

Hanging up their hats

Three firefighters honored for more than 75 years of service with department

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OCONOMOWOC - Chris Seamandel jokes that she cooked hundreds of meals that were left cold and uneaten during the past 23 years, because her husband was putting out fires from people who had burned their own dinner.

"Now we can eat hot meals again," she said.

Seamandel's husband, Bob, along with Roger Mutter and Pete Nissen, recently retired as volunteers with the Oconomowoc Fire Department and were honored Monday for their dedication and commitment to the department.

"I've been with the department for 23 years and decided to retire on my golden anniversary," Seamandel said.

Battling a structure fire in the dead of winter with similar below zero temperatures as the area experienced this week is Seamandel's strongest memory of serving on the department.

"The fire was at Clemens beach, and the temperatures were so cold," he said. "We all had to be hosed down, and on the way back to the department while riding on the back of the truck, my hands were covered in about 2 inches of ice. The guys

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Pete Nissen, left, Roger Mutter, center, and Bob Seamandel were honored Monday night with awards at the Oconomowoc Fire Department. The three retirees have a combined total of more than 75 years of service with the department.

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The guys had to use a screwdriver to chip away at the ice and free my hands from the truck."

That fire occurred in 1982 at the popular super club, Counsell's Cruise Inn (formerly Clemens Resort), located between the golf course and Lac La Belle, on Lac La Belle Drive east of Monastery Hill.

"We arrived on the scene at about 3:30 a.m. and didn't return home until about 4 p.m. the next day," he said. "It was my first major fire."

Mutter, who served on the department for 30 years, said he will never forget the time when a call came through about a house fire and he recognized the address all too well.

"It ended up being at my mom's house," he said. "I had to determine if I would ride with the guys or drive myself over to my mom's. It was a split-second decision, and

I ended up going with the guys to the fire."

Because Mutter knew his childhood house inside and out, he was able to direct fellow firefighters where to go.

"I divided my time between putting out the fire and going next door to see how my mom was," he said.

Mutter said it took his mother about a year to recover from the fire.

Mutter is a first aid instructor, assistant dive instructor and active instructor of the American

Heart Association, and said it just his nature to help others out.

"I was starting to feel the little aches and pains of aging and decided I better give it up," Mutter said of his retirement. "I didn't want to put someone's life in danger."

Spending 24 years on the department, Nissen said one of his first calls was the most memorable, still shaking him today when he talks about it.

"We were called to a structure fire on South Street and made our way to the second floor," he said

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"We knew there was someone up there, and I was the first one who found him. He ended up dying from the fire."

Nissen was so shaken after discovering the young man that he took some time off from serving with the department. But, he said he came to grips with it and stayed with the department.

"It was the first fatal fire in 30 years in Oconomowoc, and after that I responded to several stretches of EMT calls where the people didn't end up surviving," he said. "It was rough. I still think about it

often."

Nissen said that anytime he has an opportunity to share advice with the younger men and women on the department, he takes advantage of it.

"I tell them if they are having a hard time that they did everything they were trained to do," he said. "Over the years, I've seen a lot of tragic things, and now I just want to spend some time with my family and watch my kids grow up."

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