

History of Mount Airy Fires and Fire Department *(from a history of Mount Airy that was published in two editions of the Community Reporter: Friday, February 9, and Friday, February 16, 1973)*

“On February 24, 1903 at 2:00 a. m. most of Mount Airy's business section south of the railroads was burned. Destroyed were Clay and Clary's Green Grocers, Adam Ruland's Bakery, H. O. Weber butchers, Simpson's Hotel, Raymond Barnes Furniture Store, Clifton Sponsellor Dry Goods Store, Miss Mary McWilliam's Millinery, Gilbert's Hotel, the two buildings of Byron Dorsey's Agricultural Implements Shop, W. B. Rudy Drugstore, L. B. Norwood General Store, W.E.T. Smith Harness Store M.G. Clary Insurance (which was not fully covered by insurance). The loss was estimated at \$50,000.

“The fire started in a flue of a stove and spread to the bakery. Mrs. Mary Eisenhower and her family slept over the bakery. She awoke to the unpleasant odor of smoke. She raised the alarm to her family. Grabbing her pet parrot and canary, she went out on the sidewalk dressed in an overcoat and derby hat. She lost everything else that belonged to her as most of Mount Airy went up in smoke.

“In 1912, the road through town was mud. Mr. Kidd lit kerosene street lights from a stick wagon each evening.

“On March 25, 1914, at noon, much of Mount Airy again went up in smoke. The fire started in the milling company and spread to the business section north of the railroad track. Destroyed in this fire were the Farmers Milling and Grain Company, Watkins and Banks Merchandise Store, Robert Runkles Hardware Store, Dr. W.H. Hopkins Drug Store, Clarence Skeggs Merchandise Store, Miss Belle Runkles' residence, the First National Bank of Mount Airy, a stable on the Fleming estate, the E. M. Molesworth Lumber and Supply Yard, the Mount Airy Ice

Plant, the W. W. Baker residence and a stable on the Arnold property.

“Mount Airy still had no fire company. News of this fire traveled fast. The Independents steamer was brought to the scene by the United Engine. The train's speed was 40 mph. Together, they blocked the south end of Mount Airy from the flames. Water was hauled from a water tower near Route 40.

“On April 6, 1921, Mr. Charles Parker Glover founded the first fire protection unit in Mt. Airy. But when he died a short time later, the project was dropped.

“On a hot evening, about 10:00 p.m. June 4, 1925, F. B. Zepp found his store in flames. Again, the business district of Mount Airy north of the railroad tracks went up in smoke. This was the third disastrous fire in 22 years. The loss was \$200,000.00. Only \$80,000 was covered by insurance. Destroyed were Marion V. Runkles Grain Mill, F. F. Zepp Merchandise Store, Robert L. Runkles Hardware Store, C.C. Riddlemoser Electric Shop, Walter Nikirk Meat and Grocery Store, Rudy and Burdette Furniture Store, the First National Bank, Norman Hood Fertilizer Office, and Gurney Brashear's Grocery Store.

“Hood's Dry Goods Store was the only store to survive the fires. Now it houses Watkins 5 and 10.

“Mount Airy was still without a fire company. Three locomotives from the B & O railroad kept hauling water to the fire. Men were able to save the Mount Airy Milling Company and two residences.”

Editor's Note:

The site of the Garret Sanitorium, at the top of the North Hill, (referred to in this article) was the spot that sparked the interest of your Editor in 1939 as the view from that spot is breathtaking on a clear day. The mountains can be seen both from the front and rear of the property. The acreage along Route 27 was for sale at that time and was purchased

immediately by Mr. and Mrs. Bert Swartz, who later bought the adjoining farm of 160 acres. The farm is now known as the Swartz Colburn Farm and on the exact spot where the Sanatorium was located is the home of Ben F. Hulver and Carol Colburn Hulver.

“After the town of Mt. Airy was destroyed by fire for the third time, citizens felt the need to organize a volunteer fire department. Mr. Asa Watkins was elected as the first president in 1926.

“The money for this project was solicited from the citizens and a street fair. This street fair later became the annual carnival.

“On October 7, 1926, an American La France pumper was purchased for \$8,325.00. It was used by the Mount Airy Company until 1958. The men continued to care for it and give it a special spot in the fire house. It has been the oldest piece of equipment in many parades. In 1969, it was taken to Hagerstown to be completely restored. When returned to its home, it will be a show piece and will appear in many parades.

“The local company still needed a place to put their engine. For \$3500.80 they bought an old garage on Main Street. It was made into an engine house and meeting room. It is a part of today's fire house.

“Mount Airy was summoned to help on large fires some distance away. They felt there was inadequate fire protection. So in 1933, they bought a Mack pumper.

“In 1939, an International front-mounted pumper was added to the line of fire fighting equipment. It was also necessary to have additional space at the fire house. This new section on the north side of the additional building was dedicated in 1941.

“In 1940 a Ladies' Auxiliary to the Mount Airy Volunteer Fire Company was formed.

“During the war years, the company participated in the Federal Civilian Defense Program and turned the complete facilities of the company over to the local defense agency.

“In 1947, a fourth piece of equipment, a Mack 750 GPM pumper was added. It was dedicated to those members of the company who had died while serving their country in World War II. In 1969, this engine was replaced. It was purchased by a fire department in Pennsylvania.

“In 1950, the building next to the fire house was demolished and a parking lot was made for the firemen.

“In 1952, the company added ambulance service and formed a rescue squad.

“A two-way radio was purchased from the Motorola Radio Corporation in 1953. It is connected to the Carroll County radio frequency and the Fire Board at Washington Grove in Upper Montgomery County. The firemen using this radio must have a FCC license. They also began converting a 45 acre farm into a carnival ground and community park.

“In 1955, the company purchased a new Mack fire engine to replace their two old engines. This is now known as Engine #2, the main pumper.

“The first ambulance was replaced with a new 1958 Cadillac ambulance.

“The company voted to build a building at the Fireman's Park to be used a place for other community groups to use for their activities. Also in 1959, a new Dodge fire and rescue truck was added to the Mount Airy Volunteer Fire Company. This Engine #5 is equipped with stretchers, blankets, first-aid equipment and power plant.

“A junior fire department for boys aged 14 to 18 was organized in 1959.

“The fire company has also added a pick-up truck and a jeep. They are now anxiously awaiting the arrival of a \$35,000.00 custom made diesel Mack 750 GPM.

“In 1947, Mount Airy was again threatened by fire. A large frame sewing factory on Prospect Road was completely destroyed in a spectacular fire. The loss was placed at \$50,000.00 and 90 women were left

idle. The three members of the Steele family living in the upstairs apartment were able to escape with only the clothing they were wearing. Firefighting was made difficult by 10 above zero temperatures and wind. Today, Rombro Brothers of Baltimore operate a sewing factory on Center Street with 50 women making Men's pants.

“In 1949, the Lions presented the town with 44 street signs (160 name plates). The project was rather expensive for the small club of 44 members. Typical of the cooperation between the club and the community, Fire Chief Herman Beck donated his tractor powered post-hole digger's service with the balance of the work being done by the Lions. Soon after this, house numbers were issued, in 1950.