

## **Old Engine 77 Is Ready to Go**

**By Craig Fox**

[cfox@wdt.net](mailto:cfox@wdt.net)

**August 10, 2023**

WATERTOWN — Old Engine 77 looks a whole lot better these days than when the fire truck sat in a strawberry field in Sandy Creek for about 12 years.

For the past eight years, the 1952 Ford F700 — Engine 77 — has gone through an extensive refurbishment and is ready to serve the town of Watertown Fire Department in its new job.

“It’s really a nice rig for what it was,” said veteran firefighter Robert J. Johnston, 76, who has a long history with the fire engine that dates back when he was 15 years old.

But it’s been a long road to refurbish Engine 77, said John M. Falge, a 31-year firefighter with the department.

After fire department members did what they could to bring the engine back to its original glory, the old engine was sent to the town of Louisville in St. Lawrence County, where it went through an extensive bodywork and paint job that got it looking like it did when Johnston was a 15-year-old firefighter trainee.

Now that it’s finished, the engine will be showcased in parades, festivals and other events, to show off to recruits and to help say goodbye to department members and local dignitaries at their funerals.

“It’s 100% ready to go,” Falge said.

He and Johnston were put in charge of the restoration project as cochairs of the department’s truck committee. Both are still members of the department, with Johnston its senior member with 61 years under his belt.

“It’s almost as old as I am,” he said.

In 1962, he completed pumper training on the engine that was the first piece of equipment that the Watertown Town Fire Department ever owned.

The restoration project was funded only by donations and a fundraising effort and with no taxpayer money.

Fire department members initially worked on the basics of restoring the apparatus before deciding that it needed some extra attention. When it went up to St. Lawrence County for two years, the pumper’s bright red color was faded and predominantly rusted.

For years, it was a bit of a mystery what happened to the beloved pumper, in service for about 20 years, after it was taken off the road during the early 1970s.

The pumper was found on Brian J. Kehoe’s family farm in Sandy Creek, where it was used to irrigate his strawberries for a few years until the truck went out to pasture after the farm was turned into a Christmas tree-growing business.

The two firefighters credit Bob Shirley, who does auto restoration work as a hobby in his Louisville garage, for restoring Engine 77.

Shirley removed the truck’s cab, motor, back and fenders and it was just down to its frame so he could do his magic. He was recommended by a local group of antique fire apparatus enthusiasts.

“He did tremendous work refurbishing it, Falge said.

Along the way, the two volunteer firefighters learned some interesting tidbits of information about the historic fire truck.

The Ford F-700 was the first piece of fire apparatus used both as a pumper and to have fire equipment on board. It also was the first to be equipped with a V-8 engine.

Two others exactly like the Engine 77 were manufactured for the Adams and Lorraine fire departments.

The pumper was able to carry 2,000 gallons of water to fires, not the 500 that had been thought, Falge said.

“Water was kept in every nook and cranny on the truck,” he said.

Some log books were found in the truck’s glove compartment when it was returned home from Sandy Creek. And it contained an entry showing Johnston going on a fire call so many decades ago. He doesn’t remember that fire.

But now he’ll be making new memories with old Engine 77.

Only Johnston and Falge and two other drivers in the department can drive it.

That’s because it’s a stick shift and all the other drivers in the department are only qualified to drive fire trucks with automatic transmissions, Falge said proudly.