

Love of fire trucks sparks a celebration

By META GAERTNIER
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Fire truck.
The glitter of the chrome, the deep-throated growl, the long red flash of it as it hurtles down the street . . .

Emperor of the road. Lowlier vehicles scoot to curbside, adults' heartbeats momentarily quicken and kids crane and clamor for another look.

Burnsville residents Roger Jackson and Bob Simmer can tell you all about the feeling, because between them, they own five antique fire trucks. Two of their mechanical monsters will be rolling out Saturday for Burnsville's fourth annual Fire Muster parade.

"There's a strange romance about the whole thing," said Jackson, 13304 Walnut Drive, who began collecting fire engines about five years ago. "It has to do with the danger of fire, of man and machine overpowering it.

"They have a purpose; they're part of a community's history," said Simmer, 12812 Woodview Lane, a self-described "frustrated firefighter" who bought his two vehicles from Jackson earlier this year.

"I think from the age I could ride my bike, I spent most of my time hanging out at the fire station," said Simmer, a Hopkins native who owns a Burnsville printing shop. "There's just something about it; every time the alarm sounded, my friends and I would hop on the bikes and follow as best we could.

"The trucks we collect are like antique cars, except they're in better condition," he continued. "And each, if you trace it back, has a story—of the catastrophes it was at, the people who've worked with it, the tragedies it's seen."



Star Photo by David Brewster

(From left) Robby Simmer, 4, Bob and Toni Simmer, Missy Simmer, 6, Roger Jackson and fire trucks

It's the attraction of fire engines that's at the heart of Burnsville's Fire Muster, an annual celebration that begins Friday and runs through Sunday.

From its beginning four years ago as a one-day promotional event for a shopping mall, the muster has been adopted by the community and expanded from a day of fire department-oriented activities to include numerous recreational events. Jackson, a sales representative for an import firm, spent his childhood ad-

miring fire trucks. Driving past the scene of a major fire in St. Paul in 1963, he saw it: a 1957 Ward La France pumper.

"The sound of the truck, the power it represented, just the whole job it was doing really struck me," said Jackson. "I thought suddenly it would be nice to have one of my own someday."

Thirteen years later, he acquired three engines when the St. Paul purper he had admired went on sale as part of a three-truck deal. He took them home to a six-car garage he had built previously to store cars he collected.

The trucks would roll out for family outings, birthdays and other special events.

In 1978, Jackson was asked by staff members of Diamond Head Mall if he'd display his vehicles there as a one-day promotional event. (By then, he had five.) Jackson agreed, but suggested the activity be expanded to an old-fashioned "fire muster," a get-together of several fire departments, allowing them to

show off vehicles and skills in demonstrations and competitions.

Staged with the aid of the Burnsville Fire Department, the 1978 muster was successful—so much so that plans were made to hold it again at the mall in 1979. By 1980, fire department participation and community attendance had outgrown the mall's parking lot.

Jackson then contacted the Burnsville Jaycees, who adopted the event as the basis for an annual citywide celebration. Enthusiasm for the muster has caught on like—well, like a house afire.

Since early this year, about two dozen people have been asking Twin Cities area fire departments and collectors of antique fire vehicles to participate in Saturday's parade, lining up bands for a street dance and mustering financial support among Burnsville businesses.

And for every person serving on a particular committee, others have stepped forth with an idea for an event or an activity they wish to sponsor. From a Miss

Burnsville pageant to an arts and crafts sale, from a Dalmatian show to a pancake breakfast, from a fun run to a hot air balloon event, the number of ideas has made it necessary to expand the event from one day to three. The fire department-related activities will be held Saturday.

"It had to be three days so we could work everything in," said Jackson, smiling. "After last year, people kept coming up and saying, 'Say, that was really nice. But you ought to do this next year, you ought to do that.'"

"We just couldn't say no. So anyway, here we go."