

The History of The Harris Hill Volunteer Fire Company

8630 Main Street Clarence, NY 14221

The formation of a volunteer fire company at Harris Hill was underway in October of 1936 with twenty-three men signifying their intention of becoming charter members.

The Harris Hill Volunteer Fire company would be incorporated on January 7th, 1937, with John H. Farrell acting as President and Chief to fifty brand new firefighters. The bi-monthly meetings were held at various members homes, the school basement, or The Rose Garden on Wehrle Dr. They battled fires with one truck, and didn't even have an established district until 1939. Some of their first equipment included a dozen rubber coats and boots they purchased for \$10.50.

To raise operating funds, the new fire company held "Smoker Parties" every few months. The first Monte Carlo party required an outlay of \$209.55 and returned \$210.85. An annual picnic and carnival was held on Saturday July 20th, 1940. The affair was open to the public and attracted hundreds. The signing of a Fire Protection contract with the Town of Clarence in 1941 eased financial worries. The Town of Clarence paid 1/10th of the assessed valuation of all homes in the district. At the time of signing, it came to about \$550.00.

Harris Hill got its first loan from the Bank of Williamsville when they borrowed \$200.00 for a Federal Fire Siren that they had installed on top of Metz's Garage at the corner of Main St. and Harris Hill Rd. One blast of the siren indicated a meeting, two blasts indicated a drill, and three blasts meant a fire!

A new fire truck was purchased from the Caseler Manufacturing Co. in May of 1941 and delivered in August of that year, for a total cost of 3,650 dollars. The truck was painted white and carried 500 gallons of water. The Chevrolet chassis was one of the last to be built with chrome trim and brass railings because of defense priorities.

World War II brought many changes to the Fire Company. Blackout drills sometimes consisted of simulated bomb hits to which the firemen responded. In 1942 a government-owned Curtiss P40 airplane valued at \$60,000.00 went up in flames on Transit Rd. a half mile North of Sheridan Dr. The gas tank blew up and the airplane was a total loss. The war also necessitated the purchased of war insurance on the fire truck. The truck, which was stored in Metz's Garage, had to be guarded every night by volunteers.

In 1943 land was purchased on Main St. East of Harris Hill Rd, for a new firehall. The Gamblin Brothers did the initial construction for about 15,000 dollars. The Ladies Auxiliary chipped in to help furnish the kitchen.

A freak explosion nearly ripped apart a two-story frame house on Howard Drive on the evening of February 17th 1943. Chief Ray E. Collier said the blast was caused when a flame from an oil furnace ignited an accumulation of gas in the basement. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Floyd B. Gorman miraculously escaped injury.

The Harris Hill Firemen's Club was established in 1951. It was a restaurant that served dinners at the fire hall Wednesday through Saturday evenings and featured dancing on Saturday nights. All monies beyond expenses were turned over to the Fire Company. At its peak, the Firemen's Club had 851 members! The Club was discontinued in 1967 because it couldn't compete with commercial restaurants.

In 1956 an expansion was needed to increase the size of the firehall. Carl Danitz chaired the committee for the project which added a new truck room on the west side of the building that included office space for the Fire Chief and Board members. The existing building was incorporated into the expansion and was used as banquet space.

Volunteer Firemen's Sunday, was initiated in our area by Firefighter Walter Pfeil in 1959. Mr. Pfeil wrote a column for the *Clarence Press* entitled, "Safety and Fire Facts." He also encouraged the Fire Company to offer a creative writing award to high school students, which was posthumously named after him and is still awarded today.

A new Seagrave pumper was added in September 1960 at a cost of 27,500 dollars with additional equipment. The purchase was based on the recommendation of the National Board of Fire Underwriters, with a view to the fire company obtaining a better fire district classification.

In the 1960's Harris Hill Firemen resisted moves toward providing ambulance service. During this time, the Junior Chamber of Commerce tried to donate an ambulance, but it was refused. In 1965, after Clarence Center Volunteer Fire Co. complained that 75% of the ambulance calls they received were in the Harris Hill District, a fee was sent to them to encourage their continued service. In June 1965, Harris Hill adopted a resolution to provide ambulance services.

Stephen R. Bucki was awarded Firefighter of the year from Western NY Fireman's association and FASNY in 1965.

A third expansion of the firehall had taken place in 1968 when a building committee was appointed to enlarge kitchen and storage areas and create a larger banquet room. An expanded entrance and restroom areas on the east side were included with the construction. Construction was completed by Leemar building company of Tonawanda, NY. The banquet room was rented 14 times in its first year with a total profit of 1008.25

Ronald W. Plewniak, a member of the Harris Hill Fire Company, was credited with saving the life of a resident of a burning home on Boncrest Drive in November 1968. The blaze was confined mainly to the kitchen area

On February 2nd, 1970, Clayt Ertel Sr. introduced the Exempt Firemen's Club, as a service organization for the firemen to promote the welfare of the Harris Hill Volunteer Fire Company.

In 1971, The Eastern Hills mall opened near the corner of Transit Rd. and Main St. The building boasted a total size of 997,945 square feet and 92 total stores with 7 additional anchor stores and was one of the areas largest shopping centers at the time. Through the years several incidents occurred at the site including an Arson fire in a pizzeria in the Food Court area and a bomb threat.

A building permit was obtained in July of 1972 as plans were formed to increase the size of the truck room in anticipation of the delivery of an American LaFrance Snorkel truck. At this time the front bay doors were raised to 12ft and the rear wall of the apparatus room was pushed out to increase the overall space. The total cost of renovations was 20,000 dollars. The Snorkel truck was ordered in 1973, but would take three years to manufacture.

In 1978, a New York State Human Rights Law against sexual discrimination went into effect. It required a constitutional change which allowed Patricia Grogan to become Harris Hill's first female member.

A 1981 GMC/ Saulsbury mini pumper was the first fire company vehicle to arrive with the lettering of "Clarence NY" on the sides. Under the direction of Chief John Ricey the remaining apparatus would have the same lettering added through various stages of paint work in 1982 and 1983.

In February 1983, a commercial cab Mack R model chassis was purchased for the sum of 47,935.00 as part of a project to build a new rescue truck. Bids for the rescue body were sent out and returned in July 1983. The membership provided approval for the Swab wagon company to outfit a rescue body onto the chassis at an additional cost of 59,675.00.

For the 1984 fiscal year, the Board of Directors approved an operating budget of 197,480.00. This would equate to approximately .20 cents per thousand dollars of assessed value.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Harris Hill Fire Company, the local and national Post Office agreed to cancel mail with a special stamp on Jan. 7, 1987. A special 50th anniversary logo was created and proudly displayed in gold leaf on the front of a new 1987 Young pumper.

With the acquisition of the 1987 Young Pumper, the fire company sold both open cab Seagrave pumpers and consolidated the number of pumpers from four to three. The increased pump and tank capacity and compartment size of the more modern apparatus eliminated the need for four engines.

In March of 1989 the Fire Company proceeded with plans to refurbish the American LaFrance Snorkel truck, the bid was awarded to RD. Murray in Hamburg NY for a total cost of 142,600 dollars. The refurb process would entail upgrading warning lights, adding rear doors to the canopy cab for crew member safety, and reconstructing the body out of stainless steel.

During that same month, the Town of Clarence reached an agreement to contract with Towns Ambulance service to provide Advanced Life Support at First Aid calls. This would be the first ALS ambulance service utilized by Harris Hill VFC. In January 1991, LaSalle Ambulance would become a backup ambulance provider over Towns.

Jerry Roy was awarded Firefighter of the Year in August 1990 by the Erie Volunteer Fireman's Association for his heroic efforts to provide lifesaving efforts to Erie County Sherriff William M. Dillemoth, who was killed in the line of duty on Kraus Rd. while serving a warrant to a resident at their address on October 20th, 1989.

The Harris Hill Fire District saw tremendous growth throughout the 1990s into the new Millennium. The entire western border line of Transit Road expanded to include the development of several sprawling commercial buildings. Call volume increased a short time after and continued to rise with the development of additional residential homes in new subdivisions.

The fire company transformed through several changes as well during the early 1990's. Throughout most of 1991 the Clarence Town Board discussed providing a LOSAP pension program for the Volunteer Firefighters. A referendum was held in October of 1991, with residents of the district voting to pass the proposal 211 Yes / 103 No. The program would begin on January 1st, 1992.

A committee was formed to research the design of new uniforms for the membership in 1991, they were distributed in May of 1992. The uniform spec and patch are still used today. Firefighter health would become a major focus in 1992 and subsequently the first physicals were offered to members in June and August of that year at the old Doctors Hospital in Buffalo. The first thermal imaging camera made by Argus was also purchased, it was powered with several AA batteries.

In December 1992, a new Saulsbury pumper was the first truck to arrive with the reflective blue stripe. All remaining apparatus had the blue stripe added soon after. The lone exception being Engine 1, a 1971 Seagrave pumper, which never had the stripe added because of plans at the time for its replacement.

Past Chief Roy Schiefela was appointed as the Towns disaster coordinator in 1993.

The fire company added cardiac monitoring and defibrillation to its list of emergency medical services during 1994 with twelve members of the company completing required training for the program, which went on-line on Dec. 15, 1994.

A constitutional change was made in January 1995 to allow anyone over the age of 50 to join the fire company. In December of that year, funding was allocated for the construction of a fitness room inside the apparatus bay of the fire hall, the room was completed in 1996.

An Excellence in Teamwork award was provided by the Firefighter magazine for an EMS call on September 27th, 1995 during which Harris Hill VFC had their first "save" with the defibrillation unit.

In May of 1996, alphanumeric paging began to roll out in our day to day operations. At that time, the "Red phones" installed in each Fire Chiefs house were removed, because the paging replaced the purpose of the phone at a much lower cost. The primary purpose of the phones were to communicate with Amherst Fire Control for non-emergency calls, known as silent alarms. The phone system was also interconnected with each Firehouse under Amherst Fire Control. The first personal pagers were acquired through Page New York at a cost of 6.44 each per month. In 1998 group paging became available from Amherst Fire Control and would be used to provide dispatch information (Address, Nature, etc.) for any calls that were in progress.

On October 1st, 1997 a new building committee was formed to determine the current and future needs of the fire company facilities.

Several area Fire Chiefs worked to upgrade the Amherst Fire Control radio system in 1999. The fire company allocated thousands of dollars towards the purchase of new radios to be used on an initial frequency of 425.400mhz. All existing low band radio equipment through Erie County was gradually removed from service during the upgrade. The new radio system brought several advancements to operations including the "firefighter down" button, unit identification, and the Knox key release system.

In 2001, The Harris Hill Volunteer Fire Company Explorer Post 114 was started. It consists of a group of 14-18-year-old high school students who are interested in helping the community. Today the program is still functional and is a key resource to the recruitment of new firefighters.

With the tragic events of September 11th, 2001 unfolding, the Fire Company conducted a boot drive out on Main St. in front of the fire hall on Saturday September 15th, 2001. The community response was overwhelming and donations accumulated in an amount of more than 10,000 dollars. All of the funds were donated to the family of Firefighter Michael Mullen of FDNY Ladder Co. 12 who lost his life on 9/11 at the age of 34 years old. As part of an area wide mutual aid deployment, Harris Hill provided an ambulance with five crew members for deployment to ground zero in the days following the attacks.

A 75ft Quint ladder truck was purchased from Emergency One in 2003. The vehicle carried 500 gallons of water and a 2000gpm Hale fire pump and only required one person to operate. Given its capabilities and smaller size over a traditional aerial, it responded first to all fires for several years. The American LaFrance Snorkel and 1971 Seagrave pumper were sold soon after this truck was acquired.

The Clarence planning board approved a concept plan for a new state of the art Firehouse on existing property at 8630 Main St. on January 29th, 2003. In July 2005, Harris Hill members moved operations into a new facility, located in the lot just east of the old fire hall. The 24,000 sq. ft. building provided ample office space for each fire and administrative officer, as well as rooms for physical fitness and a training classroom. The seven-bay truck room provides separate areas for gear washing, equipment cleaning and maintenance. The old fire hall was carefully demolished in September 2005.

Steve Bucki became the first member to achieve 50 years of active service in 2005. In January of that year the fire company adopted hot and cold response protocols in place of the traditional A&B mode responses when Twin City Ambulance became the primary ALS provider.

The fire company began participating in Emergency medical dispatch protocols in 2006, with this program dispatchers would screen all medical calls to determine if a Fire Department response was warranted. In cases where a response would not be required, the contract ambulance provider would respond alone.

An area wide FEMA grant was awarded to Fire companies under Amherst Fire Control in 2009. The grant provided over one million dollars in funding across 16 agencies to replace all portable and mobile radios on our vehicles and enhanced communication among neighboring fire companies.

A recruitment and retention grant was awarded to Harris Hill by FEMA in 2009. The grant provided more than 85,000 dollars of funding, all of which was allocated towards the purchase of marketing and advertising materials and tuition reimbursement for college students. The grant was intended to bolster the number of available Firefighters for responses to emergencies in our community. As a result, the Fire company saw a significant increase in membership numbers. In 2018 a very similar recruitment grant of over 118,000 dollars was obtained to aide in recruitment efforts, and the results were remarkable.

In 2012 the Fire company would celebrate 75 years of incorporation. A small cocktail party was held on August 24th to celebrate the occasion. The year was marked with a special 75th anniversary logo and history book. Three Chevrolet 4x4 Tahoes were purchased through the NYS contract, to be used as response units for the Chiefs. This would signify the first time that all three Chief cars were purchased at once.

The Covid-19 pandemic would significantly disrupt fire company operations in March 2020. Firefighters scrambled to obtain medical supplies, training, and other PPE as the world moved towards a shut down. The fire hall was subsequently closed for any social activities from March until June 2020. The annual Halloween parade, open house and Installation dinner were all cancelled that year. Some drills were held virtually through the internet over a platform known as Zoom. Elections were considered an essential function of the organization and were held in the truck room where there was more space.

The Harris Hill Volunteer Fire Company has inherited a number of changes and will continue to evolve year by year as we move to adopt advancements in training and acquire new equipment to serve our community. Through good times and bad, one thing that remains constant is our dedication to protect property and provide life saving measures whenever called upon.