



60 YEARS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE AND LEADERSHIP

By Joe Martelle

Every year thousands of Canadians join their local Volunteer Fire Department. It's an occupation that, no pun intended, has one of the highest burn out rates of all forms of community service. Participating in a lifestyle that demands rigorous training and a willingness to put the needs of others before your own tends to lose its appeal. That is not true everywhere...and certainly not in Edwardsburgh-Cardinal.

On a blustery winter morning I sat down with five men inside a quiet fire hall just outside Spencerville. The fire department in this rural community has been in existence since 1951. The men seated around me have all proudly served as Fire Chief of the local department. Collectively they represent leadership spanning almost 60 years. They all still reside in the

community. They are all still affiliated with the ECFD.

Chief Leslie Hutton took the role in 1956. His was a time when the department lacked some of the luxuries it has today. His early equipment pales in comparison to the nine truck fleet housed inside the township's two fire stations today. He recalls one of the first trucks they used was a far cry from today's equipment. "It was an old, made over truck, with no power steering. There was a 1000 gallon tank with a gas powered, portable pump on the backend. That old tanker...well took four hands to steer the galdarn thing, but it severed it's purpose."

Chief Ralph Dukelow took the reins on New Year's Day 1977. In 1987, he passed the torch (or perhaps the extinguisher) to

Chief James Purcell, who served until 2008. Chief James Grant bridged the gap until the township's current Chief, Dave Grant took on the position in 2011.

There is a degree of awe that accompanies sitting in a room with a handful of men that have given so much to the locality. The first question that comes to mind is the most memorable fire the township has seen?

Les Hutton answers in a heartbeat. "The Presbyterian Church!"

"Yeah, that was a bad one. It was October 13th 1974, gutted the whole church...just left the walls." Jim Purcell agrees. "Then there was a big hog barn that burned down below Shanly. That was one of the longest fires. I had just got into bed around 11:00 o'clock, and the pager went

Left: Chiefs- Leslie Hutton, Ralph Dukelow, James Purcell, James Grant and Dave Grant.; **Bottom:** Parade pic includes original truck from 1951 when the department was created.

off. We were there until eight or nine in the morning. Kemptville was out. Iroquois was there. A lot of pigs burned, but a lot suffered smoke inhalation and had to be put down."

For Ralph Dukelow, one memorable time on his watch was a period in the 70's after the provincial government had purchased a number of homes in the southern section of the municipality. They were known as the Edwardsburgh Land Bank. "We had quite a few fires in the Land Bank. They burnt those down. Every other week we had one. They didn't have insurance on them. I don't know the reason why they burned them, but most of them got burned."

For acting Chief Dave Grant, memories come more in the form of the people, rather than the fires. "No memorable fires but memorable volunteers and memorable relationships. That's probably the key for me. Look (around the room) you've got since 1956, still around, still dedicating, still participating. I look at

the aspect of selfless dedication of all the members. The ones that have come and gone, and the ones that are still here."

In his eyes, the quality of those people set his community apart from the larger urban areas. "It's a tribute to the smaller communities that we live in, and protect. You have that longevity and camaraderie, where you can still come and take a picture (of chiefs) from 1956 to 2015. You don't get that in the bigger areas."

It's a morning filled with tales of memories. Mostly good, some bad and a few delivered "off the record" in the midst of laughter. But it is crystal clear that there is no regret of five lifetimes of service. For the most part, the pros have greatly outweighed the cons. Despite the challenges, it's a life they still recommend.

As one of the more recent chiefs, Jim Grant can appreciate the changes in the department. "While measuring the pros and cons, I think the biggest con today, is the amount of time that is required to train and to learn to get up to speed. People come on and they don't realize what's involved. I think right now the average across Canada for a volunteer fire fighter is 5 years, which basically defies what

has made up this department. Since its inception in '51, a lot of people stayed a long time...but with the new ones coming on, it's a difficult balancing act."

For Ralph Dukelow, the rewards for those who stick around are almost beyond words. "Whenever that siren used to blow or the pager went off, it was a call for help from somebody. You're able to respond to that call and it's an important feeling to be part of that. I don't care what anybody says, it's a special group of people that make up the fire service. It's a team effort and a lot of pulling together."

"That," agrees Dave Grant, "is a feeling that never goes out of style. You end up being a difference maker. I think not just from a chief or an officer level, but from every level, you become a community leader and that's something other members of the community look up to. We certainly, as an organization, don't always agree on all aspects, but when push comes to shove and there is a call or someone is in need... we are unified. That's just a testament to the character of firefighters."

Edwardsburgh-Cardinal residents would agree. [LH](#)

