



By Toni Garrard Clay

# 'THE FIRE DEPARTMENT DOES WHAT NOBODY ELSE WANTS TO DO'

*In rural America*, there are few organizations that are more crucial to the welfare of their communities than volunteer fire departments. The men and women who staff these often-overlooked departments can be found not only fighting fires, but acting as first responders in any numbers of critical situations. And they do it all for no pay and in addition to their “day jobs.”

“Volunteer fire departments are an integral part of their communities,” said Chris Moore, president of the Henderson County Fire Chiefs Association. “Being so rural, if it weren’t for these departments, help would be 30 minutes, 40 minutes, an hour away.”

While the word “fire” is in the name, the number-one call volunteers respond to doesn’t require water or hoses. “We usually stay pretty busy during the summer months with a lot of grass fires. But our most common daily calls are medical emergencies,” said Gage Guinn, firefighter and public information officer with Poynor VFD. “That’s really become the trend. A lot of departments have EMTs (emergency medical technicians). ...In order to be registered as a first responder organization, you have to have a medical officer.”

## VFDS ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE WELLBEING OF OUR COMMUNITIES

Mabank VFD Chief Ricky Myrick said about 60 percent of their calls are medical. “We have EMTs and paramedics in our department, and a lot of us are taking an emergency medical response course now.”

“The fire department does what nobody else wants to do,” said Moore, who in addition to being president of the fire chiefs association is also the fire chief for three volunteer fire departments: Coffee City, Berryville and Moore Station. “We get critters out of the house; we help grandma when she falls down; we help clear the roads when a tree falls across it at 2 in the morning; during wrecks, we act as traffic control. Oh, and we put out fires,” he added with a laugh.

It’s not uncommon for a VFD member to work long hours on an emergency call, sleep little or none and then report for his or her regular job. In other words, being a volunteer firefighter isn’t for wusses.

“There’s a lot of people who stand on the corner and say, ‘Somebody should do that.’ But only a few stand and say, ‘I will.’ It comes down to dedication and loyalty to your community and your neighbors,” said Moore.

Mabank Chief Myrick said his department is like a second family. “The camaraderie with the other firemen and their families is important,” he said. “That’s not just with our fire department. I have several good friends in other departments, and they all feel the same way.”

According to the National Volunteer Fire Council, volunteer firefighters comprise 60 percent of the national fire service, and the number of volunteer firefighters has declined by over 18 percent since 1984. At the same time, the average age of volunteer firefighters is increasing, and the call volume has nearly tripled in the past 25 years.

All but a handful of volunteer fire departments operate on modest budgets funded by donations to keep their equipment running. In recent years, a few Henderson County communities have voted in favor of establishing emergency service districts. In an ESD, a relatively small percentage of a homeowner’s property tax is earmarked to support the VFDs within the district.

“We’re fortunate in that we’re part of an ESD,” said Guinn of the Poynor VFD. “A board of commissioners distributes funds to us, and that’s our annual budget. It puts us in a good position. We don’t have to worry about what we’re going to do if a truck breaks down. It’s getting harder to run VFDs. The cost of everything is going up.”

Despite the financial challenges they face, most of the 24 VFDs in Henderson County regularly contribute to community causes in one way or another, such as providing holiday meals, “adopting” families in need, working on community centers, collecting canned goods and school supplies, and making stations available as polling places.

With all that volunteer firefighters do that does not involve fighting fires, it’s easy to forget they are also called on to place themselves in danger for the good of others. Guinn recalls a particularly harrowing experience during the summer of 2011 when a severe drought led to a 200-acre grass fire.

“We were out in this neighborhood near Frankston, and the fire raced so quickly we were suddenly surrounded,” said Guinn. “We were struggling to save these houses



Firefighters Michael Reavis (left) and Billy Moore rest after battling a structure fire in Briarwood Bay.

just feet away from fire, and I was driving a brush truck. Suddenly, the smoke was so bad I couldn’t see where I was driving and neither could the other two guys I was with. Fire came up under the engine. It was bad.

“I got on the radio and made a Mayday call. Fortunately, a Frankston truck was pretty close. They sprayed a way out of there. As soon as we got out, we started attacking the fire again. I’ll never forget a woman and a little girl were standing on their front porch while fire raced at them. A truck was able to get to them. ... We saved all the houses in that little neighborhood.”

With stories like that, please remember to support your local volunteer fire department with monetary donations and, in the event of an emergency service district election, with your vote. Our volunteer firefighters deserve no less.

## Henderson County VFDs

Baxter	Mabank
Berryville	Malakoff
Brownsboro	Moore Station
Caney City	Murchison
Chandler	North 19
City of Tool	Payne Springs
Coffee City	Poynor
Enchanted Oaks	Seven Points
Eustace	Shady Oaks
Gun Barrel City*	Tool Fire District
LaRue/New York	Trinidad
Log Cabin	West Side

\* GBC is a “combination” department, meaning a small number of its firefighters are paid.

