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# The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

## Challenges Brought by Fires

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Fires have been news items as long as records have been kept in Rabun County. Historically, buildings were constructed of wood, providing ample fuel for fires. Once wooden buildings caught fire, they were usually completely destroyed because there were no fire departments.

In January 1904, a group of citizens invited W.S. Witham, a banker in Cornelia, to discuss organizing a bank in Clayton. Witham agreed to invest half of the \$15,000 that was

needed to fund the bank. With an eye toward protecting the bank from fire, he wanted the town only to permit the construction of brick, not wooden, buildings going forward. Eager for a bank, Clayton granted this request.

Still, nothing was done to establish a fire department until the early 1920s when a volunteer fire department was organized. The original "fire truck" was a hand-pulled hose cart. Two wagon wheels were connected by an axle that held a reel of heavy hose. The cart was pulled to

fires by two volunteers. It was not state-of-the-art fire-fighting equipment. In addition, there were few to no hydrants, and when the water in Clayton's water storage tanks was low, there was not sufficient pressure to fight fires.

It was big news in 1941 when Clayton got its first fire engine as well as a firehouse siren. Clayton purchased a second fire engine in 1954, but it was not until the 1970s that other towns and communities in Rabun County established their own fire departments. The last fire department was organized in Tiger in 1993. The county currently has 12 volunteer fire stations, along with 12 paid personnel, operated under Rabun County Fire Services.

Forest wildfires have also frequently occurred in the past. With no way to fight them and few structures in danger, they were usually left to burn themselves out. Local residents will not soon forget multiple human-made wildfires that burned in Rabun County for weeks in the very dry fall season of 2016. In particular the Timber Ridge Fire and the Rock Mountain Fire burned thousands of acres of Forest Service land in the county. Forest Service personnel from more than 40 states were brought in to fight the Rock Mountain Fire. Thanks to their efforts, the fire did not destroy any homes. It was eventually put out by rain.

Other fires that have been documented are too numerous to note in this article. The Historical Society has photos of some of the fires that we are sharing in this newsletter.



A fire in a mechanic's garage sparked a conflagration that burned the resort town of **Tallulah Falls** to the ground on a windy December night in 1921. The village had no fire department, and the fire burned out of control.



In 1974, the **Rabun County High School** principal, Frank Snyder, stated that the risk of fire at the 1929 school building was "no joke". He also stated that the school did not have a legitimate occupancy certificate. On Sunday, March 2, 1975, the old high school caught fire, and many of the old buildings were lost. A new school building was under construction at the time, but it was a year before students were able to occupy it.



A fire in March of 1931 resulted in considerable smoke and water damage to the **Clayton Hotel** building (now the site of the Bridge Creek Inn). Repairs were made and the hotel continued operation. Then in January of 1946, a devastating fire completely destroyed the hotel and its furnishings. (photo above) The loss was partially covered by insurance, and again it was rebuilt and continued to operate.



In December of 1951, a blaze completely destroyed the **Rabun Boathouse** at Lakemont along with boats, motors, equipment and tools.



The **Mountain View Inn** opened on Warwoman Road in 1916. In March of 1975, it was burned with nothing left but the chimney and stone porch. The site is now occupied by the Mountain View Nursing Home.



Several fire departments in the county and from North Carolina responded to a fire at the **Sky Valley Resort Lodge** in 1983. The structure was saved.



A fire burned the **Old Lakemont Elementary School** in January 1959 and left it a mass of charred ruins. All students were safely evacuated.



On Sunday, May 12, 2005, **LaPrade's**, the legendary 70 year old restaurant was destroyed by a fire that started in a nearby shed. It spread to the restaurant that had been closed more than two years.

The **Cliff House**, a fifty-room hotel at Tallulah Falls, was totally destroyed by fire in August 1937. The Cliff House was one of the few structures that had survived the devastating Tallulah Falls fire in 1921. The building was not insured and was not rebuilt.

The historic **Earl House** hotel on Warwoman Road burned to the ground in April 1940. Wind carried burning embers more than a half mile and set the fields and forests on fire, burning more than three thousand acres. The building was not insured and was not rebuilt.

The **Dillard Methodist-Presbyterian Church** was completely destroyed by fire on May 2, 1947.

An attempted jail break at the **Rabun County jailhouse** resulted in four prisoners being killed in March 1972. A prisoner set mattresses on fire in a storage room, hoping to be able to escape in the confusion.

Rabun County Historical Society  
81 North Church Street  
P.O. Box 921  
Clayton, GA 30525



Phone: 706-782-5292  
www.rabunhistory.org  
Email:  
rabuncountyhistory@gmail.com



- Please visit our museum and research library Wednesday through Saturday from 11:00 until 3:00.
- Group tours by appointment



### ***Historical Society Membership Updates***

Welcome to our new members  
who have joined since December 2024

Benefactor

Howard & Cheryl Beckert  
Family Fund

Family

Tim & Kristi Matheson  
Bruce & Constance Nunley

Patron

Sammie Maxwell

Friend

Mark Smith  
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Dover Williams

*A special thank you to Wayne and Joan Law for a  
generous donation in honor of Mary Elizabeth Law*