

1926 – NORTH WINDHAM FIRE DEPARTMENT – 2001

In the year 1925, North Windham had several fires that did extensive damage to property in the village. The last one destroyed a house owned by the Seplowitz family. A few men from the area saw the smoke from the L & M Hartson Company, a factory in which they were employed in the area now known as Old Route 6 and Route 203. They ran to the Seplowitz house and with a few buckets of water attempted to extinguish the fire. Their attempt was with great vigor but the house was still a total loss.

The men, disheartened by their defeat, began their short walk back to the factory and little did they know this would be the start of a change in the community. Before the day was over there was talk of forming a fire department. A group of men talked to some of the members of the South Windham Fire Department, which had already been established. After getting the necessary information, a meeting was called at the North Windham Town Hall. About 15 men attended the first meeting and after information was presented, a vote was taken. The affirmative action set the stage to form the North Windham Fire Department. Two weeks later, another meeting was held to form a committee to write the by-laws and regulations of the department. An administrative committee was to find a building and equipment. A Ways and Means committee was to raise the money to purchase the equipment. The stage was now set for the start of the fire department in North Windham. The success of this venture depended on the community and the efforts of the men who wanted the fire department.

The first test of this success was the raising of the money. The firemen to be and their supporters started a subscription drive for Popular Magazine, in addition to holding suppers and card parties as fundraisers. No one in the town refused to help. The concerted efforts of the townspeople were overwhelming and all participated in one-way or another. The first step was well under way to becoming a great success.

The second step was to acquire land and the construction of a building. The land problem was solved quickly by leasing a piece of across from the L & M Hartson Company for \$1.00 a year for ten years with a clause to renew. The only problem was the land had to be dug out and leveled since it was a hill of gravel. The men began digging in the spring of 1926, all donating their time. Gravel was dug and hauled away by the members who owned pick-up trucks. An administrative committee consisting of Charles Tucker, Leslie Hartson and William Stevens were working on financial aid and signed a note of \$1000.00 for the building and equipment. Work continued on the building with the framework of the building coming from a house that was torn down by the members. The lumber for the sidewalls and roof were purchased new. The building was finished by the middle of November. It had two bays for the fire trucks and an upstairs for meetings.

During the construction of the building, other men were working on acquiring a truck. The Hilltop Firehouse in Willimantic donated an old Montgomery Hand Drawn Fire Truck, which was mounted on a Reo Speed Wagon Chassis. The chassis was purchased for \$175.00. William Stevens, a welder and metalworker, stripped down the Montgomery and fitted it on the Reo. When it was completed, our first piece of apparatus had two 35-gallon soda acid chemical tanks, 150 ft. of 1 ½ inch high-pressure hose and two hand held extinguishers. This equipment was primarily used for chimney fires, which was the main cause of fires at that time. The dream of the North Windham Fire Department had finally come true.

With dues of \$.25 cents a month from the men and \$50.00 annually from the Town of North Windham, the firemen monitored the efforts in the early years. The fiscal stability of the department was achieved by members donating their time, in addition to, the efforts of the suppers, clambakes, paper drives, minstrel shows and also the sale of fireworks.

A few years later, a newer Reo Chassis was purchased to replace the older one. The body was moved to the newer chassis and a second tank was added. In 1933, a pump was also added to this truck. In 1931, a second truck was acquired from a fire company in Putney Vermont. The open cab pumper had a 500-gallon per minute pump and 250 gallons of water. This cost the department \$900.00.

Someone blowing the siren on top of the firehouse alerted men of fires. Often trains coming through the town also alerted the residents of a fire by sounding their whistle a certain number of times.

The next truck purchased was with the help of the insurance company. They stated that a newer truck would lower rates. Townspeople donated their savings to pay off the note on this truck. The 1923 White Maxim had a 500-gallon pump and was purchased on November 23, 1936 for a cost of \$700.00 and was sold on April 16, 1957.

With the onset of the war in 1941, boys between the ages of 15 to 18 were brought into service as junior members, assisting the regular members or officers at the scene of fires. They helped fill in the shortage created by the war effort. The North Windham Fire Department covered parts of Mansfield and Chaplin for the fire protection. This gave the department added monies from each of these towns.

In 1946, the department accepted a bid of a 1947 Mack Pumper. The Mack had a 500-gallon pump and a 300-gallon booster tank. It cost the department \$8,900.00. This was the department's first new truck ever purchased. This truck went out of service in 1979 and is currently sitting in the apparatus bay awaiting restorations.

The alerting of the volunteers to fires was made easier in June of 1950 when we were hooked up to the Fir Switchboard in Willimantic located in the Willimantic Fire Department on Bank St. They would receive the fire call and start the siren for that town. In 1951, the discussion started about radio communication between the Switchboard and other departments. We purchased our first radio for the Mack fire truck in March of 1953.

The last year we were able to sell fireworks as a fundraiser was in 1953. They were outlawed in 1954. This fundraiser made the department a profit of \$1642.00 in 1953. In 1954, we began sponsoring the Coleman Bros. Carnival as a fundraiser. This continued until 1971, when we lost the field they played on. This field now holds the Windham Heights Apartment Complex.

Finding out in the early 1950's that our firehouse was in the flood plain caused by the building of the Mansfield Hollow Dam, we started negotiations with the Federal Government and The Army Corp of Engineers, to look for a new location. We signed an agreement on April 25, 1955 for an

exchange of land from the old site to the property on Route 6, where the fire station now currently stands. In July of 1955, excavation of the site began and continued through the winter; with hopes of being in the building by October of 1956. The members donated all of the work. A mortgage was taken out for the materials. Lyman Jordan, a bricklayer by trade, laid all the cement block walls in the building. The roof was finished just as a snowstorm hit. Members showing their extreme dedication, put down the cement floor on Christmas Eve of 1955. The engine room of the building was completed enough so they could move in October of 1956. The hall portion of the building was completed in 1957. The approximate cost of the building was \$12,000.00.

On March 4, 1957, we voted to purchase a used Pirsch Fire Truck from Wellesley Fire Department. It had a 500-gallon booster tank with a 750-gallon pump. The cost was \$4000.00. The Pirsch went out of service in August of 1964 and was sold in July of 1965.

In July of 1961, we purchased our first Scott Air Packs. In August of 1964, we started a truck committee for a new pumper. A purchase was made in April of 1965 for a GMC Chassis and a Maxim body for \$16,000.00. It had a 750-gallon per minute pump with a 500-gallon tank. It was delivered in May of 1966. The pumper went out of service in September of 1987 and it was sold in February of 1988 for \$8000.00.

Potters Oil Service had at this time donated an oil truck for us to use as a tanker in September of 1966. A 1956 Ford with a 2200-gallon tank with a portable pump to pump the water off the truck. It went out of service in March of 1977.

In September of 1977, we purchased 1000 feet of 4-inch hose. This large diameter hose is designed to move more water a greater distance with less friction loss. We were one of the first departments in this area to purchase this large hose. This hose was put into service on the Mack (Old Engine 5) replacing the 2 ½-inch supply line.

Around this time, we were faced with the problem of getting funds from the town. A committee was set up by the department to do a study. Several years passed with no permanent solution. Regretfully, on March 16, 1971, the three Windham Fire Departments closed their doors to force a solution from the towns. The doors reopened on March 30, 1971 with the town agreeing to fund us until a permanent solution was found. Finally, in January of 1972, an agreement was signed and accepted.

In the fall of 1974, we started sending members to EMT classes. Three members initially attended and passed. As the years went by, more and more members attended. Currently more than half of the department are EMTs.

By 1974, we had completed renovations to our hall and bathrooms. We put in a suspended ceiling with new lighting. We also added a flagpole to the building. Mrs. Ida Mott donated a flag in the memory of her husband Chief Frank Mott on December 29, 1975.

Fundraising was still a necessity in the running of the fire department. On February 22, 1975, we ran our first bingo game. This was the start of a fundraiser that has continued to the present day.

In June of 1974, another truck committee was set up. This committee came back in February of 1975 with bids for a new Engine Tank. A 1975 GMC Chassis with a diesel engine and 5-speed transmission was accepted for \$22,360.00. The body, to be an Oren, was accepted at \$29,874.00. This had a 1000-gallon pump and a 1000-gallon booster tank. It also had a 4500-watt generator to run two 500-watt floodlights mounted on the truck. On top of this truck was mounted a deck gun. The truck was delivered in March of 1977 and put into service in April of 1977. It is still in service today. This truck was primarily paid for with money raised through bingo.

In November of 1975, we entered into a 3-way agreement with Windham Center and South Windham Fire Departments to purchase a cascade of bottles to fill our Scott air packs. The cascade is housed at North Windham Fire Department but all cost are split between the three departments.

We purchased 28 Tone Monitors, which would alert members of calls without having to rely solely on the blowing of the siren. The Willimantic Switchboard would send out tones over a radio frequency, which would open up the monitors. Dispatchers would be able to tell us the location and type of call.

On July 1, 1976, all departments changed their apparatus and officer call letters to a standard designation. All departments were assigned a Station number, which all apparatus and officer call letters had to end with that number. North Windham is assigned to be Station 2.

In May of 1978, we received a 15 KV gas generator from our Civil Defense Director to power our station. Later the same year in October, we received a 1952 Dodge 4-wheel drive to be used as a service truck. We set it up to be used for brush fires and later put on a snowplow to plow the firehouse yard. This truck is still in service. Also in October of 1978, the Civil Defense of Windham gave the Switchboard Association a house trailer to use as a command post for Search and Rescue operations. This trailer is housed at our station.

In November of 1978, the fire department applied for and was granted by the State of Connecticut a license to be R-1 Responders.

In March of 1980, we accepted bids for a Rescue truck. A 1980 GMC 1-ton chassis for \$7,778.00 and an E-ONE body for \$12,800.00. As we were waiting to take delivery of this vehicle, we purchased a 4500-watt generator, Hurst tool, O-Cutters and electric power unit. The Rescue was delivered in August and put into service on December 1, 1980. The Rescue went out of service in March of 1996 and was sold to Hampton Fire Department for \$10,000.00.

During this time, E-ONE was holding a raffle of a fire truck at the International Fire Chiefs Association gathering being held in Miami Beach, Florida. We submitted several applications and the one entered by Chief Charles Dondero was the winning application. We then took delivery of a 1979 Chevrolet C-60 Midi-Pumper for free! It had a 250-gallon pump with a 300-gallon booster tank. This truck was also put into service on December 1, 1980 and is still in service today.

More changes continued when we began the purchase of Motorola Minitor Pagers in 1981. This gave members better acknowledgement of calls by not having to depend on the siren or being at home to hear the tone monitors activate. These were portable units to carry with you but due to the cost, it took several years to get enough for all the members to have one.

In September of 1982, we started changing our large diameter hose from 4-inch to 5-inch. At that time, 5-inch hose cost was \$5.00 per foot. We replaced 500 feet that year.

In September of 1983, Kendall Corporation gave the fire department two Scott air packs with spare bottles. October of 1983, we purchased a used air compressor for filling the Scott air bottles. This cost was split between the 3 Windham departments. This compressor is housed in our station replacing the cascade system.

On September 27, 1985, Hurricane Gloria hit Connecticut. We were put on standby for a day. During that time, we were out making roads passable from falling trees. The firehouse was used as a shelter for the public. To assist the Town of Windham with clean up, we burned several large brush piles.

In June of 1986, we were able to get Coleman Bros. Carnival back as a fundraiser for the department. They set up on the Major Parcel at Jillson Square. We had the YMCA as a co-sponsor.

A new truck committee was started for a new engine. In January we ordered a 1987 GMC General Chassis with a diesel engine and an automatic transmission and an E-ONE pumper at the total cost of \$123,000.00. This engine was delivered in August of 1987. It was put in service in September with a 1500-gallon per minute pump and a 750-gallon booster tank. It is still in service today.

In 1987, our dispatch center was relocated from the Willimantic Fire Department to the Police Department in anticipation of Enhanced 911. With this new 911 system, it gives the dispatcher instant information such as the name, location and phone number of the caller. This is a great improvement and time saver when it comes to getting information and dispatching of emergency services. During this time, the phone lines that were previously used to start and stop sirens were changed to radio frequency activated.

In August of 1990, we assisted in digging out what used to be known as Goldsher's Pond on Route 203. This pond is located adjacent to North Windham School. After the pond was dug out, we installed two dry hydrants.

In September of 1990, we started a major addition to the firehouse of 22' X 138'. This addition consisted of another truck bay, new bathrooms and a small hall that we use as our non-smoking section for bingo. We added a peaked roof and a second story, which consist of a membership room, two offices and storage space. We replaced all doors and windows, also added a new septic system to accommodate the additional bathrooms. We re-wired the building and changed the lights to be more energy efficient. On the outside of the building we added Styrofoam insulation with a stucco finish. We also repaved and relined the parking lot.

In June of 1991, the Taxing District voted down our budget request. We inquired about installing an Incentive Awards Program to be funded by the district. The District Board tabled the Incentive Program and cut our budget request by 30%.

On June 20, 1992, we burned the remains of the North Windham Church as requested by the North Windham Christian Society. They gave us a donation of \$1,000.00. This church had been heavily damaged in a previous fire in 1980.

March of 1993, we purchased two Rams and additional hydraulic hoses for the Hurst Tool for a cost of \$4,000.00. In January of 1994, we replaced the old 2A Scott bottles for newer and lighter 2.2 Scotts. The cost of this upgrade was \$12,500.00. In August, we upgraded our helmets to meet with OSHA standards. We purchased 45 helmets at a cost of \$218.00 each for a total cost of \$9,810.00. We added to our department in 1995 a PDH2 Biosystems Gas Meter. The meter is designed to test for toxic gases and O2 levels in buildings.

On June 10, 1995, our department responded to Willimantic to assist them in the fighting of the fire at the Windham Mills Complex, Mill #4. We were there for approximately 24 hours and laid almost all of the hose, about 4000 feet.

On November 2, 1995, we worked with the State Fire Marshall's and Channel 3 Eyewitness News to create a documentary called "Get Out Alive". This was a live burn we created in a house at the intersection of Route 6 and Airport Rd. Reporters Dennis House and Deborah Kent were given training at the State Fire School in Windsor Locks. They went inside of the house with our firefighters while a fire was ignited and then extinguished. All of it was recorded and then aired several times on Channel 3.

October 1995, we purchased a 1996 Freightliner E-ONE Rescue body for \$200,000.00. March of 1996 had us putting a new Rescue truck in service. This new truck carries six 6,000-pound air cylinders, so that we are able to fill the Scott air bottles while on the scene of a fire. This truck has a 5-man cab and a 30-foot light tower.

May of 1997, we put an epoxy finish on the apparatus floor for the cost of \$16,000.00. This project took 5 days to complete during which we had members volunteer to stay at the station to look over the apparatus. The apparatus had to be kept outside.

In August, the First Taxing District voted to give money towards an Incentive Program for the 3 Windham Fire Departments. It's based on 20% of calls, drills, meetings and bingo's. Members would be eligible for \$150.00 per month after 30 years of service.

In July of 1997, we purchased the property next to the firehouse from the estate of Authur Tesar, who was a lifetime member of our fire department. The purchase of this property now allows room for expansion in the future if ever needed. Our Bingo fundraiser completely paid for the property for a price of \$82,000.00.

In May of 1999, we upgraded our air compressor to a new 25 C.F.M.-6000 P.S.I to fill our cascade and Scott air packs. The cost of this venture was shared between the three Windham Departments. We also worked with them to purchase a Thermal Imaging Camera. After checking into several brands and having them demonstrated, we all agreed to purchase the Scott Eagle Imager. The First Taxing District, submitting this into the budget as a separate line item, accomplished this. The Thermal camera went into service in December of 2000 on ET 102.

A donation to the department in the amount of \$5,600.00 by Pauline Fryer, allowed us to be able to purchase a starter set of High Pressure Air Bags and 1 Medium Pressure Airbags.

At this time, there is a committee set up by the First Taxing District on Tax Abatement. If passed, an active firefighter who qualifies, and meets all the criteria, would be allowed a tax break. This is still in committee at this time but we are all hopeful that it will pass thus giving the volunteer firefighters more of an incentive to remain active for an extended period of time.

We have started a committee at this time to replace ET 102, which is now 26 years old. A new engine tank would cost approximately of \$300,000.00. Hopefully, we will be able to take delivery in the summer of 2002.

In closing, we would like to mention how times have changed. Our first budget from the Town of Windham was \$50.00. Current budget 2001-2002 is \$96,400.00. **Talk about change!!!**