

## FIRE HALL

Dad announced at noon one day that we would be moving to Nelson in January, 1940, a dismal prospect in my ten year old opinion. I had never heard of the place; nor did I want to. My friends all lived in Vancouver.

As soon as I got back to school that day, I told my perceptive grade five teacher all about where our family was going to live. She sensed my fear and the very next day prepared a geography class about B.C.'s interior, with emphasis on what each small city was like. Of course, by chance, quite a lot of time was spent on Nelson "because it was the central junction for the CPR."

She said the population was somewhere around 7000 and one of the boys asked what Vancouver's population was. The resulting comparison brought about a lot of whispered, "Ha ha, she'll get lost!" Things had gone from bad to worse!

Then Miss Holmes said she had once spent Christmas there amidst great piles of snow so she and a friend had spent the whole time sleigh-riding, skiing and skating. The laughter stopped. We hadn't had snow for a few years. The boys were quiet now, looking a bit envious. When Miss Holmes observed this she said she wished that she could have stayed a summer as there was lots of swimming, biking and climbing mountain trails to scenic fishing spots.

Now, seeing that the boys had been suitably impressed, she sprang what I didn't realize would be the coup de grace.

"Let's hear where you are going to live in Nelson, Shirley."

"Oh, Mum said we are just going to live in the fire hall." I hadn't thought much about it as I had visited Dad lots of times in his No. 2 firehall on Seymour Street in Vancouver. Little did I know that at that moment I had become an instant celebrity! Sarcasm gave way to questions. Would I be able to slide down the pole? Go to fires?

I knew I would never be allowed to take part in activities like that but would not have admitted it. Dad had already taken me down the pole once but only in his arms and I knew that would be the extent of those kind of activities. However, with my new-found importance, I began to think positively about our move.

That year, January, 1940, was a particularly snowy one in the mountains. Dad had gone to Nelson in September while Mum and I stayed in Vancouver to sell our house. Now, in January, instead of the usual 24 hours to reach Nelson, it took 30 hours and I was a particularly obnoxious passenger, as I threw up all the way. Our luggage had to be left at one spot so that the bus could navigate up the treacherous narrow roads, so I landed in Nelson in a nasty smelly condition with no change of clothes on a Saturday night. Stores closed on Sunday so we could not even buy anything.

However, when Dad told the men on shift of my plight, they said they would hunt through their belongings to see if they could find something that would temporarily cover a pudgy ten year old. (generous, as it was not their worry). So it was that costume in which I had my first dinner in Nelson in the Golden Gate Café dressed only in Mr. Herb Pitts' bright green tee-shirt tied around my fat waist with a string! Though, I looked like a watermelon, I enjoyed my chocolate sundae dessert and decided that living in the firehall with such helpful firemen was going to be all right.

My room was the little one at the top of the building by the bell tower. It was blistering hot in the summer and I grew radishes in a box on the window sill. One year I

even grew some small carrots. The roof of the building at that time was aluminium and when it rained the noise was like a thousand kettle drums playing overhead. Funny enough, I got used to it. (My husband, Louie, wonders why I, in spite of acute hearing, never notice the noise of traffic here!)

On the occasion of a fire I would first hear the fire-phone ring downstairs and then the alarm at the bottom of my stairs outside of my parents' bedroom, at which time Dad jumped into his boots, overalls, helmet, etc. and dashed out. (The Lord preserve me if I had left anything in the way at any exit!) There was then the clatter of the big doors opening, the sirens on the street corners near-by, and the gong in my neighbouring tower clanging to alert volunteers all over town.

Meanwhile, my mother, who had offered to phone the Volunteer firemen, would hurry down to the bell room. (Sometimes the bell in our hallway, if there was thunder, would have bluish "lightening" circling around it.) This scared her but she always attended to her duties and then sat in the old LaFrance firetruck because it had rubber wheels that she thought would be protective. However, she would quickly recover and put on pots of hot coffee, make sandwiches out of things she always kept on hand, and get out cookies or squares. When I was in high school I used to make a lot of the latter to help out.

Of course, during our first years in Nelson, the Fire Department was expected to perform certain duties related to the war. Dad organized the school children in a drive to gather rubber tires and scraps. I have a picture of a parade to celebrate that activity. The department and volunteers organized "ARP" or Air Raid Precaution tactics. They would report to the Hall, don hard hats and get a pail of sand with which to put out possible bomb fires. Although they properly performed these activities, they were rather light-hearted about it, wondering what enemy would waste a bomb on our little town. Dad liked to be asked what he was doing so he could reply, "A\_\_R\_\_Peeing." I, meanwhile, just liked to hang out the window until the sirens sounded as that was when everyone, by law, had to pull down black-out curtains or turn out all lights, and I would see everything dissolve in blackness.

After any fire was put out, the firemen were always invited into our kitchen to eat. Some nights, if the temperature was below zero there would be icicles still clinging to their moustaches and such. By that time I was back upstairs in bed but if there was fascinating chat about the fire, I would keep my ears open so that I could tell my friends who were always interested in the evening's activity.

One time when we were in high school, Mum and I had gone down to a tremendous fire that pretty well did-in the Powell Lumber Company. Mum worried that the men might need coffee before the night was over. However, we were grateful to see that the Salvation Army had attended to that.

The next morning the fire was still burning, and what with my much embellished story of the night before, my three friends and I decided that we should not be missing such a historic occasion. So we ran down to view, spending so long that we missed our Latin class. Mr. L.V.Rogers, our teacher and principal, treated the situation very calmly as the dear man usually did, and just assured us that he, too, was very interested in the situation and would appreciate us each writing an essay about our adventure after school.

Mum attended to the food on Volunteer Practice nights too. She was appreciated by the men and was given a lovely lamp when we left.

When I was in junior high Home Ec class, we learned to make baked apples and the teacher had said that each apple should be in a nice circle of syrup. I thought that meant that each apple needed its own pan. Mum and Dad had gone to Six Mile Lakes to fish that day, so I thought I would surprise them with my nice apple dessert. Well, I had them all looking just perfect, but then discovered that they did not all fit into the oven. What to do? ---This was an emergency in my small mind!

I wondered if I might ask one of the firemen what I could do. Mmmmmmm---I had orders never to disturb the men. But my apples would spoil!!!---So out I went into the hallway and rapped nervously on the door. Luckily, I guess, the man who answered had several children of his own, so he was very helpful and solved my problem-----at least that one!

I didn't know it, but just as Mr.-- was swooping down to the oven in front of the window, Dad and Mom looked up from the car. "What on earth is going on?" my Dad thundered -and ran upstairs to find a fireman had had to pitch in to prepare his dinner. Needless to say, he enjoyed the dessert, but I was cautioned not to repeat the action. Mum said much later that he had had a hard time keeping a straight face.

I knew enough never to disobey my Dad, but I did disturb the men in another way a year or so later. I was in the front room checking to see if I had bought enough 25 cent war stamps to add up to four dollars which the government would redeem for five dollars when the war ended. Mum was frying fish for supper but when she put the icy fish onto the hot frying pan it took fire! Flames shot up to the ceiling and Mum, unthinking in her shocked frenzy, picked up the pan and carried it to the sink; meanwhile setting the curtains afire!

I threw the stamps down and rushed to the men's dorm door, flung it open and shouted, "There's a fire in the kitchen!" The men responded quickly and soon put it out leaving not too much painting and repair to be done. That day we knew there was great advantage to living in a fire-hall.

I am sure Mum was not looking forward to Dad's return, but when he did arrive he didn't say very much except that not too many people have tried to burn down a firehall. And he was puzzled as to why I had thrown down my five dollars worth of stamps before running out for help. However, in spite of his calm acceptance of it all, when he gave his talk on the radio that week, he did mention "a lady he once knew" who had done the same thing with fish.

It was always interesting to see the men practicing their rope jumps on Saturday morning and climbing up and down the ladder truck purchased during Dad's time there. In what other kind of abode could one have a private circus performance while lolling around on one's bed?

I am sure Dr Auld, our family doctor, was rather sorry we lived, not only up a steep hill, but up all kinds of steps! Those were the days when doctors would call on you at home if you were very ill. I caught scarlet fever. A quarantine sign was put on our entrance (which was on the mountain side of the main doors) to keep visitors away, but poor old Dr. Auld made several trips for three weeks to check on my progress.

When I had improved a bit the front of the firehall had all kinds of kids from school who had come to check on my progress (and probably to peek in at the firemen at the same time.) They used to shout out all the news which I tried to answer with my squeaky throat.

The men used to look after a garden on the Latimer side of the hall-grass, a few flowers, and a pool in the centre. It brought visitors, one of whom was a girl who owned a giant sized turtle which she brought from the first house on Latimer across from the brewery. If you can believe it, it was on a leash! Of course she had to walk VERY slowly. down to the little pool where he would bathe!

Another curiosity that the garden attracted was a little terrior type dog which came alone to visit always around five in the afternoon to have a long drink from a little stream. Then, after drinking his fill he would leave. Now, the stream was said to contain mash from the brewery above us on Latimer, so the men used to say, "Here he comes for his "Happy Hour!"

When visitors come to visit now I show them pictures of the fire hall and tell them that that was our "estate" in Nelson. Sometimes they ask if the picture with the horses was taken while I lived there!