Smokey the Bear Is Alive and Well and Living in Dickerson

By Rande Davis

When it comes to volunteer service groups, there is none more vital than the Upper Montgomery County Volunteer Fire Department (UMCVFD), and when you speak of the firefighters, there is none who has been more vital than the recently-retired chief, Earl Moore.

Moore stepped down as chief this past January after twelve years at the helm, and after more than fifty years of firefighting service, he still plans to stay active as a volunteer. No one who knows him is surprised at that.

Large in stature, he almost reflects the firefighting icon, Smokey the Bear. Like Smokey, his passion for the fire service has guided him throughout his life.

On November 4, 1941, Earl was born in his aunt’s home (Betty Titus Watkins), and with her and Dr. White at his delivery, he came into this world “big, burly, and hollering.”

He has lived in the Poolesville area his whole life and attended Poolesville High School. Before he could graduate, his father had a serious injury and, as the oldest of six siblings, Earl was called to duty ahead of his time and needed to seek employment (he went on to gain his high school diploma later). To make ends meet, he worked on farms before landing a job with George Hilliard at Poolesville Plumbing. Too young to join the fire department, he followed Hilliard, who was the chief at the time, on calls, helping out in any way he could.

In 1959, he volunteered and became what he describes as a fire department fanatic. Young men need good mentors, and Earl had the best in George Hilliard, Bill Griffith, and Bill Bliss. Proving himself as a volunteer, he was encouraged by Bliss and Hilliard to consider making firefighting a career. In 1963, the Rockville Volunteer Fire Department put out a notice that they were to hire eleven firefighters, and, with his mentors’ support, he applied for a position. He was the last of eleven chosen and the only one not from Rockville. Throughout his thirty-year career as a professional firefighter, he continued his education by taking classes at the University of Maryland and attending multiple seminars and conferences in emergency services and firefighting.

In addition to his service as a fireman, he joined the Maryland National Guard, advancing to the rank of sergeant in light weapon mechanisms with the 115th Infantry and the 29th Infantry.

Rockville was an exceptionally-busy location for a fire company, and even on his last day as a professional in 1992, they had between fifteen and eighteen alarms within twenty-four hours.

Shortly after his retirement from Rockville, he became very active with the UMCVFD and became chief in 1999. In those fifty years, he cannot begin to compute how many fire calls he has been on: some simple calls, others extremely tragic. Some calls still bring a mistiness to his eyes like the time an infant died in his arms or the incident of three young children drowning. “It’s when the little children are victims of tragedy that is the hardest to take.”

Things have changed a lot over the years and not all for the better. When he started, most of the homes had been built in the 1940s or before and had been constructed with more substantial lumber which was more fire resistant than many materials used to build homes later.His only regret was not pursuing advanced education early so as to benefit from advancement opportunities. The best of the fifty years is easier for him to answer. “It’s the lifelong trusted friendships made knowing and recognizing that a team is only as good as the trust and bonds developed.”

Married in 1963 to his wife, Suzanne, who is also retired after thirty-seven years with NIH, she will join him as they have more time for their other great passion in life: outdoor sportsmanship and travel. They have traveled through every state in the union with perhaps their favorite being Alaska, but, when not on the road in their forty-foot recreational vehicle, you can expect our Smokey the Bear to be right where he has always been: providing guidance and good will to the community they service.