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## Local 911 pioneer retires after 18 years

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by ANNA BROWN

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Ethel Rice says she remembers being taken by surprise when the county supervisor asked her to assist with implementing the 911 system in Union County in 1991.

Ms. Rice, then a recreation department employee, had been called into the office of then-supervisor Dale Robinson on a Monday morning.

Robinson asked her if she were interested in transferring from recreation to 911.

“I said, ‘But I don’t know anything about 911,’” Ms. Rice remembers. “He said, ‘Well, no one else in Union County does, either.’”

She accepted the challenge and it took her down a career road that has been fun and rewarding, Ms. Rice said. She recently retired from her position as 911 data base manager and administrative assistant. She was honored Tuesday for her years of service with a luncheon at 911.

“I miss a lot of things about the job,” she said. “There were so many people I met down the road, even on the telephone, just talking with the people. I enjoyed being able to associate with different agencies across South Carolina. You’d meet people on the phone and once you go to different conferences, you can put a face with a name.”

Ms. Rice grew up on North Evans Street, one of 11 children of the late Jimmy and Geneva Cheek Jeter. She attended Sims High School and furthered her education in New York where she worked for 10 years, first for New York Telephone Company and later for Chemical Bank — then the third largest bank in the United States. She is the mother of four sons — Kenneth, Anthony, Alvin and Constant — and she has six grandchildren.

Ms. Rice returned to Union in 1974. After working briefly in textiles, she returned to college and later accepted a position with the treasurer’s office. In the late 1970s she went to work for the county with the recreation department.

In July 1991, Ms. Rice took the job with 911 and her official title was deputy clerk. Jimmy Wilkins was the director. Legislation had not been approved to generate funds to implement 911 through subscriber billing on phone bills, but it was in the works. Ms. Rice and Wilkins went to work on a plan for implementation that would be submitted to the State Budget and Control Board. Ms. Rice had to figure out how much would be charged on each phone line, determine how much money would be generated and figure out how much it

would cost to create the 911 system locally. Union decided to implement an E-911 system, which would allow telecommunicators to dispatch emergency personnel directly instead of having to call another seven digit telephone number.

Bell South, then the major provider of telephone service in the county, was instrumental in the implementation, first by providing the number of hard lines in Union County,

In March of 1992, their plan for implementation was submitted to Union County Council. It set a deadline of 25 months to complete the project. Wilkins then carried the plan to the State Budget and Control Board for officials to hold until legislation was passed approving subscriber billing.

“It was one of the last pieces of legislation to pass that year,” Ms. Rice said.

Union County’s was the third 911 implementation plan to be approved in the state by the budget and control board.

Linda Mitchell was hired as the first addressing technician. Johnny Arrington was the first sign and road maintenance person and Angie Lawson was the first clerk.

Every road and structure in Union County had to be physically addressed and all addresses had to be associated with a name and telephone number. Ms. Rice was responsible for making sure all of the information collected was accurate, there were no duplications and all the information was submitted to Bell South.

On May 4, 1994, Union County cut over to the E-911 system in a test mode that lasted 90 days. The official transition was made on Aug. 4, 1994. Before, that, Union County was deemed 100 percent addressed by Bell South in July of 1994.

“It was an enjoyable experience,” she said. “It was a new path in life, something you never thought you’d be going down. We were responsible for making sure that if someone in Union County called 911, the information I had supplied to Bell South would pull up on the computer.”

Today, Union County is tied in with a national data base, Intrado, in Colorado. Before she retired, much of Ms. Rice’s work was done on line.

“The 911 data base is a continuing job,” she said. “People moving in and out, different addresses, different locations.

Along with her data base and administrative assistant duties, Ms. Rice also worked with 911’s public education program for many years, including supervising the annual Christmas Card contest among students. She oversaw two budgets — one for the county and the other for subscriber billing.

“You have to keep up with 911 information; if you don’t, you will be lost,” she said. “Things changed so much from day to day. Now, there are a lot of wireless calls and calls that come in over the computer.”

During her years of service at 911, Ms. Rice was presented numerous awards, including the Jesse R. Lee Lifetime Achievement Award for dedicated service to 911 and the APCO and NENA Palmetto Award. (Associated Public Safety Communications Officer and National Emergency Numbering Association).

Ms. Rice said she will have plenty to keep her busy during retirement. She is an active member of Corinth Baptist Church and handles media relations for the church. She has held numerous positions in the church and is a member of Circle #2 Missionary.

In retirement, she hopes to spend more time traveling, baking and sewing.

Linda Mitchell, 911 coordinator, pointed out that she and Ms. Rice have been working together as a team since the implementation of 911. Mrs. Mitchell said she will miss Ms. Rice. She said Ms. Rice has almost 30 years of service and is retiring with more years of service than any previous African-American employed by the County of Union.

“It is going to be very different for me; she is definitely on my speed dial,” Mrs. Mitchell said. “She has taken care of all the little things that go on behind the scenes and kept our office running smoothly.”

Mrs. Mitchell said that although Ms. Rice has never answered the emergency lines in dispatch, her work has been the foundation of 911.

“She received the Jessie R. Lee Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials at our state conference in 2008 in recognition of her work and contribution to 911,” Mrs. Mitchell said. “She was responsible for building the 911 administrative offices from scratch. She takes great pride and care in handling the budget by taking the time to shop for the best deals in purchasing everything from office supplies to sign maintenance materials. Our books always balance; if she one penny off she will find it. When it comes to keeping the 911 database, she is diligent in making sure that errors are corrected as soon as possible. Ethel always wanted to be sure that if a citizen called 911, the dispatchers would have accurate, up to date information when sending emergency help to them. I wish her the best in retirement. She has been a dear friend who has worked hard and deserves some time for herself and her family.”

Union County Supervisor Donnie Betenbaugh said Ms. Rice is a team player and that is reflected in the quality of her work.

“She assisted in making the county’s 911 system what it is today,” Betenbaugh said. “We are going to miss her dearly and hope she has a very prosperous retirement.”

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