

## **Mr. James Elkins Fire Hall**

Though there is no way to ever adequately thank James Elkins for his 43 years of service as the Bell Buckle Fire Chief, the Town of Bell Buckle will honor this outstanding man by formally naming the new Bell Buckle Fire Hall after him in a ceremony to be held on Sunday, October 8<sup>th</sup> at 3:00. Mr. Elkins served as Chief of the Bell Buckle Volunteer Fire Department from February 1950 until February 1993 when he retired.

Mr. Elkins, a Bell Buckle native, still lives in the same house that he moved into when he was 6 months old. Mr. Elkins and his high school sweetheart, Dorothy, celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary this August. Mr. Elkins has suffered some recent health setbacks with congestive heart failure and pneumonia, but Mrs. Elkins has seen that he follows his doctor's orders so he is on the mend. His pleasant demeanor and gentlemanly qualities are ever present.

He is a decorated World War II veteran having served in the 276<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers Battalion. The unit's main objectives were to build bridges, roads and airfields. On March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1945, while working on the Ludendorff Bridge in Remagen, Germany, arguably one of the most important military bridges, Mr. Elkins along with 200 engineers in the unit were thrown from the bridge when it suddenly collapsed into the Rhine River. After being pulled from the twisted metal where he had been pinned, Mr. Elkins was flown to a Paris hospital where he awoke 28 hours later. Twenty eight men were killed and ninety three were injured in the Ludendorff's collapse. Mr. Elkins spent 6 weeks in the hospital during which time President Franklin D. Roosevelt died.

For his service in World War II, Mr. Elkins received the Purple Heart, an ETO Ribbon with three battle stars, a Germany Occupation Medal, an American Campaign Medal, a World War II medal, and the Presidential Unit Citation for his work on the Ludendorff Bridge.

Upon returning home from the war, he opened Elkins' Garage in Bell Buckle. In 1950, he was appointed by Mayor M. Busch Hinkle as Fire Chief for the Bell Buckle Volunteer Fire Department which consisted of a chief and 15 firefighters. Bell Buckle's first fire truck, a 1950 Chevy, was purchased in 1950, and Mr. Elkins boasts that it still has the original tires on it and less than 10,000 miles. The fire truck was housed at the Elkins' Garage for three years until the old Fire Hall on Webb Road was built in 1953. Not until 1985 was another truck purchased.

Mr. Elkins recalls that when he was first appointed Chief they were not allowed to go outside the city limits to respond to calls due to the fact that funding for the Department came from the town only and they only had one truck. When the town purchased the second truck, they were then allowed to respond to within a five mile radius of the town. He referred to his department as "smoke eaters" as they had no air pacs.

Mr. Elkins reflected back to the fires that he fought that has had the biggest impact in our area. He recalled the fire at the old Bell Buckle High School, the current site of the new Bell Buckle Park. He lamented that if they could have gotten there just 30 minutes earlier that maybe they could have saved the school. Sadly he remembers the night that Sawney Webb's house burned. With a look of sad reflection, he recounted the night back in 1986 when there a big storm and lightening hit the house starting the fire in the front where it swept quickly to the back of the house by the time of the Fire Department's arrival. Thankfully no students were boarding there at the time, but the historical home was completely destroyed.

An accomplished iron worker, Mr. Elkins is responsible for the iron gates at The Celebration and the old Bell Buckle school. Recently he donated 8 concrete benches with stone aggregate leaf motifs that he designed and made to the Bell Buckle Park.

Though he has retired, he continues to take avid interest in the BBVFD and has watched the new Fire Hall construction progress from start to finish. He is proud of all that the Bell Buckle Volunteer Fire Department has accomplished and the advances that the department has made in equipment, gear, training, and facilities.

It is with pride that Bell Buckle names the new Fire Hall the "James W. Elkins Fire Hall".