

The "Shirlee Ann" Memorial and Trust Fund

by Barbara R. Parmelee

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In 1997 a 42-year old tragedy continues to be the basic inspiration for local support of the "Shirlee Ann," an Emergency Rescue Vehicle based at Fire Bureau Station 22 in St. Johns. In 1955, one day before her first birthday, a little girl named Shirlee Ann Howell choked to death on a grape. Efforts by firemen and police failed to save her. She died enroute to the hospital. At the time the nearest resuscitator was located downtown. The firemen felt this child's life might have been saved with an inhalator-respirator.

When the facts were related to Mrs. Victor Van Alstine she began the ground work for a community project which she hoped would save time and possibly lives. At the same time, the child's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Harold Howell, were determined to begin a community project to raise funds for an emergency hospital in the community. The two women contacted local firemen who talked with Fire Chief Boatright. He approved of the project and listed the cost of the basic equipment at \$800.

Mrs. Van Alstine and Mrs. Howell wrote to Commissioner Stanley Earl to ask that the City man and maintain the equipment after the funds were raised. Commissioner Earl was aware of the inadequacy of emergency equipment in the north district and promised the project 100% backing. He met with the two women and reporters from both daily newspapers (the Oregon Journal, now defunct, and the Oregonian). The letter was presented at a board meeting, and approved. Commissioner Earl added, however, that he hoped the fund would extend to the cost of a fully equipped emergency first aid car.

This meeting was followed by a January 20, 1955 St. Johns Review article by Jewel Sundquist, detailing the background of the need for a first aid vehicle and the meeting with City officials. Cooperation in fund raising was requested from civic clubs, fraternal clubs, lodges, PTA organizations, churches, the Community Club and others.

In three months the "Resuscitator Fund" had reached the \$1,000.00 mark. Donations came from widely diverse sources: St. Johns Auto Parts, Skyline American Legion, Portsmouth Motor Company, Fred Bauer Chevrolet, Portland Manufacturing Company, George School PTA (and all other schools' PTAs), Rebekah Lodge, Pay-N-Takit, Wonder Bakery, Plywood Veneer Workers Local 2531, Oregon Grape Circle, Pythian Sisters, Assumption School, Steinfelds, Sunshine Seekers Garden Club, Peninsula-St. Johns Merchants Committee, Boy Scouts Contribution Project, Mrs. Howell, Carpenters and Joiners of America #583, Linnton Plywood, Mrs. Wright's Ta Shuto group, Trail Seekers Campfire, 4-H Clubs and many private individuals.

Local talent performed at a "Resuscitator Fund" benefit sponsored by American Legion Post #98, held at James John School. Entertainers included Wes Fenning and his Wood Shed 6; Virginia "Becker" Nolan, dancer and singer who recently returned from Hollywood; Irene Swanson and Viola Hawks in duet vocals; Elmer Luse, talented violinist; Tootsie Haney Reiner, professional soloist; boy's ensemble from Roosevelt High School; Celia Burley, her magic piano and talented dancers from Burley School

of Dance; Geraldine Southern and Jean Hanson with several vocal selections, and the comical 98er hot shot band of the American Legion Auxiliary.

During the fund raising months local firemen brought a First Aid Station Wagon to the bank parking lot on three Saturdays, to show and explain the equipment it carried. The vehicle was equipped to revive three persons at the same time. Not only did it carry an inhalator-respirator, but also a cot, stretcher, tourniquets, splints, burn treatment items, material for bleeding, antidotes for poisoning, a doctor's kit, blankets, sheets and ropes -- if they need to rope off an area. Because of its efficiency and added speed in traffic, the station wagon was used more often in small accidents than the larger disaster cars. In case of a major catastrophe it could suffice until the major disaster car arrived.

Jewel Sundquist reported that every fireman was fully qualified to administer first aid. Every two years they were required to attend instructor's First Aid Class, taught by the nation's top instructors. They attended two hour sessions once a week for ten weeks and then must pass an hour's written examination.

In April 1955 Larry Hirschman, chairman of the Peninsula St. Johns Merchants Committee,

announced that May 6 would be the day on which participating merchants would donate a percentage of their profits to the Shirlee Ann Fund. By then a resuscitator had been placed at the St. Johns Fire Station. Its use could be requested by calling UN 0579. Fund raising continued toward the new goal of financing a first aid car to carry the new equipment.

By May, 1955, the Fund had reached a total of \$2,584.36. St. Johns businessmen (Coronet, B & C Department Store, Shannon Auto Supply, Western Auto Supply, Bonham & Currier, The Man's Shop, Peninsula Diamond Shop, St. Johns Hardware, St. Johns Rexall, Tidewater Associated Station and Radke Auto Electric) contributed \$237.50 during that time.

A June 7 date was planned for "Dinner is Served" at Skyline School, sponsored by Skyline Post #172, the Grange, the PTA and the County Sheriffs. It was their combined contribution to the Shirlee Ann drive.

By June 30 Don Lind (then treasurer of the St. Johns Businessmen's Club) had checked the Shirlee Ann account which totaled \$3,738.41 at that time and wrote letters to the Mayor and Council, asking them to begin steps to legalize the transfer of funds from the bank to the City Purchasing Department.



The City Council accepted the donation, but not without some embarrassment to it and Fire Commissioner Stanley W. Earl.

The embarrassment came from the hard financial fact that keeping the car manned around the clock would require six men, a payroll outlay of \$25,000 a year not considered in the Fire Bureau budget. Under terms of the city charter amendment by which the city of St. Johns became a part of Portland, a crew of five firemen must be maintained at the St. Johns station to fight fires, so the personnel could not be split. "Maybe we'll just have to have the fire apparatus make every run with the first aid car whether there is a fire or not," Commissioner Earl commented.

On August 18 the Shirlee Ann check presentation ceremony was held at a Portland City Council Meeting. Attending were Mrs. Wilma Van Alstine, Mrs. Jewel Sundquist, Don Lind, Mayor Fred L. Peterson and Fire Commissioner Stanley W. Earl. The final contribution was \$3,791.00. The station wagon was to be purchased from a local car dealer, and the demonstration resuscitator temporarily located at the St. Johns Fire Station would be purchased for use in the first aid station wagon.

Finally, dedication ceremonies for the Shirlee Ann emergency car were held on a Saturday afternoon, January 28, in the new St. Johns fire station on N. Alta Street. At 6:30 p.m., following the ceremony, the first aid station wagon climbed Germantown Road to Skyline Legion Hall with siren sounding and blinker light flashing, a very effective picture in the icy snow storm. Citizens viewed the equipment and complimented fireman Glen Whalon for his efficiency in demonstrating first aid equipment.

In the following years, one major purchase (and the first such equipment in the City) was the Hurst tool, "Jaws of Life," designed to cut through a car's metal, allowing rescuers to reach accident victims more quickly. Equipment purchases, made through the Shirlee Ann Trust Fund have included dive-rescue equipment, advance medical equipment, a medical reference library, and most recently, the "high-angle rope rescue equipment" first used in August 1993 to bring up the driver of a car who had gone over the steep N. Willamette Boulevard embankment.

After the first vehicle was put into service so long ago, the open Shirlee Ann Trust Fund continued to receive community support, earmarked for equipment not in the City's budget. People have contributed over the years as memorials to loved ones, in lieu of flowers, as have many appreciative people who have been helped by the paramedics.

The "Shirlee Ann" has become an integral part of the community with an almost possessive attitude evidenced by anyone who has been involved in an emergency in the area to which the "Shirlee Ann" responded. With a response time of less than four minutes, the "Shirlee Ann" is faster than the normal ambulance response time.

Station Company 22 and the "Shirlee Ann" now cover a large service area on the North Portland Peninsula: St. Johns, the Linnton community, the Rivergate Industrial Complex, Burlington, and the West Hills area. Because of the geographical location of these communities and industrial areas, having the "Shirlee Ann" based in St. Johns has allowed for a very low response time on emergency calls.

For local residents it is reassuring to know that, in the 1950s, the City of Portland held a ceremony at City Hall and put into their permanent records a promise that they would man and maintain the "Shirlee Ann."