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Courtesy photos

An old photo of late Southbridge hero Lucien "Min" Fontaine, Inset, over a photo of Lucien's Carnegie Hero Medal.

FAMILY LOOKS BACK AT EXTRAORDINARY ACT OF HEROISM

BY AMANDA COLLINS
NEWS STAFF WRITER

SOUTHBRIDGE — Exactly 100 years ago last month, a rather ordinary Southbridge man performed quite an extraordinary feat.

Lucien Fontaine was born in town in 1898, and since he weighed just 2 1/2 pounds, was given the nickname "Min." Topping out at just about 5'2", he never outgrew the nickname, but in 1914, Min proved that heroes come in all sizes.

The story — it was a cold, windy afternoon in March. A 15-year-old Min was on his way home from school when he stumbled upon an unfolding crisis. Three young boys had been playing on the Cohasse Brook off East Main Street, and two of them, brothers Eddie and Theodore Duquette, fell through the ice into the

frigid water.

Without hesitation, Min threw down his schoolbooks, yanked off his overcoat, and crawled onto the ice.

By the time the teenager reached the hole the boys had fallen into, both had been swept under the ice and disappeared. He smashed the ice with his hands to create a bigger hole and dove in head first, and a minute later came up with 7-year-old Eddie in his bloody hands.

He plunged back under for Theodore, but couldn't save the boy. The 8-year-old's body wasn't recovered for four days.

Lucien caught a cold, and was disabled for five days. For his brave act, he was bestowed the Carnegie Hero Medal, and another

One hundred years later, act of bravery remembered

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medal from the Massachusetts Humane Society.

Remembering his father a century after that fateful March day, Lucien E. Fontaine said he and his brother, Paul, would never have known their dad was considered a hero if they hadn't stumbled upon the priceless medals tucked in a dresser drawer as kids.

"That's the thing about heroes," he said. "They don't have to talk about what they did."

Instead, Min went on to live a happy but rather ordinary life. He worked at American Optical for 45 years, first as an errand boy, then a machinist, and retired as a janitor. In 1927 he married the love of his life Therese, and the couple raised their two sons in Southbridge. He was known as a prankster, a singer, a showman, and an excellent baseball player.

The only sign that his father had been part of such an incredible story, said

Lucien, was when he'd happen to see Eddie Duquette, all grown up, somewhere in town.

"He would always stop and look at him, and do this," he said, putting his right hand up to his brow to form a salute. "And he'd just say, 'Thank you for saving my life.'"

Lucien and Paul, who both now live in Sturbridge, each have one of their father's medals. Recently, to honor the 100th anniversary of his dad's act of bravery, Lucien dug out old newspaper clippings and the Carnegie Hero Fund write-up about his father.

"Good things happened in this town and there's a lot to learn if we think back on our parents and grandparents and what they went through," he said. "The thing about history is you learn from both the bad and the good."

Amanda Collins may be reached ay (508) 909-4132 or by email at acollins@stonebridgepress.com.