

Former Weston Fire Chief Fred Moore dies at age 78

Written by Pete Reid, WVFD

Wednesday, 01 December 2010 11:28



Weston lost one of its own last week, when Fred Moore — a former Weston fire chief, fire marshal, forest warden and town constable — died at age 78.

Mr. Moore, who served as fire chief from 1970 to 1996, is widely credited with transforming the Weston Volunteer Fire Department into a modern firefighting organization.

He also played an important role in preserving open space in Weston, working with local philanthropist Katherine Ordway to assemble the lands that today make up the Devil's Den Preserve. Mr. Moore helped cut the original trail network within the Devil's Den property, and continued to serve as forest warden and preserve manager for the Nature Conservancy through the 1990s.

Mr. Moore was a trained horticulturalist and arborist who worked to eradicate non-native plant species on the Nature Conservancy lands.

In his free time, Mr. Moore was an avid "gunner," and enjoyed hunting game birds.

Mr. Moore was part of the last generation of townspeople to be born in Weston, in 1932. His father was a farmhand, and the family lived on the corner of Norfield and Kettle Creek roads.

Mr. Moore often attributed his life-long romance with the fire service to his youthful proximity to the Norfield Fire Station. "I loved fire engines since I was five years old," he recalled in an interview a few years ago. "I used to run out and wait for the engines to go by."

Mr. Moore joined the Weston Volunteer Fire Department at age 16. After graduating from Staples High School, he attended the University of Connecticut School of Agriculture, and earned a degree in ornamental horticulture.

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Following his college graduation, he lived in Arizona for some years. He returned to Weston in the mid-1950s, and rejoined the fire department. He was elected to serve as a fire service lieutenant shortly after his return.

Mr. Moore was subsequently hired to serve as estate manager for Katherine Ordway, a 3M heiress who made her home in Weston.

Ms. Ordway had a great interest in land conservation, and Mr. Moore assisted her in surveying and acquiring open space properties, lands that were later turned over to the Nature Conservancy.

Mr. Moore continued to serve as property manager for the Nature Conservancy's Devil's Den Preserve through the late 1990s, organizing trail crews and marking — and continuously remarking — the boundaries of the conservancy to prevent trespassing.

Constable

In the 1960s, in the days before Weston had a police force, Mr. Moore also served as a town constable. He drove a marked car, and carried a sidearm.

Most of his law enforcement career was fairly uneventful, but late one night he and another constable found three men trying to break into Peter's Market in Weston Center. The men turned out to be career criminals, well equipped with burglary tools and dynamite.

The men tried to flee, but Mr. Moore fired a warning shot and captured two of them. The third man escaped — and continued his crime spree into the state of Maine, where he shot and killed a law enforcement officer, before being killed in a shootout with Maine State Police.

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Mr. Moore's law enforcement career ended when Weston started its own police force, but his association with the Weston fire service became a central part of his life.

In 1963, Weston suffered one of the worst structure fires in its history, when the Hurlbutt School burned down (an account of this fire may be found on the Weston Fire Department's Facebook page).

Mr. Moore was a junior officer on the scene, and was frustrated by water supply problems that doomed the department's suppression effort.

When Mr. Moore was elected fire captain in the mid-1960s, he agitated for better firefighting equipment, including large-diameter water supply hose and new water supply tankers.

Change

"It became evident in the years after the Hurlbutt Elementary School fire in 1963 that the small town volunteer fire department needed to improve in order to meet the needs of our growing community," current Fire Chief John Pokorny said this week. "Fred led our department's progress and growth. He was instrumental in obtaining state-of-the-art equipment and developing procedures that we still use today.

"One example is the large diameter four-inch supply hose that became the industry standard years after Fred introduced it in Weston. Because of Fred, the WVFD now had the ability to deliver large quantities to a fire scene, which drastically increased the likelihood of saving the structure."

Paul Deysenroth, a life member of the Weston Volunteer Fire Department, recalled meeting Mr. Moore for the first time in the late 1960s.

"There was a large woods fire on Blue Spruce Circle and Fred was there," Paul said. "We had

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just moved to town, but I was a former member of the Rowayton Fire Department and asked Fred how I could join Weston department. He set me up and the first fire I went to was on Ladder Hill North, where I worked with Fred and crew, not really having any gear except a rubber coat and an old helmet that I had. Fred and I became the best of friends, a friendship that lasted for 46 years.”

Chief

Mr. Moore’s drive to modernize the Weston fire department gained greater impetus in 1970, when he was elected chief.

In 1972, he presided over the purchase of Engine One, an American LaFrance pumper with a 1,750-gallon-per-minute pump, a modern water supply engine that would provide yeoman service for Weston’s fire department for the next three decades.

Only months after its purchase, Engine One earned its first battle honors when an enormous fire started in Sloane’s Furniture Store on Main Street in Westport. Alerted to the fire by a dispatcher, Fred drove down to Westport.

He found a fierce fire in progress, fueled by foam rubber furniture upholstery, and spreading to neighboring structures.

The Westport Fire Department was undermanned and short of equipment in those early minutes, so Fred called the Weston fire dispatcher and said, “Send me everything!”

It could have been a controversial decision, since it left no reserve engine to cover Weston, but soon all of Weston’s firefighters were hurtling towards Westport in their trucks.

The Main Street fire was in danger of going out of control, much like the Hurlbutt School fire a decade before, but this time water supply would not be an issue. Fred positioned Weston’s

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modern Engine One adjacent to the Saugatuck River, and ordered firefighters to chop a hole in the ice. In went a length of four-inch water supply hose, and soon Engine One's huge pump was churning.

By the end of the day, the Weston Fire Department was running 11 hose lines off Engine One, along with a fire suppression "deck gun" in the middle of Main Street, until the fire was extinguished.

Constant improvements

In subsequent years, Mr. Moore never stopped trying to improve the Weston fire department's equipment and procedures.

He was a great proponent of interior attack, i.e., extinguishing a structure fire at its source. "The only way to put out a fire is go in and get it," Fred said in an interview some years ago.

But he was not satisfied with the structural firefighting masks in use in the 1960s and 1970s — mostly U.S. Navy surplus units dating to World War II — so he pushed to adopt the latest self-contained breathing apparatus, or air packs.

"Before the 1970s, breathing apparatus was not extensively used," Chief Pokorny noted. "In the early 70s, Fred had the foresight to mandate the training and use of breathing apparatus for all firefighters. Because of Fred, Weston Volunteer Fire Department was a safer place to work. When new equipment came on the market, Fred was right on it. He didn't let his budget stop him. If the equipment was going to make his firefighters safer and more successful, he found a way to get it. He would fund raise, or seek donations from residents."

That approach came in handy when the department needed more advanced car-accident extrication equipment.

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“In 1974, the WVFD asked the town to purchase the Hurst tool to help extricate trapped passengers from motor vehicle accidents,” Chief Pokorny recalled. “When the town couldn’t find the \$6,000 in the budget to afford this, Fred didn’t let this stop him. He organized a special fund-raiser so the department could buy this life-saving equipment. Because of Fred, residents and visitors to the town of Weston had a higher chance of surviving a motor vehicle accident.”

Fire marshal

Also in the 1970s, Mr. Moore was appointed Weston fire marshal. During his time as marshal, he was an early proponent of residential sprinkler systems to help protect new houses in rapidly growing Weston.

One of his papers, “Residential Sprinklers, A Viable Solution for Small Towns,” published in the year 2000, is still posted on the U.S. Fire Administration’s FEMA Web site.

Through his work as fire chief and marshal, Mr. Moore influenced several generations of local fire service professionals.

“As a young firefighter in Westport 32 years ago, I looked up to Fred, who quietly and consistently went about his job as chief and fire marshal,” recalled Denis McCarthy, Norwalk fire chief. “I was impressed that he was always looking for innovations in strategy, tactics and equipment. He was a dedicated leader in the fire service, and I was lucky to have known him and learned from him.”

Mr. Moore’s influence is still felt in the current generation of Weston fire officers.

Terry Blake, a Weston fire lieutenant, got his first exposure to the fire service from Mr. Moore. “I remember as a child that my favorite time each year was when Fred, usually accompanied by Cynthia Williams, would speak at the school,” Mr. Blake recalls. “He usually arrived in a fire truck which, as an elementary school student, was the greatest part of the presentation. I still remember those classes fondly and Fred definitely influenced my decision to join the fire department.”

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“Of course, when I did join in 1991, Fred was chief,” Lt. Blake continued. “I remember him frequently referring to us ‘young guys’ — usually preceded by a string of expletives.

“Fred was an old school guy and everyone on the department became a better firefighter being around him. He brought the department forward when he became chief and never stopped pushing us to improve until the day he retired. His contributions to the Weston Volunteer Fire Department and the town of Weston are immeasurable,” Lt. Blake said.

Chief Pokorny said the current Weston fire department owes an enormous debt to Mr. Moore.

“When I was elected fire chief in 1996, I was handed the reins for a fire department that was well organized, trained and equipped,” Chief Pokorny said. “This is because of Fred Moore. Even before he took over as chief in 1970, he was an active officer who took the lead in bringing the Weston Fire Department the latest technology that was available at the time.

“Fred was a confident leader who always had the best interests of Weston and his firefighters in mind.”

Chief Pokorny continued, “For those who never had the opportunity to meet Fred Moore, he was an amazing person. He was educated and well read. He was able to research new ideas and incorporate them into the daily operations of the Weston Volunteer Fire Department.”

If one thing is clear, it is that Mr. Moore maintained a remarkable dedication to Weston throughout his life. From his work in shaping and protecting Weston’s largest open space preserve, to his role in modernizing the fire department, to his early law enforcement duty, there was arguably no Westonite who did more to physically protect the town of Weston and its people in recent decades than Fred Moore.

“Fred was passionate about his job and his town,” Chief Pokorny said. “His life was dedicated to making Weston a safer place to live and work, and for this, we thank him.”

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Services

Mr. Moore is survived by his wife Ann of 49 years; two sisters, Emily and Susan of Weston; four children, Jeffery of Weston, Gregory of Salem, N.H., Robert of Alexandria, Va., and stepdaughter Nichola of Newtown; 10 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held this Friday, Dec. 3, at Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Lyons Plain Road, Weston, at 3.

Donations in memory of Mr. Moore may be made to The Nature Conservancy Katherine Ordway Preserve, the Weston Volunteer Fire Department, or the Weston EMS.