**Clinton Township Volunteer Fire Department**

After several decades without formal fire coverage in Clinton Township, the Van Bibber Lake Volunteer Fire Department was organized and established in 1986. Until then, Bainbridge and Russellville Volunteer Fire Departments handled most of the calls within Clinton Township and around Van Bibber Lake, but each department was at least ten miles away. The founders of the department realized that the expansion and proximity of the campers with a high population density around the lake was a perfect storm for a community without immediate emergency response capabilities. Those founders were able to organize a plan for the 400 property owners of Van Bibber Lake Estates to pay $50 per year for fire protection which would total $20,000. That funding was then used to bring the original department into existence. The new department was assigned to cover only the area around the Lake, while Bainbridge would handle the rest of the Township.

To help get the newly formed department off the ground, Russellville Volunteer Fire Department provided much needed used equipment and some formal training. The newly formed department was able to purchase Engine 91 and Squad 92, a used ambulance that could be used for medical calls, but its biggest problem was funding. The above-mentioned plan to collect $50 a year per resident was good in theory but there was no legal basis to collect from those who had no intention of paying. Some residents were very faithful in contributing, but due to a high property turnover rate, others were not, causing a big financial shortfall, a hurdle that needed to be overcome. Membership in the early days was very slim as well. Van Bibber Lake was more a weekend community that was used for parties and water sports without many full-time residents. The first members of the department had very little to no training whatsoever on how to fight fires or assist on medical runs. With that in mind, other county fire departments were hesitant to call them for mutual aid, so the new department only existed to cover the community around the lake and nothing else. Runs were sparse in the early days with the vast majority being medical calls. The first four fire chiefs of the department were Tom Helmer, Paul McCombs, Sandy McCombs, and Debbie Gable. Sandy was the first female fire chief in Putnam County and Sandy and Debbie have been the only female fire chiefs in the County as of 2022.

This lack of funding was a big problem for the department during the first several years but things began to change in 1994 when Pat Quillin was elected as the Van Bibber Lake Property Owners Association president. Pat quickly provided the department with $10,000 in funding and brought about a vote to raise association dues to $120 annually, of which $20 would go to the department. The Association Board agreed with that proposal, and finally the department was able to collect some much-needed funding as well as the legal means to ensure that it would be there on an annual basis. However, the fight was not over as community members filed a suit against the POA protesting the change in dues. Unfortunately for the department, the Putnam County Court ruled in favor of the community members, the old board was dissolved and a new board was installed and Pat was not re-elected as Association President. The new board members quickly voted to discontinue the extra $20 per year fee, so the department was right back to square one.

To compound matters, Fire Chief Debbie Gable became seriously ill and was hospitalized. Her last-ditch effort to save the department was to ask former POA President Pat Quillin to lead the department. Pat had stepped down as board President after the court ruling. Debbie was able to convince Pat to join and in 1996 he obtained his 24-hour Volunteer Fire Certification. In 1998, Pat was elected Fire Chief and he began to work on getting the department necessary equipment, training, and funding.

In 1998 the department received several VHF portable radios from the Greencastle Fire Department. These radios allowed the department to communicate with the County Dispatch, the responding ambulances, and with each other on calls. In 1999, Pat organized a Bass Tournament on Glenn Flint Lake, which adjoins the Van Bibber Lake Community. The tournament became a very big event for the Lake and an important fundraising event for the department, providing critical funding.

In 2002, Pat wrote a grant proposal to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Van Bibber Lake VFD was awarded $65,000 for his efforts. The grant provided 18 self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBAs), an infrared camera to see through smoke, 12 sets of turnout gear for firefighters, hand tools, Holmatro extrication equipment, and 2000 feet of fire hose and nozzles. This grant allowed the department to purchase a different fire engine to put all that newly acquired equipment on. Engine 93 was a Mack pumper, and it faithfully served the department until 2011.

In 2003, after a $1200 donation from the Sheriff’s Ball, the department purchased a medical response van that was named truck 94. The department then required medical certifications for all active members.

By 2004, the Bass Tournament was well established and earning the department an average of $7500 per year. Still, more income was needed, so VBLVFD established a subscription fund into which community residents paid for fire protection. Next the department was able to negotiate a pathway into the Little Walnut Fire Protection Territory with Bainbridge VFD and were allotted, for operating expenses, an additional $12,000 to $19,000 annually for five years.. With this action, they were also able to expand their coverage area to outside the Lake vicinity to calls within Clinton Township and beyond. With the new funding, the department purchased a used 1995 tanker with a 500-gpm pump that carried 1800 gallons of water.

The department did not have much of a fire station. The trucks were kept in a barn- type structure within the Lake property. With a contract in place for the necessary firefighting operations funding, the department received a commitment from the Indiana State Lottery for $135,000 to build a new fire station. The station was to be built on County Road 450 North, just outside the Lake area. The four-bay, 3800 square foot building was completed in 2007. Subsequently, the department reconstituted a new board of directors and Pat stepped down as Fire Chief to allow the department to move in a new direction. Greg Lang was elected Fire Chief and in 2010, the department was renamed as the Clinton Township Volunteer Fire Department. In 2012, the Walnut Creek Fire Protection District purchased a 2012 Pierce Pumper with a 1250 gpm pump and 1000-gallon water tank to be housed at the Clinton Township station: The department had received its first brand new fire engine.

Over the years the department has not had to fight any large fires in Van Bibber Lake, but they have assisted with a couple of major incidents in Putnam County. The first was at the intersection of U.S. 231 and U.S. 36 involving a semi tanker truck hauling wood alcohol. The semi swerved to miss a car that had failed to stop for a red light, hit another car and burst into flames. The semi tanker ruptured and leaked the alcohol into nearby Owl Creek. Many Putnam County departments, as well as a foam truck sent from the Indianapolis International Airport, assisted at the scene. A number of Van Bibber Lake firefighters suffered from exposure to the wood alcohol for several days after this incident. Another major incident remembered by past members was on April 7, 2002, when DePauw University’s Rector Hall caught on fire, consuming the upper floors of the dormitory. Multiple members of the department assisted with suppression efforts that day along with all Putnam County and several Hendricks County Fire Departments.

Currently, the Clinton Township Volunteer Department responds to an average of 175 calls a year within Clinton Township and the surrounding areas with the ability to respond with four fire trucks, including an engine,a tanker, a brush truck, and a squad for medical runs.