

The Kingston Fire Department: Some History and a Tragic Tale

By Don Clark, a long-time Kingston resident, fireman, teacher, and selectman

Part I.

We had some tragic accidents while I was on the Rescue Squad in Kingston. One of the worst was when three people died in a house fire. Before I tell this story I will give some history of our Fire Department and Rescue Squad.

As a boy growing up in the early 1940s and living on Kingston Plains, I remember running from my house to Clark's Garage where the old Dodge fire truck was kept. I would hop on the back to get a ride to a fire. The telephone call for a fire would come into the Central Telephone Office located in a person's house in the Plains. Nellie Lang, the operator, would set off the fire siren located in the field out back of the office. The electric siren was mounted on a steel frame tower 20-30 feet tall. Not everyone on the volunteer Fire Department would hear the siren, so a few extra calls would have to be made to the men on the other ends of town.

In 1949 a new brick fire station was constructed on the west side of the Plains. This was the former location of the old one-room Plains Primary school house. In 1952 the Kingston Lions Club gave a resuscitator to the town and for a while it was kept at the Telephone Office. Dr. Edwin Decatur taught the firemen how to use this piece of emergency equipment. Seven years later in 1959 the Kingston Rescue Squad was organized as part of the Kingston Fire Department. Also in 1959 a retired police cruiser from the town of Hampton was purchased. That 1955 Ford Ranch Wagon was reconstructed and made into our first rescue vehicle. The resuscitator, a litter, a first aid kit, and a two-way radio were part of the equipment. By this time the department consisted of 4 fire trucks plus this rescue wagon. In 1962 the Fire Department purchased the first regular ambulance – an International Travelall Station Wagon equipped as an emergency ambulance at a cost of \$3648. Looking at the log book I have kept all these years, I see that the first ambulance call was on June 24, 1962 to transport Mrs. E. LaBlanc from Kingston to the Exeter Hospital. The attendants were Al Moore and myself.

In the 1950s the old siren was abandoned and a new method of notifying men of a fire or emergency was put in place. This was called the Red Phone System, and the phones were actually made of red plastic. Usually the phone was kept next to the volunteer's bed so it could be heard at night. That was because calls could come in at any time, 24 hours a day. The phones were located at Clark's Garage and at the homes of 4 or 5 firemen, including mine. Each person having a red phone had a call list of 4 or 5 other firemen, so using this procedure we could reach 25-30 members. This system was not perfect but it was better than the old siren. One drawback was that after hearing this call we would usually run out of the house, leaving our wives or others to complete the calling! You can see the imposition it put on other people. I remember my wife with 3 or 4 kids running around trying to find firemen or ambulance personnel to go on a call. Poor Aunt Eunice at Clark's Garage was always receiving calls. Wally Clark, Earl Carter, and Butch Sanborn were frequently asked, "Would you be able to go on an ambulance call?" This was all volunteer work; no one was paid – not the firemen or the ambulance drivers – and most had other jobs away from Kingston.

If an ambulance call came in, it was set up that only two of the ambulance drivers would respond. I went on many calls, day and night. I could never figure out how Dwight Killam could reach the Fire Station at the same time I did. Either I was slow or he drove like the devil because he had to come way down from North Danville Road and I only had to go across the Plains!

Part II

In the first part of this Chronicle, long-time Kingston resident, fireman, and selectman Don Clark recounted some history of the Kingston fire department – their equipment and responding systems. Here he goes on to tell of a tragic fire he witnessed.

One cold winter morning about 4:30 AM the Red Phone rang. A woman's hysterical voice said, "house on fire" but it was very difficult to hear what street she said. Bob Merrick was on the other Red Phone and we agreed it must have been from Babscott Lane. Bob drove one of the fire trucks and I drove the ambulance with another attendant. We had a policy that the ambulance would always go to a fire and have two attendants if possible.

When we arrived at the scene, there wasn't much fire but quite a lot of smoke. We opened some windows to let the smoke out and I went in the hall window of this small one-story ranch. Of course windows shouldn't be opened because it causes more draft, but in those days we did not have Scott Air Packs, helmets and suits. We had to investigate because we didn't know if any people were in there or not. The lights were on and I started looking around. In the hall coming from the main bedroom was the father, Phillip Blake, on the floor – dead from smoke inhalation. Keeping my head low I went through the living room into another bedroom and saw another very sad sight. There was a baby boy 2 years old in a crib and a 4-year old boy on a small bed, both dead from the smoke. All three individuals did not have any burns. Later we learned that after waking her husband, the wife had escaped out the hall window with their 3 year old daughter. She ran to a neighbor's house to call in the fire.

The fire was believed to have been caused by an overheated central floor furnace. Many homes had this type of hot air furnace because they were inexpensive, but they were not very safe. The furnace was suspended from the living room floor into the basement with one large heating register flush with the floor. On this particular night it was very cold so they turned the heat way up and went to bed. The mistake made was that before going to bed, they put many diapers on a wooden rack over the large register. After drying out, the diapers got hotter and hotter and finally reached the combustion point and caught fire. This intense heat caused the curtains, overstuffed furniture, and other light combustible materials to catch fire. These items were smoldering, causing the smoke, but the wooden items didn't catch fire. When we arrived there were no flames so the fire was put out quickly.

Dr. Claire, the Rockingham County Coroner, had to come all the way from Portsmouth to pronounce that the three people had died. The Reverend Bob Howard went to see the widow that next morning. Although he had never met her before, he felt that he helped by just listening to her. Later he officiated at the tragic funeral.