

Brannock Family Becomes Known For Civic Activities

By NANCY DAMRON
Staff Writer

For as long as there's been a Mount Airy Fire Department, there's been a member of the Brannock family involved, with the family also being known for civic activities.

William Hastings "Uncle Bud" Brannock began the tradition that is still carried on by his descendants.

Benny Brannock, the great-grandson of Uncle Bud, now carries on the family tradition since his father, Ben Brannock, retired some years ago. Ben Brannock had simply followed in the footsteps of his father, J. Ed Brannock.

But, Uncle Bud was the first, a charter member of the Mount Airy Fire Department established in 1904. He was joined then by his two brothers, Penn and Frank. All three were the sons of Jim and Susan Brannock.

Uncle Bud was the city's first paid fireman, earning \$45 per month. In days, he manned the fire department, located in a building on Main Street across from the Post Office, seven days a week year-round with no holidays or vacations.

In fact, the only time he went home was for meals. It was about a seven-minute walk to his Junction Street residence from the fire station.

Local folks most closely associated



On hand for the dedication of the Rockford Street Fire Station in the late 1960s were (l-r) Ben Brannock, Penn Brannock and J. Ed Brannock.

Uncle Bud with Old Reuben, the city's fire horse who was bought in 1913 for \$325. It's been said that when Old Reuben heard the fire bell, he would leave his stall and head for the fire wagon, arranging himself under the shafts.

Old Reuben went by the wayside of modern technology when the city bought its first fire truck.

Being the only fireman tended to

get lonely and when Ed Brannock was about 11 or 12 years old (1914-15) he began accompanying his father to the station, spending the nights there.

He accompanied his dad to the fires and it was no surprise that when the younger Brannock was about 18, he became a volunteer firefighter. That was in May 1921. He was promoted to captain in 1931.

In 1935, he joined the department as a full-time fireman and was named assistant chief in 1946, a position he held until 1951 when he was named chief, succeeding Green Witt, who retired because of ill health.

Meanwhile, in 1954, Uncle Bud, who had continued to serve the department, was injured when a truck struck his vehicle. His wife, also in

the car, died a short time later from her injuries.

Uncle Bud remained in the hospital for several months before returning home. However, he returned to the hospital, suffering from pneumonia, in late 1954 and died just hours after being admitted. He had marked his 50th year with the fire department in February 1954.

After his death, a water fountain

was placed at Veterans Memorial Park in his honor, but it later was moved to the Rockford Street fire station.

Brannock's son carried on the tradition and became known for his recall of the city's major fires — those that destroyed furniture factories, threatened the central business district and resulted in lost lives.

During Chief Ed's years, the Fire Department became the setting for nearly nightly games of setback involving some of the city's most prominent residents, including Congressman John Folger and school Superintendent L.B. Pendergraph.

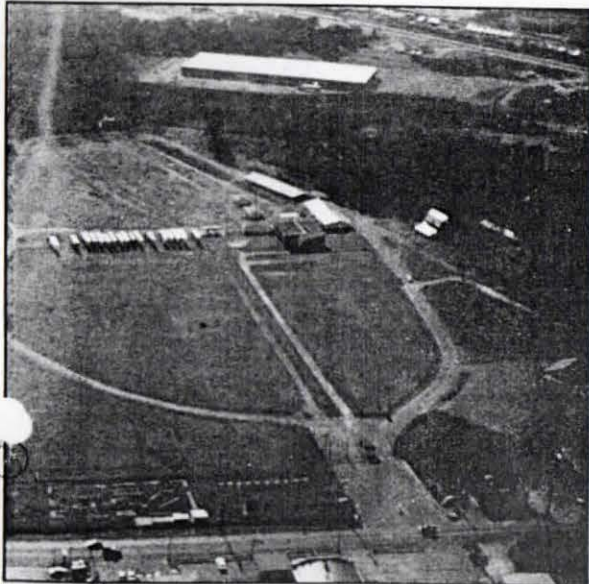
Chief Ed also doubled up in his duties for Mount Airy, acting as the building inspector. That made him in charge of issuing the permits for nearly all construction projects inside the city limits.

The second of the firefighting Brannocks, during his years as chief, worked hard for the construction of a new firehouse on Rockford Street.

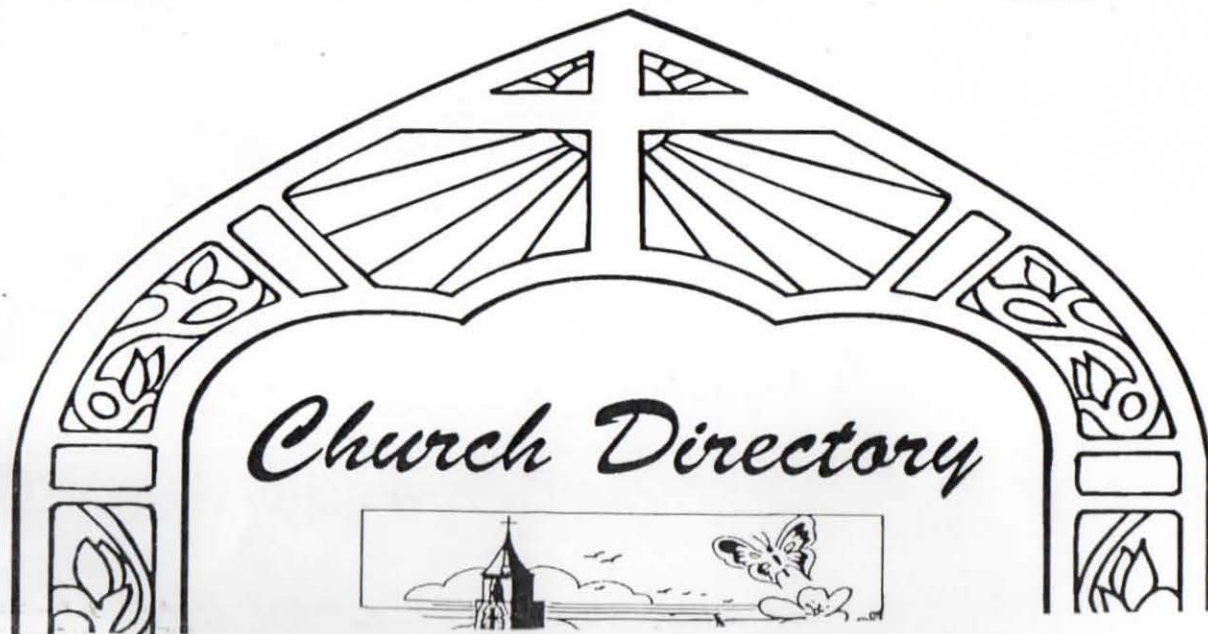
He also became known for his love of Mount Airy history and his uncanny ability to recall dates and times of events.

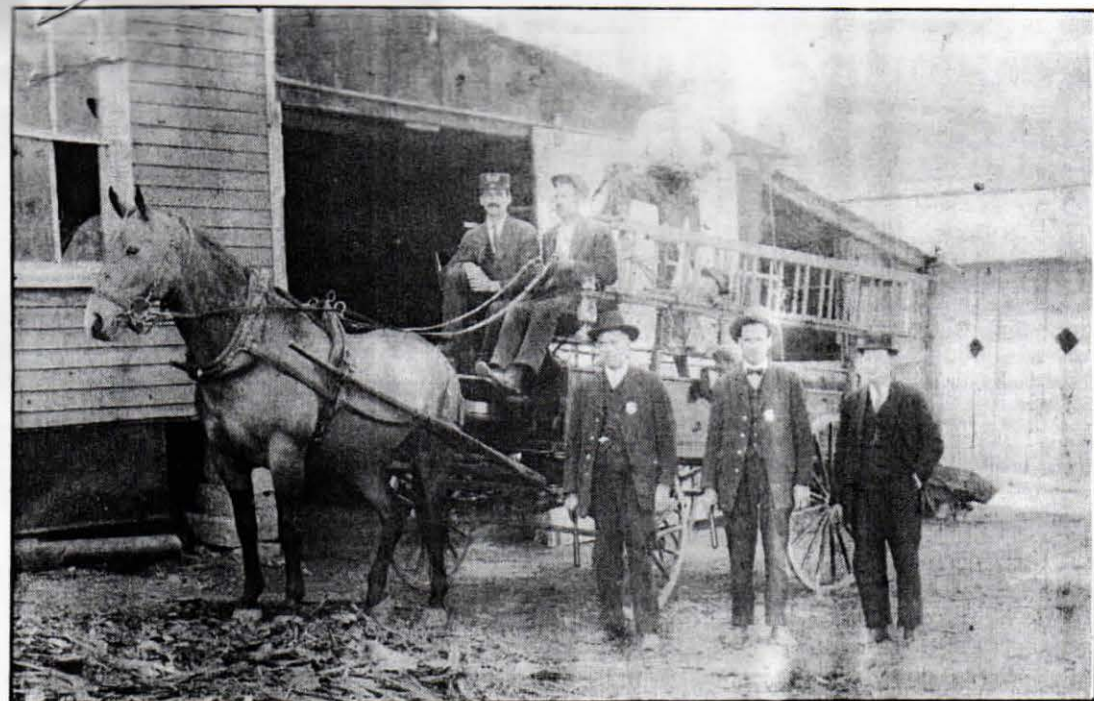
He retired, but looking for ways to stay busy, became a bondsman. He served on the Surry County Jury Committee and was an avid gardener. In addition, he was a member of the Granite Masonic Lodge, Oasis Shrine Temple and Order of the Eastern Star. He was a prominent member of First Baptist Church and was married to Cynthia Walker of Stuart, Va.

Ed Brannock died in June 1989 after a brief illness.



This is an early aerial shot of Veterans Memorial park.





Old Reuben and these early firemen pose outside an old Mount Airy fire station. On the ground are (from left) Tobe Taylor, Harvey S. Boyd and Dr. R.J. Banks. On the wagon (from the left) are R.L. Jones, W.E. Brannock and Tom Dearmin. Peering through the ladder is Payton Brannock.

Fire Department Dates To 1904

By R.J. BERRIER
News Staff Writer

The Mount Airy Fire Department, housed for years in modern structures on Rockford Street and, later, on North Main Street and boasting an array of firefighting equipment as excellent as that of any small city in North Carolina, was not always so fortunate.

There are many area residents who can recall the cavernous fire station in the old City Hall on Moore Avenue. It was drafty, although the heated set-back games played each night except Sunday could charge up the atmosphere.

Long before that, however, Mount Airy had a fire department and it also had Old Reuben, the department's legendary firefighting horse.

Old Reuben was one smart animal. When he heard the fire bell, he would become agitated, prancing around as if to ask his keeper, W.H. "Uncle Bud" Brannock, "What's the holdup. Let's get this show on the road."

Reuben would leave his stall and go to the fire wagon — remember, now, this was in the early 1900s, long before the department became mechanized. He would position himself perfectly between the shafts.

He was also a house-broken horse. When he felt nature's demands, Reuben would begin pawing the floor of his stall.

"Uncle Bud" Brannock began the Brannock tradition with the Mount Airy Fire Department in 1904. At that time, the fire station was situated in a building on Main Street across from

the U.S. Post Office.

The Mount Airy Fire Department — it began as the Mount Airy Hose Company — launched operations Feb. 8, 1904. Seventeen members were present, although eight of the charter members missed that first meeting.

Two units comprised that first firefighting organization — Section 1 and Section 2. D.D. Parks was elected chief, while John Fuller was elected captain of Section 1 and John Hodges, captain of Section 2.

Each member gave 25 cents to the department's general fund in order to buy a record book. Permanent records were just that — long-lasting — back in the good old days, for that old record book is yet at the Rockford Street Fire Station.

The Mount Airy Hose Company answered its first call some two months later — on April 5. The fire was in a small building owned by the railroad company near the depot at the bottom of Granite Street.

While the first fire station was described as being on Main Street across from the U.S. Post Office, that specific post office was not identified. The Mount Airy Post Office suffered from wanderlust from the time of its establishment 150 or so years ago and was located in numerous places before finally settling down in the early 1930s on Renfro Hill — its present site.

Those hardy first firefighters began their volunteer efforts with two hand reels. Hand reels, according to present Fire Chief Bill Joe Woodruff, were

two-wheeled carts containing a reel with a hose.

The firemen pulled these carts. It was probably a good thing for the firefighters' backs that Mount Airy was a great deal smaller at the turn of the century than it is today.

It was Aug. 18, 1913 that the town's first fire wagon was purchased. It was pulled by a horse and had its fire hose packed on top.

The fire horse, by the way, was Old Reuben, the first — and only — fire horse used by the Mount Airy Fire Department.

"Uncle Bud" Brannock looked after Old Reuben, working seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, with no holidays or vacations. He received \$45 a month for his labor.

The Mount Airy Hose Company, to return to those early 1904 days, had to have lights to go to and from fires. Cleve Belton and Leonard Irvin were elected lantern boys on April 7 of that year.

Time passed.

The Mount Airy Fire Company was organized March 8, 1916. A.G. Webb, a local businessman who was also active in banking circles, was elected chief.

In 1917, Old Reuben got his walking papers. The Mount Airy Fire Company purchased its first motorized piece of fire equipment, a solid-tired truck with chain drive. It was custom-made by the American LaFrance Fire Apparatus Co. and cost \$8,500.

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Reuben

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The truck was used by the department until 1947, when it was sold. It was reacquired by the department and in 1976, was rebuilt and now has an honored place at the Rockford Street Fire Station.

The truck included a high-powered auxiliary pump, chemical tank and pump, hose, ladders, hooks and other auxiliary items. The cost, however, was regarded as excessive by some local business leaders in this fiscally conservative period.

Old Reuben was sold to a Winston-Salem coal company.

The new fire engine arrived Jan. 29, 1917 and was unloaded at the railroad crossing on West Pine Street and taken uptown. The first fire truck was housed in a building on Main Street between Franklin Street and Moore

Avenue. The fire department remained at that site for some two years — until 1918 while the fire station and City Hall on Moore Avenue were being built.

Mount Airy's second fire truck, which cost \$12,500, arrived Dec. 18, 1926. That was the night one of this city's most disastrous fires occurred, destroying the Schafer business block in the northern portion of the business district.

The blaze was accompanied by a dynamite blast near its source of origin in the old Midkiff-Brannock business block on North Main Street. Three stores were wrecked.

Fire trucks from Winston-Salem and Greensboro sped here to assist the local department. The fire began about 11:30 p.m. and was not brought

under control until nearly daylight.

Both the 1917 and 1926 fire trucks are still housed here.

The Rockford Street Fire Station was dedicated on a snowy Sunday afternoon in 1969. It is the city's No. 1 fire station and will accommodate five or more pieces of equipment and houses bedroom and kitchen facilities.

The North Main Street Fire Station was built in 1975 at 1310 N. Main St. and the old fire headquarters in the City Hall building on Moore Avenue was closed.

The Mount Airy Fire Department has maintained extensive records from the start. It is because of these that the memories of Old Reuben and Mount Airy's legendary firefighters of old remain fresh.

Brannock Fire Department Tradition Began In 1904

By R.J. BERRIER
News Staff Writer

For most of this century there have been Brannocks at the Mount Airy Fire Department — sometimes one, more often than not, two or three. It is appropriate that a series of stories about the Mount Airy Fire Department include with the saga of the Brannocks, the one family most closely associated with the department and the city's firefighting endeavors since 1904.

W.H. "Uncle Bud" Brannock officially started the tradition 86 years ago — when the 20th century was beginning. Of course, he was joined at the start by a couple of brothers and a cousin.

First and foremost, though, there is "Uncle Bud," without a doubt one of the most colorful, certainly the most legendary, figures ever to wear the uniform of a Mount Airy fireman. He was followed through the years by his son, grandson and great-grandson. "Uncle Bud" was joined at that first start of the department by brothers Frank and Jim Brannock and their cousin, Banner Brannock.

"Uncle Bud" was Mount Airy's first paid fireman — earning \$45 a month. For that \$45, he worked seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, with no holidays or vacation.

Oh, yes. He also stayed at the fire

station full-time, only going out to get his meals. He even slept in the station, beside the stall of the city's equally legendary fire horse, Old Reuben.

The two made quite a combination, with duties other than firefighting. Their major task, when not called upon for fire-related chores, was collecting litter along Main Street. Their route began at Gallaway Opera House (now the site of Brannock and Hiatt Furniture) and continued south along Main Street to Poore's Grocery (now Fabric Menagerie). The results of that litter collection would be dumped behind Holcomb Hardware, where the town would collect the refuse.

Old Reuben went the way of progress. The city bought its first fire truck in 1917 and the fire horse went to Winston-Salem. "Uncle Bud" remained the city's lone paid fireman, still on duty 24 hours a day.

"Uncle Bud" was a member of the local firefighting unit for a half-century. During that time, he was a driver for the town's first fire truck and also the second, purchased in 1926. However, he did not get to drive trucks bought in 1949 and in March 1954.

Brannock retired in February 1954 and the charter member of the Fire Department died Oct. 6, 1954 of injuries he sustained in an automobile accident at Bannertown on Aug. 16 of

that year. A water fountain was placed in his honor at Veterans Memorial Park and later moved to the Rockford Street Fire Station.

Frank Brannock resigned from the Fire Department Aug. 5, 1935, when he entered private business. He had been named captain Aug. 5, 1904, a position he held until May 2, 1910.

Penn Brannock resigned from the department Nov. 1, 1904, after serving about nine months as a fireman. Banner Brannock resigned from the unit May 22, 1923.

The second contingent of Brannocks, sons of "Uncle Bud," had meanwhile joined the Fire Department.

Jim Brannock began his service Dec. 18, 1918, remaining with the department until Feb. 2, 1928. Raymond Brannock joined Feb. 4, 1918, staying with the department until Feb. 2, 1928, when he resigned and moved to Akron, Ohio.

J. Edd Brannock became a volunteer fireman May 6, 1921. He was made captain June 6, 1931, holding the office until May 28, 1935.

It was on Oct. 6, 1935 that he joined the Fire Department as a full-time employee. He became assistant chief June 3, 1946 and fire chief June 21, 1951, when the late Green Witt resigned as chief because of ill health.

In addition to his duties as fire

chief, Brannock was Mount Airy's building inspector. He issued building permits for almost all construction inside the city limits and inspected buildings during the work.

With his rich background, Brannock could recount tales of horse and buggy firefighting days with ease. His love and knowledge of Mount Airy history was as legendary as his ability to recall the exact dates and times of events, as well as who was involved.

He was a member of the Mount Airy Fire Department for 54 years, retiring in 1969 immediately after the opening of the new Rockford Street Fire Station.

Brannock's son Ben continues in his family's footsteps. After completing a two-year tour of duty in the Army he returned to Mount Airy, took a position with Floyd S. Pike Electrical Contractor and became a volunteer fireman more than 33 years ago — June 6, 1957.

Brannock, a captain in the volunteer ranks, has announced that he will be retiring from the Fire Department Dec. 31.

Furthering the Brannock tradition is Benny Brannock, a full-time firefighter, the son of Ben, grandson of Edd and great-grandson of "Uncle Bud."

He became a volunteer fireman Nov. 3, 1980 and joined the department as a regular fireman July 15, 1981.