

# Thomas H. Owen Sr.

## the Man ♦ the Vision ♦ the Rock

Written by Bob Pfohl, Fire Chief

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We have all benefited and can be proud that the Heartland zone was well ahead of the curve in 1973 when a joint powers agreement was signed to create East County's only regional fire training facility. One of the pioneers that spearheaded that effort was former El Cajon Fire Chief Thomas H. Owen Sr. Chief Owen passed away in August of 1992, well before the majority of firefighters that currently train at the "tower" came on the job.

Originally named the Heartland Training Facility or HTF, the facility was re-dedicated and named after Tom Owen on November 19, 1991. I had the honor and privilege of knowing and working with Chief Owen. Let me share some history of who Thomas H. Owen Sr. was, and why it is fitting that the training facility is named in his honor.



Born on July 20, 1926, Tom Owen grew up in Goree, Texas, and graduated from high school at age 17. Following high school, Owen drove a dump truck in Roswell, New Mexico prior to being drafted into the Navy at age 19. The Navy sent him to San Diego for boot camp where, ironically, he had a brother and sister working in nearby defense plants and living in El Cajon.

Following his discharge from the Navy, Tom used his travel pay to move from Texas to El Cajon and wound up working at a service station at Prescott and Main. El Cajon's first paid Fire Chief, R.M. Halgren was a customer of that gas station and before long he offered Tom a job at the Fire Department. Even though it was a cut in pay, Tom accepted the offer of \$175 per month and no benefits other than free board at the fire station. Tom joined Chief Halgren and Firefighter Herb Teeples to become El Cajon's third paid Fire Department

member on July 1, 1948, just three weeks prior to his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

The benefit of free board at El Cajon's only fire station, a small building on an alley off Main and Orange ended on May 7, 1949 when Tom married Sybil Coburn.

Sybil was a clerk at the Thrifty drug store on West Main, just a short walk down the alley from the old station. The next year, on August 23, 1950, their first son, Thomas H. Owen Jr. was born. Influenced by his father, Tom Jr. went on to join the Lakeside Fire

Department on October 25, 1972 and had a successful career, promoting through the ranks to Fire Captain and retiring on May 28, 2001.

Tom Sr.'s career progressed. In 1955 he promoted to Engineer, then to Captain in 1957. On June 11, 1958 Sybil and Tom's

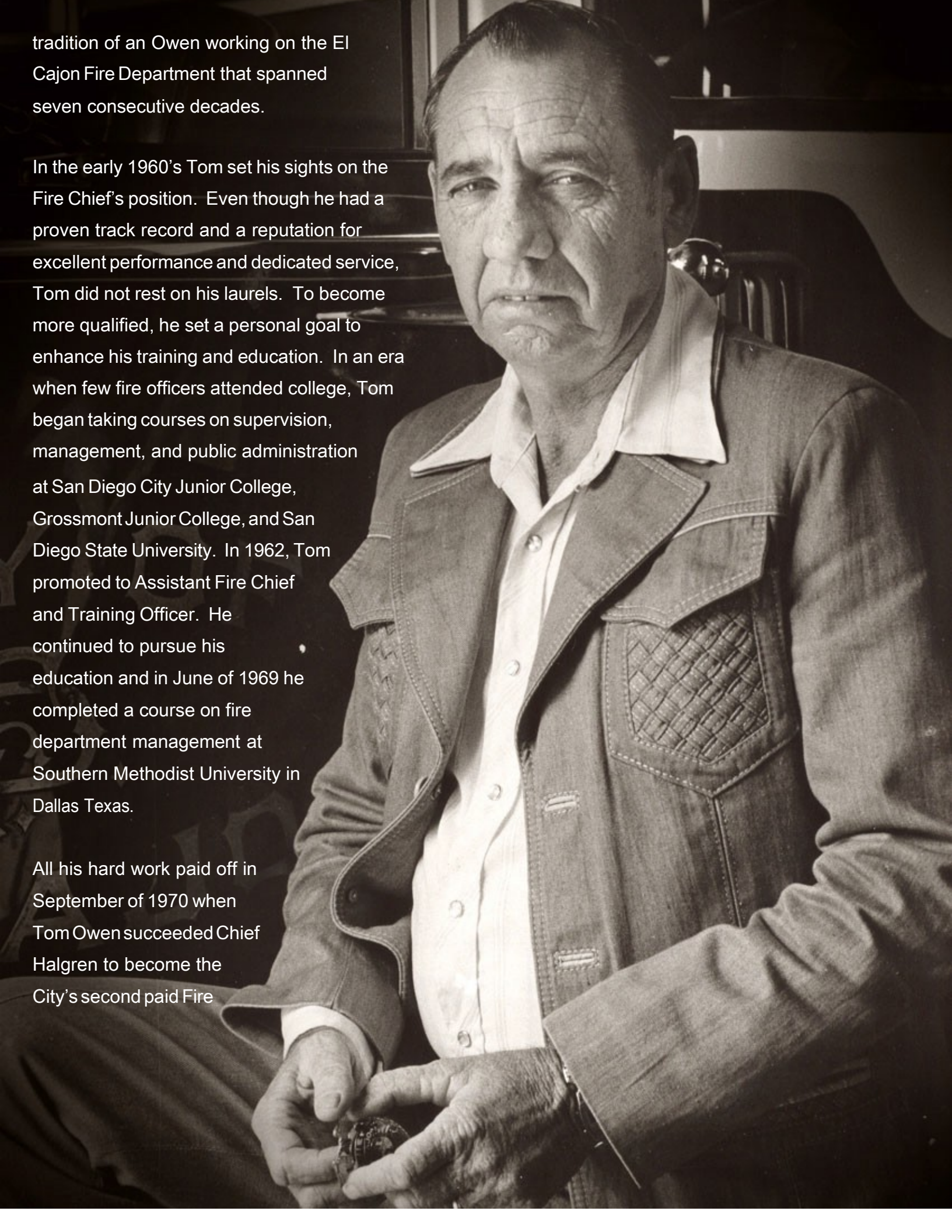
second son, Steven L. Owen was born. With childhood memories of his Father waking him and his brother up in the middle of the night to go on fire calls, Steve joined the El Cajon Fire Department in January of 1979. Retired as a Captain, Steve proudly maintained a



tradition of an Owen working on the El Cajon Fire Department that spanned seven consecutive decades.

In the early 1960's Tom set his sights on the Fire Chief's position. Even though he had a proven track record and a reputation for excellent performance and dedicated service, Tom did not rest on his laurels. To become more qualified, he set a personal goal to enhance his training and education. In an era when few fire officers attended college, Tom began taking courses on supervision, management, and public administration at San Diego City Junior College, Grossmont Junior College, and San Diego State University. In 1962, Tom promoted to Assistant Fire Chief and Training Officer. He continued to pursue his education and in June of 1969 he completed a course on fire department management at Southern Methodist University in Dallas Texas.

All his hard work paid off in September of 1970 when Tom Owen succeeded Chief Halgren to become the City's second paid Fire



Chief at a starting annual salary of \$15,412. He had a “blazing” and memorable debut. Three days after he assumed the top post, the historic Laguna fire erupted and eventually descended into El Cajon. Within weeks an entire wing of Grossmont College was substantially damaged by fire, and soon thereafter a large restaurant under construction went up in smoke.

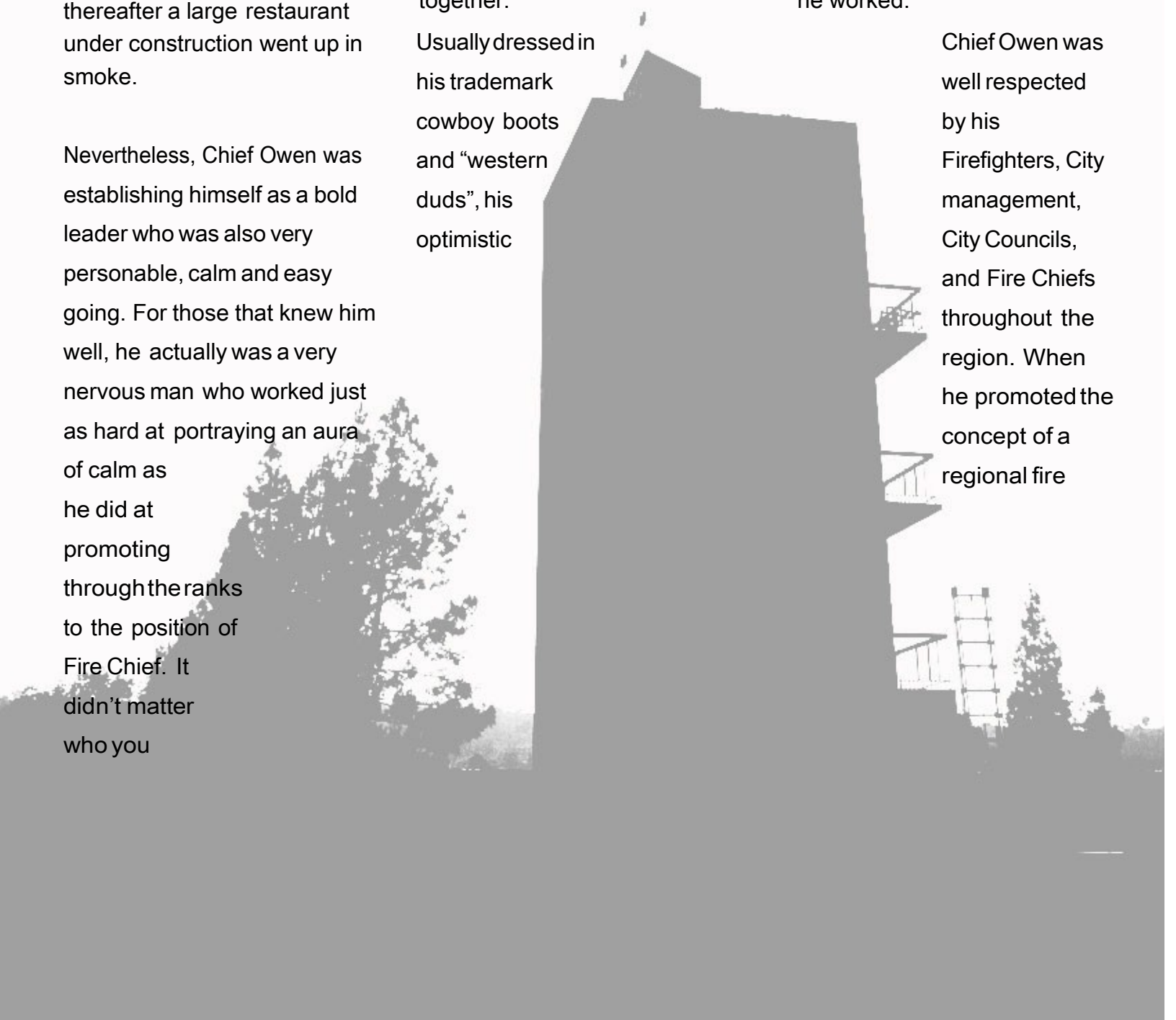
Nevertheless, Chief Owen was establishing himself as a bold leader who was also very personable, calm and easy going. For those that knew him well, he actually was a very nervous man who worked just as hard at portraying an aura of calm as he did at promoting through the ranks to the position of Fire Chief. It didn't matter who you

were, when you met him for the first time, he made you feel comfortable. In conversation, you knew he would listen and respond thoughtfully, which added value to his message. He frequently emphasized that “we are the fire family, never forget that and keep the family together.”

Usually dressed in his trademark cowboy boots and “western duds”, his optimistic

outlook on life was ever apparent. He showed respect for those that served before him while encouraging and expressing appreciation to those that worked with him. His vibrant toothy smile was a by-product of his love for the job and the people with whom he worked.

Chief Owen was well respected by his Firefighters, City management, City Councils, and Fire Chiefs throughout the region. When he promoted the concept of a regional fire



training facility his credibility was instrumental to a successful campaign. Heartland Training Facility, however was only one accomplishment championed by Chief Owen. His fingerprints were also on the development of the Heartland Communications JPA.

Within his department where he orchestrated numerous improvements, he was known to focus more on results than accolades. In April of 1980, just prior to his retirement, he was proud to see his department's I.S.O. rating, which was an 8 when he first joined the department, improve to a 2, at the time matching La Mesa for the best rating in the County.

On May 1, 1980 after 10 years as Fire Chief and 32 total years with the department, Tom retired. When interviewed by the newspaper on his final day, about his career he told the reporter that early on, he realized he had a passion for the profession and the people with whom he worked. He was quoted as saying, "If I were 21, I would do the same thing over again".



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To no one's surprise, Chief Owen did not sit idle for long following his retirement. Tom went to work as Manager of Circle R Western Wear until 1983. During that same time period, use of the training facility increased as the Heartland Departments added more personnel to their rosters. The success of regional training at Heartland created new challenges for the Heartland Fire Chiefs. There was no structured

maintenance program for the equipment and grounds. They needed a well thought-out training schedule, and someone

to manage day to day operations. Above all, the Chiefs wanted a leader with good people skills that understood how firefighters and fire departments operated.

As fate would have it, the ideal candidate, Chief Owen, was available. He accepted an offer from the Chiefs, and in August of 1984 came back to manage the very facility he helped develop. In a short amount of time, he accomplished the necessary improvements and instituted an organized training calendar. To this day, the Thomas H. Owen Sr.

Heartland Fire Training Facility stands out as a well organized model of efficiency thanks in large to the foundation and standards established by Chief Owen.

In June of 1991, Chief Owen was diagnosed with cancer. Like a rock, he courageously battled his illness and continued to fulfill his commitment to manage the

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“tower”. On November 19, 1991, just nine months prior to his death, Chief Owen attended an emotion filled ceremony on the training grounds to re-dedicate the facility and see it named in his honor. There was an overflow crowd of firefighters, dignitaries and most importantly his loving wife Sybil, and two sons by his side.

As his health began to fail, his belief in the importance of being a fire family did not waver. Retired Santee Fire Captain, Scott Rushing, remembers well Tom's last words to him, “please

promise me that you will never forget the family, and make sure the young ones learn the importance of it.” Tom added, “Scotty, keep the family together.” This is Tom's legacy to us, and this training facility where we come together has over the years become a potent tool in preserving that belief in family.

Never in the history of the fire service has it been more important that we train and operate as one. For that, we are forever indebted to Thomas H. Owen Sr. He had the wisdom, forethought, and courage to pursue a goal that continues to make us and our profession better. To those of us that knew him, he will never be forgotten. For those that never had the privilege to know him, I trust you will always remember and appreciate why the name, Thomas H. Owen Sr., is on our “tower.”