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Questions Shroud Fire Investigation



Conelia McDuffie

By Sherry Matthews
Confusion over details surrounding a fire that swept through a mobile home and claimed the life of three-year-old Conelia McDuffie still exists nearly two weeks after the blaze was reported.

In addition, "no investigation" into the fire's origin can be completed because "the trailer has been moved from its original site," Puppy Creek Fire Chief David Willis said.

The trailer, rented by Mr. and Mrs. Bobby Pegues of Raeford, apparently caught on fire around 8:30 Friday morning.

"We received a call at 8:36 a.m.," Hoke Sheriff Dave Barrington said.

The "unidentified caller", who "could barely be understood," told the sheriff's dispatcher that there was a fire at the Carolina Country Mobile Home Park.

"We dispatched the Puppy Creek Fire Department and back-

up units immediately," Barrington said.

"We followed that up by dispatching the rescue squad," he added.

"All this was done within 30 seconds," Barrington said.

When the call first came in, no one knew that there was a child trapped inside, the sheriff added.

Firemen were also unaware that a life was in danger until they arrived at the fire.

"We did not know until after we were on the scene that there was a child trapped in the trailer," Willis said.

Although the child's mother said it "seemed like it took a long time" for the fire department to arrive on the scene, Willis noted that "they were there within minutes of the call."

"There were no dispatch problems despite what has been said," Willis said.

Although Hoke Emergency Ser-

VICES (EMS) personnel were not dispatched, Willis said "we were about to call when they checked on themselves."

"It is not our normal procedure to dispatch an ambulance to a fire," Barrington said.

"When the firemen radioed back to say there was a child in the trailer, the EMS heard it and checked on themselves," Barrington said.

"We are not supposed to be dispatched unless there is someone in a fire," an EMS employee said.

In this incident, EMS employees apparently "checked on" in route to the fire after they heard radio conversation indicating someone was trapped in the blaze.

Another discrepancy surrounds the origin of the fire.

Although firemen were not sure what caused the blaze, Willis said there were "two kerosene heaters" and an "electric heater" in the mobile home.

Willis agreed that one of the heaters could have started the blaze.

"I would speculate that it was the electric heater, but we can't be sure," Willis said.

Despite confirmation from Willis that kerosene heaters were in the trailer, Pegues denies the units existed.

There were no kerosene heaters on the premises, Pegues said.

Reports also indicated that EMS personnel pulled the child from the smoke-filled front bedroom.

Willis and Barrington said that Puppy Creek Assistant Fire Chief Paul Johnson was the one who "actually got to the child."

"A man could not get in the windows where the child was trapped," Willis said, noting that they "were just too narrow."

A hose was placed in the front bedroom "to keep cool air circulating" while firemen fought their way through the blaze to

reach the child, Willis added. The child's mother, said McDuffie got lost in the smoke while "I was attempting to get the children out."

There were three other children in the mobile home when it caught on fire, according to Pegues.

An older child apparently discovered the blaze and alerted her mother.

Pegues and three of the children survived the fire.

The three-year-old McDuffie, who was transported to Cape Fear Valley Hospital in Fayetteville, was pronounced dead on arrival.

Forty-three minutes elapsed from the time the call came in until EMS personnel arrived at Cape Fear Valley, Barrington said.

Pegues said that the trailer, which was destroyed in the blaze, had caught on fire twice before.

Faulty wiring had apparently been the cause of the first two blazes, Pegues said.

Around Town

By Sam Morris

There isn't much you can write about the weather this week, because it has been perfect. We still have another month of winter, so we can still look forward to some cold days.

The forecast is for the temperatures to be in the 50s for the remainder of the week. Not bad.

The letter last week from Kay Thomas about the keeping of records for a Hoke County history has brought forth some comments from people who would like to get something started on this project.

We think that it should get underway immediately because we are not getting any younger. This hits home to me when something comes up now about the past and you can't find out because the people who would know, are now gone on.

So this project would be helpful for many years to come when you need to check on past history of the county.

The above comments were caused when during the past two weeks I have inquired about some of the history of the Raeford Kiwanis Club to be used in the section that appears in this issue of the paper.

The club was formed in 1924 and when checking on the charter members, it was noted that they were all deceased. So it was hard to get dates and find someone who could tell us about all the charter members.

So this showed me that records of the past should be kept.

Be sure to read the section. You will more than apt be surprised at some of the projects started and financed by the club.

They do a good job for our community.

The primary date is drawing nearer and each day you can see more politicians or their workers on the streets of Raeford.

Of course each of them needs your vote, but if you haven't registered, you can't do them any good. So if you haven't registered, do so today.

It was good to read that the sewer plant had been lifted from restriction by the state. Now this means that we can go after more industrial plants.

If the community college can be opened, this will also be added to the things that can help the ones going after the industries.

New plants mean more tax base and this will help finance the needs (See AROUND, page 12A)



Interested spectators

Police Major J.C. Barrington (center), Detective James Murdock (left) and Police officer Fred McQueen (right) study the scene where a Tuesday afternoon fight erupted and resulted in one Raeford man being stabbed and a second being arrested for

the assault. McQueen confiscated a shotgun at the scene that was apparently taken from the victim after he was stabbed. See complete story on page 11A.

College Querrying Residents

An effort to gauge opinions on the feasibility of a satellite college campus in Hoke County has been launched by the Sandhills Community College systems.

A questionnaire has been prepared by the college and will be distributed throughout Hoke County to determine if there is support for a campus within the community.

The questionnaire will determine

the level of support and what courses or programs county residents would like to see offered at a satellite college, a Sandhills spokesman said.

A copy of the questionnaire appears on page 12 of this week's News-Journal.

If the questionnaire has not been completed previously, please take a minute to fill it out and mail it in.

The level of community support will play a major role in determining the feasibility of a satellite college, the spokesman said.

A decision, by the Sandhills board, is expected to be made in early March on the satellite's fate.

Sandhills officials are now considering plans to move the satellite college into the old Bank of Raeford building on Main Street.

Retail Sales Increase

Retail sales in Hoke County were up more than \$1 million during the last four months of 1983 over the same period in 1982, figures compiled during the quarter show.

In the last four months, sales in Hoke increased by 7% from \$14.9 million to over \$16 million.

November showed the largest retail sales increase, up \$724,452 over the 1982 figures.

September was the only slow month during the quarter, coming in \$255,220 short of the 1982 high.

Although September dragged, a sales boost began in October with gross retail sales climbing to \$3.9 million, \$431,315 more than in 1982.

December sales fell off slightly but were still above the 1982 figures by \$222,031.

Hoke County's sales increased over \$1.12 million for the four-month period, and sales tax collections were up \$33,650.02 for the same months, according to figures released by the state Department of Revenue.

In December Hoke County merchants recorded retail sales of \$3.98 million compared to last year's figures of \$3.76 million. It was the smallest increase for the four-month period.

For November, local merchants accounted for sales of \$4.11 million, up from \$3.38 million during the same month in 1982.

October sales were \$3.96 million this year and \$3.53 million in 1982.

Hoke Chamber of Commerce Director Earl Fowler contributes the increase to "progress."

"I think this is a step in the right direction for our economy," Fowler said.

"We are making progress and our retail sales figures reflect that," he added.

Fowler also credits more residents staying "within the county boundaries" to do their shopping for the upward boost.

"We may even be pulling some people from outside the county to our shops," Fowler said.

"These increases are a good sign," he added.



Earl Fowler

Although the chamber director was hesitant to predict retail sales here climbing, he did admit that it was a "real possibility."

"I am an eternal optimist. I certainly hope these sales figures will continue an upward motion," Fowler said.

Animal Cruelty Law Given Green Light

By Sherry Matthews

Raeford-Hoke Humane Society Director Jack McGinnis and other members were "extremely pleased" following the Hoke County Commissioner decision Monday night to adopt an animal cruelty ordinance.

"All we ever wanted was to see this ordinance passed," McGinnis said.

"We were glad to see it finally happen," he added.

In addition to the new law, commissioners appointed county dog warden William Hales to enforce the ordinance.

Hales will become the new animal cruelty investigator and will be required to enforce the ordinance.

The new law allows Hales to confiscate animals who lack adequate water, food or shelter and who have been "cruelly mistreated."

Those caught violating the new ordinance will be subjected to a misdemeanor charge and a \$25 "flat rate fine."

The violator will also be required to pick up the tab for the "actual expenses incurred by the county while picking up and keeping an animal."

"This new ordinance will enforce what we have been trying to do for a long time," McGinnis said.

According to McGinnis, there have been "several reported cases" of animal neglect within the county.

"Up until now, no one has had the power or authority to do anything about it," McGinnis said.

McGinnis noted a "classic case"

involving people who had allegedly mistreated some horses.

"These people kept those horses confined to a small area and refused to give them pasture," McGinnis said.

"They were not receiving proper feed and were becoming diseased," he added.

"Everyone from the health department to the sheriff attempted to stop the cruel treatment, but there was no enforceable action that could be taken," McGinnis said.

With the new law, which becomes effective March 1, Hales will have the power to go on anyone's property and take animals he believes have not been properly cared for.

"This ordinance protects everyone, including the animals," McGinnis said.

"I am extremely glad a decision was made...better late than never," he added.

The county board also agreed to let Humane Society members have access to the new animal shelter facility during landfill hours.

"We will agree to this subject to the city council's approval," Commissioner Wyatt Upchurch said.

"They have worked with us on this. I think they should be in on this decision," Upchurch added.

Humane Society members requested the access as part of a plan to run adoptions from the pound.

"We will have staff volunteers who will come out there for the purpose of animal adoption," McGinnis said.

Although Upchurch and the other board members agreed to the

(See CRUELTY, page 12A)

Manager On Hold

By Sherry Matthews

Although the application deadline was January 31, Raeford Mayor John K. McNeill said it could be another two months before the city hires a new city manager.

"I can't speak for what the council might do, but I don't think they are going to be in any hurry," McNeill said.

The city manager's position has been vacant since mid-December when Manager Ron Matthews resigned to take a position with the Elizabeth City government.

Bill Sellars, who head the city's zoning and public works division, was named acting manager.

"He is doing a good job," McNeill said.

"We have a staff that knows how to handle any situation," he added.

(See MANAGER, page 12A)



Inside Today

The Raeford Kiwanis Club has been serving Hoke County for 60 years. We take a look at the history of the club and its contributions to the community on page one of today's B-section.