

## Fire at Uptack Road

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Sometimes when I read about somebody undergoing a coronary bypass—double or triple or quadruple bypasses you hear so much about—I remember Jake Mattolli. I see him as a kind of pioneer in undergoing heart surgery. He certainly didn't wish to be one, I hasten to add, nor was his surgery a bypass. I believe it was a valve replacement. But it was heart surgery and it was done in the late fifties when such procedures were not far from being experimental, and the survival rate was not anything like what it is today.

Jake's doctor was a bigshot surgeon in Boston, near the town where I grew up. I am sure this doctor was one of the best there was in those years. I remember he termed the operation a success, but as Jake's lungs gave out on the table, he, the patient, died. Jake died, that was what it all added up to for me. I saw the irony in what had happened when I viewed Jake's puffy face in his coffin. That sort of success most of us wish to avoid. Clearly the man had gone through an ordeal, having risked the ultimate and lost. It was one cigarette too many for Jake, I surmised, although I knew in the months before the surgery he had quit smoking altogether. That was when he began to bone up for his operation. He would brag that he could almost assist in one of those heart procedures—that was a word he liked to use: procedure. He was thorough, all right. But we all knew, too, that he was mighty scared. The night before he left for Boston, he broke down and cried in front of one of the older boys I palled around with. I was glad I didn't see it. And he gave one young man a new sports coat he'd bought only a month before, bought on an impulse, he claimed. Looking back now from the distance of many years, it appears Jake was approaching his surgery with something less than confidence. These days everybody says attitude means so much in medicine. Maybe that was the thought back then, too, but I don't recall hearing much talk about it. Then too, I was just a kid of 15 or 16 at the time.

The thing I remember about Jake, aside from what I've already told you, is that he was the fire chief in the Massachusetts town where I am from, Groveland. Being fire chief anyplace, anytime, is a fairly big deal, but for Jake Mattolli, being fire chief was almost a calling, like a religious vocation. My father used to say, in an unkind way I thought, that Jake didn't have anything better to do with his time and so that was why he was fire chief of the town's volunteer department. And my father also used to say Jake hung around the town's one luncheonette, Freddie's, much too much. He clearly didn't have use for a grown man who would spend his evenings at a lunch counter gossiping like a woman.

But then Jake wasn't married and he lived with his mother, and I guess his time at Freddie's provided a needed place to go evenings, something to do when there wasn't a poker game at the Fur, Fish and Feather Club, or if he couldn't use the cabin boat he kept in the nearby Merrimack River. Jake loved to fish, and besides being fire chief, then a part-time job, he ran a gas station/fishing tackle shop on the main street.

He was Italian, stocky in build, but not fat. Not very tall either, but not short the way my father was, who was less than five feet two inches tall. Jake had dark hair that was cropped close to his head and peppered with gray, and it looked as if it might have come in in tight curls if he allowed it to grow out. I think he was 53 or 54 when he died.

In the two or three years before his death, the fire department Jake operated was going through substantial changes, updates, I guess you would call them. The town was growing and the department had new needs. We simply have to keep up, Jake said often. He believed in change and always wanted the best possible equipment for his men, and he insisted they undergo whatever training was available. In Freddie's, in the evenings, Jake would frequently expound on the needs of his fire department, and many a night these little speeches (especially when they came late, as they often did) were heard only by Freddie or myself (the dishwasher/soda fountain clerk) or the part-time short order cook, Arthur, who filled in for Freddie some nights. And, of course, the stray cat, Gretchen. I think Jake considered that cat almost a person the way he talked to it, often in a whisper as if telling it secrets. Jake was unofficially in charge of seeing that Gretchen got fed in the evening. It was a major blow to him when Gretchen turned up missing one day. But another cat soon took her place and it was given the same special attention from Jake. Jake would have made a fine family man, I've thought more than a few times since his early passing.

The big deal technologically speaking, and this was about 1958, was two-way radios for the fire trucks and for Jake's fire car, a bright red 1951 Buick Dynaflow. Also, there was to be a centralized radio transmitter (actually there were two of them) called the Base Stations, and receivers in the homes of each of the volunteer firemen. It was truly an innovative step for the town.

Jake knew he had no talent for public speaking, but that hadn't kept him from getting up at the annual town meeting months earlier to plead for the money for his radios, and he got it all right, such was his sudden eloquence that night. Some time later he confided to us in Freddie's, Arthur, me and the cat Gretchen, how hard his heart had pounded and how sweaty his palms were as he got up to make his presentation at that meeting. But I could tell he was damn proud of himself and what he had accomplished.

One of the new base stations where the fire calls were to be received and the messages sent out, was to be Freddie's Luncheonette. Since Freddie's was open early each day, seven days a week, from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., it was thought to be the ideal place for part of the fire department radio equipment to be placed. From 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. one of the volunteer fire fighters would house the second base station in his home. Freddie himself was agreeable to this arrangement, as he considered himself a public-spirited man. But he was also to be paid \$600 a year to have the radio in his establishment. He had to be open, he reasoned, so why not the radio? Jake saw it as a good deal financially for Freddie. But to hear Freddie expound on the subject a few months after the installation of the radios, it was a big pain in the ass.

The immediate problem, as far as Jake was concerned, was the short-order cook, Arthur. He was an old man by then; at past 68 (damn near ancient to me), he was a nervous kind of fellow. But he was a great short-order cook, a real hasher from the old school. Fast at his work and friendly to the customers, he didn't demand much in wages. But he wasn't good with radio procedure.

"Thank God Arthur is only on part-time," Jake would say to Freddie after Arthur had been particularly good at fouling up the evening test of the fire radios. I remember that the test was supposed to go something like this:

"This is KCF251; testing all monitor receivers." And then the message was repeated and the person sending out the test, Arthur or Freddie usually, was supposed to say simply, "KCF251 off."

That was it. Jake was not often satisfied with the way the test was put out. He claimed Freddie mumbled so that no one could hear the call numbers. With Arthur though, he was especially critical, for Arthur's voice would sometimes falter, in obvious nervousness. He would then leave out words and numbers from the message, even though he was reading them from a piece of paper. Jake tried endlessly to properly train him (and calm him down) but Arthur seemed incapable of mastering it. It was a case of extreme mike fright, Jake noted with authority. No one could argue that point.

"Just say KCF251 off," he would instruct Arthur, impatience in his voice, but Arthur frequently would say "KCF251 over and out," if he signed off at all or if he didn't leave out "KCF251" altogether. "Over and out," as far as Jake was concerned, marked his fire department as pure amateurs.

"The man must think he's Broderick Crawford or something [Crawford was a popular TV figure in those years who frequently used 'Over and out']. They must think we are real hicks over in Haverhill," Jake would tell Freddie later when Arthur wasn't present.

Freddie seldom had anything to say. Likely though, Freddie didn't give a hoot how the test went out. He just didn't view it as all that important. When he was especially riled he might say to someone—never to Jake—Jake can just take his radio equipment someplace else if he doesn't like how it is being done. But I know Freddie liked getting that six hundred bucks every year, and so he kept his frustrations to himself around Jake for fear of losing it.

The nearest city of any size to us was Haverhill, and they had had this kind of radio gear for a number of years before we did. Thus, they became the model as to how things should be done, at least in Jake's mind. They were a full-time department and were on the air all day long, so they no doubt knew procedure well. After all, they had had plenty of practice. Yet, Jake couldn't help but make the inevitable comparisons, for in his heart he wished his volunteers were as professional in radio use as they were in Haverhill.

If Jake was annoyed and embarrassed with how Arthur put out an evening test, it didn't compare with his consternation when it came to a real fire call. I recall one busy Saturday morning at Freddie's. The place was jumping as it often was on Saturday. Dishes were piling up. I was late getting to work, and by the time I arrived, Arthur was beside himself. There were only the two of us working that morning and three would not have been enough that day. Arthur was running out of everything and he had several orders of eggs frying, and when things got this bad Arthur often would rock his body from side to side, from one leg to the other. By the time I arrived, he was rocking worse than I had ever seen him, and then that red phone in the back began to clang—and clang was what it did—Jake saw to that. Arthur dropped everything, even a pan of hot muffins, and sprang toward the back. He grabbed that red phone receiver so roughly I thought he'd tear it from the wall. He screamed into it, "GROVELAND FIRE DEPARTMENT!"

There was damn near panic in his voice. What the person on the other end thought, I can only surmise.

“A FIRE, YES, WHERE?” he asked.

I should tell you that the morning crowd at Freddie’s could be a rough bunch. Mostly, they were local truck drivers and construction workers. There wasn’t one in the bunch who didn’t know Arthur pretty well and appreciate how excitable he could become, and they were more than a little inclined to think up things to further upset him, if possible. I’ve thought many times since that if any one of that crowd had had their house on fire that day—or any day—they might well have reconsidered the razzing they gave this poor old man.

Now, however, a man in front was hollering, “Hey, Arthur, where are those eggs I ordered half an hour ago?” Laughter went up. Then, there was, “Arthur, I think your blueberry muffins are burning.” And it went on from there; there was no mercy.

By the time Arthur got to the radio transmitting part of the process, a mere three or four steps from the phone, he was quite incendiary.

The first mistake Arthur made was that he could not remember the call numbers, although they were printed in large red letters on the front of the radio. Arthur just started pushing buttons. I wondered if he even understood what all the buttons were supposed to do.

I knew, for example, that the right combination was supposed to trigger automatically the fire alarm at the fire station across the street. This morning, though, I don’t think Arthur put the necessary combination together to accomplish this required task. He pushed buttons until finally he came to the mike button and pushed that and yelled, “THERE’S A FIRE ON UPTACK ROAD!”

He didn’t say what kind of fire or where on Uptack Road, and Uptack Road was several miles long, although in those years it was mostly woods and brush. And, of course, he hadn’t identified himself. He didn’t say which fire department was putting out this call. There were at the time about seven departments on the same frequency. Each had its own call numbers, of course. Arthur’s message cut off in mid-sentence some fireman in Haverhill, that model community, but in Haverhill they were used to Arthur. Indeed, some claimed they loved it when he came on the air with such a flair. Everybody would step aside and just listen for what would inevitably follow.

“ALL TRUCKS TO UPTACK ROAD!” He forgot, however, to let go of the mike button, and so what he said next, which wasn’t meant to be on the air, went out for all to hear.

“HEY, MY MUFFINS ARE BURNING!” He was hollering to me, I suppose. “PLEASE TAKE THEM OUT!”

There was more laughter from the front of the store and the fire phone was clanging again, and Jake later said he had heard all of this commotion on his set at home, which meant that everybody on the air that day had heard it, too.

Arthur apparently had hung up on whoever it was that called in the alarm in the first place, before the man could pinpoint the location. That person was now calling back to say it was a brush fire near Stacy’s Bridge. Arthur dutifully passed on this new information, trying now as best he could to identify himself and the department. But he gave the wrong call numbers. By this time, Jake later said, he had hoped Arthur wouldn’t identify himself at all. It would be better because then at least not everybody would know what damn fools we are out in Groveland. But he knew it was much too late for that.

There being only one Uptack Road in the area, in a reasonable time the firemen got there and put out the brush fire without undue delay. After his initial upset, even Jake could laugh at it all—laugh on the outside, anyway. Later, he would wax some-

what philosophical about his problem with Arthur. He told me one night that Arthur was just too damn old to be taught good radio procedure. I suspect Arthur must have known that himself. He wasn't, after all, a stupid man. But that radio equipment just scared the dickens out of him.

It all seemed so important and serious then. And, you know, in a way I guess it was.