



*Western Edition* Episode 1

“The West on Fire: Black Firefighters in L.A.”

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(MUSIC – FRAIL)

BILL DEVERELL (HOST): I’m Bill Deverell, and this is *Western Edition*, season one: The West on Fire. Firefighters have a hard job. Whether they’re putting out housefires or battling large-scale wildfires, the work is grueling, dangerous, and often thankless. Firefighters are often first on the scene after an explosion or natural disaster. They put their bodies on the line to save others. Imagine having to deal with racism and bigotry on top of all those challenges. In this episode, we meet the Stentorians, a fraternal organization that focuses on recruiting, training, and connecting Black firefighters, men and women, in both the city and county of Los Angeles. And we’ll meet the firefighters closely associated with the African American Firefighter Museum.

BRENT BURTON: My name is Brent Burton and I am a fire captain with Los Angeles County Fire Department. And I’m also the historian for the African-American Firefighter Museum.

DEVERELL: The African-American Firefighter Museum is located in downtown Los Angeles, inside Fire Station #30. That was one of two segregated firehouses in Los Angeles between 1924 and 1955. The museum is on South Central Avenue, across the street from the historic Coca Cola Building. Brent Burton took over as the museum’s historian from Arnett Hartsfield, the founder of the Stentorians.

BURTON: He was a retired LA firefighter from 1940 to 1960. And so once he passed away in 2014, the torch was passed to me.

DEVERELL: The word "stentorian" means loud-voiced. In Greek mythology, Stentor was a herald of the Greek forces during the Trojan War. His voice was said to be as loud as that of fifty men. Arnett Hartsfield founded the Stentorians because Black firefighters needed to speak loudly against the systemic racism and discrimination they encountered back in the 1950s.

BURTON: So Mr. Hartsfield was born and raised in Los Angeles. He came to LA from Bellingham, Washington, in the late 1920s, and went to LA schools on the Westside of Los Angeles, went to UCLA with Tom Bradley and Jackie Robinson and those athletes. And he became a firefighter in 1940.

(MUSIC – PALE AND TROUBLED RACE)

BURTON: During his time, the fire department was segregated. And so he worked on a segregated fire department where Blacks only work at one of two fire stations, both on Central Avenue. And so from his time on the job to the time he went to World War II, as Lieutenant, he came back and used the GI bill to become an attorney, got his law degree from USC, he was all about equality. And he wanted to lead the charge for integrating the LA Fire Department from the firefighters' perspective. And he did a great job at that. After that he was a civil service commissioner. He was a professor of African-American American studies at Cal State Long Beach, and he just started sharing with us all of his artifacts and pictures that he had collected over the years of the history of Black firefighters, that extends way back to the year 1888, when the first Black firefighter Sam Haskins joined the LA Fire Department.

DEVERELL: In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that segregation was unconstitutional, and Los Angeles's firehouses were required by law to integrate. Black firefighters were reassigned to all-white firehouses. The white, mostly Irish and Catholic firefighters pushed back hard. Accounts from that time describe nightly hazings that were so bad, some Black firefighters resorted to carrying arms to protect themselves. By the end of 1955, the Black firefighters were removed from the white firehouses. Arnett Hartsfield sat down for a video interview in 2009 with UC Berkeley's Oral History Center. He recounted a conversation he had in the 1950s that was illustrative of the prejudice Black firefighters faced.

ARNETT HARTSFIELD: Shortly after I was integrated, they called it integration. I called it isolation. The other firemen wouldn't speak to me. Then a young kid came out, a young white kid. I noticed that whenever no one else was around, he'd speak to me.

I also noticed no hatred. Curiosity, he'd been around a Black man before. The first time he says, "Hartsfield, you folks just ain't ready." I said, "well Bill, I'm just asking you to accept the ones that are ready." And he went back and talked to the old timers again,

came back. “Hartsfield, we don't want this job to become like the Post Office, a colored man's job.”

Now, this is before Obama. I said, “well, what are you doing here? You could have been President. I'm here because this is the very best they'll let me do.” He tried me again. “Hartsfield, why wouldn't you be happier over on Central Avenue with your own kind?”

Fortunately, I had heard him talking to the other men. I said, “Bill, why aren't you back in Oklahoma with your own kind. I heard you tell the men that your mother brought you and your brother to California to better your condition. If you want to know why I wouldn't be happier over on Central Avenue, get in that rig and turn on the radio and listen the rest of the night. We had as many runs in a day as you have in a month. This is like early retirement.

He tried me one more time. Only one more. “Hartsfield, you got all the advantages. You got the NAACP. You got the Urban League. You got the Supreme Court.” I said, “hold it, Bill. Tomorrow morning. When we get off duty, come with me down to headquarters. Tell them you've just discovered some Black blood in your family tree and you won't even have to prove it. And you'll have all my advantages.” You know, the next morning, I couldn't find that dude and he never bothered me again.

(MUSIC – RADIO KEEP ME ON THE GROUND (SLIGHT RETURN))

DEVERELL: I asked Brent Burton with the African American Firefighter Museum to describe the Jim Crow landscape of Los Angeles in the 1950s.

BURTON: Well, Los Angeles was not like the South in terms of the signs that were posted of colored and, and, white, but there were just places where they tell us that you knew you couldn't go. My mother is a first generation Angeleno. I'm a second generation. She was born during the Depression and she came up on the Eastside of LA. In fact, her second cousin was a firefighter in segregated Los Angeles on Central Avenue. So that whole piece with the fire department and even LAPD was segregated and it wasn't until the mid 1950s, when both departments were forced to integrate as a result of the *Brown* decision in 1954. Looking back at those gentlemen and those men and what they had to endure, you know, we realize today that we stand on their shoulders. I mean, the shoulders of giants, I mean these men endured so much during the fifties and sixties, during that turbulent time of integration in the Civil Rights Movement that, you know, we have to keep this going in order to just preserve our history. And in order to keep the door ajar for others to come behind us. So it's a great feeling to be able to know that we've come from this type of legacy...

DEVERELL: How did you know you wanted to be a firefighter?

BURTON: So I wanted to be a police officer in the beginning. I was really infatuated with the TV show "Adam 12" in the seventies, when I was a kid and I wanted to be Jim Reed and Pete Malloy chasing bad guys in the black and white in Los Angeles. But I had a cousin, I looked up to who joined the fire department in 1981 while I was still in high school. And I got a chance to visit him at a station. And I asked if they had any youth programs like the Explorers. And he told me about a station down on Florence Avenue, near Western in South LA and I went there to inquire. But I was there when they received a call for a structure fire, and to see the fire station just come alive with 10 guys appearing within 30 seconds and jumping on these fire trucks and pulling out of the station. That was it for me. So, but the interesting thing, when I went home and told my dad, "Hey, I want to be a firefighter." I was 16. My dad looked at me and said, "the fire department? That's a racist organization." And I said, "it is?" Now, my dad was an old school World War II veteran that served in a segregated Army Air Corps. And he knew about the segregation in the fire service and the struggles of integration. So that was his perspective. So he introduced me to Mr. Hartsfield. And so I learned from him, I was mentored by my cousin. And I just knew that the profession itself was changing and it was a great opportunity to do something I love and I really loved being an Explorer. And then I joined the fire department. I was hired at the age of 19 and now 36 years later, I look back and it's always, it was a good choice to be a firefighter for me.

DEVERELL: Michelle Banks is the founding president of the African American Firefighter Museum. She's now retired from the fire department. She joined as a paramedic in 1989, becoming just the third uniformed African-American woman in the department's more than a century of existence. Think about that.

MICHELLE BANKS: Going into it, I wasn't aware at all that I would be the third African-American woman hired. Once on the job I was told. Yeah, Carlesta Wells was the first uniformed. d'Lisa Davies was the first African-American female firefighter in the Los Angeles Fire Department, and she was hired the same year that I was hired. So I had no idea going in. I was not concerned with it being a male dominated field. I was not concerned with the ethnic composition because that's the story of my life. [LAUGHTER]

DEVERELL: What do you mean by that?

BANKS: I've always been in arenas where, you know, there are few African Americans. That's just the way my world worked. I know I was very much aware of the women on the job because there were so, so few, but we worked in different spaces and places, and didn't often cross paths.

DEVERELL: What was it like to work for the city as a woman or an African-American woman? And what was your sensibility about city employ for African-American men and women alike? A good job?

BANKS: Great job. Great, great career. I had gone to paramedic school prior to joining the fire department because I had heard that that was a way to more quickly gain employment with the department. So I had really good teachers, coaches, mentors, I, not everyone on the job has had that kind of experience. And I know that because of the stories that I've heard. But my experience was great.

DEVERELL: Wow. That's, you're so fortunate. What what fire station was that?

BANKS: Uh, fire station 34. In the Crenshaw district.

DEVERELL: In the Crenshaw district.

BANKS: It's still an active fire station. And the paramedics that I worked with, phenomenal. The team that was in station, phenomenal. Didn't have issues with the folks. They introduced me to the pranks and in my childhood, we did not play or, you know, perform pranks. That's not something that I grew up with. In the fire station, there are ample pranks or at least then, things have changed now, but then, that were expected. And the rookie or the, you know, the youngest person coming in is expected to participate. It was part of the culture.

DEVERELL: How about the sort of scandalous moments where what might've started off as a prank fairly quickly turned to something far uglier, particularly as regards to race. Did that ever impact your life?

BANKS: I can think of a few times where I suspect the intent was to, let's call it, ruffle my feathers.

DEVERELL: I get the sense that's not very easy to do.

BANKS: Probably not. And certainly not then, because I was on a mission. [LAUGHTER]

DEVERELL: Yeah. Yeah.

BANKS: Passed probation and no one would...my intent was to become, you know, excellent. My focus was excellence. But it was really more gender-based initially. And I'll, I'm not sure I shared this story with many, but I'll, I'll share it here. Um, when you were in the fire station at that time, fire stations had large dorms, large locker rooms. They didn't have signs on the doors, then in terms of bathrooms, men, women. So in the large rows of locker room, everyone has a locker and everyone changes clothing there. And people were respectful. It was one person who, one gentleman, and he had been very helpful and very kind. So in the morning, as

we're preparing to leave, I'm standing in front of my locker. He is standing in front of the side locker. My back is to his, his back is to mine, I'm not really paying attention to what's going on. We're talking. I never stripped down because that's just not my way. I always had instead of clothing underneath my clothing. So that, that would never become an issue... and I turn to say goodbye as I close my locker, and this man is naked and he'd been standing there naked the entire time. So full frontal nudity and the intent was, in my opinion, was to shock and awe. Well, my response was, well, this is a locker room, maintain eye contact. Say goodbye. Close the conversation, go home and go to sleep. I worked at a busy station. We were exhausted at the end of the day. And my, my role was to get home.

DEVERELL: Wow.

BANKS: Yeah.

DEVERELL: Wow.

BANKS: I mean, and there were other times when folks. When I worked at first few years, worked on couple of projects for various chiefs. Um, a couple of conversations where they would say things like they sent a little girl like you to do this job. Hmm. That's interesting. He was attempting to belittle, and nullify my presence and diminish my capability.

DEVERELL: And your professionalism.

BANKS: Yeah. Not to worry. That did not happen. [LAUGHS]

DEVERELL: Uh huh. Uh huh.

(MUSIC – HOW YOU GONNA KNOW)

DEVERELL: Besides collecting and sharing the heritage of African American firefighters, the Stentorians actively seek out new recruits. Gerald Durant is the current president of the Stentorians for the LA City Fire Department. He grew up in Brooklyn, moved to California at a young age, and joined the department in 1987. For more than 20 years, he was a rescue scuba diver.

GERALD DURANT: As I progressed in the fire service, they started talking about the Stentorian organization as a place where we came in and practiced. I thought personally, because it was African-American association of firefighters, that was my duty to be a part of that. So I had no reservations of signing up and being a member, and I thought that was the place to be, because that's what you're supposed to do. And from there, you start learning a little bit more about the history. I understood segregation at the time. I understood that there was a lot of work that had to, you had to put in, but I was always looking for the mentors to guide me. I would show

up to meetings and, you know, eventually somebody called me up and said I was going to be the sergeant of arms. And I said, okay. And that's pretty much how it's been since then. Normally my philosophy, I'm going to say yes to everything until I have to say no. So when it's, as far as progressing and moving on, helping people doing something right. For my community, I'm going to say yes until I have to say no.

DEVERELL: I sense from that answer, that being in the right place at the right time was only part of it. I think you probably stepped up, because you recognize an obligation. Uh, and a responsibility. So I, I think that's worthy of praise. Can you talk a little bit about, let's say the general perception of Los Angeles firefighters within the Black community? Is it at all similar to the understandings we have about the police and the Black community?

DURANT: I think, yeah. The Black community has been suppressed. And what we want to do as a Stentorian organization, we want more people in our community to see people that look like them and they wonder why they don't see people like them. When we look at the numbers of us getting hired, we're not matching the numbers of Caucasian and Hispanic. For what reasons? We're not totally sure, but we're moving to make that a difference. My first encounter with a police officer wasn't until I came to California and was riding my bike, you know, just having fun, no traffic, I get pulled over and get a ticket. So my first encounter with the police was negative. So when I'm with the fire service and we go on a run or go into somebody's house, I listen to maybe how they talk to African-Americans. And I don't think they talk to them like they're part of their family. And that's an issue with me. I think everybody should be treated like they're your neighbors.

DEVERELL: Yeah. It's amazing because it, in a firefighter capacity, it sounds like there are situations in which you have to be on guard against the dangers of fire, but also on guard against the dangers presented by your fellow public servants.

DURANT: You want to trust everybody that you're with when you're on a fire ground. And I think in a sense during the fires, you pretty much can because they're obligated in the same sense, because you're going to protect them. They're going to protect you. This is what we hope, and this is what we believe. But once you leave that scene and once you're in the firehouse and once you're going through the other things that happen in the firehouse, you're not always sure if they're the people who have your back per se. Some of the comments that they might make you know, I was in an all-white firehouse during the OJ trial and to listen to them, you know, make their comments and then turn around and look at me and say, okay, maybe I shouldn't have made, said that or so forth and so on. It was a realization that we're going to see life totally different. I don't see what they see. They don't see how I see it. But that to me, didn't deter whether I was going to save their life or not. My personal goal was to be as professional as I can and be the best that I could be at doing the job that was assigned to me.

And from there every now and then just by being a professional, you broke down some barriers when people probably didn't have the right or thought of you in a different way until they got to know you as a professional firefighter.

(MUSIC – ENVIRONMENTAL CHILDREN OF THE FUTURE)

DEVERELL: People like Gerald Durant regularly speak to groups of students to share the stories of those who paved the way. He's also been a mentor to some of the newer Black firefighters. People like Stephen Fossett. He's 30 years old, and just joined the department a year ago. He has a Master's in sociology and Black studies from Cal State LA. And that background, he says, has helped him to become a better firefighter.

STEPHEN FOSSETT: My background, you know it just helps with the demographics that I work with, you know, right now I work off Crenshaw and Obama area and I appreciate the Black people that I am able to help. You know, I get to use my talents for, you know, people like myself. And I know the importance of that, of seeing, you know, a Black person, a Black male in a different spot, then, you know, what they see on TV or, you just see a Black person doing something else besides the normal jobs, you know? So just knowing I'm helping out my people and being a role model in their own field is, you know, I know the importance of that. So no matter what I do as a job just being an African American male, I have a burden just to be a role model just in life. So no matter if I'm a firefighter or just like, or I was working at Ross, you know, I have more of a pressure on me to go above and beyond. You know, like what people can view as just the basic form of being, we have to go above and beyond. You know, we can't just be ordinary people, Black males, we got to go above and beyond.

DEVERELL: Stephen Fossett says that wherever he went to school, he'd seek out the Black Student Union. The Stentorians serve a similar purpose for him.

FOSSETT: Cause it was a place where I can go and just be reassured that, okay, I'm not the only one out here. One of the stations that I was at earlier, apparently like one of the first Black firefighters was at the station. So I felt a sense of pride and a sense, it was my duty to work very hard at that station, you know, to live up to him. You know, in honor, the firefighter that came before me, I do have a duty to not be just a basic firefighter. So I know how hard they work to get here. So, you know, I'm try to lift the rest of my people, just like, how they uplifted me. I was able to go to the Stentorians and utilize their ladders and practice throwing ladders every day and practice our hose lays that we need to do for the drill tower. And just like it helped me to build that foundation that other people of different backgrounds already have from being, you know, third generation, second generation firefighters. Um, to, you know, me starting from scratch. So it kind of helped, you know without them, I wouldn't be here.



DEVERELL: Given all this, the tensions and anxieties in our world these days by way of COVID and particularly race relations, how is it out there from your perspective? How, how are things in the Los Angeles you serve?

FOSSETT: I mean, I see what everybody sees. There's tension amongst the racial groups, and tension amongst LAPD or just police in general and us too, firefighters, you know? But I think people know that firefighters are there to help. You know, we're not there to judge. You know, we're there to help. People call us when they need help at 3am when they need help. So, you know, and with COVID too, it's just, they need help. So I think that's one of the benefits of being a firefighter, why I chose to be one over the rest of the jobs out there because people call us in, you know, like amongst COVID and amongst the racial tensions and amongst the protests, the people in the city, like, they see us as not the enemy.

DEVERELL: I'm curious when you don't have your firefighter uniform on, are you perceived differently?

FOSSETT: I'm definitely perceived differently, you know. I've been a Black male all my life, you know, I'm six five, I'm about 210. And I've been a firefighter for about a year. It's just like, I remember going through the streets getting stopped by the police. So I get perceived different, and I perceive the police officer different myself, you know, cause I, now I work with them. Like, oh, you know, I perceive them differently, not as the enemy, but you know, as basically my coworkers. I work alongside with them, you know. So, and I think too, like, when I talk to police officers now, I talk to them differently now. And they find out that I'm a firefighter, it's okay, you know. But in the field too, like people like be so nice when I put on the uniform, like, oh, he's a firefighter. Yeah. Like, oh, waving at me. But if I just have my regular, like hoodie on and all black, like I usually wear, you know, I'm like seeing like, oh, what is he about to do? You get those people that still walk on the other side of the street of you, you know, or, you know, double take you and they'll take a second look at you versus coming to you to, when they need help versus trying to avoid you when you just wearing your regular street clothes. I've been out in the field where, you know, certain people call me, you know, the N word. And I'm just like, I don't know what you want me to do. You want me to help or not? I'm not, I can't do anything about me being Black, but you want my help or not?

DEVERELL: I just find that, you know, at exactly the same time, I find that utterly unbelievable. Like I can't believe people would still do that kind of nonsense. And also sadly, I find it believable that people do still do that.

FOSSETT: Yeah, yeah. And it's not as prevalent of course, but I think it's just hidden. I don't get it, but there's hope but it's going to be a long time. I don't know what it's going to take for us to come together as one unit. But we're not there yet.

DEVERELL: In 1997, the Stentorians opened the African American Firefighter Museum. Visitors to the museum can see vintage firefighting equipment, along with stories and pictures of Black firefighters, in Los Angeles and nationally, who fought for integration and fair treatment. There they might also meet Brent Burton, the museum's historian.

BURTON: So we have an old antique hose wagon on the first floor. We tell the story of the fire pole. People don't know this, but the fire pole was invented by firefighters in Chicago in 1878, a group of all Black firefighters in a Black company. And so they invented the fire pole that we slide down today. So we were able to share with our visitors that history. We talk about the integration of the fire service and what those firefighters had to endure during the fifties. Some of the harsh realities that they had to face of just showing their counterparts that they were equal and worthy to be firefighters. So it's a great place to come and see the history and learn about some of the stories of our pioneering African-American firefighters.

DEVERELL: Um, so I did not know the history of the fire pole, and I also did not know that you still utilize the fire pole. They're still utilized?

BURTON: Absolutely. The fire stations that are two stories in height, ah, all of them have poles. And you know, I always, when I have children come through, I always ask the question. How long do you think it takes to slide the pole? And I get all kinds of answers, but the correct answer is roughly, we've kind of timed it to be about two seconds, to go from the second floor to the first floor. So the fire department's designed for speed and quickness. Dispatching is so fast today as compared to the days when they had horses; they had to hitch up. I mean, we're out of the station within 60 seconds. You can process a call from 12 seconds, you know, from the time someone calls 911 to the time we're en route. You know, there's so many things that happen today within the fire service. That is great. But yeah, the poles are still used.

(MUSIC – HALLOWED GROUND)

DEVERELL: Retired firefighter Michelle Banks was instrumental in the creation of the museum. She's founding president and now president emeritus. She says it's important for people to understand what firefighters went through during the period of segregation.

BANKS: The men who went through that process had experienced a number of hardships, things being thrown at them, isolation, name calling, just a number of just horrendous things that they endured. And we believe that through individual and collective action, everyone can advance society. Those stories of struggle, injustice, and achievement helped to nurture collective identity.

DEVERELL: There have been major strides in addressing racial disparities in the fire department. A 1974 consent decree required that half of all LA firefighters be Black, Latino or Asian. That

decree lasted nearly thirty years, and in that time the percentage of minorities on the force went from 5 percent to just above 50 percent. However, the department is still not representative of the population it serves and, like so many organizations in the United States, continues to struggle with issues of institutionalized racism. To continue the longstanding struggle to diversity the department, Gerald Durant says he's recruiting as best as he can.

DURANT: Every day, I'm looking for young men and women that are willing to accept the challenge of being firefighters. And we talk about how to be a better firefighter, a better community service person, a better neighbor, a better friend, a better family person, so we can change the scenario over time. And I think it's with the young folks coming in. Our organization, if you knock on the door, we're going to help you, whether you're white, Black, Hispanic, Asian. So all our group, all our volunteers, and all the people that we deal with, we're multiracial. So what we're trying to do is create the future firefighter of all colors, of all races, of all backgrounds.

DEVERELL: Brent Burton says that he tries to persuade young people about the opportunities that come with being a firefighter.

BURTON: Well, you know with today's youngsters, they want something now. We call it instant gratification. They want a job right now. They show up, they want to work now. In the fire service, it's a testing process. There's an application process, a written exam, an interview, a physical agility test. It's a process. So getting folks to see that there's a good paying rewarding noble career at the end of the light of the tunnel is there. Sometimes they'll say, well, they don't see it that way. It's too much to do now and you have to be an EMT to be a firefighter. You have to take what's called a CPAT test, which is you have to go somewhere and pay to take this test. Things have changed. So we call them obstacles unfortunately. So getting a young person to understand, hey, it's really worth the sacrifice to do this is kind of tough when they're, we're going against being in the music business or becoming an athlete. We're up against those kinds of challenges.

DEVERELL: Stephen Fossett says he doesn't try to sugarcoat his message: being a firefighter is hard work.

FOSSETT: It's not gonna be easy. So if they think there's going to be a walk in the park, where you can just sign up, and, okay. I'm a, I'm a firefighter now. No, this is a career and it is not a job. You're going to be studying more than you thought you would be studying. You're going to be training every day. You're going to be teaching every day because your life depends on it. So like that's something I tried to do is I try to take the approach of being honest with them. So I feel like I have a very big role in trying to appeal to the Black males and females of the next generation.

DEVERELL: Michelle Banks says she's seen slow and steady progress in recruiting and hiring, though it's far from enough. Even as we record this episode, the Los Angeles Fire Department is facing allegations of racial and gender bias.

BANKS: I can tell you that for the 30 plus years that I was on the job, there were never more than nine, maybe 10 Black women in uniform on the job. I believe the heart is in the right place. The organization's heart is in the right place but the end result is sometimes there seems to be barriers to entrance. Some of the subjectivity over the years, they changed the process to remove some of the subjectivity. I think it's an ongoing story.

(MUSIC – LAST ROUNDUP)

DEVERELL: Thanks to Michelle Banks, Stephen Fossett, Brent Burton, and Gerald Durant for talking with me about their experiences as African American firefighters for this episode. Thanks as well to the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley for their permission to excerpt their interview with the late Arnett Hartsfield. I'm Bill Deverell. Next time on *Western Edition*:

PROMO CLIP FROM REBECCA MILLER: Smokey Bear was born in the mid 1940s. And he's since become one of the most emblematic figures in American culture. Just about everyone can recognize Smokey Bear, just like they can recognize Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. He's become really embedded in our culture.

DEVERELL: *Western Edition* is produced by Avishay Artsy, Katie Dunham, Elizabeth Logan, and Jessica Kim. Our music was written and recorded by I See Hawks in L.A. *Western Edition* is a production of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. Please rate, review and subscribe to the show, and share it with a friend. Thank you and talk to you next time.