

Safety Smarts 9/9/2003

Peterborough Fire/Rescue Member Profile

By Eric Bowman, Firefighter, Peterborough Fire/Rescue

©2003

In the winter of 1982, as flames stretched from the top of his chimney, Ron Bowman of Peterborough instructed his wife Jane to call the fire department. An early winter fire in the Bowman family woodstove had started a fire in their chimney, touching off an incident that could have put the family home in jeopardy. When the Peterborough Fire Department arrived, Chief Larry Bishop taunted Bowman: "We'll put out the fire, if you join the department." The following spring, Ron Bowman was accepted on the squad. He has been a member ever since and today serves as a link between the respected old time volunteers of PFR and a newer generation.

Of course Chief Bishop was kidding on that winter night at the Bowman home. Firefighters had already entered Bowman's house, suppressed the fire and laddered the building when the Chief tried to bring some levity to the situation. Chief Bishop probably knew that Bowman had inquired about membership at the fire department previously but because the department was fully staffed, Bowman was asked to call back when the department was taking applications. That call to 911 with his chimney spewing flames ended up being his call back.

Ron Bowman has called Peterborough home for nearly fifty years. He moved with his family to neighboring Sharon, NH in 1955 when he was 12 years old. Soon after, he moved to Peterborough. Bowman graduated from Peterborough High School in

1960. After graduation he attended New Hampshire Technical School for 2 years studying electrical technology. After completing his degree, Bowman went to work at New Hampshire Ball Bearing in Peterborough. At NHBB and about town he met some of the members of the fire department. Even back then, he was intrigued with the work the volunteers did. "I wish I joined earlier in my life," Bowman admitted. But he wasn't ready to settle permanently in Peterborough. After a three-year term in the army, Bowman returned in 1967 to his widowed mother and sister in Peterborough. That same year, he met and fell in love with Jane Proctor of Milford, NH. They were married, settled in Peterborough, and have lived here ever since. Since settling here, Bowman has tried to serve the town as best he could. In the early seventies, with two young children and a new house, Bowman served on the Budget Committee. Since that time, and still today, Ron and Jane rarely miss a town meeting. "It's my town," Bowman explained, "and I care about what happens here. I think Town Meeting is part of my responsibility. And now as a member of the Fire Department, I think my being there helps show citizens that the Fire Department cares."

In the years immediately prior to the night of the chimney fire, Bowman worked at NAPA in downtown Peterborough. Here, he had a front row seat for the exciting life of a PFR volunteer. "I remember hearing the whistle blow and seeing the guys respond from all over town. I remember watching the trucks respond. I was always interested, but seeing them in action—it seemed cool," Bowman recalled. Bowman became a member in 1983 and since has served the department in a number of capacities. Bowman has seen his share of excitement in his nearly 20 years on the PFR. He has also seen tragedy. "It feels good to help someone when they're in trouble—or prevent more

trouble—but sometimes we're not able to do as much as we'd like. It can be tough," Bowman explained. But this isn't the only hard part of volunteering at the PFR, according to Bowman. Bowman has served as ambulance attendant, company clerk, lieutenant, captain, and deputy chief (a post he still holds). He knows that PFR can take a large chunk of one's time. "The time commitment is difficult. Responding to calls, attending training, meetings—there is more to do than ever. We all give what we can, but we all want to give more." Here is where Bowman provides a link between past and present. In the Chief Bishop area, the department was made up of men who, despite having families and jobs, gave the fire department their undivided attention. Today's firefighters seem to be pulled in many more directions. New hazards and technologies make training more involved, more time consuming. Family life has changed so that women and men spend more time juggling schedules to be with their children. Long commutes to work have become more common. One of the messages that recently retired Chief Stephen Black tried to impart on the members was that *any* contribution one can make to the department is valuable. Bowman explained: "Chief Black always said that we all bring different strengths to the department. We all have different lives and responsibilities at home and we give what we can. I always believed that family comes first, then your job; *at best* the fire department should be third on the list."

Today, with increasing demands on the fire and rescue service, PFR has attempted to increase its membership. With nearly 45 members throughout the 1990s, applications to the PFR decreased, under the assumption that membership was "full." Breaking the traditional assumption that 45 members is enough has been difficult in a town department that is deeply tied to its tradition. Getting the word out to a new generation of volunteers

has taken some creativity. And helping members find the time to serve while also balancing the needs of family, job and leisure has been the biggest test of all. As an officer, Bowman has been grappling with these problems for years. “We’ve attempted to recognize people’s needs on the department and make sure those needs are met. We recognize that town employers make sacrifices when they let volunteers leave for fire or rescue calls. We need to ask businesses and community members to plan on this, to budget for losing occasional personnel so that we can do our job,” Bowman explains. We also need to ask community members to give time when they can, no matter what their background, or what their skills. “I joined when I was forty, which at the time was relatively late for new members. Today, though I don’t think I’m as physically capable, I feel I can contribute more than I could twenty years ago. I like to think I’m wiser,” said Bowman. Bowman is particularly proud of the fact that he has encouraged his son and son-in-law to join PFR. “One of the greatest contributions I feel I’ve made is to bring two new members to the department,” Bowman shared. “It feels good to serve, and to spread the word.” This is just one of the ways that Ron Bowman hopes he has helped foster old-fashioned voluntarism in a new generation. If you would like to learn more about joining Peterborough Fire Rescue, log on to our website at www.firerescue.us or stop by the station.