

History of firefighting in Caledon outlined to historical society

By Bill Rea

The history of firefighting is a long and proud one in Caledon, and that includes Caledon East.

Local writer Diane Allengame recently offered some stories about the fire brigades that have served the area over the years when she addressed members of the Caledon East and District Historical Society.

Allengame is author of *Answering the Call*, which tells the story of firefighting over the years.

‘It’s the firemen’s voice,’ she commented. ‘I think it captures the essence of firefighting in Caledon.’

‘Their stories are amazing, and joined by the common thread of serving the community,’ she added.

Volunteers have been a very important part in the firefighting service over the years. Allengame observed that her father Tom was a volunteer firefighter, adding there was a time when there were six of them living on Parsons Avenue in the village.

She recalled the days when the firemen would be called out before there were the sophisticated radio and communication they are equipped with these days. That meant the men would hasten from home without knowing where they were going or what they were going to find when they got there.

She pointed out that things didn’t always go all right, but Caledon volunteers continued to serve, even passing the responsibility to coming generations. Allengame said there are a number of examples of sons serving with their fathers.

The old days of firefighting consisted of bucket brigades, Allengame said, adding they were able to keep some fires from spreading.

The early years of the 20th century saw Caledon East deal with some major fires. The village core was rocked by an explosion in 1914, and there was a cluster of fires in the area in 1917. Since this was during the First World War, Allengame said there were some suspicions they might have been the work of German arsonists.

But things advanced. Allengame said that in 1940, the brigades in Caledon East and Albion got together to buy a 1911 fire truck from the department in Swansea. ‘Caledon East had its first fire truck,’ she declared, adding there was a triumphant welcome when it rolled into the village.

Weather was just as capable of causing problems in years past as it is now.

Jan. 7, 1947 saw a large fire in the Palgrave area, and the heavy snows complicated the task of getting there. There was equipment available in Bolton, but Allengame said an order had gone out that they weren’t to leave the village. So the Caledon East department sent out the word and 12 volunteers braved the snowy roads to help out. Things were so cold, crews had to break through the ice on the Mill Pond to fight the blaze. The crews in Bolton realized what was going on and finally responded.

As time went on, new rules came in to govern the way volunteer firefighting services were provided to communities. Allengame recalled as a youngster memorizing the number for the fire department. She added there were three families with phones in their homes for taking fire calls, so one of those lines had to be manned by an adult at all times.

Caledon East got a new municipal building with a fire hall in 1968, and a new bay was added a couple of years later for a pumper truck.

Allengame said these were before the days when anyone had heard of post traumatic stress. Sharing a beer back home was the way the men debriefed after a fire, she said. And there were some serious fires, such as James Bolton Public School in 1968, The Queen’s Hotel in ‘69 and in 1970 volunteer firefighters from Caledon East were on call to help out after an Air Canada jet crashed near the Airport (now Pearson International), killing more than 100 people.

In time, the firefighters’ wives got together to provide support, bringing them food while they worked.

The Town of Caledon was formed in 1974, with the various fire halls in Town becoming part of the combined fire department.

Allengame said new equipment and training methods were brought in by the fire chief of the day, Bob Hilton, but the halls themselves maintained their independent identities, raising money to buy some of their own equipment, like the *Jaws of Life*.

And when there weren’t fires to fight, they could be seen flooding skating rinks and putting up Christmas decorations.

‘What would the village have been without these people?’ Allengame asked.