Rev. Bob Wilkins, Volunteer Chaplain of the Philippi Fire Department. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

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On the cover: Norman Fagan. Courtesy of Norman Fagan.

First In—Last Out
The Story of Firefighting

By Barbara Smith

Phil Hart Belington Fire Chief, and Rev. Bob Wilkins, Volunteer Chaplain of the Philippi Fire Department. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

Phil Hart is the current fire chief in Belington (Barbour County) as well as in Bridgeport (Harrison County). He was 16 years old when he joined the Barbour County company in which three older brothers were already involved. He's still active 40 years later. "I like to help people," he explains, a statement reinforced by the fact that he served on the Barbour County Commission from 2001 to 2018, six of those years as president.

"There have been a lot of changes in firefighting," he says, "some positive, some not so positive. On the plus side, in some respects at least, it is not as dangerous as it used to be; although, we do have some frightful experiences, my worst one being the time I was inside a burning building when the roof collapsed. That was a heart-stopper.

"Our equipment and uniforms are of far better quality now, and we have much better federal and state guidelines and far better training. All firefighters, whether volunteer or paid, must complete 200 hours of training, and we do thorough background checks, and the physical exams are tough and must be repeated annually. There is al-

Phil Hart in a setup scene from the movie *Ladder 49* in which he was an extra c. 2004. Photo Courtesy of Phil Hart.

Bob Wilkins in 1968—a new firefighter. Photo courtesy of Bob Wilkins

ways that hoped-for result to keep us going—saving a structure or, far better, bringing people out alive." He notes improvements in prevention practices, including going into schools to make sure that teachers are fully trained and that fire drills take place as prescribed. "We're glad," he says, "to do anything we can to prevent the real emergencies."

On the negative side, Chief Hart notes diminished support from the public. "It's hard these days to enlist new firefighters, whether volunteer or paid. It's a widespread problem, a lack of willingness to be involved, to commit to anything. Although the paid personnel are likely to make a career of firefighting, volunteers last only five to seven years. Funding has become a huge problem. We get some support from the state and local governments, and, in most locations, there are municipal fees or fire fees, but we have to pay for all our new equipment and uniforms—which we are required to replace according to federal formulas. When we do have to replace a fire truck, for instance, we have to come up with hundreds of thousands of dollars. If we're pricing a 100-foot ladder and platform truck for use in very tall structures, we're talking half-a-million dollars. And you know how the public resists fundraisers or increased taxes. It's hard." He frowns. "Our outfits last maybe 10 years if we're lucky. Replacing one, including the helmet, runs about $500 per man."

All equipment, Phil says, must be inspected at least annually, like a car inspection, at which time appropriate replacements are mandated. "That's one of the tasks of the state fire marshal and his team. We pay private companies to come for inspections. The fire marshal authorizes such companies but also checks to be sure that training and record keeping are current and compliant. The marshal also investigates suspicious fires and checks out dangerous structures and activities. He has the power to arrest anyone who commits a crime such as arson or sending a false alarm."

The organization of a fire department is indicated, in part, by the uniforms, especially the helmets, which are color coded by local companies to indicate assignments, such as the ladder and rescue operations. All officers in all companies, however, wear white helmets.

The Rev. Bob Wilkins sits opposite Phil as they talk at the Belington Fire Station. He, too, is a longtime firefighter. "I began when I was 17, living in Long Island, New York. I played the bugle in the fire department marching band. Soon after that, I became a real firefighter, a volunteer on the active squad but was paid, minimally, as their radio operator. That lasted five years, after which I joined a research project at Columbia University, stationed in Alaska for three years and serving as a navigator while we plotted icebergs in the Arctic Ocean." After that came two years as an engineer at NASA, and then Bob became an ordained United Methodist minister. In the mid-1970s, he was assigned a pastorate in Philippi, where he eventually served as director of Heart & Hand Ministries.

After retiring from Heart & Hand in 2015, Bob became volunteer chaplain for the Philippi Fire Department, one of the few such chaplains in West Virginia. Training for that post was provided by the Federation of Fire Chaplains, of which he's a member. He also, however, is a first responder and goes to all the fires with the Philippi squad. "We chaplains play several roles," he reports. "First, we try to assess the fire victims' needs, including contacting family and friends and pastors. We also try to meet the spiritual needs of members of the squad, whatever and wherever and whenever those needs may arise. We also serve as a liaison between the fire department and the community." Bob also serves as magistrate for the City of Philippi.

Echoing Chief Hart, Bob describes the positive and negative aspects of current firefighting. "Technology is a big plus," he says, "in terms of both equipment and communication. Generally, conditions are safer, and a lot more effort goes into prevention. Inspections are sometimes a nuisance, but they make our jobs much safer and more secure. And training is much more thorough. What we call 'fire school,' the 200 hours required, takes as much as six months, plus any specialized or advanced training the person wants, and the training always includes the nature and handling of hazardous materials. Part of that training can be done online, but most of it takes place in a central location such as Elkins or Morgantown or at the West Virginia State Fire Academy at Jackson's Mill. If we have enough new people at any one time, the instructor may come to us."

Then he turns to the negative: "We are constantly reminded—because of the building materials in use today—that fumes are highly toxic and ignite very quickly. That part of the job is extremely dangerous. We have three minutes between the time we enter a structure and must have people out of the building before they become incapacitated by smoke and fumes. Firefighters have more time because they wear a breathing apparatus—air tanks."

Bob makes one more important point: "The fire departments in Philippi and Belington and Junior are responsible for the entire county. In the old days, we were responsible just within the city limits. Now, we cover the whole area. It used to take us just a couple of minutes to get to a site. Now, it may take 20 minutes or more depending upon traffic, weather conditions, and availability of personnel."

Emergency signaling via telephone and other electronic devices goes through the 911 dispatcher and is simultaneously sent to the police, emergency medical squads, and fire departments. Most current emer-

Phil Hart (L) and Rev. Bob Wilkins at the Belington Fire Station. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

gencies are not fires, however. Some 80% involve vehicle accidents, rescue operations, or medical crises.

Chief Phil Hart sums up the major problem in firefighting today: "It's a big business, especially when you realize that 70% of firefighters are volunteers who have to agree not only to extensive training and retraining but also to large amounts of time and effort and personal cost. Also, the tests are not easy to pass—an average of about 50% who take them pass the first time." He clenches his fist. "It's not surprising that this profession carries a high rate of stress and suicide and cancer caused by toxic fumes. It's a very high-risk occupation."

Phil breathes deeply and says, "We only wish the public were more aware of our problems and more appreciative of what we do. We're here to help in whatever way we can."

In terms of the courage and dedication of firefighters, their national motto says it all: "First in—last out."

DR. BARBARA ATKESON SMITH (1929-2021) was a poet, author, and editor of many books and novels and was a feature writer for Outdoor West Virginia and GOLDENSEAL. Dr. Smith taught at Alderson Broaddus University for more than 37 years and served for 20 years as the Chairperson of the Division of the Humanities where she developed a popular major in Technical Writing. These are just a small number of her life accomplishments. This is Barbara's 20th article for GOLDENSEAL, and though it may be the last article she contributed to GOLDENSEAL, her memory will live on for decades to come through the many works she penned.

A Short History of Firefighting

By Barbara Smith

The practice of firefighting probably began soon after fire itself was discovered and harnessed, both a boon and a menace to human survival. One early record, included in the Columbia University Electronic Encyclopedia, notes that an early Roman named Marcus Licinius Crassus developed his own fire company of 500 men who were sent to structure fires—not to combat the fire but to buy the burning building at a ridiculously low price. If the owner agreed, the men would extinguish the fire; otherwise, the building was allowed to burn.

The earliest written records of organized firefighting were made by Augustus, emperor of Rome, around 25 BC. The method, still used in some remote and primitive areas today, was the "bucket brigade," which involves passing buckets of water from person to person to reach the fire. Axes broke up whatever might be fueling it, and long hooks pulled down dangerous and otherwise inaccessible elements in the fire.

The next truly major development came after the massive 1666 fire in London, which destroyed several square miles of property and left thousands of residents homeless. Insurance companies organized squads to guard buildings they had insured. Buildings not insured were refused protection. Two hundred years later, the British government finally established firefighting companies. The standardizing of on-foot operations began in Scotland in 1830. Equipment came under comparable control late in that century.

Vehicles designed as fire engines came into existence during the 17th century. Their primary purpose was to carry tubs of water for use by the bucket brigades. In some cases, a pump was set in the tubs to get the water into the buckets. Leather hoses were first designed and used in Holland late in the same century; 200 years later, cotton-covered rubber hoses came into use. More recently, various types of nozzles have been designed, and chemicals are added to the water depending upon the type of fire involved. Foam is used instead of water to fight combustibles such as oil, tar, and gasoline.

In the United States, as early as 1631, John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, outlawed wooden chimneys and thatched roofs. In 1648, Peter Stuyvesant, governor of New Amsterdam (later New York), named four men as wardens to patrol the city for fire hazards and levy fines on anyone who violated city ordinances. It was Benjamin Franklin, however, who in 1736 organized the colonies' first citywide fire brigade: the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia. It wasn't until after the Civil War that government agencies took over the firefighting endeavor and until the mid-19th century that some firefighters were hired full time and paid for their labor—beginning in Cincinnati in 1853. Interestingly, at least one source suggests that some 7,000 men were hired and paid as firefighters in Rome as early as the first century AD, probably prompted by the fire on July 19, 64 AD, that destroyed some two-thirds of the city.