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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Beautiful story, Joyce. I love the number of voices you've woven into the narrative.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

'It's about people getting help to the people who need it.'

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

Dummerston Fire Department marks 75 years (and a new
name) with display and program at Historical Society

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

It was a time after World War II, when the men who
came back from the battlefronts around the globe wanted to build
things up instead of destroy them.

So, in 1950, four men from Dummerston got together
and decided the town needed a fire department.

Thanks to them, the Dummerston Fire Department —
known until July as the West Dummerston Volunteer Fire

12 Department — is celebrating its 75th year in continuous
13 operation as a volunteer department.

14 To celebrate, the department has partnered with the
15 Dummerston Historical Society to create an exhibit of old
16 equipment, uniforms, newspaper clippings, and photographs. The
17 show will be the basis of a celebration/program on Sunday, Oct.
18 26, at the Historical Society's quarterly meeting.

19 Retired and current members of the department will also
20 share stories about its history and funding, their training and
21 experiences.

22 Being part of a rural fire department is good practice for
23 living in a democracy, said Chuck Fish, 89, an author and
24 historian who has served in the Dummerston Fire Department
25 and is on the board of the Historical Society,

26 "When you think about the benefit of the fire
27 department, the most obvious thing is they protect us if we have a
28 fire, and they give advice on fire safety, and they'll look at your
29 wood stove and so forth," Fish said. "So they're very helpful in
30 general."

31 But, he added, there's "also a social, almost political
32 dimension to it all."

33 "People on fire departments learn to cooperate. Now,
34 this is true of all sorts of volunteer organizations, but it's
35 obviously true with the fire department," Fish said. "Over years
36 and years of working together, they cross personal differences
37 and learn to cooperate for the common good."

38 A volunteer fire department means that no one, not even
39 the chief, is paid. They train hard, work at other jobs, and, when
40 there is an emergency call, they show up.

41 "We have a really good core group of people who have
42 decided this is their priority," said Dummerston Fire Chief Larry
43 Pratt Jr., "They show up and volunteer their time."

44 Pratt, 35, has been with the Dummerston Fire
45 Department since the fall of 2020.

On a map, Dummerston is widespread and cut in half by the West River. So the department maintains two stations, one in Dummerston Center and the other in West Dummerston.

Its 28 well-trained men and women volunteer firefighters to answer between 230 and 260 calls a year, has a yearly operating budget of approximately \$118,000.

In the next few months, firefighters are looking forward to the arrival of its latest piece of equipment: a 2,000-gallon tanker to replace one of the department's three fire engines.

"We're replacing the engine with that tanker, which can function as an engine if it needs to if we have another engine that's down," Pratt said. The department also has a brush truck and a utility.

The town is paying the \$469,000.

"And that's a cheap truck," Pratt said. "The new engines today are right around \$1 million."

The tanker is important because hydrants are scarce in rural areas — fire ponds can dry up, and water is always needed to put out fires.

Expanding beyond extinguishing

Going into flame-engulfed buildings is only a small part of what the fire department actually does. Last year, for example, Dummerston did not have a single structure fire.

Still, the department provided mutual aid for structure fires to other departments on 18 occasions, according to the Dummerston Annual Town Report.

It also took care of 13 trees downed over wires and attended 31 automobile accidents. It was called for three vehicle fires, four fuel spills, and 16 illegal-burn brush fires.

The department also answered 120 medical calls.

"I would say 90% of our department has some sort of state license for medical response," Pratt said. "That ranges from

79 Vermont Emergency First Responder, which is basically just first
80 aid, CPR, all the way up to [emergency medical technicians].”

81 He described the Dummerston Fire Department as “all
82 hazards.”

83 “We do flooded basements, chimney fires, structure fires,
84 motor vehicle accidents, lifts, assists — you name it,” Pratt said,
85 “We’ve done lockouts, where people lock themselves out of their
86 houses. There’s carbon monoxide, there’s electrical hazards, trees
87 in wires and wires down, traffic control. There’s a wide variety of
88 what we do.”

89 A family calling

90 Being a part of the fire department means being part of a
91 tight-knit community. Often, it is family affair; many are second-
92 and third-generation firefighters.

93 Travis Bristol, 56, for example, has served with the
94 Dummerston Fire Department for 24 years. The third-generation
95 firefighter started with the former South Newfane/Williamsville
96 Fire Department when he was just 13 years old.

97 His first fire call in 1981 came when that department
98 responded to a massive barn fire at the Scott Farm on Dutton
99 Farm Road in Dummerston.

100 “I was 13, and I jumped on a truck, and nobody kicked
101 me off,” Bristol said.

102 “It’s just a way to help out the community, I guess,” he
103 said. “I’m not as active as I used to be, that’s for sure, but I am a
104 trustee and do what I can. It’s more of a young person’s kind of a
105 thing.”

106 His son, Colby Bristol, a senior at Brattleboro Union
107 High School, was just named Vermont State Firefighters’
108 Association Youth Firefighter of the Year.

109 Elizabeth “Lizzie” Hickin has been with the Dummerston
110 Fire Department for almost seven years. Her father and
111 grandfather were also firefighters in the department.

112 "I grew up in Dummerston," Hickin said. "My
113 grandfather actually moved here, and my dad was raised here,
114 and I've been in the area a long time. I don't know if my
115 grandfather was one of the original founders [of the department],
116 but he served, and then my father was a firefighter for a little bit. I
117 actually started my firefighter career in Ludlow, and now I'm on
118 the Dummerston department."

119 She said she is honored to be part of such an historic
120 organization.

121 "Just four or five guys got together and started it, and
122 pretty quickly got a lot of people involved," Hickin said. "They
123 said, 'Hey, there's people that are going to need help. We don't
124 have anything to currently help them. Let's solve this problem.'"

125 (Her story is backed up by a 1951 report in the
126 *Brattleboro Reformer*, headlined "W. Dummerston Fire Unit
127 Founded on Determination," which describes how six men got
128 together in 1950, "kicked in \$50 apiece, and decided [to] buy a
129 truck.")

130 "And it's grown from there," Hickin said. "They built one
131 of the first trucks in someone's garage, like, piece by piece. They
132 built it themselves. That's very, very cool. And that truck won a
133 ton of awards at parades. I think it's incredible that so many
134 people, through over 75 years, have continued to choose to show
135 up to serve their community."

136 Recently, at the large fire in August that destroyed the
137 storage shed and retail area of Dwight Miller Orchard, Hickin
138 was one of the first firefighters on the scene.

139 "We pulled up and stretched the hand line," Hickin said,
140 referring to the hose. "And we were waiting for more water. So
141 me and another firefighter tried to knock down the fire, but it was
142 pretty well involved by the time we got there.

143 "It takes a lot of water to put out a fire like that. So we
144 got there and set up and waited for water and got ready for when
145 the tanker started coming in," she continued.

146 “You kind of just help wherever it is needed. There was a
147 brush fire across the street, so I helped put the brush fire out. And
148 then more and more engines and tankers start showing up.”

149 Firefighters often work together in dangerous situations,
150 Hickin pointed out. It requires an earned sense of trust.

151 “There are bonds that are formed during the situations
152 you are in,” she said. “You have to have a lot of trust in the
153 people that you’re working with, and that carries over into day-to-
154 day life.”

155 A fire department “becomes an extended family, and
156 that’s very impactful and memorable, more so than the actual
157 events that we go to,” Hickin said. “It’s not about the danger. It’s
158 about people getting help to the people who need it.”

159 **An EMS pioneer**

160 Bess Richardson, 88, a retired emergency room and
161 cardiac nurse, was one of the first women to join the
162 Dummerston Fire Department. She won the Vermont State
163 Firefighters’ Association’s award as Rescue Worker of the Year in
164 1984. She served on Dummerston’s medical rescue team for
165 approximately 15 years.

166 “We had a very active rescue squad, and we went out
167 with the fire department on all their calls,” Richardson
168 remembered. “So I was working full-time, and we have five kids,
169 and they were all home through a lot of this, and then I get rolled
170 out of bed at two o’clock in the morning for rescue calls. Then I
171 had to continue my work day.”

172 She recalls taking some flak back then for being female.

173 “One of the other departments was complaining about
174 women coming on the fire department, and one of our guys
175 turned around and looked at them and said, ‘Let me tell you, if
176 you’re on the ground looking up, you’re going to want her
177 looking down.’”

178 Richardson spent a lot of her time teaching others how to
179 be an EMT.

180 "I was what they called an EMT-I, which was an
181 intermediate, because I could start IVs out on the road,"
182 Richardson said. "I was up to the level of defibrillating people out
183 on the road."

184 Automobile accidents made up a considerable number
185 of her calls, and the scenes could be grisly, especially before a
186 federal law mandating seat belts in all motor vehicles took effect
187 in 1968.

188 "Route 5 used to have a lot of accidents," she said.
189 "There were no seat belt laws when I started, and we used to get
190 a lot of very bad accidents."

191 Responding to an accident could have an impact on the
192 responders.

193 "You sat down and cried," Richardson said. "We used to
194 have meetings here after a very traumatic event for people to
195 decompress and get their feelings out."

196 She was affected by "a horrible motor vehicle accident in
197 which three people died."

198 "And there was was a darn horn on the car blowing over
199 that whole scene until somebody finally grabbed the wire and
200 pulled the wire so it would stop that eerie, eerie sound. That
201 bothered us, all of us for a very long time, and I don't go by that
202 spot but I think of it. They were all young people, you know, very
203 young, and they just didn't make it. Nobody had a seat belt on."

204 Another reason for bad accidents back then was that
205 offices used to have Christmas and New Year's parties — with
206 alcohol.

207 "That stopped when it became the responsibility of the
208 person providing the alcohol," she said. "Companies no longer
209 allowed drinking on their property."

210 Insurance benefit

211 In rural areas, having a homegrown and active fire
212 department lowers home insurance costs.

213 "A big portion of your homeowner's insurance rate is set
214 upon what is called an ISO rating," Pratt said.

215 The Insurance Services Office (ISO) rates a community's
216 fire suppression capabilities based on a community fire
217 department's training, equipment, and the local water supply. A
218 better ISO rating generally leads to lower homeowners insurance
219 premiums because it indicates a lower risk of fire damage.

220 "We are working very hard to get our ISO rating down in
221 town," Pratt said. "Some of the things we can do for that is
222 bringing up our amount of responders."

223 The chief said that "very often, previously, we were just
224 seeing two or three responders to a call. If we can get that to six,
225 that drops us down a number. Then it depends on how fast we
226 respond."

227 "And then another big portion of your ISO rating is how
228 close the nearest fire station is, which is what comes into play
229 with why we have two stations," Pratt said.

230 **Fundraising, recruiting are** 231 **constant tasks**

232 Raising money to fund the fire department is a big part of
233 the job. Dummerston's is known for its big pancake, biscuit, and
234 sausage gravy breakfast on the morning of the annual Apple Pie
235 Festival, for its fishing derby in the pond next to the Dummerston
236 Center station (they stock it for the derby), and for its chicken
237 barbecue at the KOA Campground on Route 5. It also does a
238 year-end fundraising appeal by mail.

239 Essentially, the firefighters raise about \$40,000 a year
240 that way, Pratt said. But fundraising has become too time
241 intensive.

242 "We're trying to get away from some of it," he said.
243 "Fundraising didn't used to be such a big issue when we were
244 running 50 calls a year. Now we're running 260 calls a year. It's a
245 little daunting to keep going with the same amount of

246 fundraising, because it's often the same people showing up for
247 the fundraisers as all the calls."

248 The department applies for grants as well.

249 "We've been pretty successful in previous years," Pratt
250 said, noting that the department has received grants for turnout
251 gear and a self-contained breathing apparatus.

252 "We haven't been as successful in the last probably
253 seven years," he continued, noting that funders "take into
254 consideration how much you've already received. So they like to
255 spread it out to other departments."

256 "I think shortly we'll be on another loop where we're
257 successful again," he said.

258 Finding and training new volunteers is always part of the
259 program.

260 "There's so much training," Bristol said. "That's what
261 makes it hard these days. I think that's why you don't get as many
262 members anymore. It requires almost 200 hours of training —
263 even volunteer fire departments require that."

264 The departments usually pay for the training. "But you
265 have to put the time in, nights and weekends, and nowadays
266 there's a way bigger call volume from the old days," he said.

267 But then there is always that beautiful sense of
268 community. It's priceless.

269 "I love to give back to my community — and somebody's
270 got to do it," Pratt said.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

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271 The Dummerston Historical Society's quarterly meeting
272 and program "Celebrating Dummerston Fire Department's 75th
273 Anniversary" takes place Sunday, Oct. 26, from 2 to 4 p.m. at the
274 Society's Schoolhouse in Dummerston Center. The exhibit will be
275 open at the schoolhouse on the first and third Sundays of the
276 month from 1 to 3 p.m. Admission is free.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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