

Original fire hall evolved from creamery to antique store

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Elwood Free, original owner of the creamery, stands beside his truck and the future Sunderland fire hall in the late 1930s. - Courtesy of Rosalind Doble

(SUNDERLAND) This is the first in a series of stories highlighting the history of our various communities, thanks to the volunteer efforts of area historical societies.

In the town of Sunderland, there are many buildings that are rich with the heritage of the Township. The Old Sunderland Fire Hall at 5 Church Street North, across from the Sunderland Town Hall, was once Free's Creamery.

In 1936, Elwood Free and his wife Helen Ray drew up the plans and, with the help of masons Earl and Mac Thompson, completed this block building . The cream was collected from farms from Greenbank, Little Britain, Cannington, Woodville and Lindsay.

When the business first started, butter was removed from a small churn and molded into one-pound packages using a wooden press. Then the butter was

wrapped individually. The butter was delivered to Toronto by truck and on the way back the vehicle was filled with Purina Food Chows making this enterprise a double business. Long term employees included Eleanor Camplin, Louise Martin, Doug Harder, Don Brooks, Paul Farrell and Teunis Molenaar.

In 1940, the building was sold to the Township of Brock to be used as a fire hall. In those early years, the fire protection consisted of two 25-gallon tanks (filled with an acid soda mixture) that were placed on a small auto chassis that was towed around by a truck from Gordon's Garage.

In those days, only the west half of Sunderland had fire protection as the hoses from the Beaver River only came up as

far as the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. After the major fire in January 1949, which destroyed the McDermott Block south of the bank, a two-bay fire hall was created and a 1950 GMC fire truck was purchased. It had 450-gallon-per-minute pump and a 500-gallon tank. This antique truck is in mint condition and has been restored by the Sunderland Volunteer Firemen's Association for community parades.

In 1968, when dial phones came to Sunderland, 12 volunteer firemen all had the same number on the phones in their homes and rushed to the fire hall when that number rang out. In 1972, an addition was built on the north side of the building and a third bay was added with a hose tower, meeting room, office and kitchen upstairs.

The year 1972 also saw the formation of the Region of Durham and the fire halls in Sunderland, Cannington and Beaverton amalgamated into the Brock Township Fire Department. Carl Umphrey was the first fire chief to co-ordinate the work of all three halls.

This year, the fire department celebrated its 60 years of service to the community and township with a reception at the new fire hall on River Street.

Through the years, there has been constant additions of new modern equipment and bigger more powerful vehicles. It has always been the courage and dedication of our local community volunteers that made this a special building filled with memories of over half a century.

The firemen of Sunderland have gone beyond the local boundaries of Brock to compete and train internationally as representatives of this community. The

volunteers, the fires, the machines and memories have been collected in a booklet by the Sunderland Historical Society for the years 1936 to 2009.

Now this building has become an antique store/gallery and learning centre called The Dark Horse which is operated by Lianne Megarry. The interior has been renovated but the old nostalgic charm is still there to provide a glimpse of the 74 years of memories and heritage.

Larry Doble is the president of the Sunderland and District Historical Society.