

A Somerset Historical Vignette: The Rinky Dink Fire Department
By Jack Gibson

During the mid to late 1930s, John Bryan organized five Cumberland Avenue boys -- John and Bobby Bryan, Hartley Day, Prentiss Childs and Jack Gibson -- into a club called the Rinky Dink Fire Department (RDFD). Sometime later Roger and Edward McAllister moved to Cumberland Avenue and joined the club.

Our club had a very serious purpose: during hot dry summer days and nights, coals falling from the B & O coal-burning steam engines that ran along the west edge of Somerset, often started brush fires in the fields behind Cumberland Avenue. The primary purpose of the Rinky Dink Fire Department was to extinguish those fires -- and any other brush fires in the area.



Top center: John Bryan. Center left to right: Prentiss Childs, Ed McAllister, Hartley Day, Bobby Bryan. Sitting left to right: Jack Gibson, Roger McAllister

We started out using old brooms to put out the brush fires. Later the Bethesda Fire Department gave us a hand operated, back-mounted Indian Fire pump. This was the same equipment the Fire Department used to fight brush fires where they could not use hoses. They also provided some training and a large hand operated siren.

Our siren was kept at the club house at the rear of the Bryan lot at 4905 Cumberland Avenue. The club house, originally a tool shed used during the construction of a house on the south side of

Cumberland in the late 1930s, was our meeting place and storehouse. We got the construction crew to give the shed to us, but probably had to do disassemble and reassemble it to get it to the new location.

Over several years in the late 1930's, we put out many grass fires, almost always without the help of the regular fire department. The Rinky Dink Fire Department did get some recognition for its efforts. On one occasion the club marched in a parade in Bethesda. On one or two occasions our fire department was mentioned in the Bethesda Record newspaper. And the Club was also featured in a Sunday edition of the Evening Star newspaper.



The seven-member RDFD plus their "mascot", Ronald Gibson. Note the Indian fire pump and siren provided by the Bethesda Fire Department. The three younger members are holding brooms, the boy's primary equipment for extinguishing brush fires.

John Bryan went on to establish and chair the first Department of Fire Protection Engineering in the country at the University of Maryland. He became a nationally recognized figure in this field being selected as the Man of the Year by the Society of Fire Protection Engineers in 1977, receiving the prestigious Paul C. Lamb Award from the National Fire Protection Association 1986 and the Parmalee Award from the American Fire Sprinkler Association in 1991. Professor Bryan has authored two textbooks and numerous technical papers.