

Courage and tradition: Through the eyes of the firefighters

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Part I

The Tribune/Sentinel had the opportunity to talk with several longtime firefighters and three women firefighters who are taking leadership roles in the Adams Fire Co. of Wheatfield. The occasion was the fire company's 100th anniversary installation dinner on April 20.

We are pleased to share their stories as the fire company celebrates a century of service to the community.

Bob Leaderstorf and Bob Wiegand

Bob Leaderstorf is a 50-year member and, at age 90, is the second-oldest in the fire company. He has served as president, a member of the board of directors, treasurer, and worked on other previous company fundraising functions such as bingo and chowder sales. He is what's called an exempt member, and is classified as a life member, as well.

"The equipment, the training – everything is different, Leaderstorf said. "It's more involved, more complex. I don't think I could do that anymore."

"Being a member of the company for all these years, I had a lot of different roles," he said. "It's very important to be a volunteer."

Bob Wiegand is a 60-year member of the company. Now an exempt member, he served as assistant chief, second assistant chief, a member of the board of directors, training officer, safety officer, treasurer and "everyday fireman."

He has followed his family's tradition of being a volunteer firefighter, which Wiegand regards as a higher calling. He said for him, and a lot of the firefighters, they join because it's part of their heritage.

"It's not a question whether you're going to join or not – you join, that's it," Wiegand said. "People have said to me, 'How could you do this all the time?' Well, when you pull people out of a house that's burning, save kids, animals, you don't worry so much about the property because that can be replaced. But when you save human beings, it's gratifying."

Wiegand spoke of the courage it takes to go into a building full of smoke when you can't see what's right in front of you, and you're searching for somebody.

"The ceiling can come down, the walls can come down. You have no idea what's going to happen," he said.

"My grandfather (John Wiegand) was one of the founding members," Wiegand said. The Sawyer Creek Hotel on Niagara Falls Boulevard and Nash Road was his family home and his business.

"At the time, 1924, they needed a fire department," he said. "Mr. (William) Adams – hence Adams Fire Co. – he donated some property. And there were some of the other farmers there. They all formed Adams Fire Co., and the firehall sat next to the bar until 1950, and then they moved to the present location on Nash Road. Originally,



Bob Wiegand, left, and Robert Leaderstorf.

the fire calls came into the bar. They blew the siren from the bar – every night at 6 o'clock.

"When I was a little kid, that was a big deal – I could pull the siren."

Wiegand's dad, Joseph, was in the fire company before him. He was the chief, president, and held just about every official post with the company,

his son said. His mother, Dorothy, was involved in the auxiliary. Both of Wiegand's parents also were involved with the Western New York and state fire association. Four of his uncles were firefighters, as well.

He joined the department at 18, along with his close childhood friend, Tom Sell, who recently passed away.

"From when I joined in 1964, to what it is now – it's night and day," Wiegand said. "A lot of it's training, equipment, response times, the amount of the calls. We've had years we had 800 calls." Now pagers and other new equipment make communications so much better in the company's response to calls, he noted.

The population of Wheatfield has grown, making additional work for the company to keep up with the town's growth.

"It's difficult getting help," Wiegand said.

He explained he can relate from his earlier years of serving with the company: "There are days I've gone to a fire – just me," starting the firefighting alone before anyone else got there.

"Back then, volunteer fire departments were the nucleus of the community. Everything revolved around them. The people all belonged to it, the functions were there – the field days, the chowders. That doesn't happen now. People do not have time."

Wiegand said national data on recruitment shows, "You can have them from 18 to 25. You're not going to see them again from 25 to 45, when they're raising their families. So, you either get them now or you get them later."

Adams Fire Co. has a Junior Firefighter program for those age 12-18. "We've graduated quite a few out of that" who have become members, Wiegand noted. To apply for membership in the program, go to <https://www.adamsfireco.com/join/junior-firemen/>.

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