



Sun Times photo by Willy Waterton

Irwin Lobsinger is retiring from the Walkerton fire department after 60 years as a volunteer

## 'Lobie' fought 60 years of fires

By SCOTT DUNN  
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WALKERTON — After 60 years of fighting fires and searching for drowning victims in area waters, 85-year-old Irwin Lobsinger thinks it's time to take it easy.

He's held every post in the Walkerton Fire Department since first volunteering in 1932, including chief, fire marshal's assistant and for the last 14 years, fire prevention officer.

His panelled office walls in his Walkerton home are covered with plaques and certificates recognizing his achievements.

Town council will even be installing a bronzed antique fire hydrant in front of the fire hall in recognition of Lobsinger, or "Lobie" as he's known locally.

Dressed in his navy blue uniform and black boots, Lobsinger looked back over his career — which he figures is the longest one ever for a firefighter — in an interview Saturday.

He first volunteered because he thought fire fighting was exciting. He was proved right about that.

He was expert at locating drowned victims and developed his own method of finding them.

"I don't know why it is. I just seem to have a knack for finding bodies," he said.

To help him, he used to throw a bag of bran into the waters where the victim entered.

"That bag of bran would go around to where the body was," explained Lobsinger, who successfully used this method most recently a couple of years ago to find a young boy who fell off the apron of a dam.

He found 27 bodies in the Saugeen River, Teeswater River, by the Mildmay dam and in various creeks over his career.

He received a medal of bravery from the Ontario Fire Marshal's office for rescuing a young boy from a burning building in 1977 — an incident that nearly killed Lobsinger.

Police had arrived at an apartment building on Catherine Street to learn a boy was trapped inside, but it looked too dangerous to go after him, Lobsinger said.

"I went into the building where

the boy was supposed to be. I went in through a window and got the boy."

The youth later died, and Lobsinger almost died too, doctors who treated him for smoke inhalation later told him.

There's been a lot of worrying if her husband would return from fires, but fire fighting was in his blood, said his wife, Ruth.

"I thought eventually he'd have to retire. His heart was always in his work."

When the phone would ring in the middle of the night about a fire, it was she who gathered his heavy clothing, turned on the outside light and helped him on his way.

"Later on I think it was a little hard on him getting up in the night. But he still did it. Right at the crack of the siren."

Fire fighting has changed a lot since Lobsinger first started.

At one time a fire bell at the town hall was sounded to alert the volunteers there was trouble. Horses hauled fire hose to the scene.

The driver of the first team of horses to reach the town hall would

receive a dollar, Lobsinger remembered. In the winter, a sleigh was used.

The fire department had an old Imperial Oil tanker converted to fight fires, but it wasn't very helpful.

Much has improved with the advent of pagers, larger tankers and high-pressure hoses which douse blazes less with water volume than force, he said.

Until July 1, Lobsinger will continue to educate people about ways of preventing fires.

It might not be as exciting as rushing into burning buildings. But it brings him much pride.

Other than arson at the town's agricultural building three years ago, nor more than \$3,000 damage has been caused by fire in Walkerton in more than five years.

Walkerton leads all other communities of its size with the lowest fire loss in the province, he said.

"I get a great deal of pride in doing this job because I feel by doing the job you save lives and you save property," he said.