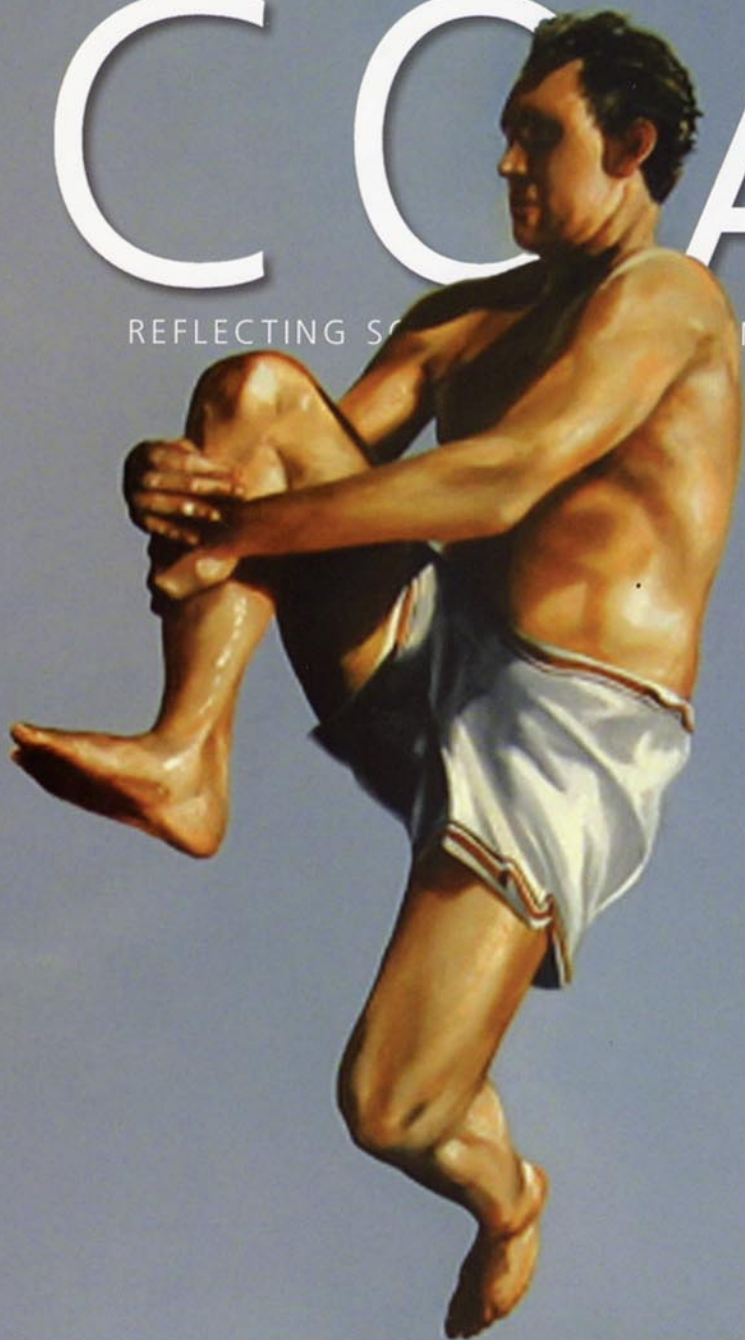


COAST

REFLECTING SONOMA'S FINER LIFESTYLE | JULY 2005

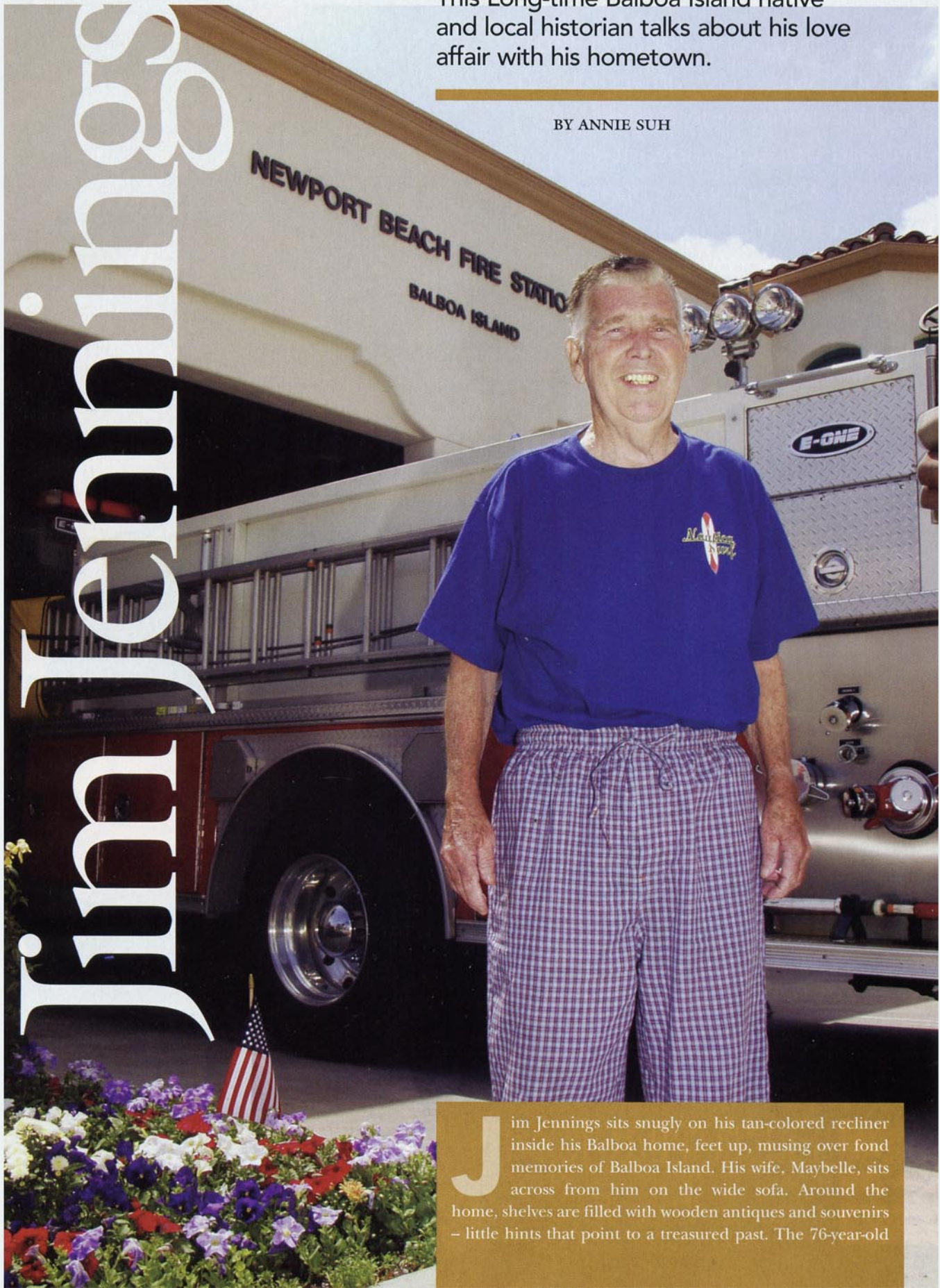


PROFILE >

This Long-time Balboa Island native and local historian talks about his love affair with his hometown.

BY ANNIE SUH

Jim Jennings



Jim Jennings sits snugly on his tan-colored recliner inside his Balboa home, feet up, musing over fond memories of Balboa Island. His wife, Maybelle, sits across from him on the wide sofa. Around the home, shelves are filled with wooden antiques and souvenirs – little hints that point to a treasured past. The 76-year-old



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Jennings has witnessed the island change over the years, but is unsure if it is for the better or worse. "They don't have enough bikinis down here anymore," Jim says, chuckling. His wife follows. For 30 years, Jennings owned the only gas station and auto repair shop on the island, at the corner of Park Avenue and Marine Avenue, now the location of the fire station.

Jennings bought the 76 gas station in 1959 – the classic-car era when Ford and General Motor cars would cruise in the 60-by 80-foot lot to pump gas or get a quick fix up. Consistent customers would come in, do their business, and over time, they would share friendly chats. The gas station functioned as a haven where Jennings got to know the community – so well that some old customers who could not drive anymore would call him for a ride to the doctor's office. Jennings remembers once getting a worried call for help because a woman's cat was stuck on her roof.

In 1966 when a nearby cottage on 112 Marine Avenue was for sale for \$49,000 dollars, Jennings moved in, and has never left. "I wouldn't trade it for anything," he says. Going to work became even more of a pleasure with such a short commute. All he had to do was step out the door, take a stroll to the left, and he would arrive at work in a few minutes. The Jenningses had been living in their home for decades, savoring the island breeze, the oceanfront, the neighboring shops, and the 76 gas station that drew the neighborhood together – then it had to close down.

One day a notice came from Union Oil that said something like: I'm sorry, but we need to shut down and sell the property due to expensive environmental laws. When Jennings's customers found out, they took action.

Little did anyone know that for the 30 years that gas station was operating, the entire corner was invisibly contaminated with gasoline leaks. The community gathered more than 2,000 signatures on a petition to stop the closure, and as many letters were sent to the president of Union Oil Company. A local newspaper mentioned that a man even wrote to President Reagan about the matter, and that some neighbors closed their stores to dedicate the day for the cause. Through

all the help and active support, Jennings began to realize his affection for Balboa Island was because of its residents. After the gas station was forced to close down, he recalls that later, "they spent \$2 million dollars trying to clean up the corner, so I'm glad I didn't own it then, but I was still sad. I enjoyed dealing with the customers because I knew everybody."

After retiring from the business, Jennings used his favorite hobby to help people. "I'm a fix-it person. I fix anything – plumbing, electrical, and minor things all over the island. And I'm in great demand because I do it for free." He goes to the next door neighbor's house to fix her plumbing and in return, he gets homemade pies. He even received a proclamation for all the good deeds he has done from the city mayor, which is hanging low on his living room wall. "I don't do anything with money in mind. I just do things for people because I just like doing things," he says.

Jim Jennings has been around for a long time, which might also explain why he is called the "Balboa Island Historian." He even has a book out that he wrote during his retirement years called *Old Balboa Island Stories*. In it, he tells snippets of history and interesting stories that occurred in Balboa Island from 1907 to 2000. Stories include happenings at the gas station, how it closed down, how Wahoo's Fish Tacos originated on Balboa Island, an empty home he calls "The Ghost House," and other factual accounts about Balboa. "I always loved writing, but didn't realize it until I started doing those stories five years ago in the *Island Breeze*, a monthly newsletter that gets circulated around the neighborhood," he says.

Out of all those years of working at the island's station, Jennings says, "I learned to be honest. Being successful comes by not being greedy and not putting money ahead of other things in life and trying to be helpful to people. God has a way of repaying you." Bypassing college has not prevented him from achieving success. He ran a successful gas station and now owns seven houses. He also has two children, five grandchildren and seven great-grand children. "The most important thing in life is having a good family," he says. ◊