Alerting Firemen Is Much Easier

Charles S. Williams

If you were outside Wednesday morning at 10:28, you may have heard a sound you haven't heard in a few years...or which you may never have heard before.

Firemen at the North Wilkesboro Fire Department blew the department's old horn again, as they do every year on Sept. 11 in honor of the 9/11 attack on America. It's not a traditional siren but rather a device that sounds a little like a shrill fog horn.

The horn was installed in the late 1950s, I think. I'm guessing on a lot of the dates here, so don't be too quick to demand corrections if I'm wrong. It was sounded in a code to tell the firefighters the approximate location of the fire.

There was, and still is, a large board on the wall with metal discs (approximately two inches in diameter) on the wall arranged by three-digit code numbers. There are slots cut out of each disc (making them look a little like cogs) to match the codes.

Each code and wheel represented a street, street corner, or general location in the town. All of the firemen had a code sheet with them so when they heard the horn they could determine the approximate location of the fire. They could drive to that spot and, in most cases, spot the fire truck, smoke or flames.

So when the alarm came in, the fireman on duty could get the location from the caller, insert the correct disc on the horn control and start the machine, write the address on the chalkboard on the front of the station (for backup) and leave with the truck.

As the wheel turned, the horn would sound each time the control arm hit a slot. If the code, for example, was 3-4-3, firemen would hear three short blasts, followed by a pause of a few seconds, four short blasts, another pause, and three blasts. There was then a longer pause before the code repeated itself.

Incidentally, it was the 3-4-3 code that was sounded Wednesday. That was in honor of the 343 firemen who were killed in the collapse of the Twin Towers. The time – 10:28 a.m. – was the time that the second tower collapsed.

The horn and code system was a big deal when it was installed…a major step for hastening the response of firemen when there was a response. In those days, and even after that, firemen were alerted when the siren at the fire station sounded. In most cases, they had to drive to the station and check the chalkboard in front to get the address of the fire.

Some departments had a phone system that would allow a caller to ring the home phones of all of the firemen at the same time. As they answered, they were told the address of the alarm. Of course that was long before the advent of cell phones, so firemen had to be home when the call came in.

Dick Whittington, a veteran of many years in the fire service, remembers that members of the Wilkes County Fireman's Association went before the county commissioners in 1974 (again, that's an educated guess) to ask for funds to update the communications system for firemen. The board members agreed to purchase one radio base station, two mobile units, and five home monitors for each fire department in the county. Each chief decided who got the monitors, which were fairly large black (later red) boxes that would alert the firemen about alarms.

Each department was assigned a specific code of two tones that would activate the radio in time for the firemen to hear the announcement. The radios, if set correctly, would stay silent until then so firemen didn't have to hear every alarm in the county.

Over the years, the pagers have been improved. They can be set to vibrate rather than beep, which probably makes ministers happy if there is a fire on Sunday morning. Most record the announcement so that you can repeat the location if you didn't hear it the first time. And now firemen can receive text messages on their cell phones if there are fires in their district.

Yes, technology has come a long way since the days of the chalkboard.