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Fires in rural areas . . .

By FRANK VASOVSKI

Any resident of Bryan or College Station who yields the right-of-way to a group of fire trucks may be doing himself a favor: the house they try to reach could very well be his own.

While this assumption is reasonably correct for an urban resident of Brazos County, the chances of a rural home being saved are less favorable because, quite often, the distance between the urban fire station and a rural fire location is more than 25 miles.

The Bryan Fire Department and the College Station Fire Department are the only two organized units of this type in Brazos County. Each is directed by a fire chief responsible to the city manager.

In the absence of similar organizations in Brazos County, both departments are responsible for providing fire protection to the entire county. Efforts are being made to organize local fire departments in Brazos County Precincts 2 and 3 to deal with minor fires.

A line parallel to the boundary line between Bryan and College Station divides the county. The northern area is assigned to BFD, under the command of Fire Chief Don VanHuss. The southern area, consisting mainly of Precinct 1, is assigned to CSFD and is directed by Fire Chief Douglas Landua.

The number of assists to the county is evenly distributed between Precincts 2, 3 and 4, all located in the BFD area, while the corresponding data for CSFD show a strong concentration of assists in Precinct 1.

Neither the precinct commissioners nor the fire chiefs nor the rural population is happy with the present arrangement.

VanHuss said his department provides emergency assistance to the county regardless of the distance and time of the notification. Occasionally, his men arrive at the scene of a fire too late to be of any help, especially in the case of old structures, built without compliance with a building code, and containing an excessive amount of lumber.

VanHuss said that my fires are caused by the negligence and indifference of rural residents in seeking the aid of his department during controlled grass and brush burning and the operating of homemade incinerators.

"A person burning trash frequently will overlook the aerosol cans among the refuse," VanHuss said. Even if the area of the burning is watered down to prevent ignition, the exploding cans are propelled

beyond the safety belt, igniting the grass. Most of the homemade incinerator drums are not equipped with grill covers and often are unattended. The burning particles carried by the thermal draft, help spread the fire beyond the control of the residents.

"BFD has the capability to conduct fire safety lectures for the community of the county, if such service is requested," VanHuss said. However, under the present constitutional restrictions, BFD, a municipal agency, cannot request such instruction for county residents.

Fire Chief Landua and his assistant, Charles Yeager, agree with VanHuss regarding the fire safety consciousness of rural residents. In addition, Landua identified other fire safety problems: the abundance of railroad tracks in Precinct 1, and the "transitory" residents in that precinct, a majority of them being associated with the Texas A&M University system, making them subject to sudden reassignment. He feels that movement of residents in the precinct adversely affects the establishment of a local fire unit, in addition to the considerable cost of the equipment, no permanent residents are available to man the units.

"The fires caused by hot boxes (overheated axle boxes) and by train flares being used by train crews along the grassy areas of the county can be eliminated with the assistance of railroad officials," Landua said.

A more serious problem in Precinct 1 is the possibility of a derailment of a train carrying a flammable or toxic cargo. Even though a train carries two copies of an index indicating the cargo in a car, fire officials could not immediately secure such a list from the crew of the train involved in the cent (Jan. 19) derailment in Bryan.

Neither Landua nor Yeager said VanHuss could offer any estimate of damage resulting from a possible explosion or spill of toxic material, all of them consider such a possibility to be a grave threat to the residents of both cities.

"We will do our best to minimize the damage in all situations," Landua said. While his department is devoted to the protection of human lives and material, Landua said.

(See Unhappy, page 11)

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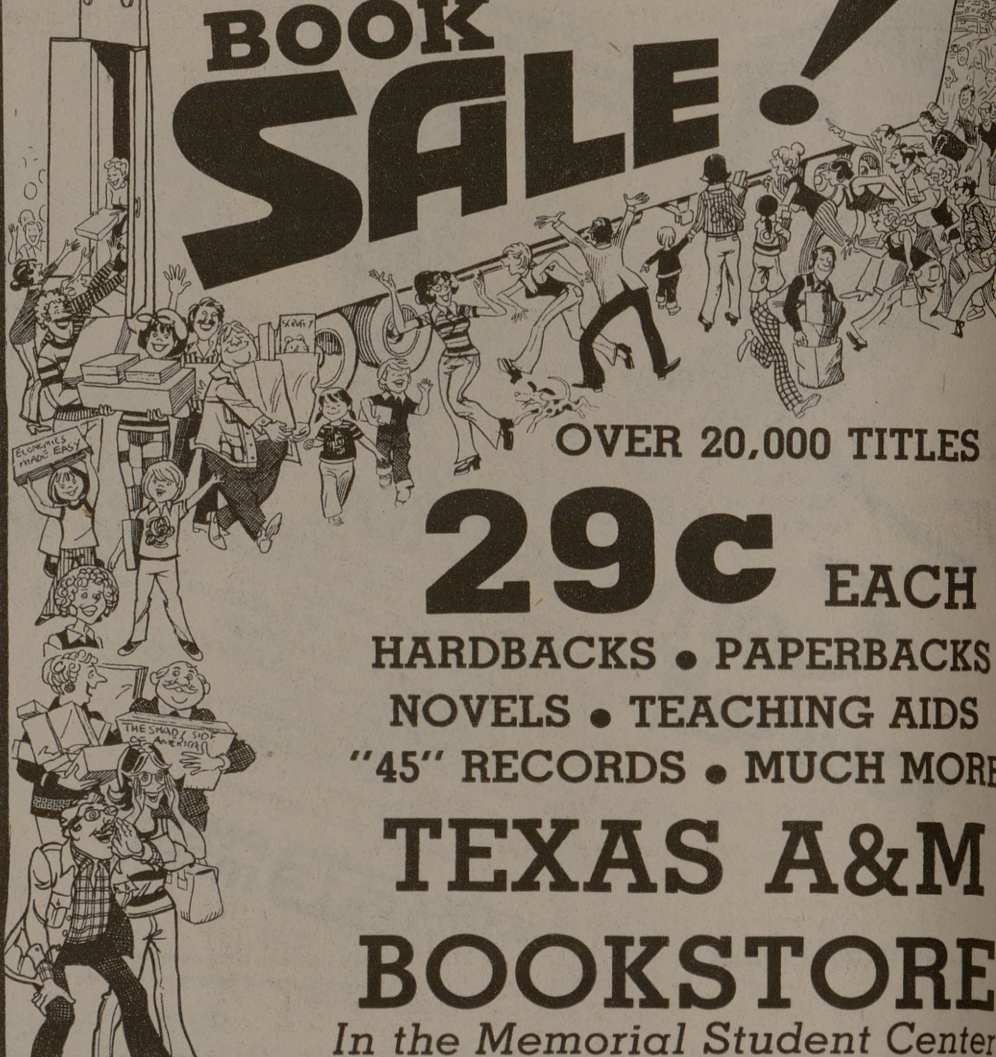

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