

Retiree proud of service to Winter Park



Gordon Williamson/the little sentinel

Assistant Chief Mike Molthop presents plaque to Whitaker.

By SARA ROEN
the little sentinel

WINTER PARK — There just wasn't any point in shouting "surprise" when Winter Park firefighters threw a retirement party Tuesday for Capt. James A. Whitaker. He already knew about it.

"They stole my shirt and my badges (for a plaque)," said Whitaker, who has been fighting the city's fires since 1955. "It was kind of hard not to guess."

Whitaker, 55, said he felt "proud that I was able to serve the city this long. I was born and raised here, on Garfield Avenue."

But not only was he born, reared and always worked in Winter Park, he will leave behind one son working for the city's fire department and two other sons with the Orange County Fire Department.

"We've worked some fires together," he said remembering the past, adding that he never worried about his sons at a fire.

"I just let them take care of themselves."

Whitaker said the worst fire he worked during his 26-year career was in 1969 when about one-fourth of the Winter Park Mall was devoured by flames.

"Just the magnitude of it made it the worst," he said.

About the only surprise for Whitaker was an appearance by Mayor Hope Strong, who declared Dec. 15 as James A. Whitaker Day in Winter Park.

Whitaker also received a plaque, complete with his old badges permanently attached, presented to him by Chief Sid Ballou. But the one event that forced him to pull a handkerchief from his pocket and wipe a tear was the engraved watch given by the members of the department.

"It doesn't seem like it's been this long. All I can say is put the city ahead of your personal thoughts. Do things to benefit the city instead of yourself."