

SUSSEX PUTS BIT OF HISTORY, ROAD MUSCLE ON SALE

The Star-Ledger Sunday, May 14, 1989

By FRED J. AUN

The 48th anniversary of Walter No. 9's delivery to the Sussex County Road Department passed without fanfare Thursday.

Nobody lit a candle or even shook their head in solemn memory of a one-time King of the Road.

They didn't climb into the goofy-looking cab to dream about plowing Sussex County roads in an era when trains still traveled to Branchville and the milk vending machine was working at Ideal Farms in Augusta.

They at least could have polished the 12-volt fan installed pridefully on No. 9's dashboard on Nov. 30, 1948.

But who cares about a homely, aged road warrior or his six Walter siblings? Now No. 9 and two of his brothers are parked out of the way in a big garage hidden from view at the road department's Andover Township outpost. The four other members of the family (they are not numbered consecutively) are in county garages in Vernon, Frankford, Sussex and Layton.

Their glory days - the blizzards of the yore - earned them respect at the time, but if you don't have a diesel under the hood these days, buddy, you're snowplow history.

The freeholders decided the other day to break up this four-wheel drive fraternity. They're offering to sell, for a dollar, four of the seven Walters to any Sussex County municipality that wants one.

Road department supervisors hardly are knocking down the garage doors for the old battlewagons with their nasty looking "V" plows and their skinny high-profile balloon tires.

But if the silent brothers could talk they'd chide the scornful to mind their manners.

The Walters aren't just snowplows, insists the 1938 factory literature filed away in the county garages. We're talking about genuine "Walter Snow-Fighters," built by the Walter Motor Truck Co. to do one job and do it well: Demolish 8-foot-high snow drifts without a grunt.

What's this about no power steering? Mister, why don't you just buy a truck that drives itself?

Anyway, it says right here in the Walter General Instructions (page 15, under

Specifications): "Steering; Left Drive, Cam and Lever Gear. Patented Knuckle which balances the drive forces giving easy steering."

And if you don't believe the grease-stained little book, just check out the horn button. Says on it "Ross Cam and Lever Steering."

That's right. Cams and levers. Not a computerized, fuel-injected, climate-controlled, self-adjusting, light-emitting diode-illuminated black box in sight.

"You have to have some training to drive them," said Acting County Administrator Anthony Thonnerieux. "Most of our drivers are used to everything automatic."

If it takes a little muscle to move a Walter, just remember what the owner's manual says: "Walter Tractor Trucks and Snow Fighters are capable of wonderful performances, and if given proper care and attention will operate at very low cost in even the most difficult kind of service."

Does it matter that No. 12 needed a new engine just nine months after it was bought for \$10,000 in December 1947? Is it meaningful that No. 11 needed a new motor three years after its purchase in October 1945?

The county didn't pay a thing for the engine replacements. The records say "no charge," and this is long before companies started talking about buyer protection plans.

"The gasoline engines don't hold up like the diesels," observed senior garage assistant Garfield Finigan at the Andover garage.

Outside, in the sun, was parked a gleaming new Ford, complete with the aforesaid diesel powerplant. Walter No. 10, locked in the garage on the hill, cost \$8,000 in 1942. The Ford in the driveway cost about \$60,000.

The Walters aren't being removed because they no longer work. In fact, they're all kept in a state of readiness, especially in the winter.

"They're a good backup truck," Finigan said.

Jack Blauvelt, the county's supervisor of garage maintenance, hopped in one of the brothers last week, pressed the starter and the 150-horsepower six cylinder roared to life.

Well, maybe it kind of rumbled to life, sounding vaguely like the warmups for the annual tractor pulls at the Sussex County Farm and Horse Show.

Life in the engines or not, the Walters - the oldest vehicles owned by Sussex County - are unwanted dinosaurs.

Blauvelt, for one, isn't shedding any tears. "It's just like anything else; I believe in progress," he said.

Finigan and Blauvelt said the new trucks can do everything a Walter can and have a significant advantage - they can be used year-round and keep up with traffic.

The Walters are called Snow-Fighters for a reason. They can't be shifted out of four-wheel-drive and the fastest they went even when they weren't a half-century old was 30 mph.

That was plenty fast in the World War II era. Those were the days before truck-mounted sanders, meaning road crews provided traction by standing in the truck beds and shoveling sand on the roads.

Back then, the county had a different philosophy about snow removal, Blauvelt said. Instead of rushing onto the roads as early as possible, spreading sand and salt to get a head start on the storm, the old way often involved waiting until the storm was over before clearing the roads.

The Walters' V-plows sliced through the thick snow and the side-mounted "wing" plow shoved it onto the road shoulder, Blauvelt said.

"They do good when you've got the snow for them," said Finigan. "But we haven't had snow where you had to worry about those things for a long time."

Still, it isn't the Greenhouse Effect that's bringing the demise of the Walter corps. Thonnerieux said the Walters must go because the county "needs the garage space."

He understands the inefficiency in keeping a fleet of museum pieces. But Thonnerieux also reveals a tinge of wistfulness at the breakup of the brothers.

"They used to parade these things through the county," he said