

First Forest Fire Claims 100 Acres

From Staff Reports

The first forest fire of the spring burned out of control in the rugged Little Laurel section of Madison County for nearly a day before being contained by firefighters early Wednesday.

The fire — caused by a downed power line, fed by dry timberland and fanned by high winds — claimed an estimated 100 acres of land before firefighters could bring the blaze under control.

Most of the burned land is privately owned, although several acres of the Pisgah National Forest were charred by the fire, according to forest service officials at the scene.

The fire was still burning Wednesday afternoon, and crews from the U.S. Forest Service, N.C. Forest Service and Madison County fire departments remained in the Little Laurel area Wednesday afternoon.

"We can't officially call it contained until after we complete the burn-out operation," said Ron Lintz, deputy resource assistant with the U.S. Forest Service. "We've still got some hollows that are burning."

About 100 firefighters responded to

the blaze, including helicopter crews, three airplane tankers and a bulldozer unit, according to officials. Some 35 remained at the scene early Wednesday afternoon.

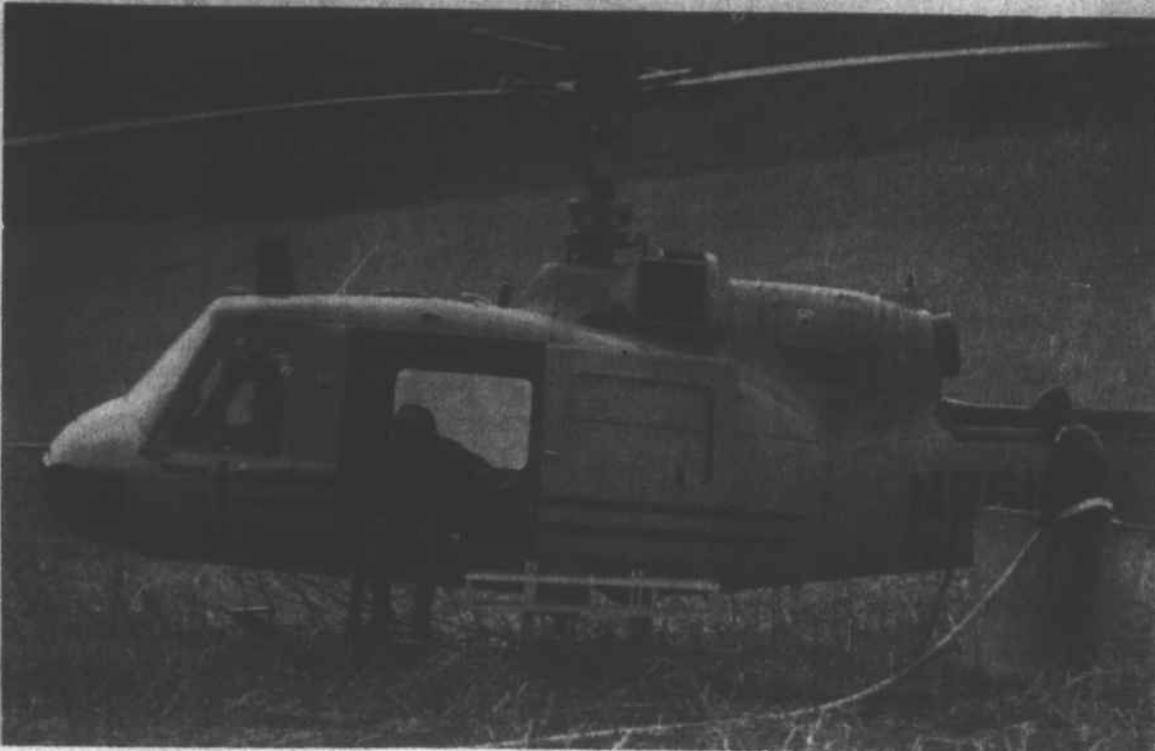
Forest Ranger Tony Webb, stationed in Madison County, said the fire began from electrical sparks caused when a tree fell across an elec-

trical power line Tuesday morning.

"A white pine fell on a power line, and the wind just fanned it," Webb said. "We've estimated that just over 100 acres have been burned."

Ranger Bill Leatherwood got the fire call at 10:50 a.m. Tuesday, and

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PHOTOS BY LOU ZELLER

'Copters Battle Blaze

Helicopter crews helped fight a forest fire in Madison County on Tuesday, dumping large buckets of water on the "hot spots." Above, workers fill the buckets with water while the helicopter pilot readies for takeoff. Left, the

helicopter leaves with its load. About 100 acres, including land in the Pisgah National Forest, burned before firefighters could bring the blaze under control.

Hot Springs Chief Of Police Disappears

By BILL STUDENC Editor

John Barrett, controversial police chief of Hot Springs, left town unannounced last Wednesday, leaving municipal officials scratching their heads about the unexpected disappearance of the town's highest ranking law enforcement officer.

"He just left and said he would never be back," Hot Springs Mayor Kenny Ramsey said. "I have no idea why. I didn't have the least idea this was coming."

Town officials say that Barrett apparently left town — and the state of North Carolina — with another woman.

"He left with another individual of the female persuasion for parts unknown," said Officer Terry Lee

Getman. "We've had no phone calls. He didn't notify anyone. He just up and took off. Whether it's permanent or not, we don't know."

Getman will serve as acting police chief until the Hot Springs Board of Aldermen can meet to discuss the vacancy.

The disappearance of Barrett comes as the N.C. State Bureau of Investigation was wrapping up an investigation of a New Year's Eve accident involving Barrett and Hot Springs' only police car.

SBI agents had been in Hot Springs during the past month to look into allegations that Barrett may have been intoxicated when he and former Madison County Commissioner Virginia Anderson crashed shortly after midnight Jan. 1. The police car

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was declared a total loss.

Barrett had repeatedly contended that he had not been drinking prior to the accident, and said that he was in pursuit of an unidentified speeding vehicle at the time of the crash.

But some Hot Springs residents say that Barrett had been seen at two New Year's parties prior to the accident. Other residents said Barrett was not in pursuit of anyone, but was driving up and down the street, siren blaring, to ring in the New Year.

vestigation, completed last week.

"Our investigation has been completed," Charles Dunn, assistant director of the SBI in Raleigh, said Friday. "The report is now being drawn up, and it should go to the office of the special prosecutor in the Attorney General's Office."

The Attorney General's Office will then decide what action — if any — to take.

The fact that Barrett has left town should have no effect on the outcome of the investigation, Dunn said.

"I don't know that it will have any effect," he said. "The investigation has been completed, and it will be up to the special prosecutor as to what action will be taken. That action can be taken whether he (Barrett) is there or not."

Dunn would not speculate if any charges against Barrett would stem from the investigation. Bill Farrell, the special prosecutor in the Attorney General's Office, is out of the office this week and could not be reached for comment.

Although Barrett's sudden departure coincided with the completion of the SBI investigation, Hot Springs officials don't believe the investigation had much to do with his disappearance.

"I wouldn't think so," Ramsey said. "I don't really think it had much to do with it."

"It (the investigation) may have added to it," Getman said. "Whether or not it had a real direct bearing, only Mr. Barrett would know for sure."

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BILL STUDENC PHOTO

Cindy Hess and her favorite dog, Sara, stand in front of the burned out trailer destroyed by fire in an recent early morning blaze.

Sparky The Wonder Dog?

Barking Dog Awakens Woman; Disaster Averted

By BILL STUDENC Editor

Cindy Hess of Mars Hill now jokingly refers to her miniature schnauzer, Sara, as "Sparky the Wonder Dog."

It's a fitting nickname. Sara may have helped avert disaster when she woke her owner early one Saturday morning as fire raged through a mobile home just outside of her bedroom window.

Hess immediately called the Mars Hill Fire Department, and firefighters removed a nearly full propane gas tank near the burning trailer.

"There's a chance that tank could have exploded," said Mars Hill Fire Chief Eddie Fox. "We removed that as soon as we got there."

Although Fox isn't ready to give Sara a bronzed dog biscuit for her heroics, Hess says that if her pet had not gotten her out of bed, the March 14 fire may have destroyed more than one trailer.

Three other trailers and two houses are within 50 feet each other.

"The most alarming thing about the whole situation was that propane tank," Hess said. "If that had exploded, we would have really had a problem."

It was about 3:30 a.m. on that Saturday morning when Sara began barking and running around in Hess's bedroom.

"She just wouldn't stop barking. She danced around and ran up and down the hall. On a Saturday morning

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Weaverville, Yancey, Marshall Merchants Discuss Cooperation

By ANNE KITCHELL Staff Writer

From Weaverville to Hot Springs, businesses are banding together in an attempt to keep retail dollars from leaving the Madison-Yancey-North Buncombe area.

The cooperative spirit between communities is a sign of the rejuvenated interest local merchants have in saving their investments, the merchants say.

The Marshall Merchants' Association recently hosted representatives from Yancey County and Weaverville to discuss the possibility of pooling resources in a joint effort to boost the area's sluggish economy.

Weaverville Town Manager Charles Horne and Yancey County Chamber of Commerce represen-

tative Wanda Proffitt joined the Marshall Merchants in a round-table discussion concerning cooperative economic development planning.

"We need to get some activities going," Horne said. "Communities need to take inventory and set their sights on attainable goals."

Horne suggested the Marshall merchants should concentrate on promoting the unique qualities of the area.

"The drive to Marshall is beautiful," Horne said. "Merchants have to work together to find ways to pull people into town and stop instead of driving by."

Proffitt told the group that the Yancey County Chamber of Commerce has shown steady growth over the past seven years. A major draw to

the area is an annual craft fair, which brought in more than \$73,000 to the craft merchants alone.

Weaverville has recently formed its own merchants association to promote the North Buncombe area.

According to Gary West, Weaverville Merchants' Association vice-president, the goal of the group is to relay to the people that the area businesses are good and that people don't have to drive to Asheville to shop.

"There's a good life in Weaverville and I believe in this community," West said. "The merchants' association's purpose is to make the town a better place to live, work and recreate."

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Towns Asked To Help Fund Countywide Dispatching System

By BILL STUDENC Editor

The director of the Madison County Emergency Management Service has asked the three towns in the county to help foot the bill for a full-time, countywide dispatching system.

Eddie Fox, director, has asked officials in the towns of Hot Springs, Marshall and Mars Hill to contribute \$3,000 each year to pay the salary and fringe benefits of one dispatcher.

In return, the county dispatchers would answer calls for all emergency agencies in Madison County on a 24-hour basis, Fox said.

The county would not establish one telephone number for all county and

municipal emergency agencies.

The system, if it wins approval from the towns, would solve a communications problem that has plagued municipal emergency services for many years, Fox said.

Municipal police department offices are usually staffed only during normal office hours — 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., he said.

"Right now, the police and fire departments in each town aren't always able to answer phone calls at night or on the weekends," Fox said. "If the police office is out on patrol or checking doors, there's no one in the office to answer their emergency calls."

The proposal, now under study by the Madison County Board of Commissioners and each of the three municipal governing boards in Madison, would, in effect, set up a central emergency operations center for the county.

"We would have one center dispatching for all the agencies in the county — fire, police, sheriff, ambulance," Fox said.

Currently, the fire departments in Marshall and Mars Hill are taking all emergency calls for the rural fire departments, leaving the sheriff's department to handle its own emergency calls, he said.

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