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Harry Cederland recognized as Foxborough's eldest

By Heather McCarron/Staff writer

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FOXBOROUGH - The year Harry Cederland was born, the New Year's ball dropped for the very first time over Times Square, the first long-distance radio signal was sent from the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and Henry Ford turned out the very first Model T.

That was just the beginning of "firsts" that have happened over the course of Cederland's life, which began in Lynn on Sept. 9, 1908, the year William Howard Taft became the 27th president of the United States.

Last week, the 100-year-old was recognized as the town's senior-most citizen, and ceremonially presented with Foxborough's Boston Post Cane — a tradition that itself turns 100 this year.

"The Boston Post was a highly respected Boston newspaper from 1831 to 1956," explained town historian Jack Authelet, who was joined by Historical Commission Chairman Carl Kusch, Selectman Linda Walsh, and family and friends in presenting Cederland with the cane last Thursday at his Foxhill Road home.

Authelet said the publisher of that paper was keenly aware that "the bad news finds you" and "you have to work hard to find the good news."

"So in 1909 he came up with the idea of the Boston Post Cane," he said, knowing that, every now and again, there would be a good news story to write about a respected elder given the cane in each of the state's cities and towns.

Recognizing this is the centennial year for the Boston Post Cane, and realizing Foxborough's cane had gone on hiatus since it was last presented six years ago, Authelet recently set the wheels in motion to keep the tradition going and find the next recipient.

A resident of Foxborough since 1932, Cederland is, as far as local historians can tell, the 24th person to be honored as the town's oldest resident since the former Boston Post newspaper first issued the canes; records for 1941 to 1953 are missing.

The wooden cane, which has a gold-plated nob on top with scrollwork and the inscription "Oldest Citizen of Foxboro, Mass.," was last presented to Mary Smith in 2003, a life-long school teacher. In order to ensure it is not lost, the cane is ceremonially presented, along with a certificate, then returned to a locked case in the Town Hall.

Cederland, who greeted visitors with a firm handshake, was surprised by all the attention.

"I didn't expect so many people," he said, sitting in an easy chair in his home's living room, wearing a pair of earphones to aid his hearing.

"Well, we don't get a chance to do this every day," Authelet explained.

As one of the town's Boston Post Cane recipients, Cederland is in good company.

"The very first Foxborough recipient was William T. Cook," said Authelet. "Mr. Cook was a businessman who eventually became involved in the Union Straw Works."

The Union Straw Works was at the hub of the town's economy for many years, making the town the capital of the straw bonnet industry in the 19th century. Cook also owned the land along Chestnut Street in Foxborough that later became the Foxborough State Hospital.

"The second recipient was Jabez Davidson, who was a bodyguard to President Lincoln and was, in fact, on duty on the day that Lincoln gave an address at a little place called Gettysburg," Authelet said.

Cederland, whose wife of 75 years, Mabel, passed on last year, worked for 44 years at the Foxboro Company — now known as Invensys.

"I worked in making control instruments. I made various kinds. Some of them, if you saw them, you'd think I was a genius," Cederland said with a chuckle. "The Foxboro Company was a nice company to work for."

Cederland said he spent most of his younger days in Mansfield. He had four sisters and three brothers, all of whom have passed on.

When he was 10 or 11, he said, "I used to work for Dr. Griffin. He was a surgeon. I would mow the lawn and all different kinds of work. I used to polish his car."

At about 18, Cederland worked in the Mansfield Bleachery, a textile manufacturing business. "I used to invoice the cloth. I had a typewriter and I had to take down how many came in a pack," he said.

He has memories of riding in horse-drawn wagons as a child, and getting ice from a local pond in the days before the refrigerator came along.

"I remember the ice on the main street four inches thick, and they had to use sleds. And I remember they used to cut cakes of ice at Fulton's Pond with hand saws and they had an ice house there," Cederland said.

He recalled having ice delivered to his family's home as well.

"Can you imagine a fellow brining a piece of ice up to the third floor, for 15 cents?" he said. In 1930, Cederland bought his first car, a 1930 Chevy.

"I paid \$150 for it and I drove it 40,000 miles. Mabel and I drove down to the World's Fair in that in 1939," Cederland said, noting there was a time when he could buy eight gallons of gas for \$1.

Later, Cederland bought a new 1967 Dodge, which he kept on the road for nearly 30 years. "That Dodge, I drove it almost 200,000 miles," he said.

"He's owned five cars in his entire life," noted Roy Chambers, Cederland's nephew, who finds that fact amazing. "Harry was driving up until he was 97."

Cederland also built his house, Chambers pointed out.

"Yes, I could do a little bit of about everything ... painting, electrical," said Cederland, clearly proud of his accomplishment.

He said it cost him about \$12,000 to build the house, now assessed at about \$250,000.

"And this lot, I bought it for \$750. It's now worth over \$100,000. So, I really made two good investments, and I didn't know it," he said with a grin.

While Cederland didn't get a telephone until the mid 90s — "If I wanted to talk to somebody, I'd get into the car and go, or I'd write a letter," he said — he did jump at the chance to buy a small television set when that technology emerged on the market.

"I think it was an Atwater Kent," he said. "I remember I'd talk to the TV and tell them to shut up and my aunt — she was quite old — she'd say 'Don't talk to them like that!'"

Now Cederland, who retired in 1973 making \$4.30 an hour, has discovered the Internet. He got his first computer at 99 and is now on his second machine.

"I always wanted to find out about a computer. I find it's a lot of fun," he said. "But I find it can be real frustrating, too."

Frustrating parts aside, Cederland has been excited to learn new things on the Internet and get the answer to one question in particular he has often pondered.

"For years I wondered what it would be like for a tiger and a lion to fight. So I typed that in and I found it! The tiger won," he said, eyes twinkling as he went on to explain, "The tiger can climb a tree and haul up 100 pounds or more. They have stronger front legs. I was just curious. I was always interested in animals."

As for the world of 2009, Cederland said, "I think it's a darn mess. I think it's awful. All the floods, the fires, and all the killing and owing all the money," he said.

Asked what his secret to longevity is, Cederland noted, "I didn't smoke, I didn't drink," but beyond that, "I wish I knew, so I could tell everybody."

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