

Farewell to a former Chief

By Sheryl Drost



Retired Harlem-Roscoe Fire Chief Jack Brown passed away on March 10.

Jack joined the department on August 23, 1953 and served 30 years, climbing the ranks to Chief. He served 18 years as Assistant Chief and became Chief in 1981 when Chief Ben Alexander retired. He resigned as Chief in 1982 after serving

less than a year due to other commitments. He still served a couple more years before retiring from the department in February 1984.

Jack was active in the medical field. He started with Advanced First Aid. He then became an EMT and was in the second class of Paramedics in Winnebago County. He was instrumental in getting Roscoe & Rockton certified with the Civil Defense, as well as acquiring the first radio and radio tower for the department. He also served three years as a fire inspector. Jack was active in the Winnebago Fire Chiefs Association (WFCA) and served three years on the board. He helped with acquiring rescue equipment for the department and was always involved with public events such as the Coon & Ham Dinner.

Jack's wife Jeanne was active in the women's auxiliary and his son Earnie also served on the department on and off for 10 years. Jack has four children - Jan, Earnie, JoEva, & Eddie. Jack served a stint in the Navy and worked at Beloit Corporation.

I interviewed Jack for the "Times Rekindled" column in the October 2005 issue of The Firehouse Scene. Following are excerpts from those interviews.

His first fire was the Brown's barn fire out on Beloit Road. At that time Harlem-Roscoe had three trucks - a grass rig, an old 1941 gas tank truck they used for shuttling water, and a 1951 Darley Pumper that held 500 gallons of water. He said the barn had burned to the ground but they spent the night out there with the burning hay.

Jack's most memorable call was a storage building fire that caught a corn field on fire on Willowbrook Road. Jack recalls, "The wind was blowing and the fire in the cornfield was heading north toward some houses. Don Hall was driving the grass rig and it died out in the middle of the field with fire all around them. We worked hard to get to them before the fire did. We also stopped the fire before it made it to the houses to the north."

Then there was the garbage dump fire down on the east side of Hwy 251 and Hwy 173. He said it took them days to get that fire out. Jack also remembers the basement fire in a house down on Sleepy Hollow when it was very cold. He said, "The trucks were covered with ice and were freezing up. Our coats were frozen shut and we used our helmets to break the ice to get them open. Plus, we still had to ride on the back of the trucks to go home!"

One of the funnier calls he remembers was when Chief Cobby Rogers lost his false teeth when they were heading in on a hose line

to a house fire. "Cobby kept yelling watch out for my teeth, don't step on my teeth" Jack recalls. He said Cobby found them, washed them off with the hose line, and put them back in his mouth.

Jack agrees a lot has changed in the last 50 years. Getting stuff in your eyes and breathing smoke was rough so getting air masks, even the first crude ones, helped. He remembers them sending Harry Schoonover into the fire with one of those first face masks (it was just a mask with a charcoal filter on the bottom of it that you breathed through). Well Harry kept coming right back out and they would send him back in wondering what was going on. Well after the second time he came right back out, they figured out they had forgotten to pull the tape off the bottom of the canister so Harry could breath. Those were the first types of air masks and they had only 2 or 3 of them, so not everyone got one. He says he also remembers the times before 9-1-1 and dispatchers. There were no pagers - they would respond when the siren was set off.

When asked what he thinks of Harlem-Roscoe Fire, Jack responded, "Ain't no better in the country! We have proved that throughout our history. We didn't stand by. We have always went with the times and pushed schooling."



1961 - Jack Brown and Ben Alexander hanging out at the fire station.



10/23/08 retired Chiefs Jack Brown and Oscar Presley visit with Chief Don Shoenflin at Station One in Roscoe.