

From the Past...

The History of Lakes Region Mutual Fire Aid

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IN THE BEGINNING...

In the early 1950s, many New Hampshire fire departments were recognizing the need — and the advantages — of combining their resources. Most fire departments were staffed by volunteers and community funding for equipment varied widely between towns. Small towns were not equipped to handle a major fire on their own.

Discussion began about forming mutual aid associations throughout the state, including the Lakes Region. The first meeting of what would come to be known as the Lakes Region Mutual Fire Aid Association was held on March 28, 1951 at the Winnisquam Fire Department. Merle Sargent was made the temporary president, with A.S. Francis selected as the temporary secretary and treasurer. Meetings would be held on the last Thursday of the month at various

locations. Funding was through voluntary collections at each meeting! The expenses of the first meeting totaled 82 cents. After a collection totaling \$6.50, it left a balance on hand of \$5.68.

The early bylaws of the organization, created on May 31, 1951, stated “The purpose shall be to promote cooperation between the member departments in the extinguishing of fires and saving property in the communities in the Lakes Region.” Membership would be open to any community that had accepted the state mutual aid law or to any community who later voted to accept it. Expenses would be met through voluntary contributions. Also discussed at the May meeting was the major reason for forming a mutual aid association: an inventory of equipment available.

It wasn't many months before annual dues were being discussed.

By October 25, 1951, the cash on hand had dwindled to \$1.82. At the October meeting, it was decided to institute dues of \$16.00 per annum.

Late in 1951 maps began to be organized and assembled to create a comprehensive overview of the area. Towns began talk-

ing about how they would respond to their neighboring towns and discussions were begun regarding radios.

In March of 1953, the first official slate of officers was elected: Chief Chester Brickett, Winnisquam, president; Chief Boomhower, vice president; and Gus Francis, secretary/treasurer.

Through the years discussions were held at meetings to address issues such as cars following or interfering with fire apparatus; dealing with insubordinate volunteers; keeping maps and contact information up to date; getting folks off party telephone lines during a fire emergency; and pumps freezing up in the winter. Some of these items continue to be discussed, fifty-four years later! Funding for items such as radios and apparatus were also ongoing topics for discussion — and continues to be.

Minutes from the 1950s reflect a different lifestyle. Each year, an evening was set aside as “ladies” night. Cost for an evening of dinner and dancing in 1956 was \$2.50! Movies and slide shows on topics such as fishing and travel were routinely shown after meetings. Training videos were also watched.

It wasn't until May 1956 that enough maps were finally turned in to create a master map! In some cases, people had to wait until mud season was over to retrieve maps. Jokes were made about the amount of paper amassed by the map committee and every now and again, maps got lost only to resurface a few months later. Creating a master map was a monumental task then and keeping maps up to date



**Dispatch was located in Laco-
nia Central Station until the
early 70s. If you know who this
is, please send the informa-
tion to debbiek@lrmfa.org and
we'll publish it in the next
issue.**

remains a sizeable job even now in the electronic age.

Radio traffic became problematic with each department having radios and firefighters not identifying themselves when speaking on the air. Calls from as far away as California could be picked up and confusion sometimes reigned supreme! Procedures were put in place to avoid this problem.

THE 1960s

LRMFA began the 60s with \$226.59 in its savings account. Dues to the Federation of Fire Mutual Aid Associations of New Hampshire continued to be \$16.00 per year. Work was continuing on obtaining lower insurance rates for member communities by proving to insurance companies the value of tankers. This work went on through the 60s, with some success being noted by early 1968. Decals denoting membership in LRMFA continued to be sold.

The February 25, 1960 minutes contain the first mention of the

“gated Y” system, otherwise known as “the rural hitch.” Training on this was offered at the Glendale docks on Sunday, March 20, 1960.

Throughout late winter and early spring 1960, the system was instituted throughout LRMFA.

The Association continued its battle to secure funding for a permanent fire training school at Lily Pond. In the meantime, volunteers began clearing the land with the help of an Army bulldozer. The first drill session was held on the site on Sunday, October 30, 1960 at 2 p.m. Instruction on hose laying, pumping, and oil fires was planned.

Color coding of equipment was instituted to make it easier to sort out hose, pumps, etc. after a mutual aid call. This had been under discussion for a number of years and the size of the Association had finally reached the point where something needed to be done.

In March, 1961, the Frequency Committee began the arduous task of getting communication between communities in sync. The committee was directed to go before the

county delegation and request \$5,000 to be used to place a transmitter on Mt. Belknap, with a base station to be installed at Laconia Central Station.

In May, 1961, Sandwich was accepted into Lakes Region Mutual Fire Aid. Also in May, spring training was held. About 50 men attended, averaging three men from each department. It was considered a poor showing and it was hoped in the future that more chiefs insist their “Indians” attend training! Later fire training sessions had better attendance, with 136 firemen receiving certificates at the end of their classes in 1962 and 235 in 1967.

Through 1961, work continued on the Lily Pond fire training site, while work toward obtaining state funding stalled. Work also began on the Mt. Belknap tower site. New England Tel. & Tel. and Public Service both gave permission to string cable on their poles. Clearance for the frequency was obtained, wire purchased to run up the mountain, and a building procured. As the



Fire fighting apparatus circa 1950. Most trucks in this area were equipped by Farrar, a manufacturer of fire trucks in the forties and fifties. These used an International chassis.



Groundbreaking ceremonies at Lily Pond Fire Training School, early 60s.

summer progressed, funding for the transmission site also stalled.

Discussions were held about mutual aid calls. Apparently, some towns still were not utilizing the mutual aid dispatch center but calling adjoining departments directly when help was needed. And, some departments were hesitant to ask for help. Eventually, a procedure was drafted and sent to all member departments.

It was during the 60s that procedures were put in place regarding forest fires and who would call for mutual aid and how.

By fall of 1962, the tower on Belknap was functional and, after testing, it was determined there would be no further problems getting messages between departments. Communication had been an ongoing problem through the years and this was the first step in creating the extensive system in place today. It was during the 60s that regular radio checks were begun. Throughout the 60s, numerous repairs and adjustments were made to the tower on Belknap.

Wires broke, access was impeded by the weather, electrical storms wreaked havoc, updates had to be made, and new cable laid.

An appropriation of \$35,000 was finally received from the state for the Lily Pond Fire School. Plans had moved forward on a building design and, once a contractor could be selected, work would begin. It had been a long wait. In September, 1963, another problem cropped up: The city of Laconia decided it didn't want to part with some of the land already cleared for the fire school and wanted to keep it for industrial development. The remainder of the land was not enough and another ten acres would be needed.

The Association continued to add training apparatus through the years, which made the construction of a building to house everything necessary. In 1969, preliminary planning began to plan and finance the project. The committee in charge looked into obtaining a large Quonset hut from government surplus.

Other changes made in 1964 included new running orders. New roads, including Interstate 93, Route 104, and the Laconia Bypass had forced the Association to take another look at the mutual aid system. Numerous changes were instituted.

It was late in 1966 when a suggestion was made to record incoming and outgoing conversations at the dispatch center located at Laconia Fire Department. Evidently there had been some ongoing problems and it was felt this might be the best way to resolve them. Research was done and an expenditure of \$1,300 approved to purchase a "magnetic recording system." However, funding could not be found and in March of 1969, an arrangement was made with New England Telephone to install a tape recorder at the central dispatch office for \$25.00 per month.

In 1968, an encoder was ordered with eight tones. Each town using a tone alert would be billed \$11.00 for their portion of the added expense. Just a year later, a



September 25, 1965. Unknown ceremony at Fire Training. Left to right: a Selectman from Gifford, Oscar Prescott, Basil Broadhurst, Edith Gardner, Merle Sargent, Ollie Hewitt, Almond Watson, Lorraine Rogers, and Audrey Robinson.

larger encoder had to be ordered and shortly after that, another radio frequency had to be added. 1969 ended with a discussion about departments not using proper radio procedure — an issue that continues to this day.

THE 1970s

The Association held its first meeting of 1970 at the Ashland Fire Station. The balance on hand was \$2,421.26. It was decided to purchase three Quonset huts for the training grounds at a cost of \$200.00 each. They were located near Hartford, CT and would have to be taken apart and moved. This project was undertaken April 14, 1970 at a final cost of \$730.00, which included rooms, supplies, truck, tolls, food, gas, etc. Once the buildings were moved to Lily Pond, a committee was appointed to rebuild them. In October 1970, it was reported the committee had gone deer hunting but they prom-

ised to have the foundations installed by winter! However, things didn't go as planned as proven by a note in the May, 1971 minutes, where the committee promises (yet again!) to have foundations in by June. The secretary states, "Sounds like the committee is finally done fooling around and going to get the buildings set up."

The fire school continued to be a major undertaking each year, having grown from a one-day affair to two days. The committee was enlarged and more time was needed each year to plan, staff, and "sell" the school to various departments in the area. As early as June, it was decided the committee had to be further enlarged because the fire school was so well attended.

Work on the site continued through the 70s, with various buildings being erected, drainage dug, and equipment added. Insurance began to be an issue — both insuring the firefighters training and the bystanders. In 1973, a policy for

\$100,000 personnel and \$10,000 property damage cost \$25.00!

Late in 1970, conversations were continuing regarding a central dispatch center. Laconia would be building a new fire station but the location still had not been announced. Studies had been done about equipping a new dispatch center and it was estimated the cost for the first year would be around \$74,000. This figure included new equipment. The number was later reduced to around \$50,000 because the center would not operate for a full twelve months during its first year. The Dispatch System was given approval in March, 1971 to locate in the Belknap County Court House basement. In April, 1971, Clifton "Kip" Hawkins of Holderness became the Coordinator.

Bomb scares became a concern in the early 70s and a great deal of discussion and training was centered around the problem.

In March, 1971, changes were made to the Bylaws, specifically

Articles IV and V. That same month, both Bristol and Plymouth resigned from the Association. Later in that same year, Hill resigned from the Association.

The May, 1971 minutes mention, for the first time, the motorcycles that would be around during the weekend of June 11 and the extra manpower that would be needed. Safety precautions were increased each year as problems with motorcycle weekend escalated. Fire departments were warned to keep tools (potential weapons) locked up and to stay with charged hoses. Firefighters were asked to respond to an incident on the apparatus — not in their personal vehicles.

Also, for the first time, the number 524-1545 appeared in the phone directory and on fire stickers that arrived in June of 1971. That number is still in use today and is one of five emergency lines coming into the Communications Center.

The “new” Dispatch Center, located at the Court House, went into operation on Monday, September 20, 1971, with an Open House being held on October 9th and 10th. Insurance rate classifications hinged on the center having a standby generator, which was not in the current county budget. A motion was made and passed that Lakes Region Mutual Fire Aid advance the money for the generator. Assurances were made that the cost would be reimbursed by the county when their next budget cycle went through. Once the generator was installed, insurance rates throughout the area were adjusted and continued to be adjusted through the years as the system modernized and expanded. Interdepartment trainings began to be held regularly in order to keep insurance rates down.

Barnstead Parade joined the Association in November 1971. Franklin waffled on membership in early 1972, with the City Council voting to leave but then deciding to



Piper Hill Road fire, Center Harbor, March 29, 1973.

discuss the issue again the next month. Eventually, Franklin Fire Dept. left the Association. Hill rejoined the Association in March 1972. Waterville Valley joined in October 1972. New Durham joined in March 1974. Center Barnstead joined on December 1, 1976. Bridgewater became the 21st town to become a member on March 29, 1979.

In April 1972, the Association voted to raise the fire school registration fee to \$5.00 per man, effective May 1973. Meadowwood Fire School (in Fitzwilliam) had raised their fees and still managed to have 1,200 men at a recent training.

During the early 70s, the cascade system of filling air tanks was introduced. A committee called the “Hot Air Committee” kept departments up-to-date on procedures. It was reported the Hot Air Committee didn’t particularly like their name, but it stuck and appeared throughout the minutes for the next year or so!

An interesting note: The program at the June 27, 1974 meeting was presented by Niels Nielson, Jr. Nielson was a construction superintendent who took part in the annual inspections and repair trips to New Hampshire’s “Old Man of the Mountains.” The title of his talk: “How Long Will the Old Man Last?” We now know the answer to that question.

In September 1974, Association President Thompson reported that the Federal government would not turn the fire school buildings and property over to the Association, even though the Association had invested a great deal of time and money in the project. The government did say the Association could continue to use the site as needed. At this point, it was suggested that no new facilities be erected until a long-range plan was put in place. A ten-man committee was appointed to study the school’s past operation and make plans for the future.

May 29, 1975 was earmarked as "Austin Barlow Night." Barlow, secretary/treasurer for twenty-one years, had retired and his service was celebrated with a plaque, dinner, singing, and the gift of a two-week trip anywhere in the world for him and his wife! The trip would be paid for by the Association, up to \$1,500 and could be taken any time within the next year.

Throughout 1974 and into 1975, major renovations were done on the Dispatch Center at the Belknap County Courthouse. Fire dispatch services were combined with the Sheriff's Department dispatch, resulting in some unanticipated problems needing resolution. Computers were installed and a great deal of time and effort was needed to input the detailed information necessary for operation.

Late in the 70s, much-needed repairs were undertaken on the radio building on Belknap. As usual, work was done on a volunteer basis. A new roof was installed and

the walls strengthened to handle winter snow loads.

The June 30, 1977 meeting was held in Meredith. It was the 263rd meeting of the Association. It was reported the fire school was a great success and, on motion, the Fire School Committee was given permission to expend the profits from the fire school on projects for the fire school.

However, the sad state of the Fire Dispatch budget was also a topic of discussion. There was worry about running out of money before running out of year. Discussion ensued and it was generally agreed that corners would be cut where possible but all were tired of running a "hand-to-mouth" operation.

Early in 1978 contracts were signed and licenses applied for, for the radio link on Mt. Tecumseh. It was hoped everything would be installed within three months. The Forest Service was interested in joining in the effort and offered solar power if they could partner with the Association.

Throughout the 70s, David Huot was the secretary/ treasurer. His minutes were frequently quite amusing and made the job of amassing this history much less tedious. One set of minutes, September 28, 1978, were particularly amusing as they offered a running commentary on a water leak from a standpipe in the New Hampton Fire Station. At one point, the secretary offered his apologies for the sketchy minutes but he was "finding it difficult to keep his pad, pencil, and head above water all at the same time." After the evening's business meeting and program, all partook of an "excellent lunch served by the New Hampton Fire Department in a section of the building which had been sand-bagged."

The Association Bylaws were again revised in early 1979. In April, 1979, David Huot, who had been general counsel and secretary/treasurer of the Association, announced he could no longer con-

Winnisquam House fire, Route 3/Laconia Road, early Summer 1972.



tinue as counsel as he had been appointed to be Justice of the Laconia District Court.

THE 1980s

The Association began the 80s decade with a balance of \$12,323.47 — substantially more than it began the 70s with! However, in ten years, all costs associated with operations had increased — and continues to increase to this day.

The Bylaws were again revised, this time to allow the secretary/ treasurer position to be separated into two positions. David Huot, who had been secretary/treasurer for quite some time, spoke in favor of separating the jobs. He subsequently ended up as secretary again!

Attendance at Association meetings had declined through the years so, once again, a push was on to build interest and participation. Member departments were encouraged to avoid scheduling conflicts with Association meetings and member chiefs were asked to urge their personnel to attend meetings.

Early in the 80s, the radio building on top of Belknap was replaced. A new antenna was also placed on the mountain.

For years there had been discussion about building a structure house at the fire school and the time had now arrived to replace the burn pits. The Association still had not been able to make arrangements with the State and Federal government for long-term control over the site and was hesitant to invest any more into it without the guarantee of either ownership or a long-term lease.

The Association continued to coordinate controlled/training burns. In addition, the cascade system was expanded and made available to departments within the Association. In January, 1982, it was reported that changes made to the compressor were complete and it would not be necessary to reactivate the “Hot Air Committee.” Later in the year, as the compressor continued to overheat due to its placement in the Laconia Central Station, the “Hot Air Committee” did have to be reactivated. They were directed to find a better location for the compressor. Several months later, the system was moved to the Gilford Central Station. Shortly after the move, a high-pressure engineer inspected the equipment and it was discovered it was not in very good shape. Work began to replace it.

The State, in its infinite wisdom, decided in April of 1982 to cut funding for fire towers. The Association secretary was directed to prepare a letter and press release indicating its opposition to this move. Later, after the budget was cut, the secretary was directed to

send a letter to the Governor asking him to prohibit forest fires!

“The Rural Hitch” appeared briefly in the early 80s. Repeated requests for information fell on deaf ears and it “went out of business.” It is hoped the current “Hitch” will last longer!

Unvented space heaters became a “hot” issue in the early 80s. The market for these heaters had taken off and time and again, they were proven to be dangerous. The Association continued to educate the public about them, as well as the legislators in Concord.

In February, 1983, the Association adopted a Scholarship Policy and a Scholarship committee was appointed. The first scholarship, in the amount of \$500, was awarded to Kerry Bickford of Gilmanton Iron Works. Bickford planned to take the Paramedic Program at the Technical Institute in Concord.

East Andover joined the Association in March, 1983.

Also during the 80s, new sites were tested for transmitter use throughout the region. As the Association grew, so did the need for transmitters. New Hampshire’s mountains made communication difficult in many areas.

In October of 1984, changes were made to both the Bylaws and the Constitution.

Late in 1984, the State began the process of reorganizing the executive branch of government. Part of the proposed changes included putting the Fire Marshal’s office and State Fire Service Training under the control of the Department of Safety. The Association was not in favor of this change and would recommend to the Governor that the Fire Marshall work under the Attorney General. Association members were asked to write letters to their legislators concerning this issue. A hearing was held on March 28, 1985, which was filled with firefighters! All of the lobbying and gentle arm-twisting paid off: the Fire Service Minimum Training Standards Commission was moved to the Department of Post-Secondary Education and would remain fully autonomous; the Fire Marshal’s Office would become part of the Division of Safety Services; and the Board of Fire Control was kept intact.

Through the years, there had been many discussions about radio procedures, overuse of radios, and licensing. Firefighters were constantly reminded they needed licenses in order to keep radios in their vehicles. An ongoing problem was the unnecessary chatter during emergencies. At one point, it was suggested that “self-discipline in not using the radio just to hear your self talk” could be the solution to the problem!

In March 1985, the summer fire school was almost discontinued. Interest had been dropping and the Fire School Committee had met with a lack of input from member towns as to what they wanted to see offered. A motion was made at the March meeting to discontinue

the school, but it did not pass — leaving the committee with little time to pull the school together. The summer Fire School did occur, but lost money. It was later decided there would be no winter or spring Fire School. Recent schools had lost money, the liability insurance had been cancelled, and support from member towns was waning. The School would begin to concentrate on smaller, local training sessions that would be more specialized.

At the same March meeting, Hebron, Groton, Bristol, and Andover were accepted into the system. Later in 1985, Franklin was voted in as a member of the system.

A motion was also made at the March meeting to begin republishing *The Rural Hitch*. It was noted that news needed to be forthcoming from member towns in

order for it to be successful — something that remains true to this day.

Midway through 1985 the Radio Committee reported that the radio on Mt. Belknap and the console in the Dispatch Center were obsolete and should be replaced. The cost to do so: between \$20,000 and \$25,000. The issue was passed along to the Board of Directors as it appeared money would need to be borrowed to make the upgrades. Later in that same year, the Board approved the upgrades.

From this point forward, the minutes have disappeared! If anyone has copies, I would love to borrow them in order to finish the history. Please contact me, Debbie Kardaseski, at LRMFA: 528-9111 on Wednesdays or email me at debbiek@lrmfa.org.



A view of the Communications Center in 2012.