

LOCALNEWS

ONE OF HOLDEN'S LAST LIFTS

Electrician that helps dress Smokey bound for retirement

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

Mike Holden's face was fully focused Wednesday as he guided the International Falls' bucket lift containing Loni Bright toward the city's iconic Smokey Bear and cubs statue.

Holden squinted against the early morning sun as he watched Bright motion with her hand to get closer to the 26-foot-tall statue that has an International Falls downtown park named after him.

Using a hooked pole, Bright caught the material of the fishing vest she fashioned for the bear's summer attire and pulled until it was smooth.

"That's good," she yelled back to Holden, who has served the city as electrician for 39 years.

This year marks the 10th year Holden and Bright have work closely to dress the big bear and his cubs, constructed in 1954. Bright has been outfitting Smokey with his seasonal wardrobe since 2004 when she crafted the vest for the first International Falls Bass Championship.

And with Holden's retirement Sept. 19, it's likely to be the last year the two together take on the Smokey project.

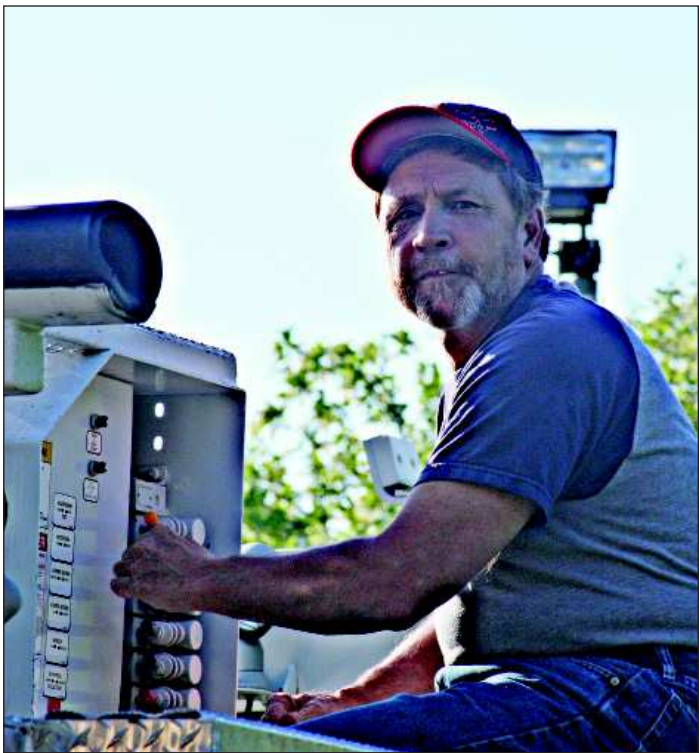
Bright said Holden, 61, is an expert at working the levers that control the lift located at the back of the truck and she said she's a bit concerned he'll no longer be her partner in the effort.

Placing a person in a bucket lift that reaches many feet toward the sky is serious business and can be tricky. But Holden pledged he would train the city's new recently hired electrician, Rusty Blais.

"You've got to know how to feather it, or you can knock her into Smokey, or throw her out of the bucket," he said.

Holden said working the six or seven levers from the truck when someone else is in the bucket is more difficult than when he hops in the bucket and lifts himself with a single stick control. And before Bright, Holden said he'd hoisted for about the last 20 years others in the community who had created ear muffs and other items for the bear.

"I will be fading away," said Holden of the work.



With toothpick tucked into the corner of his mouth, Mike Holden looks up from running the levers that control the motion of the city's lift truck. Holden will retire in September, but pledges to train his replacement in how to help dress Smokey.



Loni Bright uses a pole to zip Smokey's vest as Holden inches her closer to the huge statue.

"But I told Loni, I will be here helping (Blais) to learn."

Holden serves as the city's master A electrician, registered through the U.S. Department of Labor. He said the authority and power will be transferred to Blais after a training period, and Holden will maintain his master electrician license, minus the registered A for the city.

He credits Bright with providing him with valu-

able hand and vocal signals that he's become accustomed to as she places the clothing she's crafted on the statue. And he said Bright's attitude adds to the fun.

"We've got a great relationship," he said. "That girl is all smiles."

City Street Commissioner Dennis Jonson said he was unsure of the exact date of Holden's retirement, but he did have an idea of when it was planned. "He told me when partridge season



STAFF PHOTOS BY LAUREL BEAGER

Loni Bright waves as Mike Holden carefully guides the city's bucket lift toward Smokey Bear and the cubs early Wednesday morning.



Bright said she's begun to feel pretty comfortable in the lift bucket with Holden at the controls. Holden said he and Bright have had fun over the years dressing Smokey and says Bright's all smiles.

opens, he's going to go hunting," Jonson said laughing. "It's a Friday," said Holden — the Friday after the Sunday opening of ruffed grouse season.

Falls councilors Monday approved pay and appointment of Blais to fill the vacancy that will be created by Holden's retirement. City Administrator Ken Anderson said the city was fortunate to have five master electricians apply for the position. In encour-

aging the council action, he joked that it would help get Holden gone as soon as possible.

Holden, who often sports a toothpick at the corner of his mouth, laughed the loudest at Anderson's good-natured ribbing during the council meeting.

Serving as the city's electrician for nearly four decades has been a good job, he said. "I was able to raise five kids, never got laid off, was always home

at night and not living in a tent somewhere or on a construction job," he said.

The job's hours allowed him to be involved in a multitude of youth sports programs over the years. He's been involved in youth wrestling programs since he moved to the community in 1975. He said Bear Holler and George Fraik turned loose a graduate of the rival Grand Rapids High School on the local school's youth wrestling program.

And, he said he served in 1989 as an original board member and later president of the local Little League.

He took the city's electrician job in his early 20s after attending Itasca Community College and graduating in 1975 from Hibbing vo-tech. He said he met his wife, Ann G., who he calls "the better half of the family," and experienced the bright lights of the big Twin Cities before taking the Falls job.

Holden said he has no plans to leave the community in retirement. Instead, he said he will continue to serve the local school board, the Falls Recreation Commission and other organizations and groups.

And while he says the job drew him to Borderland, there was more to it.

"I love to hunt and fish — that's what I got planned for retirement," he said.



Bigfork Valley

Hospital • Clinics • Communities

Where skill meets compassion.

Orthopaedic Clinic

at the

Littlefork Medical Center

912 Main Street

and


Bigfork Valley Specialty Clinic

Dr. Daniel Baker

No referral needed, call

1-866-776-0262


for an appointment.



Celebration of Life

There will be a gathering to celebrate the life of Audrey Halvorson Larsen on June 10th at 1 pm, Ranier Community Building. Audrey passed away on May 15th at the age of 92.


Please join us as we share memories of her.




FERGUSON SEALCOATING

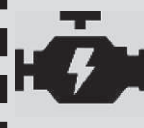
PROTECT • BEAUTIFY • REPAIR

Sealcoating, Crack Filling, Striping, Repairs & Tennis Court Recoloring



For Free Estimates Call:
218-244-1840 or 218-276-2436





Bennett Repair LLC.

SNOWMOBILE, ATV AND SMALL ENGINE REPAIR


- 24 Hour Emergency Service -
- Full Line of Amsoil Products -

Paul Bennett Jr. 218-343-4451
pjbennett71@hotmail.com

24h

For Professional Web Design
Call Us First

285-7411



complete sites starting at \$400