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Hometown History

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History of Our Fire Department

Randolph County's fire departments have an interesting history as there have been many major fires over the years. They have had occasions where they were practicing for a fire and the fire burnt down a building. Another remarkable thing our fire departments did was a change from horses and buggies to fire trucks. Many fires have occurred in the Winchester town square so many buildings have burnt down or partially burnt from these fires.

One fire was saved by heroic firemen when a hanging lamp fell and started a fire. The fire was saved and nobody was injured. "On November 3, 1896 some enthusiastic Republican during the reading of one of the extremely favorable bulletins at The Rink gave vent to his feelings by swinging up his hat; it struck the hanging lamp in the west part of the rink which fell to the floor. It broke and the oil ignited immediately, threatening a dangerous fire for a few moments."¹ This is one of the several occasions where a firefighter was brave enough to save several people from a deadly fire. Some were injured but none were major injuries.

There is a theory for the major Randolph County fires, as the belief is that there is a major fire every 20 years in Randolph County. Starting in 1899, there was a fire on July 5 when a fire started, and burnt down homes and a church. Goodrich hay barn was the next to burn between 1909-1918. "The next major fire was the Goodrich hay barn. Damage to the building and contents was in excess of \$10,000. Again, mutual aid was called from Union City."² In 1926,

¹ Franklin Tom. *From Buckets to Computers*. 1997

² Franklin Tom. *History of Winchester Fire Department*. 6/28/88

the City Mill and Elevator burned down on October 20. The fire cost \$60,000 to repair after it was all said and done. The next big fire to happen was on October 3, 1930, when the Storms Sawmill burnt down. Surprisingly, back-to-back times there was a major fire that burnt down mills. The fire caused \$20,000 worth of damage to the mill and the machines. The following major fire was in 1944 when a building was on fire on February 1. "On Tuesday, Feb. 1, 1944, the Masonic building was gutted by fire causing an estimated \$100,000 to \$150,000 in damages."³ The fire was the highest cost in damages ever to this point. That amount of money is around 1.6 million dollars in today's money, due to inflation. Five years after this fire, the semi-tanker wrecked and was in flames sometime in June 1949.

On June 12, 1953, a clothing store caught fire because an electrical pressing iron was left on. Four years later, on June 27, 1957, the said to have been the "most tragic" fire in Winchester's history happened. The fire happened when there was an explosion at the Anchor Hooking Plant. "Four men died and eight were seriously injured when an explosion and fire rocked the Anchor Hooking Plant in Winchester. The explosion, heard more than two miles away, came from a high pressure gas line."⁴ This tragic fire killed four men who were probably working at their job when the fire started from the gas line. The next two fires were in the same year, 1965, one month away from each other. On November 19, Wick's was on fire, and luckily none were seriously injured. The following month, the Sports Center caught on fire on Christmas. It spread to two other stores nearby, those stores being Eddie's Maytag and Farmer's Pain Store. Many aids were there to help stop the fire, aids from White River, Winchester, Union City, and more aid. The next fires were not as bad as the previous ones. Fires in 1969 at Anchor,

³ Franklin Tom. *History of Winchester Fire Department*. 6/28/88

⁴ Franklin Tom. *History of Winchester Fire Department*. 6/28/88

1973 explosion and fire at Zicht's Greenhouse, 1975 explosion and fire at Armstrong Mould, 1978 Samzo's Mini-mall caught fire, explosion the same year at OMCO Foundry, 1981 fire at Anchor Hooking Box Warehouse, and finally, a flood happened in 1987. In between the fire in 1981 and the flood in 1987, there was a new fire station built in 1984. The fire station is the one we still know today on East Washington Street.

The fire station has had to deal with many fires, from saving lives to not getting there fast enough or the fire being too strong. The firefighters have dealt with whatever was thrown at them and once had to do so by horse and buggy in the 1800s. The Winchester Fire Department and other local fire departments are not recognized enough for these actions. Finally, the fire department is so memorable and historical because how they are a huge part of medical care in the community.