

Ecorse Echoes: The Magazine of Ecorse History

October 6, 2009

Footprints From the Ecorse Fire Department



Remember the Fishpond?

In 1938 the Ecorse Fire Department personnel built the fishpond that stood alongside the old Ecorse Fire Station on High Street near Cicotte.

We Need A Ecorse Historical Society! Will You Help?

Hi Everyone,

My name is Kathy Covert Warnes and like you, I was born and raised in Ecorse. I miss the Ecorse of my growing up years and I want to preserve as much of Ecorse history as possible. In order to do that I think we as private citizens need to form a Ecorse Historical Society or at least organize a group of people interested in preserving Ecorse History. I also think it is a travesty that all of the communities around Ecorse – Lincoln Park, Wyandotte, River Rouge, Taylor- have historical societies and Ecorse, the oldest downriver community, doesn't! We have enough good and intelligent present and past residents of Ecorse to accomplish this if we want to do so badly enough.

I put together this Ecorse History newsletter to give you an idea of how interesting Ecorse History is and how we can present it to people. I will email it to you if you will send me your email address or I will snail mail it if you don't have an email address. Snail mail is expensive however, so email would be preferable.

We also need to interview Ecorse residents and get their stories about Ecorse while they are still with us and preserve them for future generations.

If you are interested in recording your memories of Ecorse, helping with a historical society or in any other way to preserve Ecorse history, please fill out the coupon below and return it to:

Kathy Covert Warnes
5149 Summit Lane
Allendale, Michigan 49401
kathyecors@aol.com

Yes, I want to help organize a Ecorse Historical Society or share my memories of Ecorse.

Name _____

Address _____

Email Address _____

Telephone Number _____

Police Chief Al Jaeger Recalls the Day He Fought Both Fires and Law Breakers



Fire Chief Al Jaeger, age 57, pleasingly plump and be speckled, stood on the glassed in porch of his neat frame house at 4425 High Street in Ecorse on a December Monday in 1945. He buttoned up his overcoat, getting ready to leave for his office in the new municipal building and gazed at the old two story frame building across the street that had once housed the fire and police departments of the Village of Ecorse

Twenty five years earlier in 1920, Albert M. Jaeger had become the first salaried fire chief in Ecorse, the job that he still held, and with a force of three men took up office in the wooden city hall across from his house. Now at age 57 in 1945, he went to the fire department in the new municipal building on High and Cicotte Streets to receive the hearty congratulations of the 28 member fire department.

Chief Jaeger remembered Ecorse fires. On a November day in Ecorse in 1918 as a volunteer fireman, he pushed a piano away from the second story window of a burning house to get inside. The piano crashed through the burned out rafters and Jaeger rode it to the first floor. Overcome with smoke and unconscious from his injuries, other firemen carried Jaeger to a doctor's office and he revived. He immediately returned to the fire and helped his fellow firemen fight it to the end.

About 1922, two years after he was installed as Ecorse's first fire chief, Village President Fred Bouchard made Jaeger acting chief of police. He held the two offices jointly until 1926. His joint chief ship provided material for local jokesters. The story has it that Jaeger always worked bareheaded in his office until a call came demanding his services as one department head or another. Then he would grab the correct hat, jam it on his head and run out of his office to whatever challenges lay ahead.

Holding the joint office was difficult in the turbulent days of bootlegging and rum running in Ecorse. Several underworld hideouts sprang up along the riverfront, huddled beside the river below Southfield Road. One of them known as "Robbers Roost," often sheltered notorious lawbreakers. One March day in 1924, Jaeger and one of his men, Benjamin Montie, a fire truck driver and auxiliary policeman, went down to Robbers Roost to investigate a case of petty larceny. Inside Robber's Roost, two bandits who had just raided the Commonwealth Bank in Detroit and escaped with \$17,000 were counting their money. Chief Jaeger and Benjamin Montie took the men to police headquarters for questioning and then Chief Jaeger, Montie and two deputy sheriffs returned to Robbers Roost where they found two more of the bandit ring in hiding,

The two men jumped out of a window into the river. They swam back to shore and were captured just as two others drove up in a car. The men were Bernard Malley, Leo Corbett, Elza Meade and Tim Murray. Meade and Corbett were in the car and Corbett drew a gun and killed Ecorse Patrolman-fireman Benjamin Montie. Chief of Police Jaeger drew his gun and killed Corbett.

During the scuffle Meade drove away in the car and a statewide hunt failed to find him. Later he was arrested in Arizona and sentenced to 20-40 years in Marquette Prison. As the bank robbers attempted to get away, they threw the \$17,000 all over the streets and waterfront. Finders did not return their spoils.

Fire Chief Milton Montie Retires After 35 Years



William Smith Jr. Appointed First Black Fireman in Ecorse



On July 20, 1959, the Ecorse Police and Fire Commission appointed William E. Smith Jr., 27, of West Outer Drive as the first black fireman in the history of the department to fill a vacancy created by the resignation of Pipeman Francis E. Labadie, a six year veteran of the department.

A three year army veteran, Smith was discharged in January 1954. He was married and the father of a son.

Milton B. Montie, age 59 turning 60, retired as Ecorse Fire Chief in July 1977 after years of dedication to Ecorse and the Fire Department. He carried on a tradition of service inherited from his father Benjamin Montie, who was killed in a shoot out t Robbers Roost, a 1920s gang hide out on the Detroit River at Southfield Road, when Milton was just six years old. At that time in Ecorse history, employees of the Fire Department had the dual role of fighting fires and criminals and Benjamin and Chief Jaeger were capturing the bank robbers when one of them shot Benjamin before Chief Jaeger could shoot him.

Chief Montie had a long history with the Ecorse Fire Department. On January 21, 1942, he was appointed to work was a pipeman. His was the last appointment that the Village of Ecorse made, because at midnight that day, it became the City of Ecorse. He felt that he was destined to become a firefighter. "This was the only line of work I'd ever considered. I've been around it all my life," he said.

Smoky the Firehouse Dog



SMOKY

In March 1961, hundreds of Ecorse children and the city's firemen mourned the death of Smoky, the bandy-legged beagle who had been the Fire Department's faithful mascot for eight years.

Smoky was just a cuddly little puppy when Stewart Smith, assistant fire chief, brought him to the Number Two Fire Station on Outer Drive. While Smoky was growing big enough to climb on the truck "Big Red," he was learning the difference between the various bells in the station. Soon he learned to ignore the telephone and the interstation system, but he would hop right on the truck when the fire alarm sounded. Then he rode off with his buddies to the fire, perched on the hose bed, his big ears flapping in the wind as "Big Red" went whizzing down the street, red blinkers on, siren at full throttle.

A real attention attracter, Smoky enjoyed entertaining children at a fire or at a fire prevention lecture. According to Stewart Smith, Smoky had an extraordinary record of long, faithful service since he was on duty 24 hours each day and had no day off. The only blot on his record was a one day absence that Smoky never explained.

Stewart Smith kept a scrapbook of the highlights of Smoky's life as a member of the Ecorse Fire Department. Among the pictures of Smoky was one with former Detroit Tiger Vic Wertz that was published in a Detroit daily newspaper and in the Cleveland Press. Smoky often visited other fire departments in Detroit, Hamtramck and other Downriver communities.

Finally age slowed Smoky down and in March 1961 he retired permanently. "Smoky may be gone, but the children of Ecorse will miss his playful antics and his comrades will long remember their favorite firefighter whose loyalty was unswerving," Stewart Smith said.

Small Stories: History for Kids and Grandkids



Smoky the Ecorse Fire Dog

In Ecorse many years ago,
A little brown dog looked for some place to go,
He walked around with no occupation,
Then he found the Outer Drive Fire Station.
The firemen gave him warm food and a bed,
“Hop on the fire truck and ride with us,” they said.
“You can help put out fires but that’s not all,
You can make lots of friends with a shake of your paw.”
Smoky kept his paw busy all day and some nights,
Greeting hundreds of children both black and white,
If the children felt sad or came down sick,
Smoky locked their hands and did funny tricks.
Children from schools Miller and One and Two and Three,
Came to watch and admire the antics of Smoky.
Smoky did somersaults and then stopped on a dime,
Next, he’d bark to the children, “It’s sing-along-time!”
Smoky and the children sang songs up and down,
Smoky and the children sang songs all around town.
Their songs traveled to High Street and Labadie,
Their songs traveled to Southfield and School Three,
When the children felt especially bold,
Their songs rang in the air on Pepper Road!
Their songs shook cattails along the Detroit River,
Then tired Ecorse people gave a great shiver,
Exhausted Ecorse parents fell in a huge heap,
Shouting, “Stop! We like your songs, but we need sleep!”
So Smoky and his friend sang short and snappy,
To keep the people of Ecorse happy,
Then Mr. Saylor and Campbell, taking matters in hand,
Recruited them to march in the marching band!
Smoky and his friends practiced on the Ecorse High School track,

Missing and Misplaced People: Can You Identify The People in This Picture?

