

Weston Fire Department Celebrates 75 Years of Service



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by PATRICIA GAY

For years, the Weston Volunteer Fire Department has sponsored the town's Memorial Day parade and an annual Halloween party. Now the department is putting on a celebration in its own honor.

This year marks the fire department's 75th anniversary, and sometime in August there will be a special event, including a parade, to mark the occasion, Fire Chief John Pokorny said.

The town's fire department is made up of 120 dedicated volunteers who answer fire calls, operate pumper trucks, and act as fire police during road closures and emergencies. Volunteers come from all walks of life and include attorneys and stay-at-home moms.

All firefighters undergo professional training and certification. In addition, the department has two firehouses, a main one on Norfield Road, and a second one on Lyons Plain Road. It boasts a fleet of fire trucks and state-of-the-art fire apparatus.

Formation

However, Weston's fire department wasn't always as sophisticated and up-to-date as it is now. Before the department was formed, Weston's fire calls were received by the Westport Fire Department, which in turn blew a siren in Weston. There would be a series of telephone calls, one household calling another, announcing the location of the fire.

It was common for interested residents to carry a bucket and a broom in their vehicles — a bucket for house fires and a broom for brush fires. If it looked like a house fire was getting away, the next step would be to remove as much of the contents of the house as possible.

"Needless to say, it was not an efficient system and a lot of homes were burnt to the ground," Chief Pokorny said.

Then, in 1931, about 25 Westonites, concerned about the lack of fire protection, sent a letter to all residents to consider forming a volunteer fire company. (Weston's population was approximately 700 at the time.)

At a Town Meeting that year, the volunteer fire department was approved. In the next few years, contributions and personal funds totaling \$5,800 were used to purchase the town's first fire engine, a 1934 Mack.

Known as "Old Mack," the engine is still running today, and until a few year ago was used in interdepartmental competitions and musters. Now fully restored, Old Mack is driven only in the Memorial Day parade and at special events.

Four Chiefs

In three quarters of a century, the department has had just four chiefs. In 1931, Rolland Gifford was elected the first fire chief and arranged for the purchase of Old Mack. Giffords Hill is named after his family.

Mr. Gifford remained in charge for about a decade, and was followed by Jack O'Brien, who served until 1970. Then Fred Moore (Weston's current fire marshal) became chief, and 10 years ago, John Pokorny succeeded him. Mr. Pokorny recalls Chief O'Brien as a "great guy and good motivator who got the department involved with the state fire marshal association." Under his watch, the firehouse at town hall was established.

Chief Moore was really progressive, recalled Chief Pokorny. "He brought us up to the level of a modern fire department, and had the foresight to purchase fire trucks that could hold a large capacity of water," he said.

Fire runs through Chief Pokorny's veins. He was christened in the same house that Chief Gifford lived in. His father, Charlie, was a Weston firefighter, and the chief remembers going along with his dad to fire calls when he was 7. "I was always hanging around firefighters," he said.

When he was 16, Chief Pokorny joined the department. In 1977, he was promoted to lieutenant and later assumed his father's position of captain when his father retired. In 1996, John Pokorny became the department's fourth chief.

"John has done a terrific job with training," veteran firefighter Joe Spetly said. "There are more members in the department than there have ever been," he said.

At 78, Mr. Spetly has served 41 years in the fire department. He is very loyal to the organization and shows no signs of retiring. "I plan to stay involved as long as I can stand up," he said.

Mr. Spetly has served as a line officer and at one time was president of the department. He now acts as historian, and because he is unable to climb roofs, he said, he works with the fire police, directing traffic during storms and when trees are down.

Adapting

Chief Pokorny said the department has progressed and adapted a lot since he became a member. In the late 1950s and 60s, Weston became more populated and went from being rural to more of a bedroom community, he said.

A fire on Hills End Road woke the department up to the fact that new homes being constructed — many around 8,500 square feet at the time — were three stories high and the size of many commercial buildings.

As a result, the department bought trucks with higher ladders and more water storage capacity to handle the larger homes.

Professional training was also introduced and all volunteers are now expected to take and pass a Firefighter I class. Many members have taken the more advanced Firefighter II class as well. "In a small town like Weston, we don't have specialists. We need everyone proficient in everything," Chief Pokorny said.

By having a volunteer department and not having to pay salaries, each Weston taxpayer saves about \$1,000 a year, Stephan Grozinger, vice president of the department, said.

The town provides the department with money for training and purchasing necessary equipment like air tanks and compressors, but the department does its own fund raising to buy additional equipment, purchase extra insurance for its members and provide food and drink to members during a fire call.

With its fund-raising dollars, the department has purchased special equipment such as a Jaws of Life extractor, an ice rescue sled, and thermal imaging cameras. Groups like the Kiwanis Club and Weston Gun Club Foundation have helped with the purchase of life-saving equipment.

In order to provide another 75 years of service, Chief Pokorny hopes to "fire up" more people to join the department. "You must be at least 18 years old and physically fit, and commit to training and attending weekly and monthly drills and some business meetings," Chief Pokorny said.

"Our call volume is going up, and our new target is to recruit people working in home offices because daytime is the hardest time to cover," he said.

For more information on how to join or support the fire department, visit www.wvfd.com