

## Town workers just keep going...and going



Walter Hart and Jap Hawkes (seated).

(Photo by Ed Corliss)

Jap Hawkes climbed board the road grader and cranked it up for the last time. As the old diesel engine coughed and came to life, his smile widened a few more inches. Hawkes, 78, and the grader that was being sold to the school board, had come to work for the town for Blackstone back in the 40's. Their flesh and steel had bonded by years of work—neither was going to retire before the other.

While younger members of the town's street crew saw only the discomfort and indignity of operating equipment that had no heat, Hawkes still remembered how he felt when the equipment was new. "We didn't have anything like that! Why, a piece of equipment that would do that kind of work! We didn't have nothing but picks and shovels!" Built simple and made to last, Hawkes and the grader had much in common.

Blackstone has always placed great value in its heavy equipment and made sure there was advantage to be gained before replacing a piece. But when it comes to good workers, the town figures their value increases with the years. If you work for Blackstone no one turns your engine off before you are ready.

Hawkes is not the only town employee who has stayed behind the wheel long after retirement age. There's Francis Johnson, 39 years on the Water Dept., and Ercelle Dewey, 41 years at the town office. And there's 74 year-old Walter hart, 17 years with the town after 21 years with Garrett, Moon, and Pool.

For Town Manager Larry Palmore, having men like Hawkes and Johnson at his elbow when sewer and water lines have to be replaced saves time and money. Better than maps, they can tell you not only where everything is buried but how it was buried. “When they say we used to do it this way, I listen,” said Palmore, who was hired by the town eight years ago to replace water lines. “Johnson could put his foot on every valve that was buried.”

But it is not only the knowledge these older workers possess that makes them so valuable: they also remind the younger generations of the pure joy of work. “When I first came here, Jap Hawkes said you don’t every have to worry about running out of work,” said Hart. Obviously, in the mind of these men, running out of work was like running out of food.

“I’ve been working since I was five years-old,” Hart continued. His lean body didn’t have any excess and he didn’t have much use for anyone who looked forward to the absence of work. To Hart, the end of work was death.

“Epes Harris told me—see I’ve had two open heart surgeries—not to ever quit work...I know two or three people who retired at 62 and didn’t see 65. I know one man who died the day he retired.” Epes told him that sitting at home with nothing to do but think about himself would carry him away as quick as a bad disease.

“Retiring? I’ve retired two or three times and come back!” Hawkes laughed even when he wasn’t on the grader. “They don’t let me go...and I appreciate it. You take a man my age, don’t nobody want to fool with you.” Except Blackstone, that is.

Hawkes doesn’t operate a street grader anymore. Arthritis gets his knees, he says. But he does mow everything that grows on the town property during the warm months. “He’s just like clockwork,” Palmore commented. “Never cutting anything he shouldn’t and taking care of the equipment. No one ever complains about Hawkes.”

Town employment has been good for men like Hart and Hawkes. “I bought my home. Paid for that. Bought three or four more homes around town, trailers and things...I paid for that, too!” said Hawkes.

When Hart came to work for the town, all three of his sons worked here. “I’ve had a good life,” he said, not meaning that it was over, to be sure. Hart grew up on a Dinwiddie farm. One of 15 children, and weathered the depression “better than those that had one or two children. Back then you raised everything you ate.”

Palmore laughed. “Hart doesn’t understand why the men should want a break.”

“When I come along, we didn’t have breaks...and it ain’t never hurt me!” Hart said, raising his eyebrows. Work in Hart’s mind was more than just the means to a pay check—work was the pay check!

Palmore had more to say about the town’s older workers. He said keeping their town running smoothly and helping people is what keeps them going long after the expiration date of 65 years society has set up as the norm. “They are not here because they have to be, but because they want to be.”