

Tragedy averted in cotton picker blaze, co-workers save friend

BY VICTORIANA SUMMERS
AND PAUL ALLEN WILSON

A farm worker narrowly avoided being severely burned while he was operating a cotton-picking machine late Monday afternoon near the Robeson County line. Heavily laden with cotton, the farm vehicle ignited suddenly while John Henry Gay was operating it in the middle of a field on Archie McGougan Road.

"I saw fire at the bottom of the machine," Gay said. "I could not get out."

As the fire rapidly engulfed the vehicle, two co-workers realized Gay's precarious situation in the cab. Alvin McCutchen and James Earl Locklear pulled Gay out of the cotton-picker.

"He was just sitting there and did not move," McCutchen said. "His shirt was already burning."

"There was burning cotton falling all around him until we rescued him."

A faulty bearing on the machine is the suspected cause of the fire, according to David Shook, a Red Springs farmer and employer of Gay. Co-owner of S & S farms with his brother, Steve, the Shooks rushed to the accident site when they learned Gay was possibly injured.

"I smelled smoke, and it got real hot," Gay, a 37-year veteran of S & S farms, said. "Next thing I know I saw flames, and the cotton was on fire in the back of the truck."

Gay tried to save the machine and cotton he had already picked.

"I tried to raise the basket to dump out the cotton," Gay said. "Then the wind changed and it blew the cotton

back into the machine. All the cotton was falling on fire right on top of me."

McCutchen said he saw Gay attempt to unload his cotton and called him with a cell phone. Getting no response, he called Locklear. "We went to him. Thank God he's OK."

Gay initially declined being transported to the hospital for an examination. He sat down in his pickup truck, smoking a cigarette to calm his nerves after the close call. His shirt was singed with holes where the fire had partially penetrated.

"I guess I was real lucky," Gay said. "I was scared. It happened so fast that I could not save myself without help."

"I appreciate them helping me get out of the machine."

Gay pointed to a rapidly swelling ankle that he said was beginning to hurt badly. He said his drop from the picker was about five feet.

Firefighters from South Antioch Volunteer Fire Department and Red Springs Volunteer Fire Department responded immediately to the emergency call around 4:30 p.m. The teams worked for more than an hour extinguishing the blaze on the cotton-picker.

The massive machine was still smoldering after dusk set in.

"We were the first firefighters on the scene," said Red Springs Fire Chief George Hall. "We were just happy we could assist the Antioch fireman."

"The machine was already on fire when we arrived."



Firefighters from South Antioch and Red Springs work to extinguish the blaze on a cotton picker that John Henry Gay, right, escaped from. Top photo, Alvin McCutchen, a co-worker, helped to rescue Gay from the fire.

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If you are interested, call 875-7512 or attend a meeting of the shire on December 6 at 4 o'clock in the afternoon at the keep of His Excellency Sir Duncan Lang, 407 McDougald Drive.

Sheriff hosts holiday luncheon

A special holiday festival luncheon is planned by Sheriff Hubert Peterkin on December 12. County employees will be the guests of honor, but all residents of the Hoke community are also invited to celebrate the advent of the Christmas season, according to Peterkin.

"We want this luncheon event to represent a time of fellowship and to bring our community together," Peterkin said. "I am looking forward to personally meeting our county staff and citizens next Friday."

The luncheon will be held from

11:30 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. at the Senior Center located at the former National Guard Armory on Central Avenue. The event is free to all citizens, but no carryout plates will be available. The menu will consist of barbeque, chicken, baked beans, and cole slaw.

"We anticipate at least 600 guests will attend the gathering," Peterkin said. "It is being sponsored by the Hoke Sheriff's Office and also through the generosity of Hoke and Raeford businesses."

community & programs events



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Wednesday, Dec. 3, 6:30-9 p.m., FREE.
Morbidly obese individuals who are interested in having bariatric surgery or in scheduling a consultation with Dr. C. Kenneth Mitchell of Pinehurst Surgical Clinic to determine if they are a bariatric surgery candidate must first attend an information session. Programs are held in the Conference Center, Rooms A & B, of FirstHealth Moore Regional Hospital in Pinehurst.

Space is limited, so please call (910) 215-2646 or (910) 295-0884 to reserve your space.

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Martin

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healthy."

Still believing that the President made the wrong initial choice about Iraq, I want very much for him to make this project a success. Success will not come easy. Iraq is proving even harder to govern than I thought back in March. Imposing order on the many dissident groups more and more seems to require the ruthless style of Saddam Hussein — a style our military is not conditioned to duplicate. Nor can we in good conscience now leave those groups to fight among themselves until another Hussein rises up to impose order by crushing all dissent.

The leaders we most admire are not only determined ones, but ones who learn that to stay the course to success, they often have to make painful adjustments.

Those of us who wish for a successful conclusion in Iraq should advocate for those adjustments, including an immediate and real internationalization of the occupation, and urge them on the President — even as we admire his determined spirit.

D.G. Martin hosts UNC-TV's North Carolina Bookwatch, which airs Sundays at 5 p.m. This week's (December 7) Bookwatch will be preempted by other programming. Bookwatch will return on December 14 with a program featuring Catherine Bishir and Michael Southern, authors of A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Piedmont North Carolina.

Rezoned

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area," Riddle said. "I think it would be good for the area."

However, the Hoke Planning Board recommended denying Shepley's request, according to Linda Revels, county planner.

"The area is generally more residential," Revels said prior to the voting.

The board also encountered strong resistance from 13 opposing neighbors who reside with their families in the Stonewall-Rockfish communities. One of the protesters even presented the board with a petition against the rezoning, which was signed by 53 property owners.

Factors mentioned by neighbors opposed to the rezoning included fears for their children's safety if the area becomes more commercially populated; increased traffic congestion; a perception the area could become more "junkified" in appearance; and the threat the rural appearance of country life could become spoiled.

"I just built a new home there," Daniel Wright said. "When I built the home, I did not want to live next to a commercial property. This area drew me because it is rural."

"Once it is zoned commercial, there is no turning back. I would rather see two houses constructed there."

Landowner Russell Austin negatively described the rezoned acre as "smack dab in the middle" of a residential area.

"It is a great neighborhood, and we would like to keep it that way," Jessie Scott said.

Landowner Robert Sisk, a 26-year resident of the area, said the community, which is located near Hope Mills and not far from Raeford, has become more populated.

"I moved out there because it was

rural," Sisk said. "I very much want to see it remain residential."

"Once it is commercial, we cannot control what would go in there."

Shelley Ray said she and her husband had retired to the area because of its rural appeal.

"Our property is nice and quiet," Ray said. "I believe it would be detrimental to the safety of our community to see a tremendous increase in traffic."

Many property owners not in favor of the zoning change left the meeting dissatisfied. One shrugged his head in disgust at their failure to gain the board's backing.

Following the board's approval of Shepley's rezoning, two consecutive requests for rezoning in the Rockfish-Davis Bridge area were unanimously approved. Raeford attorney Regina Sutherland represented landowner Don Ratley, speaking on his behalf. One tract consists of 1.7 acres, but she said there were no "concrete" plans yet for the land. Another 1.2 acres located at Rockfish and Camden roads was also zoned commercial. It is already surrounded by neighborhood businesses, she added.

In other action, Commission Chairman Bobby Wright and Daniels were reelected for another term as chair and vice chair of the board. Their nominations met with unanimous support from other board members.

Commissioners also agreed to purchase a new software system for the Hoke Courthouse computers. The current system used by Vera Hollingsworth, clerk of the Superior Court, is no longer compatible with the county's system that was recently revamped. She requested immediate action because she must prepare a pool of prospective jurors by December 5 for upcoming trials.

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