

Dryer Apparently Caused Fire

Jule Hubbard



House Guttled

Firefighters are in final stages of battling a blaze that gutted a home on Ridgecrest Street in the Ridgecrest subdivision just outside of Wilkesboro Wednesday.

A one-story brick and wood frame home in the Ridgecrest subdivision less than a mile from the Wilkesboro town limits was gutted by fire Thursday morning.

Shandra Haynes said in an interview that she found the basement of the three-bedroom home on Ridgecrest Street filled with smoke a little after 6:45 a.m. Thursday when she tried to check on clothes in a dryer in the basement laundry room before going to work.

Ms. Haynes said she turned the dryer on about 15 minutes earlier. She dialed 911 to report the fire to the Wilkes Communications Center and went to the bedroom of her mother, Gail Haynes, to awaken her.

Wilkes Fire Investigator Niki Hamby of the Wilkes Sheriff's Department said everything indicated that the fire started in the dryer.

Gail Haynes said she didn't have homeowner's insurance and has been unemployed since her job for a company on contractor basis was terminated in March. Mrs. Haynes said she and her daughter weren't able to get their dog and cat out of the burning house and that she believed they died in the fire.

She also said the smoke alarm in the house didn't go off, apparently because it needed a new battery. She wasn't the original resident but has lived in the home about 34 years.

Mrs. Haynes and her daughter stood in their yard as firefighters and fire trucks arrived and then went to the porch of their neighbor, Judy Anderson, who stayed with them.

Millers Creek Fire Department firefighters, dispatched at 6:51 a.m. Thursday, found heavy smoke pouring out of basement and ground floor windows and flames in the laundry room when they arrived, said Millers Creek Division Chief Robbie Bolin.

Bolin said the Cricket, Champion, Wilkesboro, North Wilkesboro, Goshen, Wilbar and Mulberry fire departments were also dispatched and arrived with additional water and manpower.

The fire burned upward along walls in the eastern end of the house, which included the laundry room, but was under control after about an hour of firefighting, he said.

The home was full of various items and this helped fuel the fire, Bolin added. "It got away from us after the initial attack but we got it back under control."

Firefighters kept flames from reaching the kitchen, living room and other areas of the western end of the house.

"I have to give our guys credit because they kept it out of the other (western) end of the house," he said, referring to flames not reaching the area that included the kitchen and living room. Bolin said the western end of the house still had smoke and heat damage.

Because it wasn't safe for firefighters to walk on a portion of the first floor above about six floor joists badly damaged by flames, said Bolin, the Wilkesboro Fire Department's aerial fire truck was used to douse areas still smoldering.

Millers Creek Fire Chief Jason Smithey said a fire hydrant within view of the Haynes home wasn't used Thursday morning because Millers Creek firefighters determined hydrants in Ridgecrest had a water pressure problem when they checked them a few months ago.

With a 2,500-gallon Millers Creek tanker and four tankers from other departments quickly on the scene, he said, firefighters had the water they needed. Some of the tankers were refilled with water from a Wilkesboro hydrant along nearby U.S. 421 with more capacity than the Ridgecrest hydrants.

Smithey said the West Wilkes Water Association is working well with his department to address the hydrant problem, which he said apparently involved a valve not opening correctly. All but one Ridgecrest hydrant, one being checked as the issue is addressed, are temporarily covered in plastic.

Smithey emphasized that not using the hydrants didn't hamper firefighting efforts since firefighters knew in advance to compensate for this by having additional fire departments dispatched.

“We called for Wilkesboro before we even got there,” he said. “And we quickly had other departments coming.”

Firefighting efforts are hampered if firefighters don't find out about a problem with a hydrant until after a hose is attached to it, he said. “That's the main reason we test hydrants,” said Smithey, adding the N.C. Department of Insurance requires that each hydrant be tested at least once a year.

He said Millers Creek and some other departments test hydrants twice a year because it lowers homeowner's insurance premiums.

Smithey said he also realized that testing hydrants could be inconvenient for citizens.

The Wilkes-Alleghany chapter of the American Red Cross was called to assist Mrs. Haynes and her daughter.

The Wilkes Rescue Squad and Wilkes Emergency Medical Services were both on the scene but there were no injuries reported.

Wilkesboro Town Planner Andrew Carlton said the Wilkesboro town limits only extend to the highway right of way for U.S. 421 where Ridgecrest Street intersects with U.S. 421. He said Ridgecrest is in the town's extraterritorial zoning jurisdiction.