

Volunteers Are Assets To Cities

Sun Herald, November 18, 1976

BY JOHN BECKER
Staff Writer

What do Al, John, Jack, and Jim Whitaker all have in common? Besides the fact that they are all in the same family.

They are all firefighters in the Winter Park Fire Department.

Al, that's Capt. Al Whitaker, is a fulltime member of the department (21 years) and his three sons are all volunteers.

The Whitaker brothers have all been volunteers since each of them turned 18-years-old. John is now 22, Jack is 20, and Jim 25.

THEY ARE three of 15 regular volunteers attached to the Winter Park Fire Department--part of a breed that, although dwindling, is still vital to the firefighting efforts in the community--volunteer firemen.

What do their bosses say about them? What is their worth to the department, to the community?

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Says Maitland Fire Chief Ezra Hardy about the 22 volunteers on call in his department, "We couldn't operate without them. They are essential in a small department such as ours."

MOST FIRE departments began as volunteer groups. Go back to the 1800s in the Dodge Cities and the Tombstones. When a fire broke out men scurried from barber shops, saloons, and stables gathering in the middle of town and rushing to save a house or a business. Sometimes the whole community would get involved creating an enormous "bucket brigade" to help a fellow resident.

NOT TOO LONG ago volunteers in Winter Park did the same thing. According to Capt. Whitaker, back in the 40s when the station was located behind city hall, the truck would make the rounds picking up volunteers along Park Avenue before heading out to a fire.

"If there was a fire down on Fairbanks," Whitaker remembers, "the truck would swing around to Morse and Park to pick everybody up then head back past the station again and on to the fire."

BUT, LATER, as cities grew larger, with more people living away from the central city, and with more money available, fulltime fire departments--better staffed and better equipped--began to spring up.

Those who did not become regular fulltime firemen, either because of a limit (economic) to the number who could be hired or because they chose not to leave their present employment or business, continued to be a part of the firefighting effort as volunteers -- it was in their blood.

REGARDLESS of the number of times they had to get up at all hours of the night, they couldn't leave fire fighting. It was a way of life and they knew the consequences.

"We almost look forward to going out. It doesn't matter what time it is," Jim Whitaker said. "Once you've been fighting fires for a number of years it's very hard to live without doing it."

He said when he was in school, every time a fire truck went by he had to get up out of his seat to watch it go by. His brothers and father all agreed they did the same thing. "It's something we just can't get away from," John Whitaker said.

MAITLAND made the change to fulltime firemen in 1970. The department was all volunteer until that time. The old fire station, which was only about 50 feet to the east of the present station built in 1972, housed three fulltime firemen.

"I was a volunteer here before I started fulltime," Chief Hardy said.

Several of the current volunteers in Maitland, who remember the old days, can't detach themselves from the feeling they get from responding to an alarm--whether they are at their job or sleeping soundly in bed. Those with many years experience as dependable volunteers in Maitland include Phil Ragozzino and Patrick Stover. Both have been volunteers for over 25 years.

EVEN A FORMER Maitland mayor is presently a volunteer fireman. He is Lawrence G. "Bud" Parker who has served as assistant chief of the volunteers.

Maitland residents probably can recall the names of such people as Irv Snodgrass, Jack Horner, Clyde Clark, Ed Owens, Phil Wittis, and the city's first chief John I. Strong. Back in the twenties these gallant volunteers were the pride of the city.

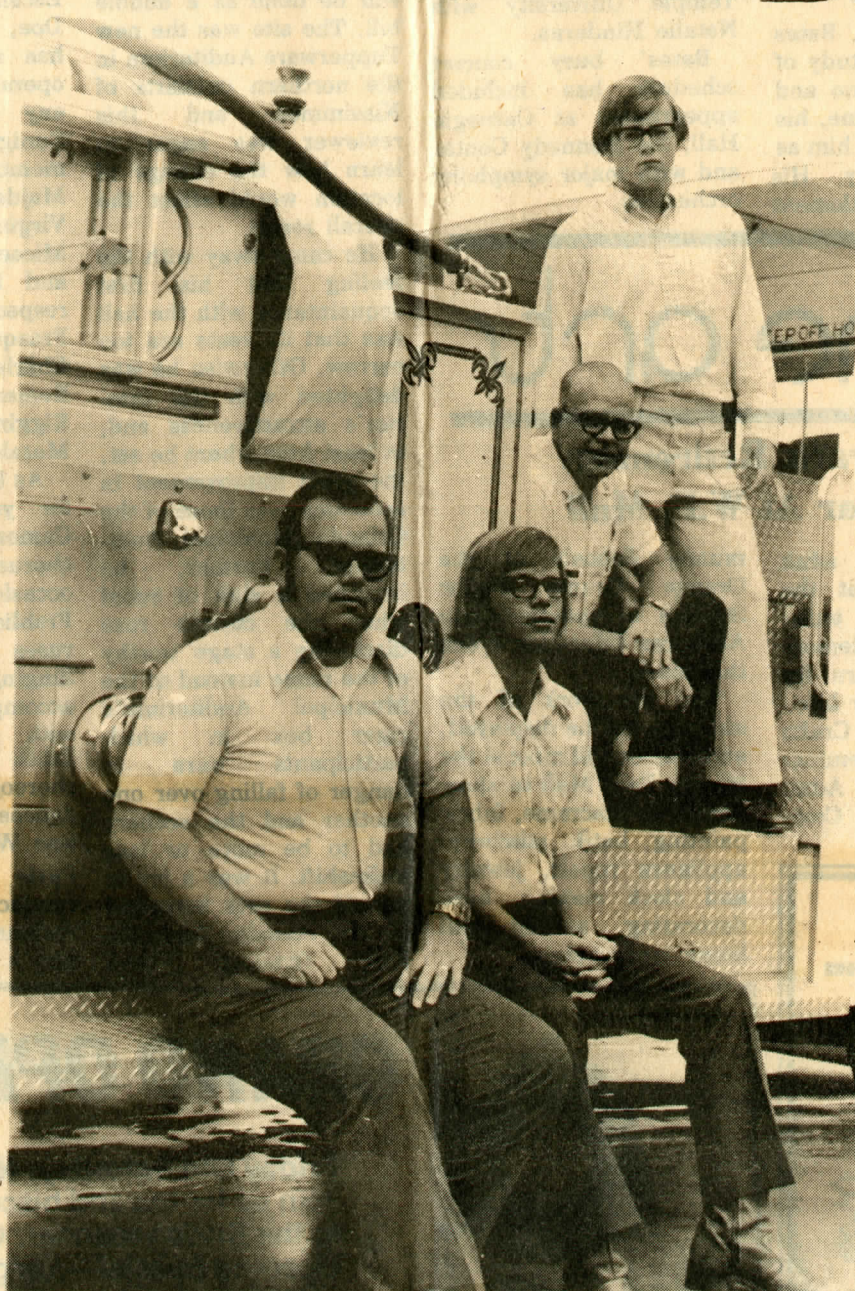
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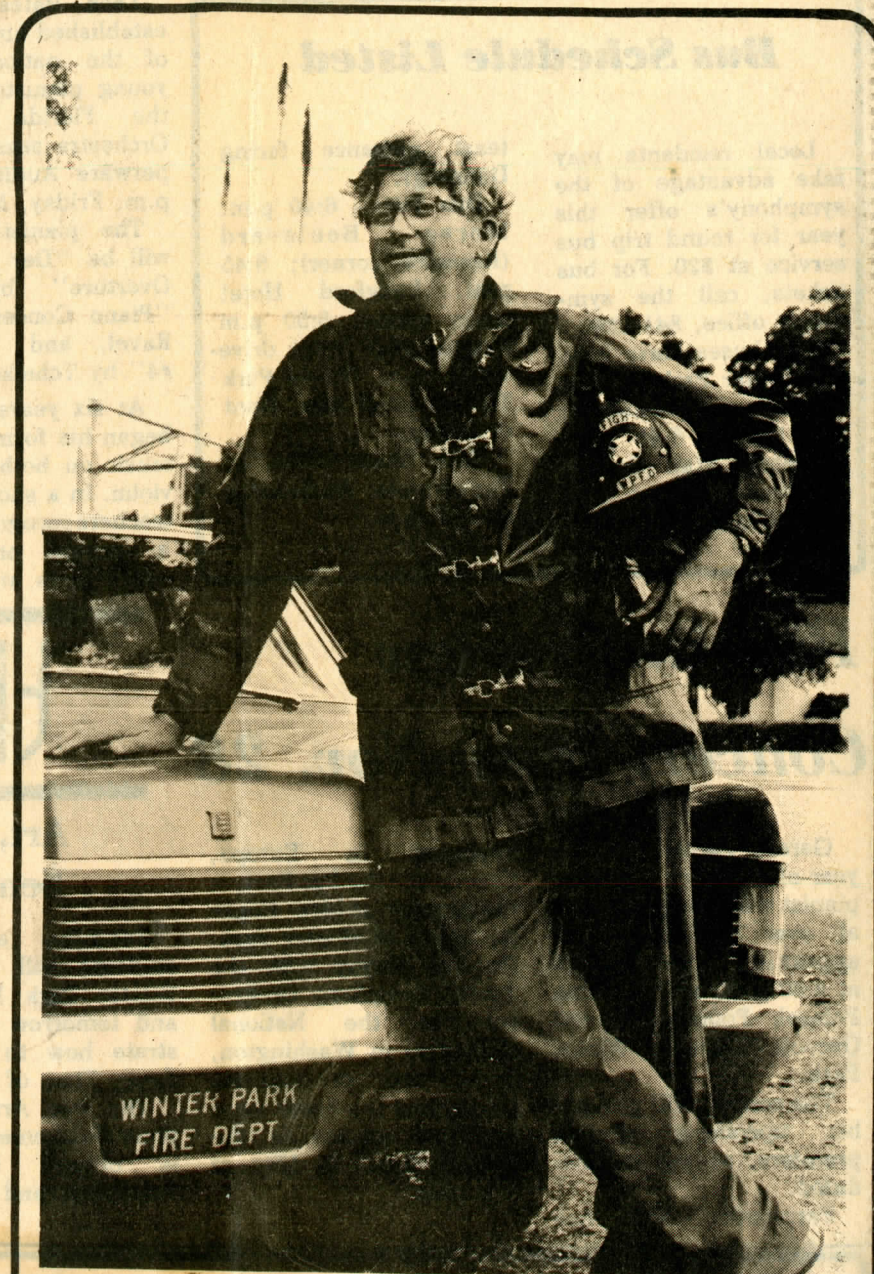


IT'S A FAMILY THING FOR THE WHITAKERS

Shown, from left to right, are Jim, Jack, Al, and John Whitaker who all share a common interest--firefighting. Al is the father, and his three sons are all volunteers with the Winter Park Fire Department. Each of them is devoted to serving the community as a firefighter.

McClendon, a cabbie, Jack Blaymeyer, and Bud Kummer, Winter Park lumber company owner who is the granddaddy of the

sustain the longevity of those who volunteer to be on call when needed. "The money surely isn't that great," Al Whitaker said.



VETERAN VOLUNTEER, BUD KUMMER

Kummer: Reflecting On 30 Years Of Service

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"I reckon I've been around here for the longest," he says boastfully straightening up to his full six-foot, five inches. "I've

departments from going almost anywhere. "I remember jumping on a truck one night and we ended up in Oviedo. Back then that was quite a piece."

The changes Kummer sees over the years in firefighting are based primarily on the equipment. Most of the equipment used to be worked manually. Now, he says, everything is done

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In Winter Park, among those willing to devote their time in a continuing effort to support the fire department during emergencies are B.G. (stands for big guy) Ellis, a self-employed locksmith, Willie

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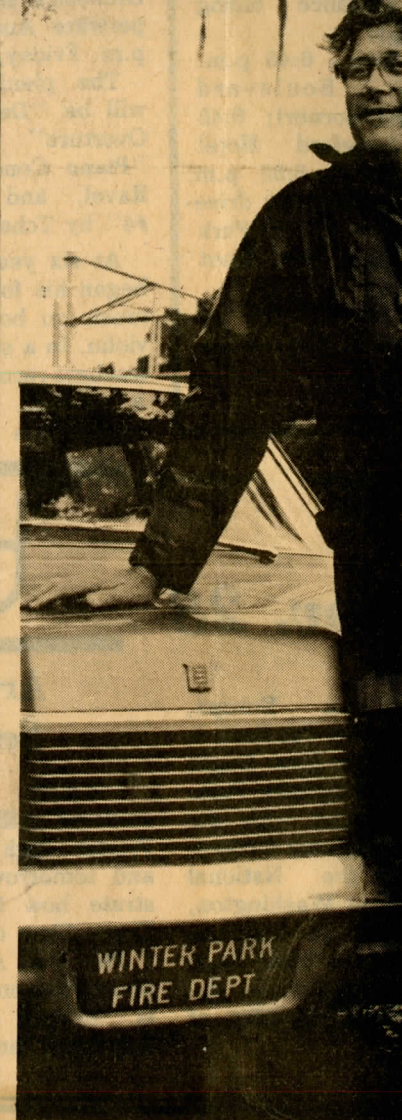
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sustain the longevity of those who volunteer to be on call when needed. "The money surely isn't that great," Al Whitaker said. "They only get about \$1.83 an hour and they aren't out for more than a couple of hours at a time. That's hardly enough to have their clothes cleaned."

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Volunteers like Al Whitaker, Bud Kummer and Bud Parker have seen a lot of changes over the years in men and equipment. They all reflect on the days when volunteers had to "run like hell" to catch the truck before it left the station or to catch it on its way to a fire.

"IT'S ALL gone electronic now," Whitaker says. "Each volunteer has a beeper that sounds when there is an alarm and it tells each guy where to go."

There's no more running for the truck. Volunteers now just hop in their cars and head for the location of the fire.

The good ole days are gone, but the thing that seems to be irreplaceable, even by the fastest vehicles and the most advanced equipment, is the volunteer fireman.

THE WHITAKERS agree it's in their blood. "I had three brothers who were also volunteers in Winter Park," Al Whitaker said. "That was back in 1935. I don't know how long they were with the department, but I know they were here in 1935."

As an indication of the strong ties the Whitakers have to fire fighting, Jim doubles as a fulltime member of the Goldenrod Dommerich Fire Department. He is a Winter Park volunteer during his off duty time.

They (volunteers) are important to the community," Chief Finlayson says. "They have a vested interest in the city because they live and work here. They are public spirited. What better kind of people

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"You get to doin' it and I suppose you can say you do it because you like to help people and all that kinda stuff. But it is a chance to help people."

He said his father was assistant chief for about 25-30 years before he (Bud) became a volunteer. "I used to chase around with him when I was, oh, about 12 or 13 years old."

He reminisced further saying, "In the old volunteer system--and there ain't nothing like it today--when the whistle blew, whoever could run fast enough to the corner (Morse and Park) and got on the truck, well, they went on to the fire."

Later, he said, when everybody got cars they just chased the truck in their cars.

Kummer said there were "a bunch of guys" who lived near Carolina and Garfield Avenues and Morse Boulevard who would get called in the middle of the night and run to catch the truck. "You have to give them credit."

"But that was before my day. I only caught it once."

Back then firemen went to fight a fire wherever it was. There were no special districts that prevented

could you have to do this kind of work."

FINLAYSON said some people think that the volunteers are holding the department down. "They soon find out the fallacy of that kind of thinking."

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departments from going almost anywhere. "I remember jumping on a truck one night and we ended up in Oviedo. Back then that was quite a piece."

The changes Kummer sees over the years in firefighting are based primarily on the equipment. Most of the equipment used to be worked manually. Now, he says, everything is done automatically.

He says the trucks are more powerful, but he's not so sure they get to a fire scene that much quicker.

"Today we have the problem with traffic that we didn't have back then. Those old four cylinder trucks could move out pretty good. A lot of them are still around."

Kummer has five sons, three of whom were volunteers in the Winter Park department. He said his family hasn't objected to his being "on call" these 30 years. "In fact," he said, "my wife used to get up with me and go out to a fire. She used to bring the coffee."

He adds with a smile, "My wife's boyfriend before I married her was a fireman in Pennsylvania. So she's used to being around firemen."

Kummer was 26 years old when he joined as a Winter Park volunteer. He rejected going fulltime because he wanted to keep the lumber business his father started in the city back in 1913.

"I don't know whether it's fact or fiction, but they say the reason my father was in the fire department was so's he'd know what to do if a fire broke out here."

He said there haven't been any fires of any significance at his store. But Bud has put out his share of fires in other people's homes and businesses in 30 years of service.

out rumors occasionally that hint at phasing out the volunteer unit. He says there is always a need for more volunteers.

Hardy summed up the future of volunteer service succinctly, "They'll be with us for a long time."