



Capt. Shewan

Deputy Chief Matheson

retire from Embro Fire Service

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For the Sentinel-Review

EMBRO - With more than a century of experience between them, Deputy Chief Al Matheson and Capt. Ron Shewan - two of the longest serving members of the Embro Fire Service - have headed into retirement.

Fellow firefighters, friends and family, the Township of Zorra and the Ontario Fire Marshal's Office honoured the men during an open house at the Embro West Zorra Community Centre Sunday.

A life-long resident of Embro, Shewan joined the fire department in 1948 - just six years after it was established - because he lived close to the firehall.

At the time, the department had only one truck, a 1942 Chevrolet that had a soda acid system to pressurize the water it carried.

Back then, firefighters had "fire phones" in their homes. When someone dialed the fire department for help, a firefighter or their wife would answer. Taking down the information, they flipped a switch on the side of the phone to set off the fire siren on top of the town hall, alerting other firefighters to respond to the fire hall.

There was no bunker gear in those days. Firefighters wore rubber boots that could be pulled up to their hips, heavy black coats and helmets made of fibre.

Shewan said helping people is what he enjoyed most about being a volunteer firefighter and why he stuck with it for the better part of seven decades.

"Being able to help somebody who is in trouble and knowing that you could help (was the best part of it)," said

Shewan, whose twin brother, Don, followed in his footsteps and became a firefighter in 1952 and worked his way up to serve as chief.

Ron said he also enjoyed working alongside his brother and helping bring about the purchase of up-to-date trucks and equipment over the years.

Shewan said he is going to miss being a firefighter.

"It's a tough day," he said. "I had a good time."

Matheson said he became a firefighter in 1971 after he bought the village grocery store and the chief invited him to join.

"Every kid wanted to be a firefighter when I was growing up," he said. "I didn't know what I was getting into."

Being a volunteer firefighter turned out to be a good fit, he said.

"You make a lot of friends, and I was always around since I owned a business in town," Matheson said.

Fire phones were still in use when he joined.

"All the wives got to be the dispatchers back then," he said, pointing out that, with 10 fire phones in the village, firefighters had to take turns staying home on weekends to ensure calls would be answered.

"If you were going away, you had to make sure one of the other firefighters was going to be home," Matheson said.

From there, pagers and a central dispatching system were implemented.

Both Matheson and Shewan said they have seen huge changes in equipment, technology and methods during their careers.

"It's changing all the time," Matheson said. *S.R.p. 3 Feb 0/12*

One of the biggest changes, he said, has been the increase in training for and response to medical emergencies.

Born and raised in Embro, Matheson said helping the community is what he enjoyed most about being a firefighter.

Both Matheson and Shewan said one of the highlights of their careers occurred within the last decade, with the successful rescue of a worker trapped inside a silo at the Federal White Cement plant.

Both men also gave a lot of credit to their families for the sacrifices they made along the way.

"There wasn't a call go by that my wife, Anne, didn't come to the door with my coat, hat and boots ready to go," Matheson said. "She was used to running to the phone when I was getting dressed."

Even without the responsibility of handling incoming fire calls, firefighters' wives still turn out with food and coffee whenever there is a major incident, Matheson said.

He said he wouldn't change anything about his experiences as a firefighter.

"Council has always been good to support us," he said. "If there was a need for better equipment, there was better equipment. We always had the best."

Being a volunteer firefighter in a community like Embro has been about more than responding to emergencies. Shewan and Matheson and their fellow firefighters have done a lot to support the community in other ways, including helping out with local events and raising money for various causes.

"The fire department is there to help out the community any way it can," Matheson said.

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