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Retired fire instructor shares expertise

By Vince Guerrieri

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George Sacco has been fighting fires long enough to remember a time before fire trucks were used, and when firemen - and they were all men back then - used wheeled carts to pump water.

"When Moses found the burning bush, George was there to put it out," said Dan Horasko of the South Baldwin Volunteer Fire Department.

Sacco, who turned 90 in June, is retired from Gulf Oil and a retired state-certified fire instructor. But since he's been retired longer than he worked, he has to do something to keep active. So he travels around, giving fire safety and technique seminars to fire companies.

"You don't stay active, they'll throw dirt on your face," Sacco said of the firefighters he teaches.

Although Sacco calls O'Hara home, he has taken a shine to several fire companies in the South Hills, and was never above stopping by and offering them the benefits of his wisdom.

And on Thursday, firefighters from Sewickley to Monongahela gathered at the South Baldwin firehouse to honor the man they call "The Godfather."

"I'll come back on my hundredth, and we'll celebrate again," he told the crowd of about 50 men and women gathered in the social hall to surprise Sacco after he talked to the fire company about arson investigation.

Sacco, the son of Italian immigrants, was born in Lawrenceville. He went to work in 1929 for Atlantic Refining, and the company promptly made him a firefighter.

"I never had any training," he said. "I just held a hose."

But his experience with Atlantic later made the powers that be at Gulf Oil in Harmarville decide that he'd make a good trainer for their fire brigade, in addition to his duties as a machinist for that company.

Working for an oil company also gave Sacco some expertise about pumps and pressurization, which he was more than willing to pass along to firefighters.

"If there was 10 gallons left on the earth, he could pump it," said Rodger Young, a member of Valley Inn Fire Department in Monongahela.

Crafton Fire Chief Roy Hermes wasn't too far removed from Crafton High

School 50 years ago when he met Sacco, who was instructing a course at the Allegheny County Fairgrounds.

Hermes recalled a demonstration Sacco would give, in which he'd attach a doorbell to the inside of a paint can. Sacco would wire the doorbell to a battery, fill the paint can with gasoline and put the lid on over it. The doorbell would go off, but the liquid-to-air ratio was too high for the spark to ignite the gasoline.

Sacco would then pour the gasoline out, put the lid back on and start the doorbell.

"The lid would blow off clear to the ceiling," Hermes said.

Sacco managed to enthrall firefighters with his lectures, using props and visual aids, and even sneaking a pinup into his presentation to make sure his students were paying attention.

"He was one of the best instructors I've ever had," said Jim Joyce of the Brentwood Volunteer Fire Department.

Sacco gave one of his teaching tools, a model two-story house, to the South Baldwin company. But it's no dollhouse. It's all clear plastic and the outside has numerous holes covered by metal plates. Sacco would open the house, use some pipe tobacco and oil to start a fire, and remove various plates to simulate the effects of windows blowing out or firefighters cutting a hole in the roof.

Sacco is a life member of three fire companies, including Guyasuta in O'Hara, where he served as chief. He is an honorary member of eight other companies, and serves O'Hara as fire marshal and an auxiliary police officer. It would be enough to keep him busy, but he's got more going on.

"And last but not least, I have a girlfriend," he said.

The crowd at South Baldwin pressed him for details, but he would say only that they met at a fire hall.

"You think I'd meet her in church?" he asked. The crowd howled.

Even at 90, a guy's got to have a few secrets.

The Sacco File

- Name: George Sacco
- Age: 90
- Residence: O'Hara Township
- Family: son George in Akron; two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren in Cincinnati.

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