

SUMMARY

In this documentary, Charles Thompson, shares his memories of the Wilmot Fire Department. This interview was recorded in two segments: one on October 23, 2020, and one on April 30, 2021, by Wilmot Historical Society board members Judy Hauck, Lindy Heim, and Fred Ögmundson. They spoke with Charles at his home on Cross Hill Road in Wilmot, New Hampshire. Charles' sister Liz Kirby was part of the interview.

The Wilmot Fire Department - transcript

Fred: Charles, will you tell us about two things that I know were very important in your family—that was the fire department and the church in Wilmot Flat.

Charles: Yes, there were two large, not large institutions but very important institutions. I think that the Historical Society has somewhere a picture of the group of men—who got together to start the fire department: Henry Rayno, John Rayno, Wilfred Nye, Howard Atwood, our father (Arthur Thompson), Arthur Clark; they're all in that picture.

There are some great people there that I remember because they were around the fire department for many years and they built a fire station, just opposite the Emons house, known as Deep Well Farm, which is at the corner of Campground Road and Village Road, behind the Post Office. It is now a residence, having been replaced by a new and larger Station on Route 11.

That fire station, as was true of the church, was built with lumber donated by the Thompson family from the fountain woodland on Cross Hill Road. You know the timbers, the sheathing, the two by fours, and everything came from here.

At one time, very early on, they had a fire truck. The first honest-to-goodness fire truck was a used American LaFrance, and it was quite a fire truck. It had, I don't know, six or maybe more big cylinders, and I never knew what happened to that. I just vaguely remember it, but I've heard stories about it.

But as years went on, fire trucks were constructed out of used oil trucks, oil delivery trucks that we see around today. But they were much older. And they had big tanks on the back and have been converted with pumps. And they were old trucks, and they were used. They came from who knows where. There might have been a fire.....it might have been a fire truck used in some other town somewhere, which had already been converted from being an oil truck. They weren't used very often fortunately, since we didn't have many fires.

Proctor Academy had a fire truck and the Proctor students, the Proctor boys, they were called because they were high school age, probably got great enjoyment and excitement out of jumping on their fire truck and going to a fire—a forest fire. They were very good. They had some training, and they had tools. They had an open fire truck. It had no roof or anything, it was a vintage machine, and they'd roll up and grab their tools and go out and work on the fire. I'm sure it's been years and years since that happened, but that was part of the firefighting capability of the area at the time.

There were several big fires over the years. The churches of course, the hotel on Mount Kearsarge, and the Methodist Church in Wilmot Center [and the Baptist Church in Wilmot Flat].

There weren't a lot of volunteers around because a lot of them were craftsmen who built houses and worked out of town, but there were enough people to keep it going. They had meetings one night a week. They had raffles to earn money to meet expenses.

At the fire department meetings when the meeting was over, there was a card game. I mean I think it was the card players couldn't wait till the meeting was over so they could play a little poker. But we didn't stick around for that. My father was nothe didn't drink; he didn't smoke; he didn't play poker; he didn't gamble; he didn't believe in any of those things. And so, we would get up from the meeting and walk home.

The late 1990s, early 2000s, the town, again through volunteers, built the new fire station on Route 11. There were new fire trucks. There're no more converted oil trucks. These are all state-of-the-art custom-built fire trucks. And we have a very active volunteer department that provides a tremendous service to the town of Wilmot. And they have breakfasts from time to time.

They also had a dance every Saturday night over at the Town Hall. It was square- dances, called by Wilbur Grace and his band, and they were highly attended. Very popular, and the town hall floor got a good workout at those square-dances. And they did some round dancing also. And there was usually a fireman's picnic in the fall up at Kearsarge - Winslow State Park², where all the families got together and enjoyed that..

One of the biggest fire problems we had was, frankly, was the town dump. Because people would go and dump their rubbish there but maybe didn't want everybody to know what their lives consisted of so they'd touch a match to it, and of course the fire took off, and so the big fire whistle would go off down there or a phone would ring, probably, that the dump was on fire.

My father would drop everything, and I was, at that point in time, eight or nine or ten, and we didn't have any transportation. So, we'd run down the two miles to the fire station. And since most of the members worked out of town, we got the truck down to the dump and poured water on it.

We had two dumps that I remember. One was out behind the Sliter's son's house and in fact their son's house is basically adjacent to where the dump was on Campground Road. And there was a winding road to get in, until finally they built the road that is now the driveway to the Sliter's son's house. That was there for quite a while.

And we had fires there, and then it was down at the transfer station [the site of the current transfers station used to be the old dump], and there were fires there. And then the town went into a co-op and residents took their rubbish down to, I think, Andover for quite a while. And then we came back to [what is now] our transfer station. And that's when we went from dump to transfer station—obviously for environmental reasons.

They [the expenses for operating the Fire Department] reached the point where the town was appropriating money to support the fire department, because they couldn't raise enough money for what they needed, and the town was growing, and it was necessary to get another truck and newer trucks and more reliable equipment. So, the new station¹ was built in the late 1990s, I think 1990s. I think it was. and it's grown enormously – modern equipment and so forth. So, it's come a long way.

Liz: Were there any forest fires during that time frame?

Charles: There were forest fires during that time frame. Some were distant that we could see from where we lived: the top of Mount Sunapee, the top of Corbin Park over in Grantham and Croydon. But there was also a fire probably around 1952, '51, '52 somewhere there. Ernest Patten was logging the Vikre land over between Cross Hill Road and Route 4A. And there was no real reason why he would have started the fire. It was in the springtime, when the ground was dry and the leaves were dry, but he was logging with horses and a wooden scoot. So, there was no real instance where there'd have been a spark or something like that. Now whether somebody threw a cigarette or dumped their pipe ashes out, who knows. But it burned about a quarter to a half of an acre right over the property boundary between the Thompson property and the Vikre property. And today, this day, you could go out there to that spot and still see the scars at the butts of those beech trees that are growing where this fire burned into the roots and up into the stumps of the trees and made a big scar and a hollow in the tree, and you can

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tell which direction the fire was going because that's the side that has the burn hole there. And you can stand and see one and look around and see others facing you from where it'd been.

Liz: The medical services that they provide have really expanded over the years from what I understand also. Is that right?

Charles: That's true. In fact, some of the firefighters have suggested that the Wilmot Fire Department is really Wilmot Fire and Rescue, because they have the FAST Squad [First Aid Stabilization Team], that has the capability of transport and also of immediate care to make sure a patient who is in some medical emergency in town is cared for until professional medical help can come in the form of an ambulance. Usually that's where it works, or a doctor. But they have a very well-equipped truck, a nice piece of equipment, and people who have formal EMT training. And it's again another important aspect of the department.

Liz: Thank you very much. Wilmot is a really amazing town in many, many, ways. It's retained its vintage personality, but it has kept up with the times and provides the services that could not be equal anywhere else in a town of this size.