

## **Seven Young People Killed in Wake County Car Crash - December 30, 1976**

03/18/14 1402 W, 3 I - + 15 - 6

What was the worst traffic accident in Wake County's history? It's the type of morbidly curious question asked about in the day rooms of fire stations or rescue squads. Or discussed between generations of responders: paramedics, EMTs, firefighters, law officers, and dispatchers. What were the worst ones? Who remembers the big ones? And, of course, what happened?

In the annals of Wake County's emergency services history, the worst car crash was probably the seven fatalities and five injuries that occurred on a narrow dirt road in eastern Wake County on the night of December 29, 1976. The ages of the victims ranged from fourteen to twenty-one. They resided in Clayton, Knightdale, Garner, and Raleigh.

### **Two Cars Collide**

The head-on collision happened on Bissette Road (SR2508), about a mile southeast of the Shotwell community, and near the Johnston County line. Two cars on the crest of a hill about 8:30 p.m.

Six people were riding in a 1971 Oldsmobile driven by William Harold Wheeler, a 16-year-old high school student from Clayton. The vehicle was traveling an estimated 60 to 70 miles per hour, and on the wrong side of the road, when it crashed into a 1973 Chevrolet traveling 25 to 35 miles per hour. The second vehicle was occupied five times.

The Chevrolet was pushed backwards 36 feet down the hill, State Troopers later determined, before coming to rest in a ditch. The car was crushed on the driver's side. The Oldsmobile continued eastward down the hill for 51 feet, before turning over several times, and landing upside down. The car was flattened.

Four passengers were thrown clear of the vehicles. The remaining eight occupants were pinned inside the two vehicles.

One of the surviving passengers in the Oldsmobile recalled there was little warning of the "impending wreck." Recounted Charles Randy Gurley in the *Raleigh Times*, "We were going along, and all of a sudden everyone said to watch out." He said in a telephone interview, "The next thing I remember, I was crawling out from under a car."

### **Dispatching The Call**

The accident was reported by a female motorist, who passed the scene a few minute later. At the Wendell Police Station, police dispatcher and rescue squad member Roger Lane took the phone call on the emergency line (365-4444).

He remembers the caller saying "someone has come to the house and said they were in a wreck." When asked if anyone was hurt, they said "I'm not sure, but the person that walked to my house seems dazed and confused."

Lane dispatched the standard resources for a motor-vehicle accident: one ambulance (the squad had three) and the crash truck. The latter carried the squad's hydraulic Hurst tool, which they'd acquired two years earlier.

The driving distance from the two-year-old Wendell Rescue Squad building to the accident scene was about six miles. The location was about equal distance between the towns of Wendell and Knightdale. (A rescue squad in Knightdale was organized the following year. One of the founders, Bob Couick from Wendell Rescue Squad, would respond this night.)

### **Responders Arrive**

Squad Captain Norman Dean was the first to arrive. He recalled being dispatched to a "simple" car accident "with personal injury." He found one young man walking, with a wound to his face. He found another victim who was deceased, and that's when he "radioed for all the help I could get."

Lane remembers receiving the "scary details" from Dean over the radio. He jumped up from his chair and re-dispatched the call, requesting all available Wendell rescue units. He radioed for Zebulon to send all of their ambulances. He called the Knightdale Fire Department. And he called "RESCOM" to send two wreckers as an "emergency request."

Six "rescue trucks" and a "nearly a score" of rescue workers arrived from Wendell, Knightdale, and Zebulon, reported the *News & Observer* and *Raleigh Times*. (Did Clayton or Garner send any ambulances?) Two fire engines were also called to the scene, as well an "auxiliary truck." Some of the victims were conscious. Those trapped in the vehicles were removed with "the aid of power tools."

Three young women, and one young man were pronounced dead at the scene. Another young woman died in the Wake Medical Center emergency room shortly before midnight. Two more, one young man and a young woman, died the following day.

Those with non-fatal injuries were admitted to Wake Medical Center in varying conditions: critical (1), serious (1), good (1), and fair (1). Plus one who was treated and released.

Squad member Bob Couick lived in Knightdale, and responded to the scene in his personal vehicle. He remembers riding the first ambulance that left the scene, a Wendell unit with himself and Herb Ramsey in the back.

They transported a female patient to Wake Medical Center, where she passed away. Couick stayed at the emergency room for several hours, helping out, before returning to the scene to get his car.

Dean told the *Raleigh Times* that both drivers were pinned behind the steering wheels. Both drivers died.

Several troopers investigated the incident well into the evening. Two Federal Highway Administration officials arrived at the scene the day after. They were asked to investigate any accident with more than five fatalities.

### **Morning After**

The next morning, those who lived nearby were "surveying the scene." Curious area residents, reported the newspapers.

Both the *Raleigh Times* and *News & Observer* ran front-page stories about the accident, as well as subsequent stories about the students, the party that some had attended, and their funerals.

Wheeler and his four passengers were honors students at Clayton High School. He had received his driver's license only two days before. They had left a holiday party to take a ride.

The Highway Patrol said no charges would be filed, but their report would note the driver of the Oldsmobile was speeding and traveling on the wrong side of road.

### **Mass Funeral**

On December 31, 1976, a mass funeral for the five youths killed from Clayton was held at First Baptist Church in Clayton. Close to 1,000 people attended.

The accident also brought back memories to many Clayton residents who remembered four teenagers from town who were killed in a car accident on January 3, 1941. Their car was struck by a train in Benson, as they were traveling to a Clayton-Benson basketball game.

Recounts longtime Johnston County emergency services member Jason Thompson, "For many years, those student's photos were hanging in the library at Clayton High School." He also notes that his grandfather lost a coin toss that morning, and didn't get a ride in that car and his life was spared.

That accident also ended interscholastic basketball at the high school for several years.

### **The Occupants**

1971 Oldsmobile

- William Harold Wheeler - 16 years old - Clayton (fatal)
- Kim Spence - 14 - Clayton (fatal)
- Lisa Jo Wright - 15 - Clayton (fatal)
- Ken Smith - 15 - Clayton (fatal)
- Lisa Rosa Lynch - 15 - Clayton (fatal)
- James Gregory Sassar - 15 - Clayton (injured, fair)
- Charles Randy Gurley - 15 - Clayton (injured, treated and released)

1973 Chevrolet

- Susan Frances Underhill - 21 - Wendell - East Carolina University senior (fatal)
- Helen Jean Brewer - 18 - Raleigh (fatal)
- David Martin Lee - 19 - Knightdale (injured, critical)
- Paul Timothy Lee - 18 - Knightdale (injured, serious)
- Braxton Van Williams - 21 - Garner (injured, good)

Front Pages

Mostly Sunny  
Mostly sunny. Highs in low 40s. Lows in upper teens to low 30s. Details, Page 2.

# The News and Observer

Vol. CCXXII, No. 183      48 Pages Today      Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, December 30, 1976



Bodies lie covered between smashed cars in wreck at Shotwell

Staff photo by Lane Harvey

7 Others Hurt

# 5 Killed in Wake Wreck

By ROBERT LYNCH  
Staff Writer

Five persons were killed and seven injured Wednesday night in a head-on collision on an unpaved road about a mile southeast of Shotwell community in eastern Wake County.

Three young women and a young man were pronounced dead at the scene. A fifth victim, a young woman, died shortly before midnight Wednesday at the Wake Medical Center emergency room.

The identity of only one victim had been made public late Wednesday night. She was identified by

the Wendell Rescue squad as Sue Underhill, 21, of Wendell.

The two cars collided about 8:30 p.m., apparently at high speed, on top of a hill on the narrow rural road near the Johnston County line.

Several state troopers were still at the scene late Wednesday night investigating the wreck.

They were unsure who was driving the two cars and of other details of the collision.

Two of the dead women had no identification and were simply tagged by Dr. Louis J. Kansa, Wake medical examiner, with labels describing their

clothing and in which car they had been riding.

Troopers were unable to provide a list of the injured or dead at midnight Wednesday. They said the investigation of the accident would probably take all night.

The injured were taken from the wreckage by members of the Wendell Rescue Squad and rescue units from nearby areas.

One of the drivers was believed to have been from Blodgett Road near Knightdale and the other from Clayton.

# Seven young people killed in head-on crash in Wake



By SUE PERDUE  
Times staff writer

Seven young people were killed in a head-on collision of two cars Wednesday night on an unimproved Wake County road.

Five of the victims were Clayton High students who had left a holiday party to take a ride. The driver, 18-year-old William Harold Wheeler, who was among the dead, had gotten his driver's license only two days before.

An East Carolina University student driving the other car and one of her passengers, an 18-year-old Raleigh girl, also were killed.

Five other youths were injured, one of them critically. The two cars — a 1971 Oldsmobile driven by Wheeler, son of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Wheeler of Clayton, and a 1970 Chevrolet driven by Susan Frances Underhill, 21, of Wendell, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Henry W. Underhill — collided at 8:30 p.m. on Rural Road 258. The road, also known as Housley Road, is four and a half miles south of Wendell.

State Trooper Ronald L. Hayes said Wheeler's car was left of the center line when the wreck occurred.

"It's the worst I've ever seen," he said of the wreck.

Those killed in the Wheeler car in addition to the driver were identified as Kim Spence, 18, of Rt. 1, Clayton, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Spence; Lisa Jo Wright, 18, of Rt. 2, Clayton, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ted Wright; Kim Smith, 17, of Clayton, son of Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Smith; and Lisa Elena Lynch, 18, 217 S. Elmington St., Clayton, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Leamon F. Lynch.

Smith died this morning in Wake Medical Center. The others died in the wreck.

A mass funeral for the five will be held at 2:30 p.m. Friday at First Baptist Church in Clayton.

Miss Underhill, the driver of the other car, was killed in the wreck. A passenger, Helen Jean Erwin, 21, died this morning in Wake Medical Center. The Highway Patrol listed Miss Erwin's address as 511

See NC 30-25, page 1

Three dead youths lie covered by sheets near the car driven by Miss Underhill

## New license was ticket to tragedy

The 18-year-old William Harold Wheeler was proud of the new-found independence his 18-year-old driver's license had given him. He last night he decided to take some Clayton High School friends for a ride.

A few minutes later Wheeler and four of the six passengers in his car, all home at school, died in a head-on collision with another crowded vehicle on an unimproved Wake County road.

The driver and a passenger in the other car also were killed. Asked this morning what had prompted the ride, Mrs. George Houser of Clayton said, "It was just ordinary. That boy had just gotten his license."

Mrs. Houser is the mother of Rocky Houser, who last night threw a party for some classmates from Clayton High. Mrs. Houser said Wheeler offered to

take some friends for a ride. "We didn't even know they'd left because they were in and out of the house so much," Mrs. Houser said in a telephone interview. "They were planning to come back. The girls had left their coats here at the party."

Mrs. Houser frowned about the accident when a friend called the house.

"We were having a casual

one-handed hamburger and all that," Mrs. Houser said. "They had nothing but Coca-Cola and tea to drink. They had had nothing else that I know of."

Wheeler's father, Harold Wheeler, said his son's 18th birthday was Monday — the day he got his driver's license.

"He should be a better person for a year before that," the older Wheeler said. "He was a

good driver."

Wheeler's vehicle collided with an automobile driven by Susan Frances Underhill, 21, of Wendell, a senior dean at East Carolina University who was home for the holidays. Miss Underhill was killed instantly.

A passenger in the Underhill car, Helen Jean Erwin, 21, of Raleigh, died this morning.

—SUE PERDUE

Raleigh Times - December 30, 1976

**Colder**  
Winds, colder. Little chance of rain. High to near 20s. Low to near 10s. (City) Page 7.

# The News and Observer

11th Floor

TELEPHONE NUMBERS  
Main 331-1234  
West 4th 331-4112  
Columbia 333-1000

---

Vol. CCXXXI, No. 184      21 Pages Today      Raleigh, N. C., Friday, December 31, 1976      11th Floor      Daily 10c, Sunday 25c

## Wake Wreck Death Toll 7

Spears Thursday night at impact point of 1971 Oldsmobile's front end that killed seven. City at night shows position of Underhill car after collision; left view shows Wheeler car's position.

In 1971 Oldsmobile passenger

The 21st girl in a head-on collision Wednesday night took to town. Three automobiles and the 18-year-old driver of one were spinning and on the wrong side of the road.

The other youths were injured, one critically.

In the wreck that occurred Wednesday night on Rural Road 258, the 1971 Oldsmobile driven by William Harold Wheeler of Clayton was heading to its 30 miles per hour when it smashed into a 1970 Chevrolet driven by Susan Frances Underhill, 21, of Wendell.

Wheeler was going about 15 to 20 miles, and Miss Underhill was killed instantly. Wheeler was the second to die and Harold Wheeler of Clayton. Miss Underhill was the third to die and Mrs. Henry W. Underhill of Wendell.

Hayes said that a witness from the Underhill's address, "We were going between 25 and 30 miles an hour."

The car's front end hit the front of a 1970 Oldsmobile driven by Susan Frances Underhill. The front of the impact crushed Underhill's car back to its base. Hayes said the Wheeler vehicle continued to plow down the hill for 20 feet after the impact, having more travel distance before coming to rest up the hill.

See NC 30-25, page 1

Helen Jean Erwin

Susan Underhill

Lisa Elena Lynch

Kim Spence

Kim Smith

Lisa Jo Wright

News & Observer - December 31, 1976

## Historical Perspective

Other multiple fatality incidents in Wake County's history have included:

- December 13, 1994 - Fifteen killed in plane crash in Morrisville.
- February 19, 1998 - Twelve killed in plane crash at Raleigh-Durham International Airport.
- November 1, 2003 - Six killed in MVA at Chapel Hill Road and Nowell Road in Raleigh.
- October 22, 1982 - Six killed in MVA on Airport Road and Highway 70 in Raleigh.
- January 14, 1968 - Six people killed in house fire in Zebulon.
- September 18, 1966 - Six people killed in MVA on Bass Lake Road in Fuquay-Varina.
- February 25, 1965 - Five people killed in plane crash at Lake Crabtree.
- February 21, 1964 - Five people killed in plane crash at Raleigh-Durham Airport.
- February 1, 1948 - Five people killed in apartment fire in Raleigh.

Sources:

- Oral histories.
- *News & Observer* - December 30, 31, 1976; January 1, 1977.
- [North Carolina Deadliest Disasters Database](#).
- *Raleigh Times* - December 31, 1976.
- [Timeline of Events in Clayton Area](#).

---

Not sure of the date, but it was in the early 80s- RDU was still in the original fire station. Two vehicle MVC at Airport Rd intersection and US70. Family station wagon leaving RDU pulled out in front of another vehicle. Several fatalities and debris all over the intersection.

**DJ** - 03/18/14 - 22:39

That would be it. I remember it being a Friday night with an elderly driver. Durham Highway FD also went.

**DJ** - 03/19/14 - 17:29

I know the one at Nowell Rd & Chapel Hill Rd in Raleigh was a bad one. I was on Cary Engine 2 that night and responded with Rescue 2 and Western Wake and numerous EMS agencies. Several fatalities and other injuries, caused by a drunk driver plowing through a earlier accident scene. Mike I believe it was in 2003 or so?

**car3550** - 03/20/14 - 19:34

November 1, 2003 – Six killed in MVA at Chapel Hill Road and Nowell Road in Raleigh.

As listed above, at the bottom of my essay.

I was also there that night, arriving around the time of the first fire unit(s). Was in the area, went to the scene expecting a "regular" motor-vehicle accident. Was quite harrowing, though I don't readily recall specifics of the experience. Can't remember what I did with my photos, beyond giving a copy to Western Wake. Might've submitted a FireNews.net story.

**Legeros** - 03/20/14 - 19:39

November 1st, 2003 is a night I will never forget as long as I live. The images I saw still haunt me. Driving through that intersection just today still brought back memories. Strong work that night by each and every member that responded on each and every piece of equipment.

**shevais** - 03/20/14 - 23:59

Name: (real name  
preferred)

Remember personal info?

**Public Information About Public Safety**

03/19/14 196 W - + 6 - 2

Since this week is [Sunshine Week](#), let's take a tour of local public information sources about local public safety agencies. With our friend Google, here's what surfaces around Raleigh and Wake County:

[Open Raleigh - Public Safety](#)

- Fire station locations mapped
- Fire incident data for prior month
- EMS station locations mapped
- Daily police incidents
- Master police incident data set - All police incident data from January 2002 to September 2013
- Police beats mapped
- Police districts mapped
- Fire response districts mapped

[Raleigh Fire Department Report System](#)

- Fire inspection reports
- Fire incident reports - Excludes EMS calls, it appears

## Raleigh Police Department

- [\[Traffic Accident\] Report Database](#)
- [Citizens Online Police Reporting System](#)

## Raleigh-Wake County Emergency Communications Center

- [911 Incident Data](#)

[Wake County Sheriff's Department](#)

- Police record event search
- [Traffic accident] report search

## Wake County Fire Commission

- [Meeting Minutes](#) - Dating to the start of the commission in 1998 (!)

## Wake County Real Estate Records

- [Property Search](#) - Not necessarily public safety, but quite useful for things related!

What other local sites are worth mentioning? And, for tonight's discussion question, what does everyone think about this access and these reporting tools? Too hot, too cold, or just right?