

# North Wilkesboro Fire Department celebrates 100 years

Saturday event to commemorate centennial

By **JERRY LANKFORD**

**Record Editor**

In 1910, the citizens and businesses of North Wilkesboro were made safer with the establishment of a dedicated fire department.

On Saturday, the 100-year anniversary of the North Wilkesboro Fire Department will be commemorated. Various modern fire equipment, historic displays, food, music and children activities will be the fare of the day at an event at Rotary Park in West Park in North Wilkesboro. The event will run from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. and is free.

“We’re hoping for a big turnout,” said North Wilkesboro Fire Chief Nikki Hamby.

He added that there will also be music by Eric Ellis and Friends from noon until 2 p.m., as well as free fire safety items for kids. Hot dogs and other refreshments will be provided to the public at no charge. State Sen. Steve Goss, along with town and local officials, will be on hand.

“We’re looking forward to celebrating our 100-year history,” Hamby said.

The North Wilkesboro Fire Department was established in early 1910.

Initially the station was located at 708 B Street and there was also one hose house located in front of 204 C Street. The first apparatus consisted of three hand hose reels with 600 feet of two and a half inch cotton rubber-lined hose each and two hand hook and ladder trucks.

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

On Aug. 31, 1939 the fire station relocated to Town Hall building (currently the police station) on Main Street. The next year, in 1940, firefighters Hub Hutchinson and Fred Lane were appointed as the daytime and nighttime drivers for the department.

In 1955 land was purchased from North Wilkesboro resident Bud Jones for construction of the current station at 709 9th Street. Construction was completed in 1958 at a cost of \$64,255.32. On Tuesday, May 20, 1958, at 7 p.m., all trucks and equipment moved from the Main Street station

to the new station location. The new station was publicly dedicated on Sunday, Sept. 21, 1958 and is currently still in operation.

Throughout the history of the department there have been eight Chiefs who have led the department.

Hamby was appointed to the post on Jan. 1, 2003. He succeeded Edgar Harris, who served from Oct. 7, 1995, to Dec. 31, 2002.

Other fire chiefs included:

- Conley Call – Aug. 1, 1985 – Oct. 5, 1995;
- J.T. Vannoy – July 1, 1972 – July 31, 1985;
- Tam Shumaker – July 1, 1969 – June 30, 1972;
- John Thurman Kenerly – Jan. 1, 1945 – June 30, 1969;
- C.G. Day – April 6, 1928 – Dec. 31, 1944;
- D.S Lane – February 1910 – April 5, 1928.

Call recalls his decade as fire chief – he served on the department for a total of 37 years – as one of “rigorous” training and improvements. “We trained every month,” he said.

He added that the fire department’s rating went from 7 to 4 during his tenure (with 1 being the best). That upgrade made fire insurance policies significantly less expensive for businesses, he said. “We were able to do this in cooperation with the Water Department and town government.”

Call said that American Drew had much to lose in the advent of a fire and that the company wanted someone who worked there on the department.

“The company was glad to have me serve,” Call said. “And, I wanted to serve. I knew a lot of people in the department from other organizations I was involved in. There was a lot of camaraderie.”

Today, the North Wilkesboro Fire Department is looking to build a new fire station at the site of the now closed American Drew Furniture complex between D Street and the CBD Loop.

“We’re maxed out on space as far as personnel and equipment,” Hamby said.

Architects are drawing plans and conducting space need studies for the new station which is expected to cost between \$3 million and \$4 million. The old factory portion of the American Drew complex will be demolished to make room, Hamby said.

“At the time the present station was built, it was adequate for the call volume and equipment,” Hamby said. “It was modified for the aerial truck when it was purchased in 1988. At the new station, we’d like to have room for training as well.”

And, with added space for training and equipment, Hamby said that the fire department's rating should be increase from its current Class 4, which would offer, particularly businesses, more savings on fire insurance.

One of the most import aspects of any fire department is team work.

According to Hamby and Call, that's always been in abundance in regards to the North Wilkesboro Fire Department.

"In a fire department, everyone has to trust the fella on his right and the fella on his left," Call said. "The fire department is not an 'I' organization, it's a 'we' organization. It takes an entire community to make a good fire department. If you don't have the support and good will of everyone, it's hard to get the job done."