

HISTORY MAKER

NED RUSSELL STUART

Born: Jan. 10, 1894, Winston-Salem

Died: Feb. 26, 1986, Kernersville

Known for: A pioneering automobile dealer and lifelong public servant, school board member, alderman, Chief Air Raid Warden during World War II, founding member of the Kernersville Fire Department and Fire Chief for 40 years.

Like many of his generation, Ned Stuart fell in love with motors. They saw the veritable explosion of innovation as combustible engine tech powered everything from toys to “horseless carriages” to air machines.

At 16, he got his first job driving trucks. In 1920 he moved from Winston-Salem to Kernersville, where he opened the first automobile dealership and service garage.

After a major fire devastated the north end of the downtown business district in 1923, the town put in water access, and Stuart, with experience in the Winston-Salem Fire Department, established the Kernersville Fire Department. He served as the fire chief for the next 40 years.

The middle of nine children born to John Robert and Sarah Orabelle (Hendrix) Stuart, Ned helped in his father's Winston-Salem carriage and blacksmith shop when he wasn't in school. The family moved to Kernersville in 1907 to open a hardware store. It was one of the businesses lost in the fire.

Stuart attended Guilford County's Oak Ridge Military Institute before becoming a commercial truck driver in Roanoke and Petersburg, Va. An older brother worked for the Winston-Salem Fire Department, and they needed a driver. The chief sent a telegram offering him the position in 1916.

“It was better money than I was making,” he said in 1963. “So, I gave it a try.”

That turned into a lifelong dedication.

After volunteering for a stint in the Army aviation and balloon services during World War I, he brought his training, mechanical skills, and passion for trucks to Kernersville.

The 1923 fire did more than \$250,000 in today's dollars. He led the town to purchase their first fire engine in November of that year. His experience aside, he also had a garage where the town's firetruck was housed and maintained.



NRS Sr., NRS Jr., & Robert with the Big Wrecker

FROM “A MAN & HIS TRUCK” BY ROBERT STUART

Ned. R. Stuart Sr. (left) Ned Stuart Jr. and Robert Stuart with the family's Big Wrecker.

In 1966, after more powerful trucks were bought and the '23 was mostly retired, department members gave it a loving restoration. It had been maintained fire-ready and needed little more than a good paint job and some body work.

For much of his time as chief, calls for the department rang to a phone in his apartment above the Stuart Motor Co., where there was a fireman on duty 24/7.

He was a charter member of the town's American Legion Post and active member of the Lion's Club. During World War II, he was among the first trained in civil defense procedures and served as Chief Air Raid officer. He served many years as the town's building inspector, on the education board and as an alderman.

But in the end, the fire department was his real calling.

His obituary in the Winston Salem Journal quoted him discussing his time as fire chief. “I've appreciated every minute of the time (in the department) ... To me it's the ultimate service to other human beings.”