

Bonny Doon

There's A New Title-Holder

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Oldest Active Volunteer Fireman

By Bill Neubauer
Sentinel Staff Writer

Fire Chief Ted Toft of Felton was hailed Saturday as the new "world's oldest active volunteer fireman" at the Bonny Doon Fire Team's annual steak barbecue at Bonny Doon School.

Toft won the title "by about a year or so" from Earl Schoonover, 74, who captains the fire team's rescue squad.

Toft was treated to a free steak dinner by a smiling Schoonover and the 23 other members of the fire team.

"It was really quite exciting," reported Mrs. John Robb, publicity chairman for the barbecue. "Chief Toft showed his driver's license to Frank Hellenenthal, and then everyone began to shake hands. In many ways it was the most successful barbecue we've held. We served about 450 steak dinners to people who came from all over."

Part of the proceeds will go toward construction of a firehouse on a half-acre given by Hellenenthal to the fire team. Other proceeds will be used to purchase more equipment.

Toft said Monday that he isn't sure he's the world's oldest active volunteer fireman but that he thinks he may qualify for the northern Santa Cruz County title.

Toft has been chief of the Felton Volunteer Fire Department since 1947. He has been an active member of the organization

since its formation in the latter 1930s to buy land for establishment of the California Division of Forestry headquarters in Felton.

"People wanted the forestry headquarters in Santa Cruz and Scotts Valley and other places," Toft said. "But we were told that the forestry division wanted to be in Felton. They had no money to buy land, so we got merchant George Fetherston to guarantee payment for the land and then the fire department was organized to pay for it."

Toft's father, Nissen H. Toft, came to Felton from San Benito County in 1898 after he had lost 1200 acres of wheat there during a hard winter for farmers. Toft himself came to Felton some seven weeks later with his mother, sister and two brothers.

The trip was made in a buckboard drawn by two horses, Toft recalls, with a colt following and a milk cow behind. Four days were needed to make the 85-mile journey for a new family start in the San Lorenzo Valley.

Toft's father entered the teamster business, which was big business in an early-day Felton where lumbering and lime quarrying and burning were king. Toft joined the business as soon as he was old enough. One of his first jobs involved helping his father haul "powder" wood to today's Paradise Park area, which was in those years site of a powder mill.

"Powder" wood was an ideal load for an embryonic teamster to begin on, Toft said. Madrone, creek alders and willows made up the load, wood that had been split very small in winter and left to dry thoroughly. It was light wood when finally loaded in summer and fall and was ideal for transformation into charcoal for the powder.

Wages were 25 cents a day.

Toft first worked with his father's big horses in 1910, and after 1912 used the big teams regularly on whatever job the company landed.

For a teamster, a typical day began at around 3:30 a.m. The horses were given 1½ hours to eat their ration of rolled barley and hay. While the horses were eating, the stable was cleaned, the harness seen to, the wagon greased. After the horses were curried and harnessed, the teamster had his breakfast. He was out on the road at about 5:30 a.m.

For the heavy loads, Toft said, teams of six or eight horses were used. His father had horses for all kinds of work, wheelers weighing 1800 pounds, swingers weighing 1400 pounds, leaders weighing 1200 pounds, and lighter horses for plowing, delivery work and freight hauling to Mt. Hermon.

Loads handled by Toft were barrels of lime from the old IXL kilns on Fall Creek Road, cordwood, tanbark, railroad

ties and log sections for the mills.

By 1922 most of the teamster work petered out in the valley, Toft said, as more and more automobiles and trucks appeared on the roads.

Toft remained in Felton, however, working at a variety of jobs and participating with his wife, Mae, in community projects.

The projects included building Felton Community Hall in 1924, helping to convert the old Felton Community Church into a library in 1956, helping to organize and create the Felton Volunteer Fire Department.

In the past 10 years Toft has helped repair and preserve Felton's Covered Bridge, recently designated a California Historical Landmark. An annual pancake breakfast served on the bridge by the firemen has attracted national attention and brings huge crowds to Felton.

But firefighting remains Toft's main interest.

He responds to fire calls and other emergencies along with everyone else, contributes "savvy" as well as physical effort to the task of containing fires.

During Toft's tenure as chief, the Felton Volunteer Fire Department has won plaudits not only from the community but from the California Division of Forestry, which rates the department as "one of the very best in the area."