

Emergency Services

North Lakes Fire Department (NLFD) History

by Chief Darren Woods, Emergency Management Agency

Aroostook County has a rather unique item to share within their Unorganized Territory. They operate a fire department that has an interesting story leading up to the success that it is today. This story began with a handful of local citizens in the township of Sinclair (T17 R4) recognizing the need for fire protection and creating an agreement with the local church for a piece of land which then turned into an old-fashioned barn raising. This was in the early 1940s. They soon realized they needed financial support which is where county government came into play.

In 1980, the neighboring community known as Guerrette (T17 R5) had a fire in which three people died. This was very hard on the community and residents decided they needed a fire station closer than Sinclair. So once again, residents took it upon themselves to build a garage right across the street from that fatal fire. This second station became part of the Sinclair Volunteer Fire Department. But there was a problem. Back in the 1940s there was also a church built in the village of Sinclair. This was very controversial however, because there was heavy competition for it to be built in Guerrette. When the final decision was made, the heavy and very personal feud began between the two unorganized communities. In the 1990s the members of Sinclair Fire Dept. "station 2" decided on their own to separate and against the wishes of the Aroostook County Commissioners broke the department into two the second one being called the Guerrette Volunteer Fire Department.

In the 1990s both departments suffered from a lack of strong leadership and the stations spent more time fighting than training. This included some instances of law enforcement having to respond and break up the "meetings."

In the late 1990s, the County Commissioners could no longer overlook this issue citing liability concerns and public safety issues they asked the Aroostook County Fire Marshal to do a quick audit on the two departments' capability. Based on lack of training and adequate equipment, his recommendation came back to either shut them down or come up with a drastic plan for change. Then County Administrator Roland "Danny" Martin recognized that if change was going to happen it needed to come from somewhere outside of the two feuding communities and hired Darren Woods from Caribou as Fire Administrator to facilitate that change. Change never comes easy, and the depth of the feud was immediately evident with the inclusion of threats of physical harm to Mr. Woods that were severe enough to warrant him needing Deputy Sheriff escorts to meetings where the goals were to pull the two stations back together as one department. Each station had only 5-6 members and both were purely defensive only due to lack of training and equipment.

Fast forward again to 2007 and this now unified department finds itself being asked to cover two more unorganized territories. T16 R5 (Square Lake) would now be covered by the newly named "North Lakes Fire & Rescue" because of access and T16 R4 (Madawaska Lake) would now be needing coverage due to contract issues. That was when the third station, located near Madawaska Lake, was purchased from MDOT as they didn't need the garage there anymore.

Today, this department operates three stations and covers four unorganized territories and the Town of Westmanland. The department is very active with 43 members, nine trucks, two UTVs, two snow sleds and a fire training area that includes a building and other props. The members have achieved different levels of training from Basic Fire School to Firefighter 1 & 2, Fire Instructor and Fire Officer 1 & 2.

North Lakes Fire also prides itself on being fiscally responsible as it grows. The members have found that by pulling together to accomplish tasks they can save the taxpayers a lot of money in outside contractor costs. By getting creative,

the department has been able to acquire a lot of equipment, from trucks to snow sleds or hand tools through grants, low cost purchases and in some cases outright donations from other departments around the country.

The department has also gone from one of poor training and numerous safety problems to a very well trained group of firefighters and officers. They have also been recognized five times since 2008 by the Maine Bureau of Labor with their SHAPE award for safety.

As the department improved and grew it found itself becoming a focal point of the region. Other fire departments are now coming to the North Lakes Fire training grounds and stations for everything from basic fire schools to more advanced officer and chief officer trainings.

As this department became more regionalized the members felt it was important to remember who they really are. Basically, that meant understanding that they are a rural fire department, that they serve a highly recreational area full of mostly senior citizens, and that they work for Aroostook County government. So, boundaries became blurred for them as they concentrate more on taking care of people than political issues. This department prides itself on its ability to provide good customer service and that doesn't stop with just fire calls.

North Lakes Fire is proud of its ability to help their neighbors and perform numerous community service roles. There are many examples such as responding to assist an elderly gentleman when his boat dock broke free and his neighbors were worried he would over extend himself trying to fix it so these department members spent some time fixing it for him. Other examples include checking and clearing roads following summer storms to ensure emergency vehicles can pass (no public works on camp roads), bringing in wood following a resident's injury, cleaning driveways or roofs following a resident's cardiac event, checking on elderly residents during power outages, assisting motor vehicles in remote areas and recreational vehicles on trails and many more.

This Unorganized Territory fire department has found the keys to successful regionalization of services and providing high quality service of both emergency service and customer service to citizens that both reside in these areas and those that visit the areas. While this did not come about quickly or easily, we believe that we are providing critical services at a very low cost to these underserved areas.

More information can be found at their website www.northlakesfireandrescue.org or you can find them on Facebook.