

I Remember When....Neighborhood Firefighter Remembers the Madrona Fire House

By Jon MacLeod, 36th Avenue

Jack Dunn is an Irishman straight from central casting. Twinkling blues eyes, white beard, watch cap. Rain or shine, Jack takes laps around Madrona carrying a walking stick carved from a gnarled rose from his garden, “Not nearly as old as me,” says Jack, “but old enough for a strong stick.” He misses Opal, a white Bassett hound who ambled along with him for ten years until she died last February. “The most famous Madrona dog ever,” Jack claims.

Jack’s daily circuit often takes him by the Sally Goldmark Library. To him it’s not just a library, but also the Engine Company 12 fire station, where he worked for 22 years until the station was closed in 1972. The arch over the bricked-in fire apparatus door is still visible, but Jack frets that this last trace of the fire station may disappear during the current library renovation.

1921 is the year on the cornerstone, but there was a fire station on the site as far back as 1904, the days of horse-drawn fire trucks. “Until the sidewalk on Union was repaved a few years ago,” Jack recalls, “you could still see the wheel track where the horses got a downhill start from 33rd to 34th.”

Born into a Kelso logging family in 1923, Jack joined the Navy in 1941 as a machinist mate, maintaining seaplanes on New Caledonia in the South Pacific and later at Sand Point. In 1944, he married Bette Lou Neuss, who grew up at 28th and Union. After the war they stayed with Bette’s family while building a home of their own at 34th and Pine, where they raised three children and still live there today.

In 1948, Jack passed the firefighter exam and was assigned to the tiny 3-man Madrona fire house, with one chain-driven 1918 American la France pumper truck on its last legs. For Jack it was “nice to be so close to home,” but he and his mates worked all over central Seattle. They helped fight the spectacular Todd Shipyard fire in 1964, and a four-building arson fire just south of 14th and Union. They spent their quieter days doing hydrant inspections and playing ping pong in the fire house with kids from Madrona School, where Bette was the principal’s secretary.

“Madrona had everything back then,” says Jack. “I could walk out the back door of the fire house, stop by the pharmacy on the southwest corner of 34th and Union, pick up groceries on the northwest corner, and gas up the car on 34th and Pike. You didn’t have to leave the neighborhood if you didn’t want to.”

“Things really got exciting in the late 60’s, when the Black Panthers came along,” says Jack. “I suppose there are rotten apples in every barrel, but the Panthers I knew, like the three Dixon boys, Aaron, Elmer and Michael, who grew up in Madrona, did a lot of good with their free breakfast program for poor kids and free medical clinic.”

“In those days,” recalls Jack, “the Seattle Police Department, like the Fire Department, was pretty much all-white, and some cops were just out to get the Panthers. They commandeered the phone booth in our fire house to do surveillance on the Panthers, and one night, someone who didn’t like the cops using us for cover, fired a couple of bullets in our direction--you can still see the spots above the apparatus door where we patched the holes. I didn’t like it either, and said so, which made me politically incorrect for a while in the fire house.”

Jack retired in 1973, shortly after the Madrona fire house closed, but didn’t sit on his hands. A skilled photographer, he spent six years taking photos at rodeos all over the Northwest. Jack was an avid skier and biker, and enjoyed playing tennis on the Madrona courts. His courtmates included long time Madrona residents Walter and Carla Chotzen, whose sons Loren and Ben are now real estate brokers with the Landmark Group at 31st and Madison, and Martin Kraus, whose wife Mimi, now 98, still lives at 36th and Spring. “Martin was a really good player,” Jack says with a laugh. “He could beat me every day of the week and twice on Sunday.”

Engine Company 12 is long gone, but it is a vital part of Madrona’s rich history. Walking past the Goldmark Library, take a minute to imagine Jack Dunn at the old station house drying hoses on a quiet sunny morning. Listen for the excitement of a fire alarm and the red pumper truck racing out onto Union. But don’t stand too close or in your reverie you might be trampled by a couple of charging horses.

The Madrona Community Council is working with the King County Library to preserve the history of the Madrona Fire Station by incorporating a commemorative plaque into the library remodel. If

you have other information or photographs of the old fire house, contact me at jwm@jwmacleodlaw.com.

Caption: Wearing his black helmet, Madrona fireman Jack Dunn and the boys from Station 12 take young Barbara Dunn for a spin in their ????????