in fall 2004.

NASAD is the accrediting agency for approximately 240 schools of art and design out of several hundred across the country in an effort to foster high standards for art and design education. Boise State joins the University of Idaho as one of only two such accredited programs in Idaho.

Boise State's Department of Art is one of the largest academic departments on campus, with about 600 majors. The department offers emphases in art metals, ceramics, drawing, interdisciplinary studio, painting, printmaking, photography and sculpture.

## BSU OFFERS NEW MASTER'S DEGREE IN MATH

Boise State's Department of Mathematics will launch a new graduate program in fall 2005 leading to a master of science degree in mathematics.

"We're very pleased to offer this new degree, which supports Boise State's position as a metropolitan research university," says Alan Hausrath, department chair.

The new master's degree includes concentrations in pure mathematics, applied mathematics, or statistics. A student's course of study can be tailored to suit a particular interest. According to Hausrath, the department has strengths in set theory, topology, statistics, computational statistics, numerical analysis and cryptography.

The new degree is the second master's program offered by the math department.