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Don Stith: The Smoke Eaters of Warrenton

by David Cecelski. "Listening to History [2]," *News & Observer.* Published 2/10/2002. Copyrighted.
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I interviewed Don Stith at the old firehouse in Warrenton, about 60 miles northeast of Raleigh. He is straight talking, brash, always moving. Above all, he is dedicated to volunteer firefighting -- and to upholding a proud heritage of African-American firefighting that has nearly been forgotten.

Stith is assistant chief of the Warrenton Volunteer Fire Department, founded in 1868 and the oldest all-black fire company chartered in North Carolina. Most of our towns and cities used to have racially segregated fire departments, all white and all black, but the black men at the Warrenton Volunteer Fire Department have been the town's only firefighters for most of its history.

A building inspector and fire marshal, Don Stith has been a volunteer firefighter for 27 years. His mentor, retired chief Leon Cheek, joined us during one of my visits to Warrenton. Cheek once saved Stith's life at a house fire, and Stith's eyes shone with reverence every time he looked at the 80-year-old firefighter.

Don Stith. Photo by Chris Seward, 2002. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

> I'm from a big city, but I moved here after Vietnam, and I was so impressed to see this all-black fire department. They were like cowboys to me! Gunslingers! These guys were getting DOWN! They would get the alarm and they would get on t
>
> Chief Cheek, when it came to a fire scene, he didn't care who you were. You didn't get in his way. He was very competitive, very arrogant in his way, but he got the job done. These were the kind of guys that made up the Warrenton Fire Depa
>
> When I first joined this company in 1974, it was an insult for a man to grab an air pack, 'cause we were smoke eaters. Yeah. If you couldn't go in there and eat that smoke, then you couldn't be a firefighter. You were a punk. We didn't want yo
>
> Cheek was such a hero in my eyes, but we caught hell trying to live up to the reputation that these guys created. In the beginning, it was blood and guts, man. I'll tell you, it was blood and guts. You had to prove to these guys, Cheek and then
>
> See, this department started out as a group of ex-slaves in 1868. They called it the Plummer Hook and Ladder Company, and John S. Plummer was the first chief. The town of Warrenton was a predominantly black town. There were a lot of f
>
> Throughout North Carolina, you had your black fire departments and your white fire departments. The black fire department took care of the black side of town; the whites took care of their area. They'd work together, on occasion, at a major f
>
> And most of the time, historically, the white department was far better equipped than the blacks. We did the best we could with what we had. That antique truck that you see out there now, that '38 Ford, was the first firetruck purchased by this
>
> The times have changed, Dave. The days of the all-black fire department are all but over. I bet there's not five all-black fire companies left. Take a look around. To be a volunteer firefighter, you got to have a desire to want to train hard, help y
>
> I'll never forget the look on Wilbur Davis' face when they had that fire at his house. I was fire marshal then. I was in the area, and I saw smoke coming out of the house. I ran up there, and the caretaker that was looking after him said, "Mr. Da
>
> I got on the radio: I told them I got smoke showing, I got a nonambulatory black male in there, I'm going in. I didn't have an air pack, nothing. I remember that old guy raised up off the bed, and he said, "Son, how you going to get me out of he
>
> I said, "We going out of here, Mr. Davis."
>
> He said, "You can't carry me!"
>
> I said, "You let me worry about that." I got him out of there. He wasn't a small guy, but I got him out of there. And the look on his face when he said, "Thank you, son, " that was worth it. See, it's moments like that.
>
> And then I did like Chief Cheek and them used to do: I wiped my brow and I got in my car and rode off.

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