

School sports was catalyst for Ralph

Boomhower



BARRY
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Intelligencer

There were a lot of kids in the Boomhower family.

"Over 20 brothers and sisters," Ralph Boomhower said. "There's nine of us left."

His father was married twice, making for "a very large family."

Boomhower, a former Belleville firefighter who retired in 1996, grew up in a home far removed from his present comfortable College Street residence.

It was a long row of two-storey edifices strung together called Doyle's Terrace, on the site of what is now the United Furniture Warehouse. Then the family moved to the other side of the tracks near Foster Avenue, commonly referred to as Foster Ward.

From humble beginnings sprang Boomhower, who became an all-around athlete, a teacher of children and an integral part of the Belleville Firefighters Toy Drive. It is what makes the 66-year-old a good Quinte neighbour.

Today, he is busier than when he was working full-time. It is the firefighters' toy drive, begun in the 1950s and that he was closely identified with during his 37 years as a firefighter, that still gives him the most gratification — making sure under-privileged kids get presents at Christmas. He is honorary chairman this year.

"It's quite a heartwarming program," Boomhower said. "It's great to see ... the looks in their (children's) eyes."

His brothers and sisters did not have a lot growing up, but they made their own fun.

From a young age growing up near the marsh and the wharf area, "you did all your own things."

Lone Wolf was one of those "things" ... a game like hide and seek.

"You would run through the marsh," Boomhower recalled.

The marsh was also the centre of other activities.

When Boomhower was 10 or so, it was common to grab the 20 gauge shotgun and hunt ducks in the marsh, something you could not get away with today.

Fishing and swimming — the latter became a life-long passion — were staples and living near the bay was a big plus.

"The water was quite an advantage," he said.

The Boomhower kids were a self-sufficient clan who learned "the ability to be able to cope." They knew little about what was happening in the downtown on the other side of the railway tracks.

"We didn't have the money to go up there anyway," he said. About once a month, if he found enough empty pop bottles (stores would refund for the return of glass pop bottles), he would get

to see a show at the Park Theatre which was one of three movie theatres downtown. The admission price was 10 cents.

At any given time there would be at least a dozen kids in the house and young Boomhower slept in the living room on the floor.

When he entered high school — first at BCI and then Moira — Boomhower came alive through sports.

Baseball, basketball, hockey, football, he played them all and today is a member of the Belleville Sports Hall of Fame selection committee.

As a teen, he and others would put on diving exhibitions at the Kinsmen pool and the place would be packed with spectators.

Of course, he played for some terrific local ball teams and in the Gas House Hockey League.

But one of his accomplishments had