

FRYEBURG FAIR'S FIREMEN'S MUSTER CELEBRATES 40TH ANNIVERSARY 1977-2017

Fryeburg Fair will celebrate the 40th anniversary of their Firemen's Muster this year October 1st, 2017 beginning at 9 a.m. – always the first Sunday of its eight-day schedule.

In 1977 local firemen and forest rangers began mulling the idea of starting a muster. Some had seen and attended similar events in nearby North Conway and Bridgton. They approached Fryeburg Fair and everyone agreed that a muster to highlight the skills, commitment and camaraderie of firefighters would happen on the first Sunday of Fryeburg Fair 1977.

The newly formed Firemen's Muster organization invited town fire departments within the Fryeburg Fair Society (Fryeburg, Lovell, Stow, Waterford, Stoneham, Hiram, Sweden, Porter, Bridgton, Otisfield, Cornish, Baldwin, Standish, Harrison, Denmark, and Brownfield in Maine; Freedom, Eaton, Bartlett, Chatham, Conway, and Jackson, in New Hampshire) to participate in competitive events like the Ladder Climb, Bucket Brigade, Water Barrel, Dry Hose, Rescue & Water Ball. Each town would bring their pumper truck filled with water and they would run through timed exercises. The events were competitive in every sense of the word overseen by knowledgeable and experienced judges and timers. Announcer Bob Walker, who was also the announcer for Oxford Plains Speedway, and a firefighter, emceed the event.

The backbone of the Fryeburg Fair Firemen's Muster during its 40-year history is the Watson family, all three of Fryeburg. The patriarch of the family is Corliss Watson, age 88. Corliss grew up in Fryeburg, graduated from Fryeburg Academy in 1948 and entered the U.S. Army serving in Korea. He was an occasional chauffeur for General Douglas MacArthur driving him to West Point. After the military, he returned to Fryeburg, owned and operated his business, Watson's Sunoco, as well as an apartment building and a rubbish business. He and his wife, Shirley, have been married for 64 years. They have three children, Sheila Watson Smith, Clyde Watson and Teresa Watson Prouty. Clyde joined the Fryeburg Fire Department in 1970 and worked side-by-side with his father organizing and running the Firemen's Muster right from the start. Not just for the boys, both Watson daughters, as well as daughter-in-law, Twyla Morris Watson, have worked on the administrative and record-keeping end of the musters. Clyde is the Public Works Director for the Town of Fryeburg. He and Twyla have been married for 38 years and have two sons, Gabe & Gus. Gabe Watson, age 35, is a Captain at Fryeburg Fire Department and joined the Firemen's Muster organization in



*The family behind Fryeburg Fair's Firemen's Muster - Corliss Watson (center) with his grandson, Gage Watson, and son, Clyde Watson.
Photo by Rachel Andrews Damon*



The Brownsfield Fire Department has perfect attendance at the Firemen's Muster - members are Tyler Miller, Gary Larson, Paul Duquette, Rich Merrill, Cristin Perreault, Captain Richard Perreault, Ernie Perreault-Deputy Chief, Scott Burnell-Assistant Chief, Don Dunham, Jesse Richards, Whit Lucy, Greg Courtney and Tim Babb; Missing from photo Foulton Babb and Stanley Smith; Photo by Rachel Andrews Damon

2000. He recently took over his father's excavation and trucking business. Moving down another generation, Gabe has one son, Cole, age 7, and says, "The best thing about the Muster for me is having four generations of my family there on that day."

Looking back on the last 40 years, Corliss says, "We've had some great people work with us on the Muster." He says he's not sure he can remember all of them and then quickly begins to list a few, "Bob Butters, our Head Judge, was the chief of Norway Fire Department. He dedicated his life to firefighting. Now his son, Randy, is the head judge. We give out the Bob Butters Sportsmanship Trophy every year to recognize Bob's contributions. Bonnie Seames, Bob's daughter, has done scoring for 40 years. Dennis Yates, Scott Hunter, Calvin Hunter, they've all been judges. They run the times and the rules we go by at Fryeburg Fair. Scott Gregory runs the Fryeburg pumping truck and has done so for years. Rex Wiley did it before that."

Corliss celebrated his 70th anniversary with the Fryeburg Fire Department this year and was featured on WCSH Channel 6 news. Clyde has been with the department for 46 years and Gabe 15 years. Clyde has been the chief of Fryeburg Fire and is now a captain. Both Clyde & his father have been the President of the Western Maine Fireman's Association. Corliss says, "I've always enjoyed going to the fire meetings and seeing all the guys. I was 17 when I started. Everyone was gungho to do everything and not at all interested in pay."

"I've always been interested in firefighting," says Gabe. "I started going to the fire station with my father when I was about five years old. My son, Cole, is already going with me and he loves it."

Fryeburg Fair's Firemen's Muster remains traditional in its events and organization today except for the fact that in 1990 it was opened to departments throughout New England and Canada. Corliss says, "When we started back in



*The Denmark Fire Department in the "Water Ball" event.
Photo by Rachel Andrews Damon*



Rich Merrill of the Brownfield Fire Department in the "Ladder Climb" event supported by fellow firefighters. Photo by Lori Candelora

1977 we had about 15 teams locally. Last year we had 24 which often includes teams from Canada, Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Participation in the Muster is on a first-come, first-served basis. Invitations must be accepted by September 15th."

Clyde adds, "There's lots of comraderie at the Muster. We always have a moment of silence for those who have passed. Lori Panno of Brownfield has been singing the national anthem for us for years. We have traditions and we stick with them. The departments that participate love the Muster and the Fair because they all have a good time."

Gabe says, "The Fair's Muster is out of the ordinary routine for everyone. It's a great time to get together. It's a real social event and it's all about family. Everyone sets up a tent and tailgates with their teams. You can't beat it."

Who's the best team at Fryeburg Fair's Firemen's Muster? Gabe says, "Brownfield has attended the muster every year – perfect attendance. We recognized them at the 35th event with a special award. They also won the sportsmanship award last year."

"North Conway has had great participation too," says Clyde. "We have a plaque for the team with the most event wins. Waterford is a very impressive department. They muster all summer long in different locations. For a while they competed on a professional level."

All three Watsons agree on the highlights of Muster day. Clyde says "I think one of the best things is the morning breakfast when the teams cook and tailgate before the Muster begins. We all get to visit and it's great to see everyone again."

Gabe adds, "The crowd loves it when Richard Merrill from the Brownfield Fire Department climbs to the top of the ladder." Merrill, now 56, has been doing this for 39 years. "Every year he's on that ladder. It can sway a little bit...but he is on it, he's sticking to it and climbing no matter what direction the ladder takes. It's very impressive. Unfortunately his knees are starting to bother him a bit." Writers note: Word on the street is that despite a few aches and pains, Rich Merrill will be on the ladder again in October.

If you're wondering what happens should a fire break out while local firefighters are at the Muster, Gabe reassures, "We have an engine staffed downtown so they can respond immediately. And the rest of us are ready to go right behind them if necessary."

Andy Dufresne, a life-long firefighter, and chief of the Fryeburg Fire Department says, "We are very fortunate to have three generations of Watsons serving here. They are very dedicated and hardworking individuals. Corliss was just recognized for 70 years of service. That's quite an amazing achievement in any field."

Despite the Watson family commitment to firefighting, Clyde says, "Unfortunately volunteer firefighters are not joining at the rate we need. The family legacies just aren't around anymore. And it's much harder to get the younger ones to join. There's a lot more going on for them now. All departments are in the same boat. When I was a junior firefighter there were 25 others with me, now there are none. All of us would like to see more people come out and serve."

For more information on becoming a volunteer firefighter, contact Fryeburg Fire Chief Andy Dufresne at (207) 935-2615 or at fryefire@fryeburgmaine.org.

Written by Rachel Andrews Damon