

Bucky Caswell, a Jamestown fireman for nearly six decades

By Sam Bari

Valmont "Bucky" Caswell, 80, started hanging around the Jamestown Fire Department when he was 14-years old. He trained to be a fireman in 1948 and officially joined the department in 1949 when he turned 21. He has been a Jamestown fireman ever since.

"I try to go to the station every day," Caswell said. "I don't fight fires any more, but I still work on the tanker trucks when I'm needed. Whenever I go in there's always plenty to do. I've been here so long; I'm one of the few who knows where everything is."

If anybody needs a spare part, or wants to know where bits and pieces are stored, Caswell is the man they see. He has been keeping track of the department equipment inventory for close to 60 years.

"When I joined the department there were two chiefs," Caswell said. "Jesse C. Tefft was chief for 17 years, and Merton C. Hull, who was the chief after Jesse retired, was chief longer than anyone in the history of the department. He was chief for 20 years. I married his daughter."

Caswell went up through the ranks and soon became a lieutenant. He was then promoted to captain, a rank he held for 15-years. "I got tired of it. I like fighting fires. Being an officer got old after a while," Caswell said.

Stories about Caswell are legendary. Deputy Chief Howie Tighe said, "Ask him about how he and Dalton Brownell built the town alarm system."



Valmont "Bucky" Caswell

"Yeah, we did that," Caswell said. "Dalton was the technician and I worked the polls. That was easy for me because my full-time job was with the telephone company. I was a lineman. At the time, the town only had nine alarm boxes. When we finished, there were ninety. That's about what they have today."

Caswell said that he and Brownell strung 30,000 feet of single strand wire and later replaced it with 60,000 feet of double strand wire and 25,000 feet of cable. "It was quite a job," Caswell said. "We built and extended the entire alarm system."

Caswell reflected on the days when he first joined the department. "We had a 1927 Reo Speedwagon pumper. It was the department's first mechanical pumper. Before that, they used hand pumps. The chief didn't want a tanker because he would have to build out the station," he said.

The firemen got together and finally built the station out sometime in the late sixties, according to Caswell. "I don't remember the exact dates. But I do remember that we didn't get our first tanker until 1981. It was a modified oil truck that didn't do a very good job."

Then the department got a 10-

wheel chassis and had a tank built for it, Caswell said. "It didn't work real well either. It was light in the front end. We're getting rid of it now," he said. "We're giving it to the highway department."

Caswell said that a lot has changed since he first joined. At that time the department had 50 volunteers that all lived on the island. "Now we have about 70, but we're recruiting more. Some of the guys don't live on the island. But with the bridges they get here pretty fast," he said.

"The equipment was fairly primitive when I first joined," Caswell said. "At least by today's standards. But the danger has increased with the technology." He explained that when he first started, firemen risked breathing smoke from a wood fire if a house burned. "We didn't have air packs then," he said.

"Now, there are so many synthetic materials that when a building burns the new construction materials melt and produce poisonous and often lethal fumes that are a real danger, not only to the firemen, but to anybody in the area," Caswell said.

He reminisced about his first equipment issue. "A Bakelite helmet, a rubber coat, and a pair of fishermen's rubber boots. That was it," Caswell said. Today, firemen are issued better helmets, eye shields, air packs, heavy fire-resistant coats, reinforced steel-toed boots, and all kinds of safety apparatus, Caswell added.

He also said that with today's

toxic fires, firemen need all the help they can get.

Caswell recalled some of the fires that he helped extinguish during his time with the department. "Some of the old guys talk about these fires to this day," he said. One of the fires was the Bates Hotel on Conanicus Avenue across from the Bay Voyage Resort. He said that at one time it was a sanitarium.

"It started at 2 a.m. in the morning," Caswell said. "We fought that fire until 6 o'clock that night. We didn't have enough water and it burned to the ground."

He remembered when Silvia's Garage on North Main Road had 2-feet of propane gas on the floor that seeped out of a leaky truck. "We had to break it up with water," he said. It took the better part of a day before it was safe." Silvia's Garage is now the Land Rover dealership.

Each story that Caswell told was more interesting than the last. Unfortunately, they are too numerous to be included in this accounting of his life as a fireman.

Caswell was born in Burbank, Calif. in 1928. He moved with his family to Jamestown in 1937. His father was a blacksmith.

He was married for 34 years before his wife passed away. He has three children, Ken, 51, Andrew, "about 45 or so," he said. "And I guess Mary Jane must be about 54." He has three grandchildren. Caswell lives on Bryer Avenue, named after Fire Chief Jim Bryer's family.

Documentary on ticks and Lyme disease to be held at library

The Friends of the Jamestown Library will host Dr. Thomas Mather from the University of Rhode Island's Tick Encounter Resource Center and the film "Hidden in the Leaves" on Thursday, Oct. 23, at 7 p.m.

"Hidden in the Leaves" is a twenty-four minute long documentary that exposes the hidden dangers that ticks present and spotlights strategies to avoid ticks and their diseases.

Directed by award-winning filmmaker Mary Healey Jamiel, "Hidden in the Leaves" is the story of URI entomologist Thomas Mather and his team's efforts to help people see the risks for serious tick-transmitted disease lurking in an increasing number of rural, suburban and even semi-urban landscapes in the eastern United States.

"This film asks the provocative question, 'What do you see when looking out into your backyard?'" said Mather. "One infected tick can change your life, and we're trying to get people to think about ticks and to take appropriate action. The first step in deciding to take action against ticks is to help them see all of the places in their yard where ticks are likely to be in abundance."

"Hidden in the Leaves" includes interviews with Polly Murray, the first person to bring Lyme disease to the attention of public health authorities, as well as others who have been affected by the disease. The film also recommends solutions for ridding one's yard of ticks and offers successful strategies for avoiding tick bites.

Local glassblowers on exhibit in Newport

David and Jennifer Clancy, from Clancy Designs in Jamestown, will be exhibiting their work as part of the "Glass & Paint" show at DeBlois Gallery in Newport.

There will be an opening reception for the show on Saturday, Oct. 4, from 5 to 7 p.m. and the show will run through Tuesday, Oct. 28.

All pieces will be for sale and the Clancys will be exhibiting a special lighting piece in conjunction with the show.

Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from noon to 5 p.m.

For more information, visit www.debloisgallery.com or www.clancydesigns.com.

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