



Photo by Bill Sitzmann

Father Knows Best

By Anthony Flott, Editor

Robert Dahlquist carries on a family tradition, climbing to the top rung of the Omaha Fire Department

Near the end of his 74 years, the old man decided he didn't like his nickname any longer. "When I was a kid growing up," recalls oldest son, Robert, "it was Swede. 'Swede this,' 'Swede that.' Swede. Then I guess . . . maybe when he got sick . . . he said, 'I don't like Swede. I want to go by Horton.'

"Which is an odd name. Not too many people name their kids Horton."

Horton Dahlquist took his name with him March 3, cancer delivering its final blow. "It was 03-03-03 at 3:33," says his son. "That's kind of weird."

Just a bit more than a month later, Robert Dahlquist carried the family name once more to the top rung of the Omaha Fire Department. Both Dahlquists are UNO graduates—the father earning a BGS degree in 1966, the son an associate's degree in 1988 and a BGS in 2002. In mid-April Omaha Mayor Mike Fahey named the 44-year-old Dahlquist fire chief, replacing Joe Napravnik. He also succeeds the old man, Horton, who held the post in the early 1980s.

"He knew that I qualified for the position, that I sought the position," the new chief says behind his desk at the department's downtown headquarters. "And when he was feeling well, he encouraged me to do so. He was supportive."

"However, his sickness took a lot out of him, and I really never got the opportunity to sit and discuss really the immense responsibilities that are associated with this. And nor would I even at that time, because I didn't have the job. This was a long way to go. He was sick and ill, and that was the hardest part, and that's the part we dealt with on a daily basis."

Horton Dahlquist was a career fireman, starting with the

department Sept. 1, 1955. "I think he really believed that it's an honorable and really a terrific way to pay back the community that provided so much for him." He married Cathryn, moved from his South Omaha roots to the area around St. Cecilia's Cathedral, and raised five kids. "I was blessed with two wonderful parents," Robert says. "They made a great team." His mother, who passed way in 1995, also was an active public servant, holding seats on the parole board and liquor commission. "We had been ingrained for many years that we had to look out for how and what we did because it could have a direct impact on our parents," Robert says. "And I think in general we were very successful at that."

Robert was the oldest, and Horton shipped his son to Creighton Prep High School rather than Cathedral, which was right across the street. He graduated from Prep then bounced from job to job—at grocery stores, the city parks department, First National Bank, and UPS. But he never really considered following in his father's footsteps until the old man put a challenge of sorts before him.

"Horton mentioned, ' . . . they're having a test. You might be interested. But it's not easy. It's very difficult.' Many firefighters' kids had attempted for several times to get on the fire department. However, they were unsuccessful. He reiterated the fact that it's not about being a firefighters' kid, it's about being able to perform and do better than everybody else on the written and physical portion. Most of the kids weren't able to do that."

"It was more of a motivating factor. When you hear those things, it's kind of a little challenge."

Robert Dahlquist passed the tests and joined the department July 6, 1981. Half a year later, Horton became fire chief.

"It worked out really well," Robert says. "I had some great relationships, and I still do. I think I maintained the . . . first couple of rules, which is show up for work, do your job, and keep your mouth shut. Simple as that. And that's all anybody ever wants on this job."

"It was the beset decision I ever made, without a doubt. Without a doubt."

And now he's running the whole show, guiding a department radically different from when Horton rode the big red trucks nearly half a century ago. "Back then they used to be a 'You call, we haul,' policy as far as medic units and those types of things. Generally, you just dealt with burning structures and dwellings, which was a great portion of the work done 50 years ago. And there were outstanding firefighters back then who didn't have the equipment we have today."

"Things have changed enormously in the last 50 years. We've basically become a . . . EMS provider, and that's the majority of our runs."

The department today has more than 175 paramedics, extensive training and women firefighters. "We put the best product available on the street to serve the citizens of this community," Dahlquist says. "You want first response, and that's what we are. To be able to stabilize, pump drugs, whatever you have to do. And you want those skills on somebody's front porch in four minutes."

And as Horton knew, four minutes could mean a lifetime. ■