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Southern City Hopes to Return Favor to New York

By KEVIN SACK

COLUMBIA, S.C., Oct. 21 — In 1867, two years after this Confederate stronghold was devastated by fire at the close of the Civil War, a group of New York City firemen made a magnanimous peace offering. They shipped a state-of-the-art hose carriage to Columbia, and when it sank in a shipwreck off the Outer Banks, they raised $2,500 to send another.

The Southerners were clearly touched by the gesture from their former antagonists, and promised to return the favor should similar misfortune ever strike New York. At the ceremonial presentation of the hose carriage, Col. Samuel W. Melton, a former Confederate officer and a legal adviser to the Independent Fire Engine Company of Columbia, told the visiting New Yorkers that he hoped his city would one day be able to "obey that golden rule by which you have been prompted in the performance of this most munificent kindness to a people in distress."

Now, 134 years later, that day has come. Led by a brigade of schoolchildren, Columbia is raising $354,000 to buy a fire engine for New York. In addition to losing 343 firefighters in the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, the Fire Department of New York lost 98 vehicles, including 19 pumpers and 15 ladder trucks. The replacement cost of the equipment has been estimated at $47 million.

Civic leaders here say that the fire truck campaign has completed a historical circle. "It brings some closure for us," said Samuel J. Tenenbaum, a local businessman and philanthropist who is active in the campaign, "and it links generation to generation."

When the White Knoll Middle School principal, Nancy L. Turner, conceived of buying New York a fire truck, she was unaware of the historical symmetry. But she soon learned of it from Columbia's fire chief, John D. Jansen, a Staten Island native who has long been fascinated by the linkage between his current and former homes.

In recent weeks, that history has captured the imagination not only of Columbia but of the entire state, and has made what might have seemed a daunting fund-raising goal a relatively certain prospect.

Before this weekend, the students at White Knoll had raised nearly $44,000 from bake sales, car washes, the sale of patriotic T-shirts and buttons, and other projects. They collected donations at a booth at the state fair and raised $400 by offering haircuts in the school lobby. Last week the governor and the mayor came by for a rally.

As word of the campaign has

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A kindness after the Civil War has not been forgotten.

spread, unsolicited contributions have poured in to the school, sometimes at the rate of $2,000 a day. Other schools have joined in, with some bringing tens of thousands of pennies to Ms. Turner's office.

On Saturday, about 70 White Knoll students, wearing red plastic fire hats, swarmed the parking lots surrounding Williams-Brice Stadium, collecting contributions in buckets from tailgaters before the University of South Carolina's homecoming football game against Vanderbilt.

The students' efforts have inspired corporate support and several large gifts from individuals. William Murray, a retired New York lawyer with roots in Charleston, pledged $100,000 if South Carolinians raise the remaining $250,000. An anonymous donor gave $50,000, while a local steel executive pitched in $5,000.

"Whoever would have thought that Columbia would have the opportunity to repay New York for its kindness?" said Chief Jansen, who began his career as a volunteer firefighter in New York and who chokes up when speaking of the 13 friends who were killed in the Sept. 11 attacks. "It's a great twist."

How Columbia burned in February 1865 remains a matter of dispute. The Confederates blamed the invading troops of Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, who arrived in Columbia after torching their way through Georgia. Sherman, said Walter B. Edgar, a South Carolina historian, always denied giving such an order and contended that Confederates started the fire by burning stores of cotton to keep them out of Yankee hands.

Whatever the truth, high winds quickly pushed the flames to the city's wooden roofs, and, within hours, a third of Columbia had been destroyed. As the fire raged, Mr. Edgar said, Sherman's drunken soldiers cut the city's fire hoses. For the next two years, Columbia's volunteer firefighting companies relied largely on bucket brigades.

Then the hose carriage arrived, a gift from the New York Firemen's Association that merited mention in Harper's Weekly and The New York Times. The Times described it as being made of polished rosewood, with wheels painted in crimson and gold. A firehouse logbook of the era, handwritten in exquisite script, preserves the flowery sentiments of the day.

At the dedication ceremony, Henry Wilson, the president of the New York Firemen's Association, called upon "our fellow citizens of the two great sections to emulate our example and thus hasten a restoration to its normal condition and grand proportions of our once beautiful and still united national fabric." Capt. J. J. Mackey, the president of the Columbia fire company, responded that "these noble efforts of yours to assist us must forever remain green in our memory."

Today, as then, a gift may narrow regional differences. Ms. Turner said she hoped the fund-raising campaign would help erase the image of South Carolina created by its protracted debate over the flying of the Confederate battle flag over the state Capitol. And since Sept. 11, she said, even prideful Southerners have come to see New York as "the capital of the American heart."

"We have stopped seeing New Yorkers as distant and unfriendly," she said. "And I hope that feeling of the American family will only continue to grow."

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