

Jefferson Morris "Fireman Jeff"

Jeff Morris joined Portland Fire on December 1, 1950. He was 22 years old at the time, but his involvement with Portland began 7 years earlier. The early 1940s were a difficult time for Portland Fire since many firefighters were called to military service. Substitutes (volunteers who were hoping to find a paid spot one day) worked with different crews to fill some of the staffing gaps. Jeff was one of those.

Over the years, Jeff would rise through the ranks. His true love throughout his career was people. He loved to talk and share fire safety information. From this would evolve what is largely considered the first efforts in public education. While this may be true, Jeff was not officially appointed to that capacity. Most of his public educating was done on his own time.



Jeff was a dynamic and charismatic personality who built tremendous loyalty in whatever he did, whether with school children, politicians, the media, or his co-workers. Jeff was often referred to as "Portland's Best-Known City Employee." He was truly Portland Fire's unofficial Ambassador of goodwill.

Many years after Jeff's death, a community member decided to donate some fire related goods to Portland Fire's archives. The firefighting equipment had belonged to the donor's parent, who served with Portland. She also had a Junior Firefighter Card, signed by Jeff Morris himself. She proudly showed off this item. When asked if she would be donating the card to the "Jeff Morris Fire & Life Safety Foundation," she said "not on your life!" She valued the card and her memory of Jeff just that much!

As Jeff rose through the ranks, eventually becoming a Battalion Chief, he also served as Portland Fire's public information officer. He was assigned to city hall to work under Commissioner Connie McCreehy, who would later become Mayor. He became quite popular at city hall and likely brought much good favor toward the Fire Bureau.

Jeff's strong relationships were not limited to city hall. His other loyal friends could be found in the media as well. Jim Howe, long time news director with KEX radio and Floyd Smith, local television news anchor, would be two of his long time and loyal friends. Jeff was always honest, straightforward, and kind to all members of the media.

Jeff would succumb to cancer on October 1, 1974 at the age of 46. Not long after his death, his friends from the media formed “The Friends of Jeff Morris” committee and begin raising funds for causes dear to Jeff.

The “Jeff Van” was the first project. The 1974 Ford Van was dedicated to public education and transporting materials to schools and other locations. The tradition of the Jeff Van would remain until 2011.

Portland Fire quickly realized the void left with the passing of Jeff. Assistant Chief Harry Surbaugh solicited firefighters to become speakers on behalf of the fire bureau at community events. Chief Surbaugh was a member of Toastmasters and felt a cadre of firefighters with similar skills could benefit the Fire Bureau as representatives to the community. About fourteen firefighters stepped forward and became the “Speakers Bureau.” Firefighter Les Pratt became instrumental in organizing this movement and was one of the most active members.



Much of the effort of the Speakers Bureau supported outreach to the schools. A poster contest for fire prevention week was popular at the time and it was judged by the Friends of Jeff Morris Committee. Presentations to other civic groups were common as well. At the time, much of the funding came from the “Independent Insurance Companies of Portland,” the insurance company that provided insurance for the city.

By 1985, the Friends of Jeff Morris had raised funds to build a fire museum at the north end of the Central Fire Station. Carter Case Architects (of Portland) designed the addition to the Central Fire Station to be compatible with its Old Town surroundings. Old Town is a tribute in restored buildings to the city’s architecture of the 19th and early 20th century.

The existing arches along the north wall of the superstructure will form the outer boundary of a covered walkway, according to the Carter Case blueprint. From this spacious walkway, spectators will view vintage firefighting equipment through shatterproof panes. This arrangement, enhanced by skylights over the exhibits, will provide a feeling of openness, according to architect Case. Yet, his plan has the displays completely enclosed and observers comfortably sheltered out of Portland’s frequent mists.

For many years, the Jeff Morris Fire & Life Safety Foundation (formerly the Friends of Jeff Morris Committee) continued to support fire and life safety education and the preservation of the Fire Bureau’s history. The Safety Learning Center & Fire Museum at the Historic Belmont Firehouse is a living legacy to the vision of Fireman Jeff.

Lila Morris, Jeff’s widow says of Jeff: “He absolutely loved the fire department; it was his entire life.” By all accounts, Jeff Morris was a tireless worker. In his 23 years with the bureau (time out for the

Marine Corps) he rarely missed a day of work and likely contributed more of his time off than he took in vacation.

"He was a very funny man" quipped Lieutenant Les Pratt, the fire bureau's public information officer after Jeff. "He had a hundred jokes, most of them corny. And even if they weren't funny, when he laughed--he always laughed at his own jokes—the way he laughed, you laughed with him."

This indefatigable ambassador of The Portland Fire Bureau "who could be very serious," according to his widow, worked until 10 days before his death. Then, she says "He went to the hospital and entertained people. He sat up in bed and told his jokes. He never complained. He really loved people."

Jim Howe, former news director at KEX radio says "Jeff was one of those rare public servants who alone made a huge contribution to the community. And what he did rubbed off on those who knew him. We are trying to continue the kinds of things he was doing." Howe would go on to serve as the President of the Jeff Morris Fire & Life Safety Foundation.

In a further demonstration of appreciation for Jeff Morris, his friends from the "Rhododendron Eradication Society," a tongue in cheek society of close friends of Jeff's who spent free time vacationing at a cabin in Rhododendron, Oregon, created a rhododendron in Jeff's memory. It would be registered with the American Rhododendron Society (ARS 773) and be named the "Fireman Jeff." Every spring it spawns beautiful flowers, red, of course.

