

Vo-ag teacher to end long career



CHRISTOPHER MASSA REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Alex Thomson stands inside a new vo-ag truck outside Nonnewaug High School. Thomson, a longtime fixture at the school, will retire at the end of this month.

After 30 years at Nonnewaug, Woodbury man ready for change

BY RICK HARRISON
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

EARLY ARRIVERS at Nonnewaug High School's agri-science building might see Alex Thomson enjoying some quiet time at 5:45 a.m., preparing for another day.

But next fall, the building will be a little emptier. Thomson will retire from teaching after 30 years at the school.

"I made a promise to myself to leave the job when I still enjoy it," Thomson said. "The kids are still good. The kids are still fun."

But after 30 years teaching agricultural mechanics in the only full-time job he has ever held, Thomson, 55, felt the need to move on to something different.

"As we all get older, you realize you don't have quite the gumption, the get-up-and-go," Thomson said. "Not the same desire in the afternoon to put

together a whole new lesson plan."

Thomson, a Woodbury resident from the time he was 3, had been cutting hay in a field on Middle Road Turnpike in 1979, when the director of the agriculture program asked him if he would apply for a job opening in January.

Thomson got the job and eventually took over the program, serving as director for 18 years until he gave up the post six years ago.

"I think he's built an interest in the agricultural mechanics part of the program that will continue to grow," said Bill Davenport, the current agri-science director who replaced Thomson. "So many past students are successful because of what he's taught them."

Two of his current students, Ben Paparazzo and Christine Hogan, led an effort to raise about \$1,500 to buy a 1942 John Deere tractor they presented to Thomson Tuesday as a retirement gift.

"Just amazing that students

would do that," Thomson said. "I was dumbfounded. So shocked in a pleasant way."

Paparazzo, who worked for Thomson three years ago, praised his teacher for going "beyond the call of duty" to help him weld a backhoe at home and donate some spare metal plates.

"I don't know if we'll find someone who can fill his shoes," Paparazzo said. "It's a tough job. You've got to be just about a genius. He can do all kinds of welding. Mechanics, automobiles, diesel engines, gas engines, milk a cow, plumbing, electrical, lighting, he can build a building. He's been doing it his whole life."

Thomson grew up on Weekeemee Road across the street from Frank Johnson's dairy farm, a place he rents today to store hay.

"That was an idyllic growing situation," he said of his childhood. "In the country, fields to play in, a farm to work. I can't imagine having a teaching job like this without a background

like that."

Over the years, he has seen how technology has shaped the business and how students learn: new welding tools, tractors with computers, repair information and equipment specifications available online.

"Technology is great, but we become so dependent on it, people are helpless when it's not around," Thomson said.

Thomson, who hasn't hooked up the television in his house, plans to keep busy in retirement, expanding his part-time farm business, tinkering with old equipment in his shop, possibly volunteering to teach adult education classes or working with the Flanders Nature Center. And spending time with his wife, Janet, whom he met while driving a Zamboni at the University of Connecticut.

"I'm not in a wheelchair yet," Thomson said. "There are a few things I want to do. You never know what's around the corner through the next door."