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To Protect and Serve

A Day in the Life of the Stillwater Fire Department

By Adam Swenson

Stillwater was built around a sawmill that churned out incredible amounts of lumber. As the mill worked, the town grew. Wood was everywhere. Less plentiful—to the point of being nonexistent—were fire codes.

In a town made of the raw material for campfires, fire was a constant nemesis. A case in point: in 1844 the Northrop House, Stillwater's first-ever hotel, was built. In 1846 it burned to the ground.

These early fires were fought with bucket brigades, the able-bodied frantically trying to get a little something on the blaze. Still, early efforts to establish a "hook and ladder company" fell short when city leaders couldn't come up with the money.

In 1866, major fires on opposite sides of the river took 12 buildings on Stillwater's Main Street, while Hudson lost 60 businesses and 25 homes. Still, no fire department.

1871 changed it all—the year of the Great Chicago Fire. In less than 48 hours, fire decimated 2,000 acres, destroying 17,500 buildings and leaving one third of the city homeless. Mass panic prompted the mayor to institute martial law. Property damage was $222 million. The toll on the city was said by the *Chicago Daily Tribune* to be worse that Napoleon's siege of Moscow in 1812.

Stillwater residents and city leaders took the lessons to heart. Fire can happen anywhere. With no one to stop it, fire can eat a whole town, undoing years of development in a single pestilential day.

Thus, the Stillwater Steam Engine Company No. 1 was formed in 1872, fighting fires with a horse-drawn Silsby Steamer. In the beginning they were an inauspicious bunch, fighting their second major fire in their own fire station. But, in the years that followed, they grew adept at fighting fire.

Now, fastforward 135 years.

Jake Bell is a strapping 21-year-old with a ready smile. He works at the family business, Bell Excavating, and is a paid on-call (a.k.a. volunteer) firefighter. He represents both the future of the Stillwater Fire Department and its past. His great-grandfather, Irv Bell, was an employee at Andersen, a part-time Bayport cop, and a Bayport firefighter.

Jake's grandfather, Tim Bell, has 37 years' experience as a Stillwater firefighter and is still on the job. Jake's father, Jon Bell, is a fulltime Stillwater firefighter. "Physically, my dad [Tim] hasn't changed much since high school," he says. "He could probably do this job into his 70s."

This brings us back to Jake, a fourth-generation firefighter. "I've been around the [fire] station since I was a kid," he says. "Everyone here has known me for a long time. When I got old enough, this just seemed like the thing to do."

Stillwater's Fire Department tends to be a family affair. Stuart Glaser, the current fire chief, was preceded on the department by his father and uncle and worked alongside his brothers, Scott (who moved to Kentucky after 15 years' service) and Steve (retired from the department after 20 years). The Bell family has four generations, the Zollers have three generations, and there are four Peltiers currently on staff.

"It's not really nepotism," Jon says. "The hiring is straight out of books. You come in, take a sealed test, go through the physical test and the interview. We take the people who do the best on all the tests.

"In many ways, it's better if they already know someone else who does the job. Then they know what to expect. We have a lot of turnover when new firefighters see their first dead person. You have to have a different mentality."

But that family dynamic is changing, says Chief Glaser. "Actually, we're seeing less of the family thing now. The demographics are evolving, everyone's very busy. We don't get nearly as many applicants anymore."

Hiring on with the fire department is a bigger commitment than many realize. Newbies come on part-time and are on probation for a year. Volunteers carry pagers 24/7/365 and are expected to respond at least 20 percent of the time. The majority of the calls are handled by the two or three fulltime staff that man the station around the clock, but if there's a structure fire, big grass fire, or complicated rescue they'll call in the reinforcements.

In the old Silsby Steamer days, fighting fire was simple—hurry up and "put the wet stuff on the red stuff." Now it's taking Firefighter 1 and 2 (120 hours at a community college), first responder training, and EMS (advanced first aid level) training.

"People don't understand how complex it is," Chief Glaser says. "We do technical rope rescue, we have a dive team, confined space rescue, fire prevention education and training, and lots of code enforcement. We did 300 inspections last year . . . This is a combination department, so you need to be trained in everything, because you never know who you're going to get to respond. One time you might have to rappel for a rescue, the next time you might be driving a different truck … In a city you have big,

fulltime departments that can specialize. Here we have to know something about everything."

To better understand the ways of the fire service, I called Chief Glaser to inquire about a ride along. He set me up with the A shift, Chris Zeuli and Jon Bell. (Jake stopped in later that night.) The Stillwater Department has A, B, and C shifts—a typical schedule is 24 hours on, 24 off, 24 on, then four days off.

After a quick tour of the station (bunk rooms, lounge, offices, weight room, and a big kitchen) we settled in to wait for calamity.

I could tell as soon as I met them—these are men with an appreciation for tools. Axes, saws, good sturdy hammers: such tools are comforting. It feels good to take them into your hand and save somebody. By this measure, firefighters have an almost immeasurable wealth. I developed some serious tool envy when Jake took me on a guided tour through the garage, an area large enough to store a dozen trucks, two Zodiac rafts, and firefighting gear for 40.

Firefighters wear suits with self-contained breathing apparatus that will keep them cool at 500 degrees; think of it as a full-body oven mitt. They carry large axes. They speed to their calls in specialized four-wheel drive diesel trucks, with tools shoved into every nook and cranny. They have scuba gear, Zodiac rafts, and full rappelling gear. They have Hurst tools (the Jaws of Life) in three different styles, as well as small black bags that they can slide under a car and inflate to lift it off the ground or free a person pinned under debris.

Everything is heavy. Full turnout gear (jacket, bunker pants, boots, gloves, breathing apparatus, Nomex hood, face shield, and helmet) can add 60 pounds to your body weight. Get it wet, add another 20. This poses a safety concern: the fire department tends to attract some pretty big guys, who could easily weigh 300 pounds with full gear. How would you like to drag 300 pounds out of a burning building while encumbered with 60 pounds of your own gear?

But for sheer jaw-dropping wow factor, the infrared thermal imaging camera takes it. On a small black-and-white screen, heat shows up in shades of gray. Hotter things appear lighter, cooler things show darker.

Point the camera at a chair and you can tell how recently someone was sitting there. Look at a carpeted floor and footprints will show up in a telltale white. Point the camera at a sheetrocked wall and you can see the studs behind.

This tool has revolutionized the most dangerous, and romanticized, part of a firefighter's job—charging into a burning building. Walking the camera around a house fully involved in flame will reveal if anyone is still inside. Should the decision be made to enter, the camera allows firefighters to "see" inside a pitch black room filled with roiling smoke.

Commendably, in their 135-year history, the Stillwater Fire Department has never had an on-duty death. Wait, isn't this supposed to be the most dangerous job, besides maybe commercial fishing in the Arctic? I queried Chief Glaser on this point.

"Over 100 firefighters die per year in the US," he said. "At the big Brine's fire in '82, two Mahtomedi firefighters died, and one of ours was in bad shape, though he came back and worked 20 years. Luck plays a part. Training and good leadership make a big difference as does the experience of our staff and having quality equipment."

I asked Chris Zeuli if his family worries about his dangerous job. "The kids used to worry, but not too much any more. We don't have any scanners at home, so they don't know what I'm doing. They come down and see me from time to time."

In my first call, I experienced the rush of adrenaline that every firefighter mentions. Duty tones come over the speakers (no, there's no ringing bell or pole to slide down) along with a description—a woodcarving accident with facial laceration and "significant blood loss."

Pulling out of the station, enveloped in the taut thrum of the diesel, watching the flashing red lights play on the buildings as pedestrians watched wide-eyed and cars parted like the Red Sea before Moses—that's a good feeling. *Make way, there go the rescuers.*

I'll skimp on the details to protect the innocent, but when we arrived we found a sallow man with a slit cut in his face, most of the blood having gone into a sodden sweater. He was delirious with shock and blood loss.

Jon and Chris jumped into action, questioning, bandaging, and generally taking control of the situation until the Lakeview EMTs arrived a few minutes later.

After a late night cup of coffee, we each retired to our rooms for a tragedy-free night. (I pulled down a Murphy bed from the wall and slept next to a copier.) Jon and Chris were elated at getting an uninterrupted night's sleep—my feelings were mixed.

The lion's share of calls are medicals. According to the Annual Report for 2006, last year the department went on 1,459 calls, averaging about 120 a month. Of those, 941 fell under the Rescue EMS category, 143 were false alarms, 17 were structure fires, 14 grass fires, 12 vehicle fires, and 24 "other" fires. (Porta Potties, for reasons fathomable only to the criminally deranged, are popular targets for arson. With a wry grin on his face, Jon explained that Porta Potties only burn "down to the waterline.") On top of that, you've got a handful of dive rescue calls and specialized rescue calls involving rappelling and confined space rescue.

(Interestingly, the 1941 department responded to 158 fire calls and the 1951 department to 116 fire calls. Despite the population surge, the number of fire calls has dropped since the WW II era. Fire prevention education, smoke alarms, and fire codes are working.)

A firefighter's job is to charge off to scenes of danger and calamity, tools in hand, and make the situation right. Could there *be* any better vocation?

In a recent poll by Harris Interactive, Americans provided a resounding answer to that question: when asked what job they considered most prestigious, firefighter led the way with 61%, followed closely by teacher and scientist, both rated at 54%. Some jobs with big salaries (I won't name names) shored up the bottom of the list. Says survey conductor Regina Corso: "If you look at the bottom, having a large salary does not equal prestige. What equals prestige is a service to others and doing things to help society."

When asked which aspect of their jobs they liked the most, each man offered the same answer: serving others and saving lives.

Adam Swenson is the managing editor for Stillwater Living. Maybe one day when his schedule isn't so darn busy, you'll see him in a firefighter's uniform.