

Capitola's Harold Jarvis Was Destined To Be A Fire Chief

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The retirement of three longtime mid-county fire chiefs — Harold Jarvis of Capitola, Ray Negro of Soquel and Dick Pound of Live Oak — represents another step in the passing of an era in the fire service in Santa Cruz County. Each chief began his career nearly 40 years ago as a volunteer and rose through the ranks as his department and community grew. They learned the firefighting business as they went along and built their departments on solid, practical foundations. Today, the three fire departments are as much a mirror of their pioneer chiefs as they are of their communities. Beginning today, The Sentinel will feature the three chiefs and the departments they built.

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It was about six months after Harold Jarvis returned from World War II to work in his father's garage in

Capitola when a call of a grass fire came in.

Jarvis was working alone when the fire phone rang because his dad — the fire chief — was in Santa Cruz on business.

"None of the volunteers who showed up had ever driven the rig. At that time, neither had I. But we went to the fire," Jarvis recalls. He steered the old 1926 Star engine to the scene.

Not only had none of the volunteers ever driven the rig, but none knew how to work the pump once they reached the fire.

Lily, Jarvis remembers, fire engines were not very icy back in those days so all he had to do was follow the pipes leading from the tank to the pump to the hose, turning the valves as he went along. "By golly, it worked," Jarvis recalls.

Jarvis and his novice crew put out that first fire on their own, and, as he remembers, "I was hooked from that day on."

Jarvis signed up as a Capitola volunteer in December 1945. His father, Fred M. Jarvis, was the chief. The title came with the purchase of the garage, because that's where Capitola's fire engine was housed.

"Working at the garage and around the fire engine made it impossible not to be a fireman," says Jarvis.

Last December, Jarvis retired from the Capitola Fire Department after serving 35 years, the last 16 as chief.

The fire department was organized as a taxing district back in 1939, but there had been a volunteer department long before that. "I've never run across anybody who knows exactly when it began, except that there's always been a volunteer fire department," Jarvis explains.

He worked in his dad's garage from 1945 to 1950, leaving for a job as a delivery truck driver and then briefly as Capitola's first mailman. In 1952, Jarvis joined the railroad and worked as a switchman at the Watsonville yard for 10 years.

The last year he worked for the railroad he also was fulltime assistant chief of the fire department.

By then, the fire house had been built on Capitola Avenue and was being manned by Jarvis' father — the first paid chief — and his brother, Leland.

His father and brother moved into the fire house shortly after his mother died. Harold, who had married his wife, Margery, in 1953, worked days — every day — and then at the train yard at night.

"I never got rested until about five years later," he recalls.

In 1963, brother Leland and Larry Bertolucci were hired as fulltime firefighters. Bertolucci is still with the department, now a captain.

Jarvis became chief in 1964, shortly after his father died. About the same time, now-captain Al Parrish was

hired and the station has been manned on a 24-hour shift basis ever since.

Jarvis says he learned from his father that a fire department must be dedicated to serving the people any way it can. Jarvis and his men have practiced that lesson every day since.

Serving the people, Jarvis says, means more than putting out fires.

The Lions Club, he recalls, donated a resuscitator to the volunteers in 1946 or 1947.

"In that first year," says Jarvis, "we revived a 7-year-old boy who had nearly drowned while swimming in the lagoon. From that day on, I made a commitment to help people who couldn't take care of their own problems."

As fire chief, Jarvis drilled that philosophy into every new volunteer who came into the department.

Among the new volunteers was Jarvis' son, Donald, who now is a firefighter with the Santa Cruz Fire Department.

"And, I told the public to call the fire department if they had a problem. I told them if we couldn't take care of it, we'd know who could."

In the ensuing years, Capitola Fire Department has been called upon to render all kinds of aid and has earned a reputation for effective response.

Even since the chief's retirement, the department has retained the Jarvis touch and still can be called upon to rescue a cat from a tree or a dog who has fallen down a cliff.

Jarvis says such work is really hazardous, but he considered it good practice for placing ladders and rappelling down cliffs.

Besides, he says, "I've always hated to see an animal suffer if there was anything we could do about it."

It's only fitting that Capitola Fire Department keep up that tradition. After all, each of the paid firefighters began as a neophyte volunteer and learned the business from Jarvis.

A fire department, the chief maintains, is really a business, but unlike other businesses, it doesn't go out drumming up customers.

"When your business expands, it's because you're needed," he explains.

When Jarvis joined the department as a volunteer, fire calls numbered about 30 a year. In 1968 the department answered 168 calls and 10 years later responded to more than 1,000.



Harold Jarvis

Some of the calls Jarvis recalls most vividly were those for help from neighboring departments. They were big fires — the Aptos Beach Inn, San Lorenzo Lumber and the Pacific Avenue blaze in Santa Cruz.

"We had a couple of big ones, too, like the old dance hall fire in the volunteer days," says Jarvis.

That wooden dance hall and restaurant was located at the end of the Esplanade, where the Patio restaurant and public restrooms are now.

"It was about 4 o'clock in the morning and the wind was blowing and it was raining when somebody saw fire coming out the roof," Jarvis explains.

Thirteen fire departments rolled into town to help put out the blaze.

"Our primary tactic was to chase flying embers because we only had about 500 gallons of water per minute and we could have used 5,000.

"Boy, what a night," he remembers.