

Vashon's First Ambulance

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

Sitting in a café in “downtown Vashon” the quite serenity is occasionally broken by the wail of sirens and the loud honking of air horns, as the emergency vehicles of Vashon Fire & Rescue speed through the 4-way stop on their way to an emergency call. Although they are noisy and shatter the quite, we are all thankful they are here and ready to help whenever the need arises.

It was not always so. Vashon did not have a fire truck until 1926 when a volunteer fire department was formed at Vashon, and then more when later volunteer departments were formed at Burton and Dockton. The island did not have an ambulance until 1940. The American Legion, Vashon Island Post No. 159, presented the first ambulance to the island in December 1939, but it was not until February 1940 that the ambulance was ready for service. The ambulance was a surplused Washington State Patrol vehicle and was acquired through donations by Titus Motors in Tacoma, contributions by Lloyd Raab and George Davis, and a community fund raising drive, all organized by the American Legion.



Vashon Ambulance, 1952, Tom Hebert Photograph

The ambulance was kept at the County Building at Center and Sherriff Finn Shattuck and each of the island doctors had keys, so they could use the vehicle when needed. The American Legion also provided the insurance coverage and turned the title of the new ambulance over to the King County Sherriff's Office so the County would maintain the vehicle and deputize drivers so they were available when needed.

A fund was set up to defray the costs of a first aid kit, blankets, sheets, pillows, and other items necessary for the ambulance to operate effectively. As the News-Record (the Beachcomber of its day) reported: "It is hoped to have a reserve fund of \$100, and a week ago this did not seem possible until the gift of \$43 from the Japanese Association and \$5 from the Japanese Mother's Club this week boosted the \$2.29 cash on hand to \$50.29." The Vashon Japanese American Community stepped forward to make the fund happen.

Being an all-volunteer ambulance service, and having the ambulance stationed at Center did not always work as hoped. In early May 1941 an injured boy had to wait for several hours because the keys to the ambulance could not be found. Both deputies were off on other parts of the island on calls, and no one else could find a key to get the ambulance out of the garage and the key to start it. A News-Record editorial "We Need More Keys" spurred efforts to make the ambulance more readily available, and similar delays did not reoccur.



VIFR All-Terrain Rescue Vehicle, Susan Reimer Photograph

Today, things are very different. We now have the island-wide District 13, Vashon Island Fire & Rescue. The move to create this island-wide fire district

began after the 1939 Washington State Legislature passed legislation that allowed the formation of independent fire districts. In March 1942 islanders voted almost unanimously (there were 4 no votes on the entire island) to form fire protection District 13. Vashon Fire & Rescue is a direct descendent of that original fire district. The district has gone through many changes and controversies, but its support on the island has always been strong. The recent 2016 gift by Granny's Attic, of an all-terrain gator vehicle, which is equipped to help support both medical and fire emergencies, is a good reflection of the spirit that led to the gift of the island's first ambulance 77 years ago.

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Photo 1 - Ambulance about 1950 – Tom Hebert photograph

Note the water tower in the background, which was located behind where Vashon Pharmacy is now.

Photo 2 - Rescue Vehicle 2016 – Susan Reimer photograph

Vashon Fire & Rescue's Brigitte Schran Brown and Ben Davidson with the gator.