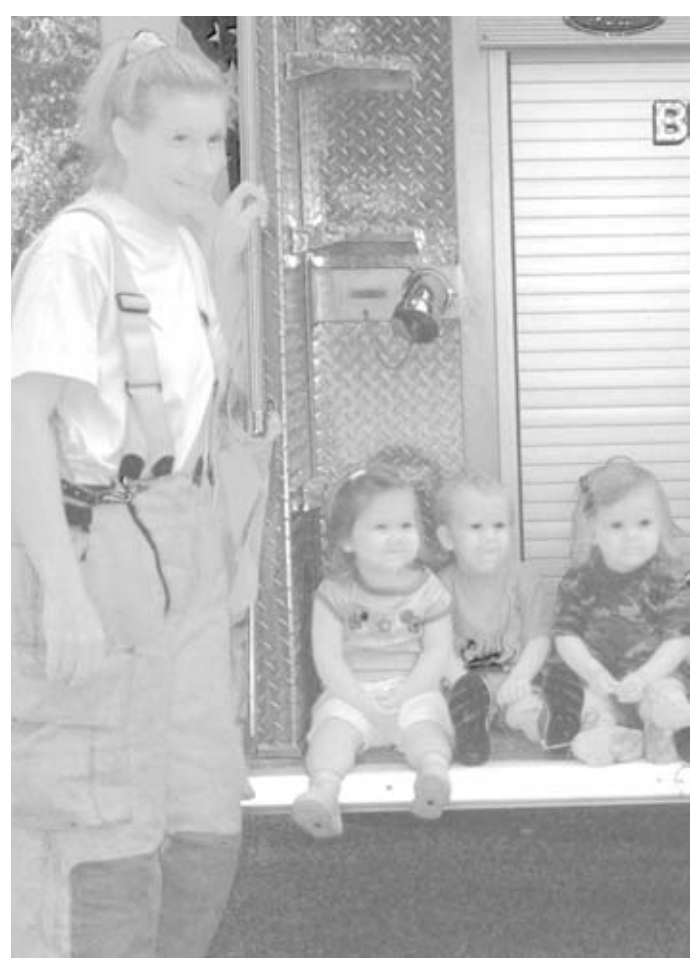
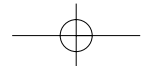


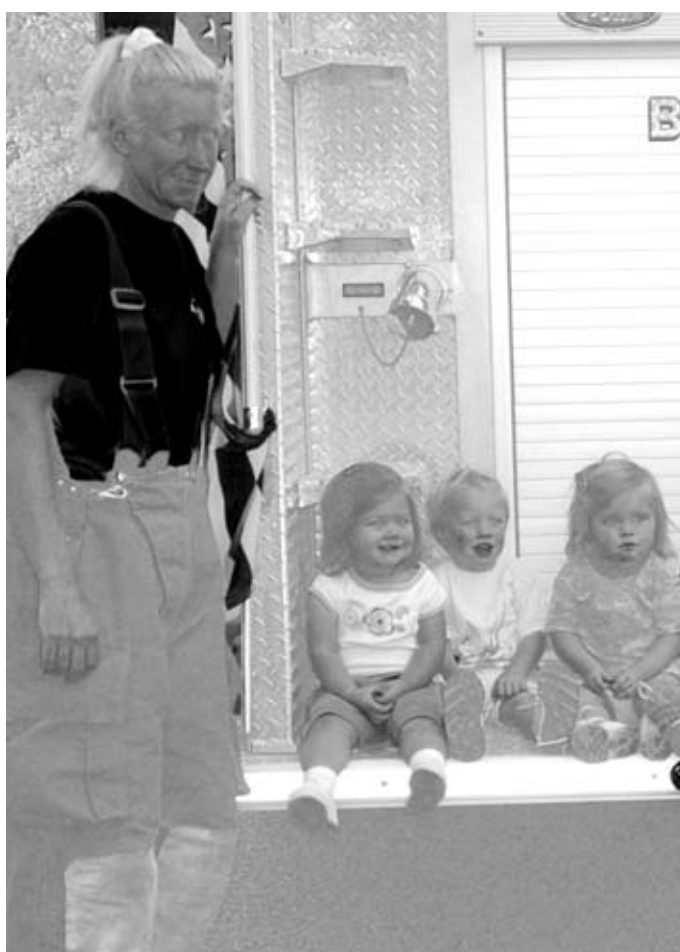
Female firemen ... fighters



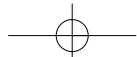
The Sun now shines twice as brightly .. Tuesdays & Fridays!

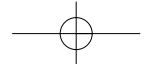


Female firemen ... fighters

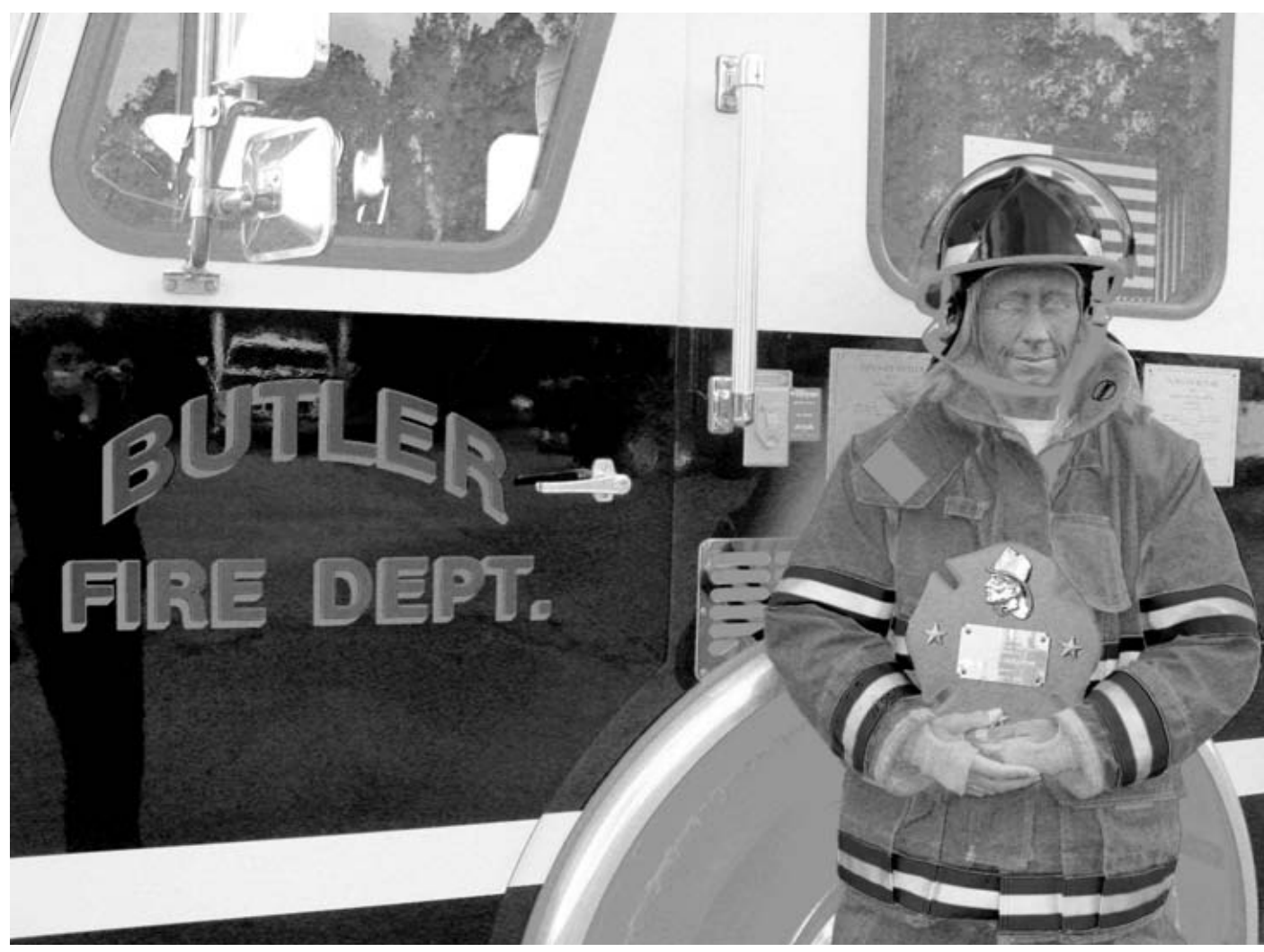


The Sun now shines twice as brightly .. Tuesdays & Fridays!

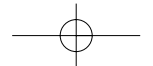




Female firemen ... fighters



The Sun now shines twice as brightly .. Tuesdays & Fridays!



Female firemen ... fighters

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER, SILAS — “I do this to help people,” says Melissa Skelton. “I tell other women that they can do it, too.”

For the past 2 years, she has been answering the call, donning her gear, and responding when the community needs her. Whether the call comes at 2 a.m. or the middle of the afternoon, when the alarm sounds, she’s there.

Skelton is one of a small but growing percentage of women in the United States who are firefighters, and last month she was voted Firefighter of the Year for the Butler Volunteer Fire Department — an award never before given to a female.

It was an honor bestowed upon her by her peers, and one that she says she treasures deeply.

“I had no idea it would be me,” she says. “I thought it would be one of the boys.”

“When we saw that Melissa was going to get it,” says Fire Chief Max Edwards, “my wife told me we couldn’t call it ‘Fireman of the Year’ anymore. We had to call it ‘Firefighter of the Year.’”

Nationwide, only about 2% of firefighters are female. But with more and more women getting involved — whether as a career field or as a volunteer — many departments today have percentages as high as 10 to 15% female, and the trend is growing.

While Skelton, along with several other women in the county, holds a volunteer role in a non-compensated rural department, more than 4,500 women now hold career-level positions in nearly a thousand fire departments across the United States. Hundreds more women work for the Federal government or state agencies in wildland firefighting roles.

Many thousands more work in other types of roles within the fire department, including auxiliary roles that involve fund-raising and support for the firefighters.

According to the Alabama Association of Volunteer Fire Departments (AAVFD), there are about 24,000 volunteer firefighters currently involved in their local departments across the state. Of that number, roughly 10-12% are women whose roles are strictly firefighting, with about 20% working as firefighter/EMT’s.

“Having women firefighters in Choctaw County began with them getting involved with the ladies’ auxiliary,” explains Johnny Alberson, Butler firefighter who also serves as President of the AAVFD. “There were members who got involved that way, and then some began to actually fight the fires.”

Among the county’s first women firefighters were Evelyn Adams and JoAnn Copeland, who were instrumental in the work of the Silas department in the 1980’s.

“JoAnn and Evelyn were most likely the first women to fight fires in the county,” Alberson agrees. “There may have been others, but I believe they were the first.”

“We did it all, even back then,” says Adams.



Submitted photos
Butler firefighter Melissa Skelton became the first female to be named Firefighter of the Year at the department during their end-of-the-year awards’ dinner in December.



Possibly the first women firefighters in the county, Evelyn Adams and Joann Copeland are pictured in this photo taken in the mid-80’s (2nd and 3rd from left), along with other members of the Silas VFD at that time.



Among her favorite roles as a firefighter, Skelton says, is her visits to local schools, like this recent visit to Patrician Academy. She says she hopes, by seeing her as a firefighter, young girls will see that they can do it, too.

the trucks doing training,” Skelton says. “It’s not hard, but you have to learn.”

In addition to Skelton and Wallace, there are several other women who have been active firefighters in the county, including long-time Lisman firefighter Linda Turner-Gaines.

Gaines has been volunteering as a firefighter in Lisman since 1980, and has received extensive training in all aspects of the job. Throughout her years with the department, she has been instrumental in the response to more than 80% of the fire calls in that area of the county.

With ample numbers of committed volunteers often hard to come by, Chief Edwards says that he hopes there will be more women willing to get involved.

“We really want this to grow, to increase it in Butler as much as we can,” says Butler Fire Chief Max Edwards. “The availability of men is not enough to do the job, and these women can do it.”

In an effort to bring in other women firefighters, Skelton is vocal about her role and regularly encourages others to get involved.

“Other women say, ‘I can’t do that,’” she says. “I didn’t think I could either. But I set my mind to it. I still don’t know everything I need to know about it, but I learning.”

Skelton agrees that many women may have the mistaken impression that the heaviness of the gear and the manual efforts that are required of firefighters are too difficult for females. But, she says, those issues are not insurmountable.

“The gear is heavy, but you don’t have a problem with it after you get used to it,” she says. “There is a lot of pressure on the hoses, but somebody else is always there to help you with it, whether you are a man or a woman.”

Despite the fact that she is female, Skelton says that her fellow firefighters do not treat her differently. They simply do their jobs, and she does hers.

It is her ability to do her job, and her hard-working attitude, that earned her the most prestigious award given to a firefighter in Butler — an award voted on by the peers who work beside her on the job.

“It takes a lot to get Firefighter of the Year,” Alberson says. “The votes come from your contemporaries, and it’s a very good feeling to know that they think you deserve it.”

And when other women ask her about her role with the fire department and about her Firefighter of the Year award, she simply tells them it’s something they should do, as well.

“When they saw I had gotten the award, they said, ‘You go, girl!’” says Skelton. “But I just tell them, ‘You can ‘go,’ too!’”

“There’s seldom a meeting that goes by that we’re not out there with

“These women work at what they do.”

-- Johnny Alberson
AAVFD
President

Grant-writing workshop to be held in Butler

BUTLER — The Black Belt Community Foundation (BBCF) will conduct a Grant Seekers Workshop in Butler on Tuesday, January 30 at 5:30 pm, at the Choctaw Community Development Center.

The BBCF is beginning its second round of Black Belt Arts Initiative grants. Community organizations based in

and serving BBCF’s 12-county service area are eligible to apply, including the counties of Bullock, Choctaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Perry, Pickens, Sumter and Wilcox.

The Black Belt Arts Initiative is a project of the BBCF in collaboration with the Cultural & Youth Committee of the

Black Belt Action Commission and the Alabama State Council on the Arts. The goals of BBAI are to promote arts awareness, arts appreciation, and creativity throughout the Black Belt. Grant applicants are invited to submit proposals that portray similar objectives.

The upcoming workshop will address the

requirements of application, how to apply, and the BBCF grants review process. The deadline for application will also be announced at the workshop.

For more information contact Whitney Green, BBAI Coordinator at 334-874-1126 or whgbbcf@bellsouth.net, or visit www.blackbelt-found.org.

Dee Ann
From page 6-A

each time someone who lives underneath her Stars and Stripes claims that our nation is the evil one, and all others are somehow justified in their hatred of us.

And a huge hole is ripped in our flag each time a citizen goes overseas and speaks vileness against our nation in other countries, and each time they rant and rave about the ‘evils’ of the U.S. military — the same military that, I might

add, gave them the right to voice their opinions in the first place.

To care for our flag means so much more than simply caring for the physical representation of our country. It means protecting the principles on which it was founded, and understanding that, despite her flaws, America is still the greatest nation that has ever existed on the face of this earth.

Today, we must protect our nation from those who would tear it down — whether from the outside or from within.