



100 years of firefighting

by Jule Hubbard

(Photo caption) Photo courtesy of North Wilkesboro Fire Department-North Wilkesboro firefighters battle a blaze that destroyed the Forest Furniture factory on April 26, 1963.

The North Wilkesboro Fire Department, celebrating its 100th anniversary Saturday, is one of the oldest fire squads in northwestern North Carolina.

The fire department was created in 1910, nearly 20 years after North Wilkesboro was incorporated and eight years after a fire of undetermined origin likely made a strong impression on residents of the young town.

One night in late September 1902, the view of the Brushy Mountains from North Wilkesboro was lit up with a fire that destroyed the Lithia Springs Hotel.

The resort hotel's location on the front ridge of the Brushies near what is now the intersection of Brushy Mountain and Lithia Springs roads was highly visible in downtown North Wilkesboro. Plus, it was primarily North Wilkesboro entrepreneurs who launched and owned the hotel.

North Wilkesboro was poised for growth as a major retail and manufacturing center for northwestern North Carolina when the fire department began in 1910. D.S. Lane was the first fire chief, serving until 1928. Lane was also police chief part of this time.

Conley Call, fire chief from 1985 to 1995 and later mayor, said officials with C.C. Smoot & Sons Tannery in North Wilkesboro played a key role in getting the fire department started because of the tannery's high potential for fire.

According to Sanborn Map Co. fire insurance maps in September 1920, the North Wilkesboro Fire Department had 23 volunteers, a fire station at 708 B Street and one hose house in front of 204 C Street then. It also had three hand hose reels with 600 feet 2½-inch cotton rubber-lined hose, two hand hooks and ladder trucks. Fire alarms were sounded by telephone and whistles in North Wilkesboro then, which had a population of 4,000.

Along with several fires, the most notable event involving the North Wilkesboro Fire Department in its first two decades was the disastrous 1916 flood.

About five years later, on Jan. 13, 1921, a downtown building that housed the Trogdon opera house and Wilkes Hosiery Mills was destroyed by fire. Located at the intersection of Sixth and what now is Main Street, it was one of the first brick buildings in North Wilkesboro.

Early in the morning on Nov. 1, 1922, fire destroyed a 10th Street building used by A.F. Phillips to store roots and herbs that he purchased and resold. The fire damaged an adjoining building owned by Phillips and occupied by a corn mill company. A newspaper account said "the reel company" made an early response to the fire, apparently referring to the North Wilkesboro Fire Department.

There are also newspaper references to North Wilkesboro's power plant near the Reddies River dam being destroyed by fire in 1923.

The department's first fire truck was an American LaFrance purchased in December 1926 for \$12,500. This truck remained in service until April 12, 1958. On March 29, 1927, a committee was formed to make arrangements for storing of the fire truck and employing a man to operate it.

The N.C. National Guard Armory on the fairgrounds property (now Memorial Park) in North Wilkesboro was destroyed by fire in early February 1933. The fire was believed to have started from a stove lit for a basketball game. Businessman Charles G. Day was fire chief.

On Aug. 31, 1939, the fire station was relocated from 708 B Street to a newly-constructed Town Hall building (currently the police station) on Main Street. In 1940, firefighters Hub Hutchinson and Fred Lane were appointed as the daytime and nighttime drivers for the department.

North Wilkesboro firefighters were called out to assist when the Yadkin Valley's other disastrous 20th century flood occurred in August 1940, with the Yadkin River rising three to five feet higher than during the 1916 flood.

Fires triggered by the flooding wiped out the Home Chair Co. and the International Shoe Co. Tannery, two of the county's largest manufacturing operations and employers.

On April 8, 1948, The Journal-Patriot reported that the North Wilkesboro Fire Department was offering fire protection to owners of property along highways outside the town. The offer was \$3 per home and \$5 per commercial establishment annually to residents of Millers Creek, Mulberry, Moravian Falls and certain other communities, all of which established their own fire departments in the mid to late 1950s.

In late April 1950, fire destroyed the P.E. Brown Lumber Plant, North Wilkesboro Ice and Fuel Co., Wilkes Milling Co., the Billings Trucking Co. terminal and a residence owned by P.E. Brown but rented to someone else.

The Journal-Patriot reported, "Firemen fought valiantly to save the Wilkes Milling Co. building," but were hampered by brisk wind and flames shooting 200 feet into the air.... A fuel tank containing thousands of gallons of diesel oil burst and a river of fire flowed down Cherry Street to the intersection of Fifth Street."

In 1955, land was purchased from North Wilkesboro resident Bud Jones for construction of the current station at 709 Ninth Street. Construction was completed in 1958 at a cost of \$64,255. In 1958, all trucks and equipment were moved from the Main Street station to the new station location. The new station was publicly dedicated on Sept. 21, 1958. A new station is planned.

North Wilkesboro volunteer firefighter Roy Cashion lost his life battling a house fire in 1958. Call said Cashion was in front and Claude Key was behind him holding the fire hose at the fire, which was in a small commercial building across from the Carolina Mirror plant on N.C. 268 East.

Call and Harold Brown were nearby with another fire hose when pressure from the fire's heat caused an explosion that killed Cashion instantly. Call's arm was broken in four places and had to have 40 stitches in a leg. John Kernerly was chief then.

Call said one of the town's largest fires occurred around 1962, when the Allen Theater, Family Shoe store and two or three other business were destroyed or heavily damaged on west end of what is now Main Street. He had been a firefighter for about five years then.

On April 26, 1963, fire destroyed the Forest Furniture Co. factory in downtown North Wilkesboro. It was one of the town's oldest and largest industries. The loss was estimated at over \$1.5 million

Lowes Foods supermarket on Second Street was destroyed by fire on the morning of May 5, 1963. Immediately in the rear of the supermarket, Danner's Chapel Church also burned. A new church was already under construction at Third and K streets at the time.

North Wilkesboro firefighters had multiple opportunities to practice their skills with the intentional burning of several old homes in the early 1970s as part of the urban renewal program.

About 9:30 p.m. June 23, 1972, a 6,000-gallon propane gas tank at the intersection of Vance and Maple streets near Smoot Park exploded and continued burning through the night. The area immediately around the tank looked like it had been bombed and the explosion rattled windows over a mile away.

Tam Shumaker was chief from 1969 to 1972 and J.T. Vannoy was chief from 1972 to 1985.

The Hulcher Brothers and Co. building on Sixth Street was heavily damaged by fire on May 7, 1986. Hulcher Brothers had been in business for 60 years and at the Sixth Street location for 30 years.

North Wilkesboro firefighters worked long hours removing downed trees and limbs and helping in other ways after tropical storm remnants of Hurricane Hugo struck on Sept. 22, 1989. North Wilkesboro was particularly hard hit.

Call said a fire that gutted the old Crest store building on West Main Street March 17, 1991, easily could have spread to more of downtown North Wilkesboro. He said the fire department's aerial ladder truck, purchased in 1987, played a key role in controlling the blaze and other fires.

Fire swept through the old Goodwill Industries store building on 10th Street in late June 1994, leaving little but four walls standing. Edgar Harris was chief then.

Over the years, North Wilkesboro firefighters often responded to fires caused by sparks igniting wood dust at American Drew and other and other furniture factories. Call said federal regulations requiring containment of wood dust also created potential for explosions from heat buildup.

North Wilkesboro firefighters Greg Fletcher and Robby Gentle were injured when a dust bin fire they were battling at the American Drew furniture factory near the Central Business District Loop unexpectedly erupted in flames on Nov. 21, 1999.

Fletcher had first and second-degree burns to his face from flames and a fractured right knee when he fell four to five feet from a platform inside the dust bin silo. Gentle had a cracked elbow bone when he fell from the same platform and had first-degree burns to his neck.

A fire in March 2004 heavily damaged The Record/Thursday Printing building at the corner of E and Fourth streets in North Wilkesboro.

The Captain's Table restaurant building on Boone Trail in North Wilkesboro was destroyed by fire in 2005.

The Jack's Drive-In restaurant building on D Street was destroyed by fire on Feb. 26, 2006. It was later rebuilt and now is Woodhaven restaurant. Nearby, the NAPA Auto Parts store building was destroyed by fire on Nov. 28, 2005. It later reopened across the street.

Niki Hamby has been North Wilkesboro fire chief since Jan. 1, 2003. The department now has 32 firefighters.