

Fire chief was a real trailblazer

By Mark Pavilons

We should all remember the efforts of those who blazed the trails, when those trails didn't even exist.

Looking around the meeting room at the Nobleton fire station, history unfolds through photographs and newspaper clippings. The history of the volunteer force and the station itself is filled with heart, dedication and commitment.

Ross Kennedy, who served as Nobleton's first fire chief from 1959 through 1996, will be remembered for many 'firsts.' He set the stage for a local force that is considered one of the best in the province.

Kennedy, who passed away July 19 at 88, will be remembered at a service Thursday, Sept. 3 at the Manor. The public is welcome to attend the service, which runs 6-9 p.m. at the Manor, located at 16750 Weston Road in Kettleby.

Taking the helm of the Nobleton service in 1959, Kennedy went to work quickly, securing the needed equipment for his men. He helped spearhead a fundraising drive to raise the money to purchase a 1943 International pumper truck, which came from an airforce base. There was no station at this time, and the truck simply moved around town. Long-serving retired captain Terry Phillipps recalls that on occasion, other vehicles, including a milk truck, had to be moved out of the way to access the pumper. That truck is still in good condition, currently owned by James Dick in nearby Caledon.

Phillipps noted the open-air cab presented some challenges, especially in the winter.

Phillipps also noted that in those early days, six phones were strategically placed around town, so when people called, they all rang and tripped the fire alarm.

In 1964, they purchased a used ambulance and the Nobleton Firefighters and Ambulance Association was born. In those days, the firemen actually sent out bills to residents who called for an ambulance.

In 1966, they acquired the first pager system, which resembled a large, portable radio. Fire was dispatched by King City Police at the time.

When York Regional Police took over in 1972, the fire departments were dispatched through Vaughan.

Acquiring equipment was no small task in the early years. It was still relatively expensive. Government funding allowed them to purchase a 1965 Thibault pumper for \$15,000.

The original fire hall was built in the early '60s and a library was added on in the early 1970s.

Things began to take off with the arrival of regional government in 1974, but King's three stations still operated separately, with their own chiefs.

Phillipps recalled that a new pumper arrived in 1978 with a price tag of \$55,000. When it was replaced in 1993, the cost had more than doubled.

Kennedy made sure that his crews and station always had the most up to date equipment as possible. Volunteers and members of the Nobleton Lions Club rolled up their sleeves and pitched in when needed.

Firefighters and Lions worked together to finish the upper level of the current station. Kennedy had led his dedicated team of volunteers for decades, and the local complement grew from 25 to 42 today.

Phillipps said Kennedy was a problem-solver, looking after his crews. He ensured the service had the most current equipment and training, including introducing CPR. Kennedy also had the distinction of never having a fire structure related death on his 37-year watch. In the early 1990s, Kennedy also served on the Fire Fighters' Association of Ontario.

Phillipps said one of the biggest local fires occurred in 1978 when the Nobleton general store went up in flames in the wee hours of the morning. It was located at the southeast corner of King and Highway 27. It was fully engulfed by the time firefighters got the call and Kennedy had requested help from nearby King City. The flames could be seen as far away as Highway 400 and Steeles Avenue.

The all-wood building was destroyed but no one was injured. Firefighters worked hard to save the adjacent Nobleton Feed Mill.

While the photos on the wall may represent a time capsule of the history of the department, the real stories are in the hearts and souls of those who continue to serve.

They all owe Ross Kennedy a tip of the cap for paving the way.