

UPDATED: Jay Leno and Chapel Hill's 1921 American LaFrance Video

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Found this the other day, a [video from Jay Leno's Garage](#) featuring Chapel Hill's 1921 American LaFrance triple combination. Registration #3600, ship order #57359, and ship date September 24, 1921, says [John Peckham's database via SPAAMFA](#).

The truck, which was the second motor apparatus to serve the college town, was sold around the mid 1990s. It was purchased by the late Bob Biggs, a local apparatus buff and longtime friend of the Raleigh Fire Department. Recall that he lead the restoration of the city's 1926 American LaFrance. Biggs and Raleigh Capt. Mike Murray restored this truck.

Bob passed away in 2007, and the truck was since sold to Gary Wales in Woodland Hills, CA. He gives Jay the full tour, and then they take the truck for a spin. Watch the video:



By way of pre-restoration comparison, here's a picture of the truck from Lee Wilson at Station 2, taken in the early 1990s. Click to enlarge:



Lee Wilson photo

The 1921 American LaFrance was an original Town of Chapel Hill apparatus. I'm not sure of the exact dates but Bob Biggs purchased the truck. (I'm not sure if this was a purchase from Chapel Hill FD or a private individual.) Around this time period Bob Biggs (retired US Air Force Colonel) and my Dad, Mike Murray (retired Raleigh Fire Department Captain), were working together on restoring numerous antique fire apparatus including Raleigh's 1926 American LaFrance and the Raleigh Professional Firefighters Association's 1948 Mack.

The restoration of the '48 Mack (RPFPA) and the '26 LaFrance (RFD) took place at a local fire station, but other restorations of trucks Bob and my Dad completed took place out of the basement in the backyard of my Mom and Dad's house. (Which is not a whole lot bigger than a standard two-car garage!) This was the house that I grew up in and currently live in after my parents both retired and move to Morehead City, NC.

While I was a teenager in the late '80s and through the '90s, Bob and my Dad worked restoring old fire trucks Monday through Friday of every week. Bob and my Dad would meet daily for breakfast at the local diner up the street and would come back home to spend the day working on restorations. I remember always seeing old fire trucks parked in the back yard or in the basement that were either the ones being restored or the numerous parts trucks that they purchased.

After working on Raleigh's truck and the RPFPA truck they talked about getting a truck of their own to restore and display in parades and truck shows around the area. So Bob purchased

the 1921 LaFrance and work began. Bob and my Dad were a great working pair. Bob was a brilliant-minded engineer and my Dad had a great talent in the aesthetics. We used to say that Bob handled the "working" mechanical aspects and my dad handled the "pretty" parts, the look and shine of the trucks.

Although they were able to accomplish great thing working together, this didn't go on without some very heated arguments. If anyone knew these two, being hard-headed and stubborn was a trait they both expressed at times! I'm not sure of the exact time frame of that particular restoration or the others for that matter, but I know it was in the several years throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s.

In the time period from the late '80s until the passing of Colonel Biggs in March of 2007, they restored a '20's era American LaFrance for the City of Fayetteville and also a '20's era LaFrance for a friend's private collection. It was a passion they both possessed and between their contributing talents they produced some of the best restored old LaFrances's you will find.

At Bob's insistence, Bob, my Dad, and everyone else that knew them always referred to the truck as "their" truck (Bob and Mike's) even though Bob made the initial purchase they both agreed that after all the great amount of labor and resources put forth by both of them that it would be referred to as theirs. Their 1921 LaFrance was stored in the basement of our house for upward of 18 years.

After the passing of Bob Biggs in 2007, the status of their 1921 LaFrance has been unknown by my Dad until his passing this past October 2013, me and my family. Shortly after Bob's passing the now retired RFD captain Gary Amato, Executor of Bob's Estate, came to the house and took possession of the truck. Not until seeing this episode of Leno's Garage has the location of this truck been known by myself and my family. Shortly after the link was posted to the Internet, my mother called me and said "Hey! Isn't that the truck that Bob and your Dad restored that JAY LENO !! is driving" After watching the video I immediately knew it was their truck.

I have attached a couple of pictures I could located at my house showing the truck just after completion sitting in the side yard of our house. The other picture is of Bob (on the left) and my Dad Mike (right) standing beside of one of the trucks they restored in that small basement. You will notice that the hood of their '21 LaFrance reads "New Hope Fire Department." This is because at the time of completion, Bob was affiliated with this fire department. A few years later he decided to put "Chapel Hill Fire Department" back on the truck to restore its authenticity.

Sorry I can't provide more precise dates on restorations of the 1921 LaFrance as well as the others, but on my next visit to Morehead City to see my mother, I'll look through the picture collections of these trucks and try to get a closer time frame for each.

Captain Nick Murray
Raleigh Fire Department



AMERICAN - LaFRANCE

1921 American-LaFrance 750 gpm Pumper

Restored by: *Bob Biggs and Mike Murray*

Original owner: *Chapel Hill Fire Dept.*

Gold leaf by: *Steve Filarsky*



Nick Murray (Email) - 02/09/14 - 18:27

Great read! Thank you for your time and effort in the composing of the narrative, Capt. Murray. Your father has legendary status and is missed by many.

Rescue Ranger - 02/09/14 - 21:41

Excellent history that I never realized! Thanks Capt. Murray!

A.C. Rich - 02/09/14 - 23:17

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