

AUGUST 17 AND 21, 2005

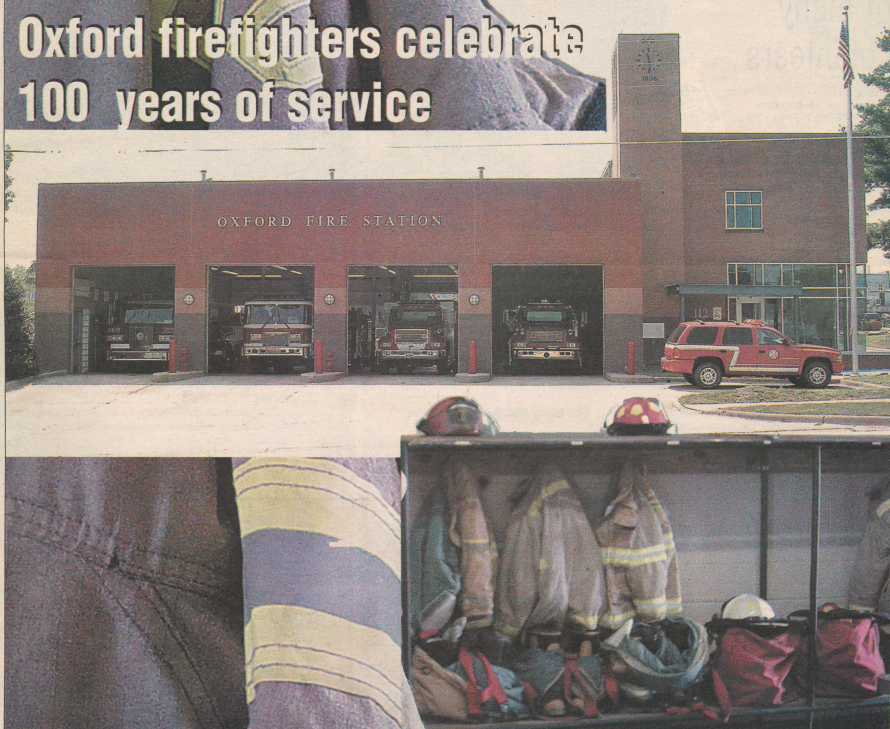
THE DAILY



DISPATCH

**A CENTENNIAL
SPECIAL EDITION**

**Oxford firefighters celebrate
100 years of service**



Oxford Fire Company celebrates 100 years of volunteers

Fighting fires has gotten in the blood of many volunteers

By KATY WATTS
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY DISPATCH

OXFORD – Volunteers with the Oxford Fire Company share a history packed full of adrenaline-charged memories from 100 years of serving the community these men love.

"When I joined in 1970, the chief said, 'You'd better look out, cause it's going to get in your blood,'" said Dr. Richard Taylor, who is an active honorary member now.

Chief Allen Cozart was right, but his prediction wasn't really all that hard to make.

Like other families with members in the company – the Sizemores, the Williams, the Jacksons, the Powells – Taylor comes from a long line of volunteer firemen. His grandfather Thomas G. Taylor served beginning in 1890; his father, surgeon Rives Taylor, volunteered from 1959 to 1970. Now Taylor's son Lewis, who is a paramedic and a Granville County EMS captain, also is a volunteer fireman.

The Oxford Fire Department employs 10 men, including the chief. To fight fires, the department relies on the Oxford Fire Company, comprised of 36 volunteers, who are voted into the company with the agreement that they will participate in regular training and get up and go if



Members of the Oxford Fire Company stand with the 12-cylinder pumper truck the town purchased in 1925. The vehicle needed three men to turn it when it was moving because it had no power steering.

their fire pagers call.

"It evolved into something very unique," said Chief Lanny Dillehay, who has been in the volunteer company for 32 years, since he was 21.

Mayor Al Woodlief, a volunteer for 33 years, credits the volunteers with saving Oxford \$1 million a year.

"I think the town would be lost without it," said the Rev. Harrison Simons, who has served as Fire Company chaplain for 16 years.

The early years

The Oxford Fire Department officially began in 1905 as the Edwards Hose & Ladder Company, named for Frank Edwards, who owned the hardware store and was instru-

mental in drumming up support for an organized fire-fighting effort in the city.

The department's beginnings, however, date back much further. Since he retired from medical practice five years ago, Taylor, a volunteer for more than 30 years, has been researching the history of the station for a book he plans to write.

Some of what Taylor has learned will be shared in a commemorative booklet being published to mark the centennial.

The foundation for the Oxford Fire Company began in the 1870s as a volunteer organization, Taylor said, and it operated sporadically for several years. During the 1870s, three fires nearly burned down the town.

"Every time they had a big fire, they'd decide they

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needed one," Taylor said. "Every now and then the city'd buy buckets and ladders."

And he's not talking about bucket trucks and ladder trucks; he means buckets and ladders. In the early days, volunteers used bucket brigades to move water to fires. By the 1890s, the volunteers used a hand pumper in conjunction with a bucket brigade to douse the fires. After the men dragged the pumper to the fire, they filled it with water using a bucket brigade. The pumper pushed the stream of water through the hose.

When Oxford completed its Water and Light Co. in 1905, the water system held 60 hydrants and a 100,000-gallon tank. The city finally had a more reliable water source, so officials decided to organize an official department.

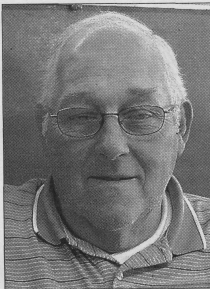
Until then, people had simply expected their neighbors to show up with buckets if there was a fire, Taylor said. In 1905 the city organization became known as the Edwards Hose and Ladder Company, with a "colored" company and a white company, he said, and both companies responded to all the fires.

In 1916, the company purchased a horse named Mamie B., after Mamie Cannady Britt, who was the wife of Wade Britt, the foreman in charge of volunteers. At the same time, they purchased a water wagon.

Mayor W.A. Devin wanted to know if he'd made a good investment, and in 1906 he set a bunch of boxes on fire at the end of town to see how long it took to get water there, Taylor said.

The response time then was four minutes.

The company bought another horse the following year and named him Big Sam,



DAVID DEMONSTRATING WATTS

Taylor Jackson has been a member of the volunteer fire company for 50 years.

in honor of Sam Wheeler, who was the fire chief, the chief of police and the streets superintendent at the time.

In 1915, the company's name changed to the Oxford Fire Company.

The company purchased its first auto-motor truck in 1915, an American La France, which was supposed to save \$600 a year in feed costs to the horses. But the truck was so difficult to crank, the firemen could hook up the horses and usually arrive more quickly at the fires than the truck could, Taylor said.

The 12-cylinder pumper truck the town purchased in 1925 needed three men to turn it when it was moving because it had

no power steering. The wheel was impossible to turn when the truck was not in motion.

In the line of duty

The only fireman who died in the line of duty was Scott Burwell, a member of the "colored company" in 1935. Burwell fell from the running board on the way to a fire, and he died from his injuries.

The "colored" fire company dissolved in the 1940s during World War II when many men went to fight the war, and it never reorganized.

Firemen always have struggled to get through the traffic in the city on the way to a fire. A law required everyone to pull off and wait for five minutes after an alarm sounded. Instead, folks often went straight to the fire, causing a road block, and firefighters couldn't arrive at the scene.

At least once, city officials sounded the alarm for a dead-end street where there was no fire. Police arrested everyone caught in the trap.

State-of-the-art progress

Over the years, firemen have been notified by a bell on the courthouse that some-

one tapped the requisite number of times to indicate in which district the fire burned. Next an 800-decibel bell rang from the opera house, and in 1921 the department purchased a compressed air horn known as "the closest thing ever to raising the dead," Taylor laughed.

"It was right across the street from Orpheum Theater," Taylor said. "Women in the audience put their hands over their ears and said, 'Mercy, mercy.'"


When there were two paid firemen on duty, one would take the first truck out while the other alerted the volunteers, then he took the second truck to the fire.

Every street in town had a number, and the horn would beep according to the fire's location. Brass disks inserted into the horn were coded with the correct number of beeps.

"Right after they got that horn, you could hear it five miles," said Taylor Jackson, a volunteer for 50 years.

Jackson recalled that Raleigh Street was coded 46, and the horn would beep four times and then six times for several cycles. Taylor said that Linden Avenue was coded 33.

The compressed air horn broke in the 1960s, and officials decided it cost too much to fix it.



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"It got to sounding kind of hoarse," Jackson said. "It was state-of-the-art at the time."

When a new telephone system was installed around 1936, the company used a dial system that would call each member and tell him the location of the fire. The dual notification system remained in place until the firemen received pagers in 1979.

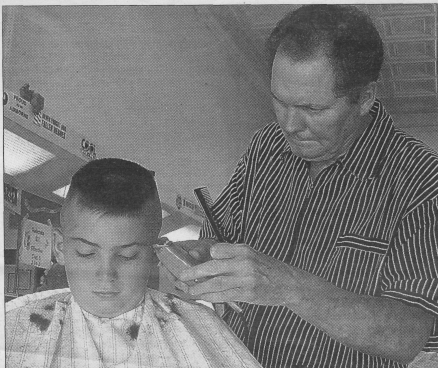
Progress with the water supply was also critical to the development of the city's fire department. Prior to 1925, when the city dammed the Tar River, the city had depended on wells for water.

The fires

Taylor has gone through records from the city, the newspaper and the fire department minutes and documented fires as far back as Richard and D.C. Herndon Store in 1857 and the Kingsbury Co. Factory in 1859. Oxford College burned in 1904 and 1906, and an alcohol explosion at B&N Motor Co. in 1929 killed three men. Main Street burned in 1940, and a fire destroyed Orpheum Theater in 1942. The most expensive fires were the warehouse fires in the 1970s which cost about \$1 million in damage, he said.

But the fires that involved children were the most. When firefighters arrived at a fire on Chestnut Street on March 20, 1976, they found a house fully engulfed, and it was only after the fire was extinguished that they learned five children had died in the blaze.

Harrison Simons, former pastor of St. Stephens Episcopal Church who runs the church's book store, has volunteered 16



DAY SHOOTER/NATHY WATTS

Harold Slaughter, right, who owns Granville Barber Shop, has been with the fire company for 29 years and is foreman in charge of volunteers.

years as chaplain to the fire company.

Simons joined in the 1980s when he saw Johnson's warehouse burning, a fire that nearly burned Taylor's office. He could see the blaze from his house.

"When I got down here it was in full flame," Simons said. "I grabbed an older parishioner and put coffee on and carried it down to the guys."

"As chaplain I go to the fires, I go to the training sessions," Simons said, but due to

health issues he no longer enters burning buildings. "I just felt like if you're going to

be a chaplain, you need to be available."

He meets with the families who lose their belongings in fires and connects them with Red Cross and other organizations that can help them.

He doesn't have any standard words he shares with people who suffer a fire or the firemen who struggle with the tragedies they witness.

"You don't really tell them anything," he said. "Sometimes you just sit with them."

A close-knit fraternity

There are 36 members of the company, and it's not easy becoming a volunteer in this elite group. Although it's comprised of volunteers, members vote in new firemen. Until recently, it was by unanimous vote only. It's been a standard joke that "someone had to die" before others got the chance to volunteer.

"It's tough getting in," Jackson said.

"They take it serious."

Over the 100 years there have been 270 volunteers, Taylor said.

"Once people get in there, they stay forever," he said.

Granville Barber Shop owner Harold Slaughter is foreman in charge of volunteers, and he's been in the company for 29 years.

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"I wanted to be of service to the community," said Slaughter, who is a former paratrooper. "It sort of grows on you."

There has been more turnover in recent years as people move in and out of the community. In addition, training requirements by the state have increased. The volunteers must meet for monthly meetings and drills and are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Nevertheless, the company usually has 16 or 17 volunteers show up at each fire, Dillehay said, which is a high response rate.

One key to entry into this elite group is the ability to get up and go when there's a fire.

"I've got up from a menu meal, I've got up from church," Jackson said. "When the call comes, you go."

In some ways, times have changed, Dillehay said. When he first joined, the only thing they did was fight fires, and they did so at 95 percent of the calls that came in. They responded to 50 calls his first year; now the department responds to around 300 calls a year, including more false alarms and car wrecks.

"Our number one teaching: prepare for the worst and hope for the best," Dillehay said. "Every time something comes in we don't know what it is until we get there."

"It's been a big part of my life," Dillehay said. "I made a big commitment. You could probably ask both of my wives, and they'll tell you."

The fire company today

The volume of calls has increased tremendously over the last 100 years, but

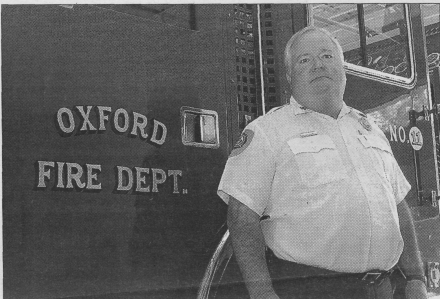


Photo by KATHY WRIGHT

Fire Chief Lanny Dillehay is one of 10 paid members of the Oxford Fire Department. The department also relies on the Oxford Fire Company, comprised of 36 volunteer firefighters.

the response time remains four minutes or less.

Woodlief has been a volunteer since he was 22 years old. He returned to Oxford after college and bought radio station WCBQ, and his dual role assured that the fire reports were accurate and timely since he was on location at the fires as a volunteer.

In his position on the town council, he has worked to help the department purchase top-notch equipment, such as its

\$750,000 aerial ladder truck. Other equipment has improved as well, he said. For example, uniforms weigh one-third what they used to weigh, and every fireman has his own air pack.

When Oxford's department updates equipment, other stations benefit. The

department sold one of its old trucks to Stovall in 1960 for a fraction of its cost. In 1999, after Hurricane Fran, Oxford donated a 1974 John Bean fire truck to Chinquapin Volunteer Fire Department, which had lost everything in the storm. They donate old uniforms to the rural departments.

Woodlief praised local industries for their support, particularly Bandag, which provides once-a-month meals for the volunteers and sponsors special events. He cited the Fire Protection Fee that industries outside the city pay for fire protection as one of the keys to keeping the department on solid financial ground.

Improvements in building codes have made buildings safer, Dillehay said, requiring fire alarms and walls that are designed to stop the spread of fire. In addition, people burn less wood and coal for heat now.

In 1998, City Manager Tommy Marrow asked Dillehay, who was foreman of the volunteer company then, if he'd consider being chief. He said he does a lot of administrative work now, but added, "I still get to do my fair share" of firefighting.

He has confidence in his men. "They can handle anything," Dillehay said. "They're good at calling the shots."

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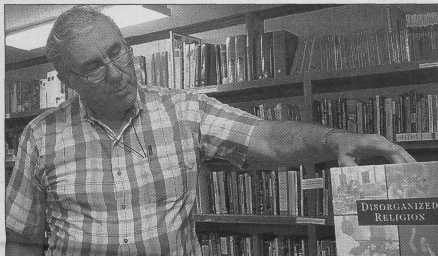
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DAILY DISPATCH/KATHY WATTS

Harrison Simons has volunteered for 16 years as chaplain to the fire company. When not responding to fires, Simons runs the Education-Liturgy Bookstore.

All of the volunteers share a desire to give back to their community. They confess to enjoying the thrill of firefighting as well as the deep camaraderie that comes with sharing life-threatening experiences.

"It can be a very dangerous sort of thing," Taylor said. "When you realize this guy next to you is responsible for your life, there gets to be a little bit of a bond." Dillehay said that as a child he was

drawn to "the thrill of red lights and sirens."

"I always wanted to know where they were going and what they did when they got there," he recalled.

Like the rest of the volunteers, now he knows.

The writer can be reached at kathyanakids@hotmail.com.

Centennial celebration set for Sunday

FROM STAFF REPORTS

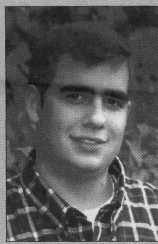
Several events are planned Sunday to celebrate the first 100 years of the Oxford Fire Company.

An open house will begin at 1 p.m. at the fire station on McClanahan Street.

Members of the Fire Company will par-

ticipate in a commemorative service at 8 a.m. at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, next door to the fire station, and the unveiling of a centennial memorial immediately following.

An invitation-only dinner and awards program will be held Sunday night at the city's public works complex.

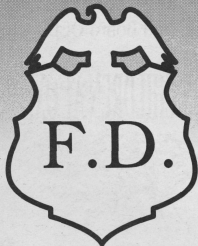


Firefighter remembered

William Jason Brooks is remembered on the Granville County Web site for his dedication as a firefighter and for being a friend.

Brooks was a member of the Oxford Fire Company for a year and a half. He was 18 when he died in an accident in July 1999. He was not in the line of duty at the time. The tribute can be seen at www.granvillecounty.org/brooks.htm.

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A commemorative booklet prepared for the centennial celebration includes these names of volunteers with the Oxford Fire Company from the past 100 years.

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Michael Allen
*Scott Allen
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Steven Ball
Vernon Ball
Vernon Ball Jr.
Chad Barker
I.H. Barnette
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Sat 9:00-4:00

SERVICE HRS:
M-F 7:30-5:30