

ORIGIN OF THE NORTH SAANICH FIRE DEPARTMENT

Unedited account written by Jim Cumming, August 1991

Through the kindness of Mr. Larry Buchanan I have received a copy of Fred Musclow's collection of newspaper clippings and reports relating to the fire department established in Sidney. There are a couple of errors and omissions I would like to see corrected, but essentially the dispute which lasted for several years is clearly presented and tells its own story. I would like to add a further chapter which presents another side of the story I feel should be recorded for future students of local history.

George Cochrane, who operated a grocery and general store on the corner of Second Street and Beacon Avenue is quoted as saying that the first firefighters acquired hose and hose-reel very cheaply. Actually, in a discussion with Joe Mitchell and myself he said that the original fire-fighting equipment belonged to the original Sidney sawmill and was used for all local fires.

When the mill finally closed down, the assets were acquired by its two former employees, Joe Mitchell and Jock Anderson. Mitchell had been the mill's bookkeeper and continued to make the fire equipment available to the area. Cochrane said this equipment was used well into the 1930s.

Mitchell also gave the firefighters the building lot which was the site of the first fire hall. In later years his workmen were always the first to turn out to a fire alarm, but the record makes no mention of Mitchell and Anderson's contribution.

My first contact with the Sidney group was in 1943. I was in the Royal Canadian Air Force at Patricia Bay airfield and our commanding officer, Group Captain McGregor, received a request to send part of his fire fighting department to Sidney to help control a large fire on Beacon Avenue. Since the Pat Bay station fire department came under the jurisdiction of the Construction Engineering Dept., of which I was sergeant major, I also turned out—but only as an onlooker.

The fire had a good hold when we arrived. The Aladdin Café on the corner of Third Street and Beacon Avenue was saved, but Rey's Café and the whole block of old and odd buildings down to Second Street were reduced to cinders. Macleod's Hardware now stands where Rey's Café stood. Aladdin Café still remains in my memory—we learned to frequent it in the evening when we had time off. We could buy bacon and two eggs with unlimited toast and coffee for 45 cents. These are fond memories.

To get back to the fire department: we turned out one unit to any fire in the area from then on. Our station had a large population of 7,300 people in uniform some with wives and families, so it was in our self interest to put out any fires. The population of the entire Saanich Peninsula in those days did not compare with the population of the Patricia Bay air station.

With an ample supply of water from Elk Lake pipeline, and a million gallon storage reservoir the airport fire department with its tanker trucks and pumper was well equipped to fight any fire, be it aircraft, bush or houses.

With the end of the war in 1945, the base population began to dwindle. Servicemen were being discharged and the War Office cut all service equipment and workers. The fire department was reduced to a small unit to protect the ever-so-much smaller airport establishment. Many of the service people chose to stay on in the peninsular area. Many others who were still trainees made up their minds to return and did so. Others, hearing by word of mouth of the pleasant climate, chose the Saanich Peninsula as their future home.

In 1946, the sudden influx of vigorous, reasonably young men brought a new life to the northern peninsula. A demand for better fire protection over the whole district led to the organization of a body to provide financing and equipment to the volunteer fire department centred in Sidney.

The group was well-organized and registered as a charitable organization with the provincial government. The secretary-treasurer was Trammy Leigh, a just-retired Royal Navy commander who had just arrived (May, 1946) in Sidney. The group was registered as the North Saanich Fire Protection District, and Trammy Leigh lost no time in organizing dances, parties, races, fairs, etc. You name it, he did it if there was a dollar to be made for the fire department. His is the only name that survives from those early years of the North Saanich Fire Protection District.

The organization received grants from all of the various government establishments in the North Saanich area. Sidney, of course, was still part of North Saanich and the fire protection district quickly became the source of all funds for the previously independent and loosely organized fire department.

Growing pains affected the area and in 1952 Sidney applied for Letters Patent as a self-governing village. These were granted by the provincial authorities.

The Village of Sidney, with narrow boundaries and less than 1,000 population, was constricted and soon moved to expand its boundaries. Sanscha Hall was started and built on the Memorial Park while still outside the village boundaries—which led to prolonged dispute.

Another factor was the fact that the new village's commissioners were no longer part of, or subject to, the North Saanich Fire Protection District.

The next year, 1953, the name of the fire department was changed to read Sidney and North Saanich Fire Department. Then Dr. Hemmings, chairman of the department and Commissioner of the village, undertook to impose a one mill tax on village properties and suggested that in fairness the North Saanich Fire Protection District should do the same.

Application was made to the provincial authorities to give North Saanich Fire Protection District taxing privileges which it had not previously held. Letters Patent were issued accordingly, and North Saanich F.P. District became a taxing body in 1956, with Trammy Leigh still serving as the secretary-treasurer and Frank Heward as chairman.

Trammy, regardless of his official position, still called the shots. He in fact wrote the provincial authorities on 30 October 1956, complaining of his difficulties with the Sidney council and Firemen's Association. They wanted him to stick to providing the money while the council and the Firemen's Association ran the department. Trammy, however, signed himself as chairman of the North Saanich F.P. District.

All this took place in 1956, 10 years before North Saanich municipality was created. Yet until 1972 it was North Saanich that was blamed for the friction.

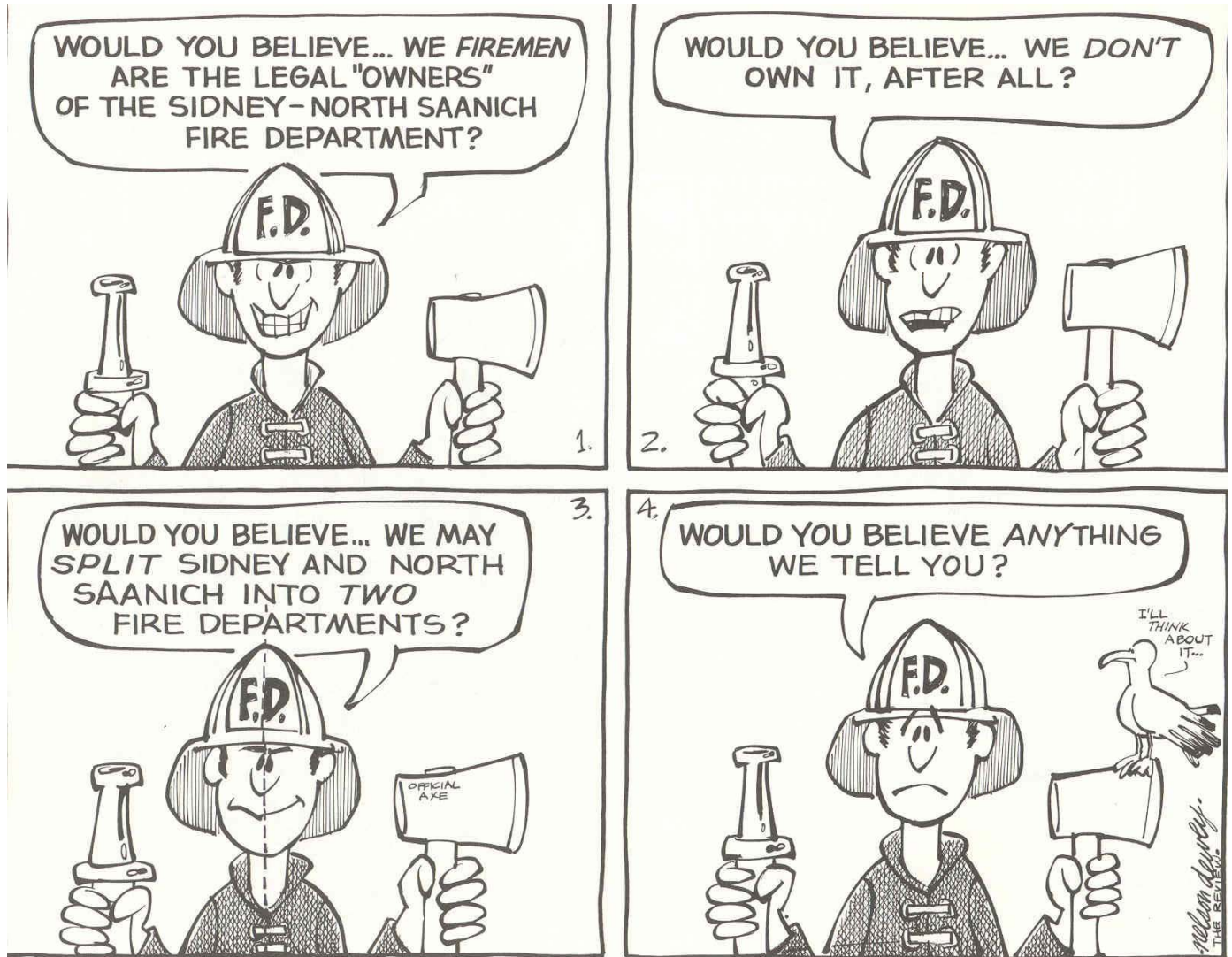
The N.S.F.P.D. imposed a one mill tax on all North Saanich property owners and further received cash grants from the various federal, provincial and other bodies who were exempt from taxation—Experimental Farm, the airport, the Department of Transport, Air Canada, and the federal docks. This created a situation where the fire protection district had ample funds, but whose authority was resented by both Sidney and the firemen's organization.

Sidney's population was growing fast, and the boundaries were extended to provide and extend services to the people. In 1963, a very large expansion was approved by the provincial government. In answer to a plebiscite in the Shoreacres and Resthaven areas to provide sewers, the west and north boundaries of Sidney were moved out to the then ferry highway, now known as East Saanich Road and McDonald Park Road. An extension to the south was also made with the obligation to provide sewers.

This large increase in the size of Sidney had many repercussions. North Saanich lost 1,300 people to Sidney which now, with a population of just over 2,500 legally became a town with a mayor and aldermen.

Seeing the writing on the wall with the constant encroachment of Sidney, Ardmore Ratepayers' Association tried to organize as a village and were refused by the Minister of Municipal Affairs. They then contacted the chairmen of the other ratepayers' associations with the idea of getting together for protection from the encroachment of the new town.

A further problem for the fire department was that the officers of the North Saanich Fire Protection District lived in the Shoreacres area and were now residents of Sidney. They were no longer eligible to serve on the North Saanich district force.



I was privately approached by three residents of Sidney, all old friends, who asked if I could do something about the situation. The delegates were Joe Mitchell, Roy Brethour and J.J. White. The upshot of the situation was that each of the two officers of the Fire Protection District, Frank Heward (chairman) and Trammy Leigh became owners of a quarter interest in my property and therefore ratepayers with the right to vote and be elected to office in North Saanich.

This was all in 1964, and things began moving faster.

With the loss of the Shoreacres-Resthaven area to Sidney, the North Eastern Ratepayers' Association was sadly depleted, but the remnant centred chiefly in the Curteis Point area got together.

I got a phone call one evening from Don McLaren, a World War I flying ace who was chairman. He asked if I felt they should continue with the association. I, who had never been a member, replied yes, as a group action was always more effective than the individual. Don's reply was "Good, we have just elected you secretary."

After that, things became rather hectic. We tried to tap the new water main to the new ferry terminal and organize a Curteis Point water district. This was refused—but the water supply is another story.

Don and I attended a meeting called by Dr. Arthur Nash with the Ardmore ratepayers, the chairman and secretary of the Deep Cove group, and the south-east group centred around the experimental farm.

A long discussion took place and it was decided to look into the possibilities of incorporating the whole area into a rural municipality. I asked about costs, but no one had the slightest idea. Being Scottish, I felt that we could not go to the people for a vote without being able to tell them whether it would cost more or less than their present provincial taxes.

I spent the winter of 1964-65 haunting the municipal department of the provincial government and other municipal governments. I visited the new Central Saanich municipality, Saanich, Victoria and even Oak Bay, studying the costs of policing, hospitals, public works, etc.

At the next meeting, I was asked to put together a report for public consumption.

A public meeting was called at North Saanich High School, where my report was read by Peter Burchett. Dr. Nash was chairman, and I was called upon to answer questions from the audience on my estimate of costs and my claim that we could operate for less than our provincial taxes. I must have been convincing as a few weeks later a public vote endorsed the idea of a municipality.

In August, 1965, Letters Patent were issued creating the Municipality of North Saanich, but the means used by the Department of Municipal Affairs led to great difficulties for North Saanich and even now, 26 years later, it is an effort to explain these problems.

The Letters Patent issued to the new municipality noted that in 1946 the North Saanich Fire Protection District was organized, registered and approved.

In 1956 the Letters Patent were amended to increase the powers to tax and in 1965 these Letters Patent were withdrawn and new Letters Patent issued re-creating the fire protection district as a complete and full municipality. The district officers, Frank Heward and Trammy Leigh, refused to have anything to do with this. However, the Minister, as still recorded in the Letters Patent, appointed the nine members of the ratepayers' committee as an interim council until elections could be held.

The program or platform presented by the new council to the people was fire protection for the west side (Ardmore and Deep Cove), provision of a library, hospital facilities to be improved, and a better water supply.

The library study I made led to the opening of the library, first on Beacon Avenue, then at Sanscha Hall, and later on at the current premises. The Regional District Library lost no time after receiving our request for membership and the branch opened in November, 1965. In 1966 I appointed Nell Horth from the new council to replace me.

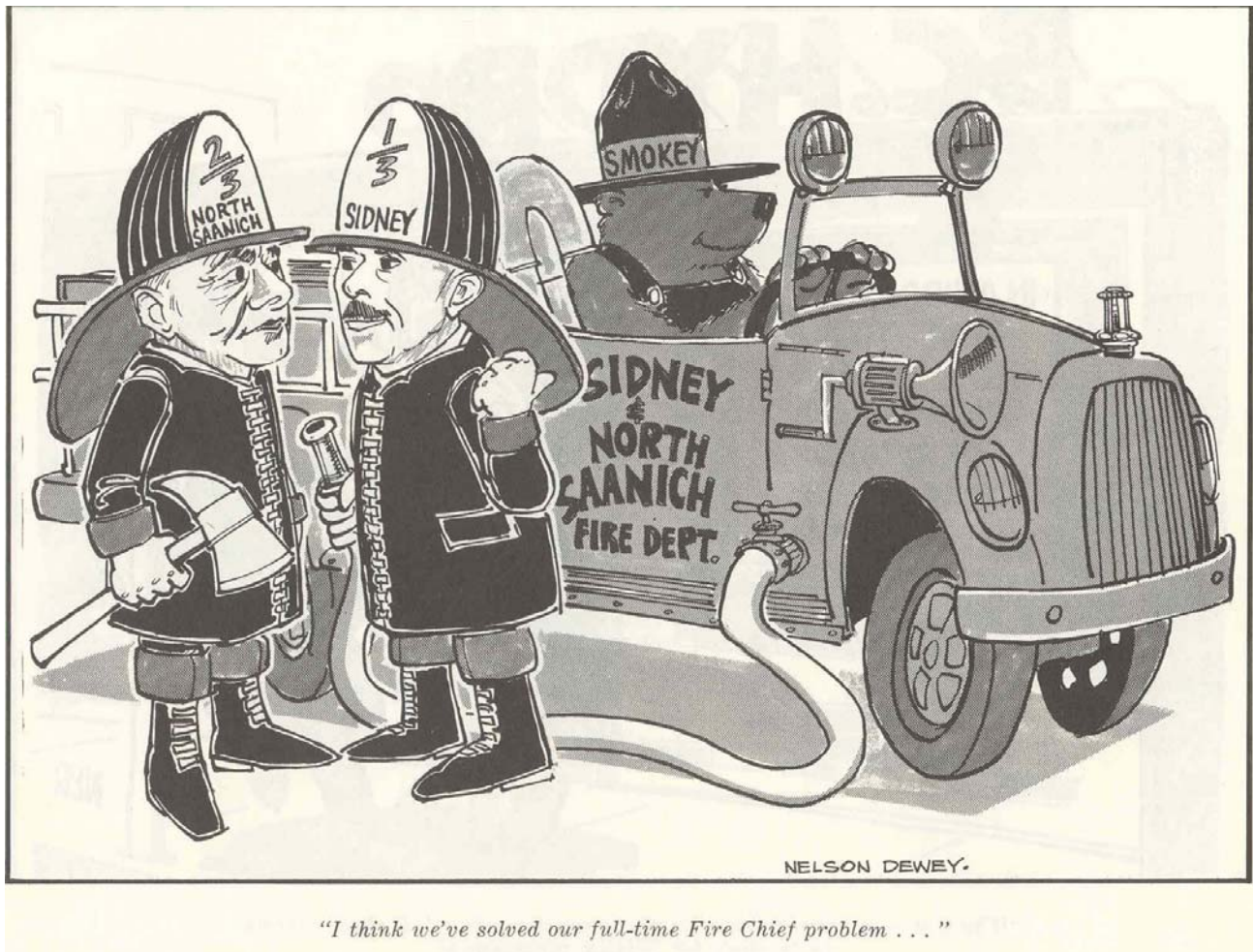
Water took longer, but we did succeed and turned our attention to fire protection.

Land was purchased and we in council discussed the building of a branch fire hall, and the procurement of volunteers to be trained by the veterans at the main hall in Sidney, which was still under the jurisdiction of the North Saanich Fire Protection District.

However, the Firemen's Association flatly refused to train any new recruits and strongly objected to any branch fire hall, claiming it was unnecessary. They demanded the funds available to be spent on the main hall in Sidney.

Supported by Sidney council, they demanded that we employ a fulltime paid fire chief. North Saanich council had no option but to proceed as they had undertaken to provide fire protection for the west side. They paid all costs from municipal funds until the controversy was settled.

Sidney asked for control of the fire department, but when offered a 50/50 share, conditional on their sharing costs on the same basis, Sidney indignantly rejected the proposal as unfair. North Saanich was still paying a little more than two-thirds of costs on the basis of assessed value.



In 1971 I appointed Aldermen Cumpston and Aylard as a negotiating committee. In 1972 after I ceased to be mayor, the situation was resolved by turning over all assets, land and property to the town of Sidney, Sidney in turn undertook to provide fire protection for North Saanich's outlying areas, such as the south-east (Lochside Drive) district for a certain period of time.

The branch fire hall located on Wain Road became the North Saanich Fire Department. It has never lacked recruits and is today a fine body of men, respected and admired by the whole community.

The McTavish Road branch of the fire department deserves a chapter, although its development was not part of the original unit.

It has been mentioned that Sidney had undertaken to repay North Saanich for its share of the central fire department buildings and equipment in Sidney by providing protection to the south-east sector of North Saanich municipality. When this contractual agreement ran out, North Saanich acquired the corner of McTavish and Cresswell Roads from the Capital Regional District as the site for a future fire hall.

In 1977, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs had by order in council placed all water supply sources under the control of the Capital Regional District. The land transfer of the various units (such as the pumping station at Elk Lake) had not been properly completed and Sidney Water Works still was shown as the landowner.

Sidney tried to bill North Saanich for rent or taxes, but were unsuccessful. The lawyers had a field day, but the matter was ultimately cleared up.

The fees required by Sidney council for continuing fire protection for the south-east quarter of North Saanich were considered excessive and unacceptable, so that plans for the southern fire hall on the McTavish site were moved ahead and construction started.

