

The town and the Fury

Police chief Scott Collins loves Selbyville and the 1973 Plymouth Fury he restored as a tribute to his father

By JAMES DIEHL, Special to "The News Journal"

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Scott Collins, Selbyville's chief of police, with his Fury. The restored police car has been used mainly for car shows.

Special to "The News Journal"/JAMES DIEHL



Collins with a photograph of his father, Junior Collins, who was Selbyville's chief of police from 1967 to 2001, when his son took over.

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SELBYVILLE -- Scott Collins loves everything about Selbyville. He loves the people, he loves the proximity to the beach, he loves the history, he loves his job.

He's just glad he doesn't have to take out the trash.

Collins, the chief of police and a history buff, tells of a time when the chief's duties included driving the town's trash truck once a week and spraying for mosquitoes.

"I'm certainly very thankful that I don't have to drive the trash truck," he said, chuckling, from his office in Town Hall.

The son of longtime chief of police Ward Collins -- whom everyone in town knew simply as "Junior" -- the younger Collins spent many a day at the side of his father learning the ways of the law.

Junior Collins was chief from 1967 to 2001 before giving way to his son.

When his dad died in 2005, Scott dealt with the loss in his own way -- he began work on what has become his pride and joy, a bright red 1973 Plymouth Fury that, even today, conjures up images of his late father.

"Dad was a mechanic before he was a policeman, and we had always talked about restoring an old car together," Collins said. "When he passed, I just decided that it was going to get done." Known for years for the bright red police cars that patrolled its streets during the days when "Junior" ran the town, Selbyville is one of a growing list of Sussex County municipalities bursting at the seams with development.

But the car brings Collins back to a simpler time, when everyone knew each other by first name.

"I don't know how many times people have seen the car and come up and told me stories about my father," Collins said. "Just the stories I've heard and the memories people have shared ... of my dad, have been priceless.

"Since he's passed and I've heard other people's tales, it's changed how I look at things," Collins added. "To me, he was dad and he was boss, but now I see what kind of impact he had over the years. He got things done, and he got them done in his own way."

The Selbyville Police Department is one of only two departments in Delaware that used to have red police cars patrolling their streets -- Delaware City is the other.

While all of the Selbyville Police Department's former cars are long gone, Collins was lucky enough to find a former North Carolina sheriff's car for sale. He drove to Waldorf, Md., and bought the car for \$3,000.

Two months later, with restoration complete, the car was as it was in the 1970s, complete with the original police radio, window radar unit, flashing light and Junior's ticket book. The restoration work cost Collins an additional \$3,500.

"This car definitely brings me back," Collins laughed. "As I've aged, I keep getting the comment that I'm looking more and more like dad every day, and I just wanted to do something that he would be proud of. I think I did that."

The restoration of "Junior's car" was complete in time for the police department's 75-year anniversary last year and stimulated Collins' interest even more in the history of Selbyville, and in the police department.

The old railroad station, next to city hall on Church Street, has been turned into a museum and boasts many items from Selbyville's past, including a replica of Junior's old uniform and his first police-issued gun, a Smith & Wesson .32-caliber revolver.

"I'm a big historian, and talking about the car with people has allowed me to talk with them about the history of the town and ask them if they have anything [we could include in the museum]," Collins said. "It's really been a big conversation starter."

Collins' research into Selbyville's past has taken on a greater urgency in recent months. As the town's makeup continues to change, the chief of police, and father of three, is concerned that its past may soon be forgotten.

"We've tripled in size in the last year and a half, and we're starting to see the influx of different people into the area. "It's getting harder and harder to find a lifelong resident," Collins said. "It's tough to find people who remember what Selbyville was actually like back in the '40s and '50s."

The restored police car, which has been used mainly for car shows, has had the unintended consequence of strengthening ties between the police department and the community.

"The car has really been a great community policing tool for the department. As soon as people see it, they want to come up and talk about it, and it really opens them up," Collins said. "If you get them talking about the car, they get to know the police officers and also what the department can do for them."

