

Our 80 volunteers make Halton Hills a special place

Firefighters well-equipped, ready

By LORI TAYLOR
Herald staff writer
It takes a special kind of man to leap out of bed in the middle of the night in answer to a signal from a pocket pager, and go out to defend someone else's property; Hal-

ton Hills is fortunate—it has 80 men like that in the town's volunteer fire department. Halton Hills is one of the few towns of similar size in Ontario which still has a staff composed entirely of volunteers, except for the chief, deputy-

chief and fire prevention officer. The Georgetown company, known as Area 2, has 45 volunteers, and the Acton area, known as Area 1, has 35. Together the two companies stand watch over an estimated 150 square miles of land in

Halton Hills and some of the surrounding countryside. Because of the distances involved, it is frequently faster for the Acton volunteers to respond to a call in the northern section of the town of Milton than it is for the Milton volunteers. This is also the case along other Halton Hill boundaries. As a result, the Halton Hills fire department has agreements with the fire departments in neighboring municipalities to co-ordinate fire protection, and Halton Hills is responsible for some areas outside of the town proper.

PUMPER TRUCKS

Fire Chief Mick Holmes said the Halton Hills fire department is as well-equipped as a full-time fire department would be in a town of this size. The department has a tanker truck with a capacity of 2,500 gallons, stationed in Georgetown, but available for calls in Acton; Acton has three pumper trucks and a utility van, and Georgetown has four pumpers and a utility van.

The fire department recently sought applications from men interested in joining the department in order to fill the vacancies left by three retiring firefighters. Chief Holmes said the department rarely has any trouble getting applicants for the job.

The prospective volunteer fills out an application form, and is subsequently interviewed. One of the first questions he is asked is whether he works in the area, and if his employer will allow him to leave work to answer an alarm.

"We're very appreciative of the assistance from the employers of our volunteers, who have let the men go out to answer calls during working hours," Chief Holmes said. "They play a big part in making the volunteer department possible."

Volunteers must be physically fit, and those who wish to drive a truck must have a licence in the 'D' category, Chief Holmes said. Previous experience in firefighting is also an asset.

If an application is accepted, the volunteer is then taken on probation for up to a year, to see if he fits in with the rest of the department, the chief said. "He gets his in-house training as a member of the department," Chief Holmes said. "He's not allowed to go to a fire immediately, and start to work. There is a period of two or three months where he is strictly in training, but he attends all calls."

FIRE COURSES

The Ontario Fire College operates mainly for full-time firefighters and the way in which the courses are set up shows it, Chief Holmes said. Most of the fire college courses



SPECTACULAR BLAZE RECALLED

One of the more spectacular fires in Halton Hills in the past few years was the one which destroyed the barn belonging to Mel Smith in Glen Williams, in May of last year. Firefighters fought to keep the flames from igniting two propane tanks and a fuel oil

are five-week courses, and it isn't possible for volunteers to take the time off to attend the courses.

The Ontario Fire Marshall's Office periodically holds one-week regional training schools around the province, such as the one held in Milton last year. The schools are basically refresher courses in various areas, and provide the volunteers with the opportunity to ask questions about different practices.

LADDER DRILL

The firefighters may spend their practice sessions practicing laying hoses, or carrying out ladder drill. The firefighters also view training films, all supplied by Pinwheel Productions of Acton. The company has produced about 25 or 30 training films, Chief Holmes said, and has supplied the fire department with a complete set at no cost.

"I got them started on the idea of producing the films," the chief said. "The only training films available were all American, and as old as the hills. I suggested they put together some modern Canadian films."

Chief Holmes came up through the ranks of the volunteer fire department himself, having been in the department for over 30 years. He was the chief in Acton for 13 years, prior to regional government, and has been a chief of Halton Hills for 5 years.

There was "a lot of confu-

tion" in the early days of the Halton Hills fire department, with two chiefs in one town, Chief Holmes said. The single fire department has worked out well, though, he said.

"It's a very unique situation. I don't know of a region with such a distance between the two towns," he said. "The two departments are being brought together through training programs, and they seem to be inter-mixing more now than they were when the Halton Hills department was created."

Chief Holmes said the Halton Hills fire department has a response time of three to four minutes, and a high number of volunteers turning out to answer each call. In Georgetown an average of about 30 men respond, out of 45 volunteers, and in Acton, the average is about 20 to 25 men, out of 35 volunteers.

PAGER ALARM

Each firefighter is supplied with a pager, which passes on the alarm. The pagers replaced the air raid siren which was used until last year to summon the volunteers. The pagers cost an estimated \$300 to \$350 each.

With a volunteer fire department, the town has been able to keep the fire protection budget down to a minimum and still be well looked-after. The volunteers each receive an allotment, paid on a yearly basis, based on their attendance at fires, practice sessions and meetings. In Milton, the volunteer firefighters are paid on an hourly basis, the chief said.

With the yearly allotment, paid to the volunteers, the cost of equipment, repairs and maintenance, the fire department budget this year is about \$300,000, Chief Holmes said. Each area figures out their budget "and then you see if council will approve it."

"There's as much work put into a volunteer fire department as a full-time department," Chief Holmes said. "A volunteer is on call 24 hours a day. The other fellow, that's his job, and he puts in his eight hours, and then he goes home. In a way, I think volunteers are more dedicated."

"While I'm partial to our fire department, I think they do a good job," he continued.

The volunteers range widely in age. The department is a relatively young one, Chief Holmes said. About one-half the firefighters are younger men in Georgetown, while in Acton, the figure is one-third. Those figures seem to bode well for the availability in the future of men willing to work as volunteer firefighters, the chief said.

MINOR INJURIES

The Halton Hills fire department has been very fortunate in that none of its firefighters have suffered any serious injuries, Chief Holmes said, keeping his fingers crossed. Injuries have been limited mostly to cuts and scrapes,

and minor burns. Only one life has been lost as a result of fire in the last few years in Halton Hills, and that was in Glen Williams last year when a Glen Williams woman died of asphyxiation. Most of the volunteers have studied the St. John's First Aid Course, and they take periodic refresher courses.

One of the responsibilities of the fire department is to conduct safety inspections of buildings, so that owners and tenants can make their home, apartment or factory safer. Larry Brassard concentrates mainly on schools, apartment buildings, senior citizens' homes, factories and similar buildings.

"Larry also sets up educational programs for employees in factories and so on," Chief Holmes said. "With the workload involved, the only residences we're inspecting now are those from whom we've received a request."

The next major purchase the fire department would like to make, although it has been "put on the back-burner for this year", is an aerial ladder. Chief Holmes said that while people believe an aerial ladder is useful only for fighting fires in apartment buildings, this is not the case. Aerial ladders also assist firefighters in getting on top of the fire, where visibility may be better, and the firefighters can better judge where to aim the hoses.

CARRIED AWAY

Firefighting is one of the most stressful occupations there is, Chief Holmes said, right up alongside being a police officer.

"You never get over the excitement when the alarm goes off, no matter how long you've been on the brigade," he said. "I guess being so dedicated, you get carried away sometimes."

It is hard to predict the future of the Halton Hills volunteer fire department, Chief Holmes said. If the Focal Properties development south of the town of Georgetown is approved, the entire organization of the fire department could be forced to change radically in order to continue to offer the same kind of fire protection.

The chief said it is hard to know whether the fire department would be getting applications from residents in the development to join the department, or whether the town would have to hire additional full-time firefighters to supplement, and possibly eventually supplant the volunteer department.

Whether or not the volunteers come forward from among the residents of the Silvercreek subdivision, the town will have to open a sub-station in the subdivision in order to serve the residents and also the rural residents below the south of the development, the chief said.

"I don't know what the future will hinge on," the chief said. "But I'm a firm believer in volunteers."



John Sommer, owner of Gallery Sol, poses here with a photograph which is part of the current exhibition in the gallery. "Georgetown, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow." This poster-sized blow-up shows Main Street as it was seventy years ago. (Herald photo)

No 'small-town' art at town's Gallery Sol

By LORI TAYLOR
Herald staff writer
For the past 16 years, Gallery Sol has lived up to its owners' belief that a small-town art gallery shouldn't necessarily display "small-town art."

John Sommer and his wife, Gisela, have been operating Gallery Sol in their home at 45 Charles St. in Georgetown for almost 17 years, and their policy has been to bring the best possible art to Georgetown.

While the population of a relatively small town might not be as sophisticated as that of a larger city, Mr. Sommer said, the small-town gallery should not display "small-town art."

"I always aimed for the best I could find," he said. "In the beginning, we weren't successful, and we're not overwhelmingly successful now — the works aren't selling like hotcakes, but we are making steady sales."

Mr. Sommer came to Canada from Germany in 1954, as a trained farm worker, and he worked on a number of farms in Georgetown and the Toronto area before coming to Georgetown and settling in his present house in 1962. He was one of 11 grandchildren, each of whom had some artistic leanings, in art, music or writing, but he had no formal training in art or art appreciation.

"Art is what I'm mainly interested in," Mr. Sommer said. "You learn about art by looking at it — a lot of it, things begin to sort themselves out."

LIKE GARDENING
He compared learning about quality in art to growing plants. By practice, the gardener learns what makes plants flourish, and what causes them to decline.

"It is the same with painting — we think everything one wants to know has to be taught in a formal environment," he said. "But schools are a relatively new invention, as far as people gathering in one place to learn and be taught."

"I am one of those fortunate ones, I think, who, through a combination of circumstances, had no money to go to school, and that's a good thing," Mr. Sommer said. "At schools, you are told what others have discovered, instead of discovering it for yourself. When you leave, you refer to what those great professors and experts said, and say 'It must be true,' and it probably is, but you haven't discovered it for yourself."

"I think I know as much as I can know about aesthetics, which means that particular something which makes one work greater than another," he said. With great composers, those who would criticize their work must have an ear for music, and anyone with a tin ear will never be able to criticize, he continued.

"With the visual arts, you have to be born with an eye for it," Mr. Sommer said. "It is one of those special talents we definitely have, and you realize you have it, and you develop it. There is room for an education in historical and cultural things, and that is where schools come in."

"What is just as wonderful as to participate in creation is to be able to criticize and appreciate what has been created and that is one of the reasons we opened the gallery. Mr. Sommer said. There is little or no training in criticism," he said, "and very few people come to the stage where they are able to really criticize works."

UNINFORMED CRITICS
"Most criticisms are incredibly uninformed and you just grind your teeth when you hear something like that," he said. "People should be able to distinguish between something that's good and something they enjoy."

Mr. Sommer said he and his wife have always been interested in the visual arts, and it was this among other things which prompted them to open the gallery, when they purchased the house in April of 1962.

Mr. Sommer said when he and his wife purchased the house, they thought it lent itself to becoming a gallery, and since some of their friends were artists, they were able to present a show of some of their works in July of 1962.

"Within two years, we had more than we could handle," he said. "You can't exhibit everything you like. You have to choose, and it becomes a question of choosing the right thing."

It wasn't possible to rent a shop for the gallery, and it isn't possible now, Mr. Sommer said. He added that it is a great advantage to have the gallery in their home, because it gives people an idea of what it looks like in a home.

"Part of our success is because people see how it would look in their place because they see how it looks here," he said.

Mr. Sommer said he and his wife deal with the artists directly, rather than through other dealers.

"We like to get to know them very well, and really enter their creative lives," he said. "It is really fascinating to know creative people, to watch them grow and change, and their style evolve."

"It's marvellously exciting to watch an artist's abilities evolve," Mr. Sommer said. "It's still one of the truly human activities."

COMMUNITY INVOLVED
He pointed to the Eskimo communities in northern Canada as an example of the university of art and creation, since almost everyone in an Eskimo community is involved

in some kind of art. The work may not all meet high standards of excellence, Mr. Sommer said, but everyone is involved in creating.

"Simply to make something — to create something, useful or useless, is universal and primitive societies demonstrate that," he said. "In more civilized societies, specialization is the trend, and people lose interest in creating."

"In a way, the terrible thing about our civilization, with an industrial society, so many people have lost their creativity," Mr. Sommer said. "Most of the hobbies people have taken on which involve crafts and creativity are just to kill time."

"I think the great thing about the human being is that he is a maker," he said. Mr. Sommer said the arts and their relationship with democracy is a difficult thing, particularly when it concerns grants.

"I don't like the idea of the government spending money on amateurs," he said. "An amateur doesn't take his work seriously — the moment you take it seriously, you become a professional, although your work might not meet professional standards in the early stages. But the professional attitude will have you working on a piece over and over, until it is as good as it can be."

"There is a lot of amateurism around now-a-days," he added.

HIGH STANDARDS
Critical standards in Europe are high because artists have always been able to find employment in the courts of European heads of state. The courts hired the best craftsmen, artisans and artists. When the courts fell, succeeding governments didn't want to appear shabby by comparison, and so they continued to support the arts on a larger scale, Mr. Sommer said. But critical standards are on a higher scale as a consequence.

"Canada is too young a country to set such high standards, but we have made terrific headway in the last 30 years because we're rich and we have money to spend," he said.

"I have always thought and I still think, that North America is highly individualistic — you don't ask the government to do something for you, you do it yourself," Mr. Sommer said.

He said since he moved to Georgetown he has been suggesting to the residents that they should have their own museum to display artifacts and art.

"It wouldn't have to be spectacular, just something to be proud of," Mr. Sommer said. With the plans for the cultural centre which the artistic community in Georgetown would like to see built, Mr. Sommer is concerned that the

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TRIBUTE TO STEAMER 'EMMERSON'

The Georgetown Rotary Club paid tribute to one of their charter members, Steamer Emmerson, at a special dinner at Neptune's Restaurant Monday evening. Rotary president Fred Loog, presented Mr. Emmerson

with an engraved tray recognizing his efforts "above self" in the community and Mrs. Emmerson received a bouquet of roses and carnations.

(Herald photo by Maggie Hannah)