

## Feature Writing Portfolio

### Belgravia barn owner says 'it's a devastating loss'

Aug. 31, 2021

Charles Paullin

The Northern Virginia Daily

EDINBURG — Cecil "Sparkie" Miller is in the cattle business.

Needing farmland, about six years ago he purchased the land at 1738 Belgravia Road, which came with a barn on it.

He thought about demolishing the barn, but decided to rebuild it.

"It was unbelievable," Miller said Monday of the condition of the Barn at Belgravie Farm. But after about three years of work — including that first year of working seven days a week using a big excavator, front loader and two bobcats — the project was finished and became a place for weddings and community gatherings.

"It was here for the public's enjoyment," the Mount Jackson native said. "Anybody that wanted to come by was more than welcome."

On Friday, the barn burned down. The structure became so overrun with flames that fire crews had to let it burn.

The cause of the fire is still under investigation, and it could take weeks to determine a cause. Officials from the Shenandoah County Fire Marshal's Office said nothing indicates that the fire was deliberately set, but an electrical malfunction was a possibility.

No one was injured during the fire as no one was home and the horses and chicken inside were able to get out.

"It's a devastating loss," Miller said Monday, adding that's it's hard for him to come on to the property anymore to see it.

Miller rebuilt the barn with wood original to its 1890 construction date, Miller explained. The 80-by-165-foot structure was built by William J. Cox, who was from Belgravia, England, and had the materials shipped to Shenandoah County.

"This guy has beaucoups of money," Miller said.

Cox, who was in the horse business, died in the 1930s and the land continued to be used as a farm, including an orchard. Miller still has five wooden crates with "Belgravia Orchard" emblazoned on them.

The materials for the barn included heart pine, used in the 20th and 19th centuries and can't be found in the United States anymore. It also included hand-hued pine, which is wood that was made by hand into flat pieces from cut-down trees.

"It is to the point anymore unless you tear down an old barn, some old log houses you will never find it again — the hand-hued lumber," Miller said. It would cost someone \$5 million to \$6 million to rebuild the barn with similar wood, Miller said.

Because the barn was built to house horses, there was a big hayfork in the middle that would pick up hay bales and raise them to storage on the second floor via a pulley system, pulled by a horse, Miller said.

“That was a massive building in its day,” Miller said. “It’d be a massive building today.”

After Miller renovated it, the barn could seat 300 people, with space for more, as well as food. But the barn also maintained its historic character, Miller said, in one way, by having a bar area made with boards that horses would chew, or crib, on.

The sliding windows on the side of the building were handmade. A feed grain bin, a little bit bigger than a three-person couch, made by Miller’s grandfather was inside as well as gifts from other people.

“I wouldn’t have taken \$50,000 for it,” Miller said of the bin.

Several community events, from political meetings to annual National Wild Turkey Federation gatherings were held at the barn. Many were held at no cost, as the space was for the community, Miller said.

Weddings were also held at the venue, for a fee, but Miller on Monday had to return a couple's payment, so they could book another site for their upcoming wedding. Miller also gave the couple a table made with the heart pine that was inside the barn.

John Adamson, manager of the historic barns program with the Shenandoah County Historical Society, noted the barn was built as a stable, different than most others in the county.

"It's the longest barn in Shenandoah County," Adamson said of its 160-foot length. The next longest barn measures at about 102 feet, Adamson said.

Shenandoah County is one of the most barn-dense regions in the country and could have still more, if the Union Army hadn't burned down some during the Civil War.

"It's a very, very rare barn," Miller said, noting that modern-day barns are built larger to house tractor equipment.

Miller said that after he cleans up the place, he might convert the site into a rental campground. It’s something he wanted to do before, but didn’t want to have a bunch campers conflicting with the views of the mountainside.

“It’s quite a unique place,” Miller said, of its tucked away location between Mount Jackson and Edinburg.

## **Leading by example: Former Warren County fire chief still serves as a volunteer**

### **May 28, 2021**

Charles Paullin

The Northern Virginia Daily

LINDEN — He had wanted to be a cop.

His dad was a sergeant in Tappahannock and a couple of times as a 15-year-old he got to ride around with him.

After graduating high school he applied to the Virginia State Police, where he was told he had to wait

until he was 21 to have a gun.

“I said, ‘Whoa ... ain’t what I come down here for,’” recalled Richard “Dickie” Mabie, now 70 years old, in a recent interview. “So I went home and I actually saw the City of Richmond was advertising for firefighter.”

Fifty-one years later, the Linden resident is still a firefighter, serving as the chief of the volunteer fire department near his home, after spending the last 25 years as Warren County’s first paid fire chief.

“The job is a good job,” Mabie said. “Once it bites you, it gets you.”

### **Working his way up**

Mabie began his career in Richmond, working his way up through the ranks over almost 26 years. Deciding he wanted to be a chief, or a lower ranking one, such as a battalion chief, he began to look outside the department.

First up was Nags Head, North Carolina.

“Nice station, nice equipment,” Mabie said. “Bored as all get out during the winter but really would be nice in the summer.

It didn’t work out, and he found Warren County. Although his son had played football against Randolph Macon Academy, he admitted he had no clue where Front Royal was.

“But I got hired, that’s what counts,” Mabie said.

Mabie’s assignment was to bring the eight volunteer fire companies under the oversight of the county instead of having them operate independently. The consolidation would add financial guidance and accountability to the groups, Mabie said.

That meant dealing with the Front Royal Volunteer Fire Department, who were known as the “big guys,” under the old system, Mabie said. They got the most money, had the nicest equipment, ran the most calls and had the biggest staff, which included some career guys paid half by the town and the county, Mabie said.

“I went over there, I left out of there crying. I went home and literally cried,” Mabie said while laughing about the memory. “What the...have I done. I’ve given up almost 26 years in Richmond for this? They told me, ‘We’ll run your ass out of here. We don’t want you over here.’”

Having spent time with Hanover County, Mabie went back there for guidance, as they had gone through a similar process with their volunteer fire departments and received some push back.

As a firefighter, Mabie said, he can take some harsh words and around the first anniversary of his appointment, he went back to the Front Royal station to pay a visit.

“Happy anniversary, guys, year one’s gone,” Mabie told them. “They didn’t know what to say.”

The process of establishing the county’s first system took some buy-in from the rest of the companies, Mabie said. Six of them were onboard since it saved them putting effort into fiscal matters. Besides Front Royal, one other company was hesitant as it had financial records so old it wasn’t clear if the firehouse was \$20,000 or \$200,000 in the hole, Mabie said.

Eventually, the groups came around, and Mabie began implementing other changes such as clarifying leadership roles and taking over the application process to establish credibility with the community that good people were responding to emergencies.

Other changes included redeploying staff closer to their homes for quicker response times and having the county take over coordination of Emergency Management Service operations.

“I’m proud of the way this department is,” Mabie said. “It’s not just Dickie Mabie’s department. These volunteers save a lot of money.”

### **Retiring during COVID**

Mabie said the end of his career in December was a low point. He was being paid for 35 hours of work a week and pulling mostly 50 hours, including visiting stations during the day and doing office work sometimes until 1 in the morning.

One reason he was forced to retire was a county ordinance that required him to retire when he reached 70 years old. The ordinance should be changed, he said, to allow people to work if they can pass a physical exam.

His health was another reason he retired. Not only had he fallen over or almost fallen over a couple of times, but he contracted COVID-19 and needed to be hospitalized. His stay in the hospital revealed he had suffered two strokes, though with no lasting damage.

Retiring during the pandemic meant no party, which would have brought former co-workers and friends together, Mabie said. The best possible recognition under the circumstances were the plaques and emails from people offering congratulations, he said. But “COVID hurt,” Mabie said.

Now with a pacemaker expected to last 10 years, Mabie said his doctor told him he’s safer than other firefighters since it’ll bring him back after a heart attack. And instead of buying a home in Florida like some of former co-workers, the firefighting bug that bit him half a century ago has him still going, wanting to give back.

“I was fire chief of this department for 25 years pleading with the public to contribute, being a volunteer, giving back to the community,” Mabie said. “If I’m not going to lead by example when I have the time, what have I really done.”

### **Still serving**

Knowing the needs of the different companies in the county, he has been helping the Linden Volunteer Fire Department, which has about six active volunteer members, for the past few years, he said. Living about six minutes away — or five if he pushes on the gas a little bit with nobody in front of him — he decided to help out at the station with the free time he has now.

Keeping the fire and rescue pager by his bed, turned down low so it doesn’t bother his wife, he has decided to cut back on responding to as many calls. Still, his wife, who helps out administratively at the station, knows how much he loves the job and sometimes suggests he go to the station instead of sitting on the couch.

Mabie has never been into hunting but he does fish, mostly throwing the catches back. He goes to the store more than ever and recently got a boat to take out on the lake. He is captivated with the TV soap opera “The Young and the Restless” and admits that sometimes he records it in case he needs to catch up on what’s happening in Genoa City.

Mabie, who said he has slimmed down since the end of last year, has always loved steaks and French fries with cheese. He’s never been a smoker. He’s never gotten a second job and his kids are all grown and understood the sacrifices he’s had to make to be a firefighter, he said. He likes cutting the grass at his home, which is located up on Apple Mountain West, a place he wouldn’t get rid of on a bet, he said.

But it remains to be seen when he will hang it up for good, he said.

“It’s the camaraderie,” said Mabie, explaining why he liked firefighting. “This is a family. It’s a family away from home.”

## **Front Royal family dealing with missing son for over a year**

**April 12, 2021**

Charles Paullin

The Northern Virginia Daily

Terry Smith can picture her son riding a three-wheeled bike down a hill with his two daughters in the middle.

“The girls would be just a scream at the top of their lungs, just as happy as they can be,” Smith said. “They’d just be wantin’ to go again with him.”

That’s a memory Terry Smith has of her son, Kevin Smith, who has been missing from Front Royal for a year and three months.

Kevin Smith, a son, brother and father of two children, was last seen on Jan. 19, 2020, according to the Front Royal Police Department. His 37th birthday was in March.

Terry Smith, 57, and Kevin's father, Steve, 60, said prior to his disappearance, he had completed a 6-month prison sentence for violating the probation he was on for drug charges.

He was headed toward Maryland with two guys from Winchester and a woman from Warren County when they stopped in Centreville to fix a flat tire, his parents said.

He walked away from the group, “and then was never seen again,” Terry Smith said.

After releasing information about Kevin Smith's disappearance and media attention afterward, Front Royal Police Capt. Crystal Cline said her department has no leads or updates about what might have happened to him.

“No one has come forward with any credible leads or information to determine exactly where he is...nothing,” Cline said. Her department would welcome any information, as small as it may be, as it could break the case wide open, she said.

Kevin Smith was initially listed as missing under suspicious circumstances, as opposed to endangered circumstances, according to a previous Northern Virginia Daily news article.

It wasn't unusual for him to stay with friends, not at the house, and he always called his mom to let her know where he was at and what he was doing, Terry Smith said. The family reported him missing after not seeing him for a week and not being able to get in touch with him by phone, Terry Smith said.

“So when he didn't answer his phone for me, then that's when I knew something was wrong,” she said.

Fairfax County police canvassed the area where he was last seen. They looked in homeless shelters in that area and found no trace of him, Terry Smith said. Video footage showed Kevin Smith in the Fairfax County area before he left without a trace, a Front Royal detective told the Northern Virginia Daily about a month afterward.

“It's just like he vanished,” Terry Smith said.

Kevin Smith's father wonders if the people who were with his son knew what happened and aren't saying anything.

“I think they're holding back. I think it's just a matter of time before one of them talks,” Steve Smith said.

But “the people he was with were cooperating,” Terry Smith noted, explaining they visited the Smiths' home looking for him a few days after he walked off.

The family has received several tips and passed them on to Front Royal police detectives, but nothing has panned out. The tips range from potentially seeing him somewhere to people saying he's in a trunk somewhere, Terry Smith said.

"We get the bad stuff, too," Terry Smith. She'll go visit anywhere he might be, noting that her son's looks are unusual.

"I'll take it," Terry Smith said. "Kevin is an unusual-looking person, he's very tall, very thin." Few people see many men well over 6-feet tall with curly hair, she added, noting Kevin Smith typically kept his hair short and not curly.

The police have been doing the best they can, Terry Smith said, noting different detectives have been assigned to the case after others have been promoted or moved on to other cases. Each new detective assignment, she said, brings a fresh perspective to the case.

The people Kevin Smith was last with have been interviewed several times, Cline said, adding that it's frustrating that people haven't come forward with information about what happened.

"As time goes by, it gets less and less in the forefront," Cline said, noting the pandemic happening last year as well as other matters. "Someone somewhere knows something. That's just frustrating. I would love to give the family answers."

Terry Smith said she has communicated with The AWARE Foundation, a Roanoke-based organization that posts flyers and news articles about missing people on social media.

According to the organization's website, the National Crime Information Center had 84,924 active missing person records as of Dec. 31, 2014. Juveniles under the age of 18 accounted for 33,677, or 39.7%, of the records and juveniles defined as under 21 years of age account for 43,289, or 51%, of the records.

Kevin Smith did have a drug problem, which in addition to interactions with the legal system led to some distancing from his brother, Terry Smith said. She described him as a quiet, reserved boy while growing up who started to come out of his shell more and became very friendly and sociable as he grew older.

"Kevin's had his trouble. He's got his demons, of course. But Kevin's always been the type of person, no matter what, he'll give you the shirt off his back," Terry Smith said. "There's no way he would want to take off and not be here for his little girls."

A 2003 graduate of Warren County High School, Kevin Smith played football and baseball there.

Growing up, he played soccer and Little League baseball, appearing in several all-star games and throwing a no-hitter in one of them. In his later years, he enjoyed the outdoors, like floating down the Shenandoah River with a friend, Terry Smith said.

He appeared to be getting back on track after the drug use, his brother Stephen Smith, 39, of Front Royal, said. A father of two himself, he and his wife have been in communication with the mother of Kevin's kids, whom they stay with, Stephen Smith said. He will help with having Kevin's kids visit their grandparents and keep Kevin's side of the family in their thoughts, Stephen Smith said.

"The biggest joy I would have is for his daughters to see him again," Stephen Smith said. "They just want their daddy."

"I would love nothing more than to just give him a big hug right now. Just tell him how much I miss him," he said.

"It's been absolutely devastating, mainly the closure for my mom and dad," Stephen Smith said.

Having a service or vigil to remember Kevin Smith had not crossed her mind, Terry Smith said, as by having one, that would indicate he's not coming back. She's hoping he wasn't harmed and is all right, she said. If for whatever reason he is deciding not to return home, she hopes that he changes his mind and does so,

"It's like anything with the grieving process, I guess. It gets a little easier over time," Terry Smith said. "It's always there. We're always thinking about him...we're still trying to find him, of course; we're always going to try, but we know we're not so naive to things that the longer it goes on, that the harder it's going to be."

Smith is described as white, 6-feet, 3 inches tall with hazel eyes, short brown hair and a scruffy beard. The Front Royal Police Department can be reached at 540-635-2111 if anyone has any information on the case.