

White River Fire Department, a History in Review

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In January 1952, residents of the Smith's Valley area united to form a group known as the "Smith Valley Community Center". One of the primary functions of this group was to organize and maintain adequate fire protection for the community. The group then purchased a 1937 GMC fire truck, and in April began protecting the area. Between April of 1952 and November of 1953, the community responded to 15 calls. November of 1953 also brought change to the newly formed group, as a proposal was passed to segregate the fire department from the community center. With a membership roster of 28, and \$197.30 in their bank account, The Smith Valley Volunteer Fire Department was formed.

April of 1955 brought the first official contract providing fire protection services to the people of White River Township. The contract, formed between the White River Township Trustee Maurice Paddock, and the Smith Valley Fire Chief, Joe Porter, negotiated payment for services rendered in the amount of \$2.50 for the first hour and \$1.50 for each additional hour for all firemen engaged in each run. Each run was to receive payment of at least \$10.00.

At a regularly scheduled board meeting in July of 1956, the Smith Valley Community Center voted to permit the fire department to operate fully independent from the community center. The official date of incorporation was July 2nd, 1956, and the fire department became known as the White River Township Volunteer Fire Department Inc.

Thirty-seven members of the newly formed department began 1957 with a budget of \$2,718.96. They responded to a total 24 calls that year, built a fire station, and were able to raise \$3850.00 to purchase and build their first new fire truck under the new White River name. The department purchased a 1954 Dodge Chassis and members of the department made many repairs and built the body of the truck to fit their needs.

By 1962 the call volume was up to 30 runs, the membership roster up to 44, and the snow was deep. After a late February snowfall, most roads in the county were impassable. Firefighters Robert Kelso and Edward Hinkle reportedly worked better than 24 hours with bulldozers that they had borrowed, clearing snow from roads in Smith Valley, Mt. Pleasant, Bluff Creek, State Road 135 and even Highway 31, so that people could return home from the High School sectional games at Whiteland. Later that year, the mortgage for the fire station on Runyon Road was paid in full. At that time the building was valued at over \$3,000.00

Many records and files from 1963 to 1976 were damaged or destroyed in 1998. Many newspaper articles and photographs survived, however all statistical data and meeting minutes are forever gone.

The year 1977 came with dramatic increases in the number of fire and medical calls. Following a steady increase in the number of runs since 1970, the department saw a dramatic jump of 75% in the number of emergency calls. Larry Robinson stated that he foresees as the Township grows and changes, the Fire Department will be charged with providing a different grade of fire protection. But while the need for services at that time was fast growing, the mechanism for increasing funding was not available and the Department was facing a crisis. Faced with a tax levy frozen at its 1972 level, other means of income were implemented to raise money and fund the departments operation. The operating budget in 1981 was up to \$63,500 and nearly half of this money came from fund raising efforts, or donations.

In 1986 the department responded to 420 calls with a membership roster of 24. One of the most remembered calls that year was the March tornado strike, which left extensive damage across the area. On October the 8th of that year, the White River Fire Protection District was formed, protecting the boundaries from further annexation, and they established budget needs for the growing department. The following year brought a few more volunteers to the department and the Fish Fry was noted as being "a success!" The budget was around \$300,000 and there were a total of 485 calls for the year 1987.

A lot of growth occurred from 1987 through 1997. The department began paying volunteers to work stand-by at the station, built a second station at Fairview and Meridian Parke Drive, re-furbished and replaced several pieces of equipment, remodeled the station on Runyon Road to accommodate the rapidly growing department, and hired the first full time paid Fire Chief. 1997 took the fire department world-wide with the creation of a fire department web site. With just a few clicks, the world could now visit the White River Township Fire Department through the comfort of their home computers. The Fire Protection District Board assumed ownership of all stations and vehicles that year, freeing up money for the Fire Department to hire and train new firefighters. Paramedic service was also started by placing medics on first responding apparatus. This made a big impact in the higher level of medical care the citizens of the community were receiving, and it continues to improve daily. In 1997, protecting a population of 30,000 residents with 80 members and a budget of \$709,140.00, the White River Township Volunteer Fire Department responded to 1,210 emergency calls.

Since 1997, only ten short years ago, the White River Township Fire Department has grown drastically to keep up with the rapid growth of the community. The Volunteer Corporation dissolved in 2004, and all firefighters are now employed by the fire protection district.

We are now protecting a community of nearly 45,000 residents and answer more than 2000 emergency calls. I would like to make note of the efforts Bob Wehrman had in getting fire hydrants in our area and beginning the

reduction of tax rate for the community. At that time, our ISO fire rating dropped from a ten to a seven and now our rating is at a three.

The White River Township Fire Department currently employs 105 personnel with 37 of those being full time. Our inventory of more than 20 vehicles includes a ladder Truck, 4 pumpers, a pumper/tanker, brush fire truck, heavy rescue, tactical support unit, various other support units, and staff cars. We operate with at least 16 personnel on a shift and an administrative staff of 10. The operating budget is now more than five million dollars.

Next month we will be retiring the station on Runyon Road that has served us well for the past 50 years, and will move to a new station at Olive Branch and State Road 135. Our fleet is constantly growing and changing as the needs of the community call for us to respond to many different situations never faced before. Today we will be placing a new Engine 53 into active service. We would like for all of our members past and present to be a part of this dedication.

Lt. Col. James Doolittle once said, "There is nothing stronger than the heart of a volunteer." We would not be where we are today had it not been for all of the hard work, sacrifice, and dedication that all those before us have given to the White River Township Fire Department. We also extend a special thank you to the families who have stood behind us along the way.

We truly are charged with providing a different grade of fire protection.