



NWFD past, future celebrated

by Jule Hubbard

(Photo caption) Jule Hubbard/staff photo-Current Fire Chief Niki Hamby stands with his two predecessors, Edgar Harris, middle, and Conley Call, far right.

With an eye toward the future and building a new fire station, members and supporters of the North Wilkesboro Fire Department gathered Saturday at the North Wilkesboro Rotary Club's Worth Tomlinson Park to celebrate the department's 100th anniversary.

"From the early days of 1910 when the fire department was manned with hose carts, to the present day modern fire apparatus, the North Wilkesboro Fire Department has evolved into a state of the art, well equipped and highly trained department," said Niki Hamby, North Wilkesboro's fire chief since 2003.

"Looking to the days ahead, as some of you know, we are working on a new and very much needed fire station. We have drastically outgrown the present station we have. We are looking forward to this new building and location," said Hamby.

North Wilkesboro commissioners have approved an agreement with Block 46 Development LLC that gives the town about five acres of the old American Drew property off D Street and the Central Business District Loop for a new fire station. Discussions are under way with an architect for the design of the new facility.

Hamby said there are no adequate words to convey gratitude to all the people who continually support the fire department, especially spouses and other family members.

"I can remember many hours on call and training that have interrupted anniversaries, holidays and other family gatherings so that we may help our fellow man. We love you and thank you for your support," said Hamby.

Hamby recognized local elected officials and two former fire chiefs, Conley Call and Edgar Harris.

Wilkes County Commissioner Charles Sink, a North Wilkesboro firefighter for 31 years and county fire commissioner, said Call brought a major emphasis on training and professionalism to the department after becoming chief in 1985.

Sink said Harris and then Hamby each continued this progress and brought improvements to the department.

Harris described being a firefighter-and being on call to save lives and homes-as a way of life. He was chief from 1995 to 2002.

Call, chief from 1985 to 1995 and later North Wilkesboro's mayor, said, "This is a historic day but never forget that we have probably only scratched the surface of how we can serve our fellow man because the best is yet to come."

Call said he would rather be sick or have an accident in North Wilkesboro than anywhere else because of the quality of emergency services in the town.

Noting that necessity is the mother of invention, Call said the C.C. Smoot and Sons Tannery in North Wilkesboro helped get the department started in early 1910 due to fire risks at the leather tannery.

J.F. Allen was the first chief, serving for about eight months.

Call said the North Wilkesboro Fire Department served rural areas of Wilkes for many years before rural fire departments started being formed in the late 1950s, although there was a period when people outside the town could pay the fire department \$5 annually for fire protection.

Call mentioned two fatal fires in the 1960s not mentioned in accounts compiled as part of the centennial observance. One was on Cherry Street and the other was on D Street where the KFC restaurant building now stands. The D Street fire claimed two lives and occurred when temperatures were in the single digits, causing fire hoses to freeze.

He said there could never be enough money to compensate emergency services personnel for what they do and experience.

Saying North Wilkesboro has the best fire department around, Mayor Robert Johnson said he looked forward to moving into a new

fire station.

North Wilkesboro commissioners Jeffrey Elmore, Bart Hayes and Debbie Ferguson also praised the department.

N.C. Sen. Steve Goss read a congratulatory certificate from the state senate and firefighter Kini Hamby read a congratulatory letter from Gov. Bev Pardue.

Gary Barrows, secretary and treasurer of the fire department, shared historical details. Barrows and fellow firefighters Curt Hayes and Jamie Reavis worked together compiling the department's history.

He said the department's first responder program was started in 1998, with 269 medical emergency calls and 118 fire calls that year. In 2009, there were 556 medical emergency calls and 169 fire calls.

Barrows mentioned some of the most department's most notable fires, including an Oct. 21, 1958, blaze at the Elizabeth Hosiery Mill on N.C. 268 East that claimed the life of North Wilkesboro firefighter Roy Cashion.

Jason Wiles, chaplain of the department, had a moment of silence in memory of Cashion before opening the ceremony with a prayer. He rang a bell 10 times to commemorate the department's 10 decades.

The department now has 30 volunteer firefighters. It also has three full-time firefighters, Kini Hamby, Robby Gentle and Tony Hayes, working in shifts of 24 hours on and 48 hours off.

About 100 people attended the event, which also included activities for children and a display for fire trucks from the North Wilkesboro, Wilkesboro, Ronda, Mulberry-Fairplains, Broadway and other departments.