

The Making of Bloomington Township's Fire Department

In 1970, Bloomington Township Trustee Fred Davis had no fire department. But he saw the need for one.

Earlier that year, a task force was formed to analyze the county's fire safety needs. That fall, it proposed that Bloomington Township form its own department and locate its station at the exact center of the township, near the intersection of Whisnand Road and Old Highway 37 North.

Until then, the township – like others in Monroe County – had been served by the City of Bloomington Fire Department. But the city could dedicate only one vehicle and two firefighters to runs outside the city limits. With population growing and new housing developments springing up, that was seen as an inadequate response by Davis and his board members Lloyd Anderson, Marshall Campbell and Marion Kerr.

Under its first chief, volunteer Pete Lockhart, the Bloomington Township Volunteer Fire Department (BTVFD) went into operation at midnight on January 1, 1971. The first shift was worked by charter members Bob Parks and Bob Payne. The original department vehicles included a Ford pumper, a Chevy tanker and a Ford brush truck. It is said that the first run was interrupted by a police officer who suspected the truck might have been stolen!

The young department combined both volunteers and paid firefighters, and contracted its services to the township. At that time, BTVFD owned the equipment and wrote the paychecks. The department also contracted fire protection to Benton Township in 1971 and to Washington Township in 1972. Both those contracts remain in effect today.

Then-trustee Reverend Ernie Butler, along with his board and the volunteers, agreed on a reorganization of the department in 1972 whereby it became the Bloomington Township Fire Department, with paid firefighters coming under the direct authority of the trustee. BTVFD, also referred to as the Volunteer Association, contracted with the trustee to provide volunteer services.

When Jim Dawson became trustee in 1979, he was concerned about the need for better firefighter training. The state of Indiana had little to offer, so each summer Jim took a group of firefighters to the Texas Fire School, known for its quality of training. The goal was for all township firefighters to be professionals, whether they were paid or volunteers.

Charter member Dale Livingston, who served as a full-time firefighter for 23 years, retired in 1993. He served as fire chief from 1979 to 1986. Dale's son, Faron, followed in his dad's footsteps. After serving as a teenage volunteer, Faron joined the department in 1973. He was appointed chief by longtime trustee Jim Dawson in January 1991.

It wasn't long before the new department began garnering awards and honors. Ludger "Lu" Aubin, another of the charter members, was named Fireman of the Year in 1974 by Bloomington's Northside Exchange Club. In 1981, the Exchange Club named Chief Dale Livingston its Fireman of the Year.

The first department fatality occurred in April of 1973, when charter member Jim McHenry died in a car accident enroute to a fire scene. In his honor, the fire station was re-dedicated as the Jim McHenry Memorial Fire Station. Charter member George Ringer became the second firefighter to die in the line of duty when he suffered a heart attack on the scene of a fire in March of 1978. Fortunately, the department has not lost a firefighter in the performance of duty since that time.

During its first few years, the department only fought fires. Then in 1973, auto extrication was added to its duties when federal revenue sharing made possible the first purchase of a Hurst tool. In 1976, the department trained for standard and advanced first aid and started an EMT program. 1980 saw the first emergency medical assistance runs.

When Dale Livingston's tenure as chief ended in 1986, veteran firefighter Russell Edwards took over as chief, serving from 1986 to 1989. Russell had been instrumental, along with Faron and trustee Jim Dawson, in establishing the department's HazMat capability beginning in 1982. Russell, Faron and Dave Headley were the first three members of the department to certify as HazMat technicians. Around this time, the department officially became the Bloomington Township Department of Fire and Emergency Services, reflecting the fact that EMS and HazMat had been added to the original firefighting duties.

In 1982, Jim Dawson and the township board approved and built a satellite facility --Station 15 -- on West Vernal Pike on the northwest side of Bloomington, next door to the trustee office. Its location made possible a more rapid response in the western part of the township.

From its beginnings in 1971 through 2000, department headquarters was housed in a small building at 5081 North Old Highway 37. The land parcel on which it stands was purchased by the township in June 1970. During those 30 years, on-site expansion included the erection of a pole barn for storage and small vehicles, an addition to the west side of the main building, and the first elements of an outdoor training academy. An adjacent parcel of land for the academy was purchased in October 1988.

The department became the first of the rural departments in Monroe County to purchase a Quint fire truck in 1998. It is so-called because of its five major equipment functions: water tank, pumps, aerial ladder, ground ladders and hose.

In 2001, under the guidance of then-trustee Nancy Brinegar, board members Bill Sturbaum, Ben Bruce and Barbara McKinney, and Chief Faron Livingston, a major expansion and renovation of the headquarters was undertaken. That project quadrupled the square footage of the facility, erected a greatly expanded new vehicle bay, and added sleeping, fitness, training and recreational areas for the 24-hour firefighters. Then, in 2002, the department *as a whole* was designated the Northside Exchange Club's "Firefighter of the Year." Also during Brinegar's tenure, Station 15 was enlarged and renovated.

Throughout the past decade, the department has continued to conduct training and acquire equipment to strengthen its HazMat expertise. Since 1990, the department has been the Regional Response Team for a seven-county area for hazardous-material spills and investigations. Other area departments may identify and contain such spills, but only our department has certified personnel and equipment to render the scene safe of toxic materials.

Since 2001, the renovated station has boasted a modern training classroom which can accommodate up to 45 students at a time. Equally important to the department's training mission were two more of Nancy Brinegar's initiatives as trustee. In 2006 a flashover chamber was installed. A year later, an entire new multi-scenario training field had been constructed, along with a three-story 'burn building' with a reinforced roof for rappelling exercises. All these improvements enhanced the quality of training for our own firefighters, as well as other area firefighters.

In 2007, Chief Livingston received the Exchange Club's newly-created Lifetime of Service award. Faron shared the award that year with Tim Deekard of the Van Buren Township fire department.

Brinegar retired in 2008, and her deputy, Linda Sievers, was elected trustee. Under the leadership of Sievers and board members Dawn Allen, Barbara McKinney and Bill Sturbaum, the department has weathered the economic crisis, has maintained equipment and personnel levels and has replaced vital response vehicles. Sievers, along with her management team of Chief Livingston, Assistant Chief Joel Bomgardner and Deputy Trustee Allan Murphy is now creating a long-term master plan. Bomgardner's grant-writing expertise has brought many thousands of dollars into the department to fund equipment, apparatus and training materials, sparing taxpayers those expenses.

The department's award-winning ways have continued during this time. Firefighter Clay Edwards, who serves as personal fitness trainer for the department, was named Local Firefighter of the Year by the Northside Exchange Club in 2009 for a water rescue he performed while off duty. Chief Livingston was named the American Legion's Firefighter of the Year for District 7 in 2009, and then beat out all other nominees to be named State of Indiana Firefighter of the Year.

All in all, Bloomington Township Department of Fire and Emergency Services has a distinguished history which is still unfolding. The department is justifiably proud of its past, and optimistic about its future ability to provide reliable, professional emergency service to the community.