

Fire Marshal Fred Wells Roberts

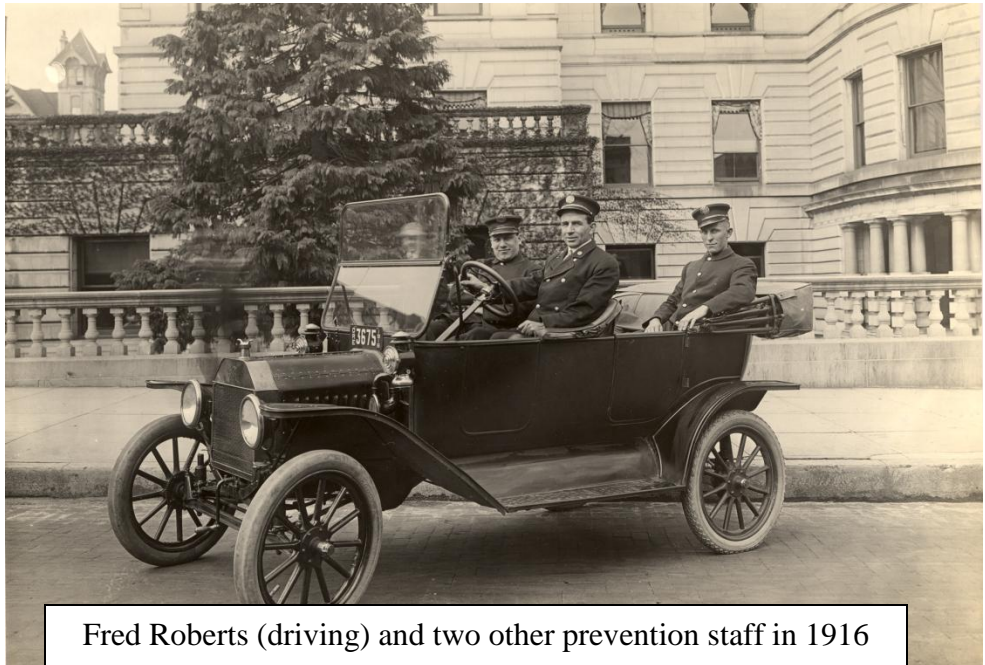
Compiled by Don Porth

Fred Wells Roberts would distinguish himself as one of the most noted and successful Fire Marshal's in the history of Portland Fire. His career, like that of most Portland Firefighters, began as an entry level firefighter.

Born on March 16, 1875, Fred would be hired by Portland Fire in 1898, at the age of 23. His first assignment was Engine 7. For unknown reasons, he resigned July 5, 1899 but was rehired on January 1, 1900. He would return to Engine 7. On June 1, 1904, he would be promoted to Captain. He would transfer to Engine 12 in 1907 and remain there until the creation of the Fire Prevention Bureau on April 18, 1914.

Soon after the creation of the Prevention Bureau, Fred would be assigned as one of the first Fire Investigators for the department. Appointed by Fire Marshal Jay Stevens on June 1, 1914, Fred would become a staple in the Fire Prevention Division until his retirement in 1946.

Fire Marshal Jay Stevens, the first Fire Marshal for the City of Portland, was a national pioneer in the field of fire prevention. One of his first steps after the creation of the division was to assign three fire investigators to better understand the causes of fires. Captain WA Groce, Lieutenant EJ Treese, and Captain Fred Roberts would be the first fire investigators.



Fred Roberts (driving) and two other prevention staff in 1916

These men attended every fire in Portland, often arriving at the scene before the fire companies. As soon as possible, they began inspection of the scene and continued until the cause of the fire was established beyond any reasonable doubt. Their untiring and vigilant efforts, coupled with the able and willing assistance of District Attorney Walter H. Evans and his deputies, uncovered two arson rings operating in Portland.

About twenty persons were involved in one ring. It had operated profitably up and down the Pacific coast, but chiefly in Portland, since 1910. The arsonists had developed their profession to a science.

They built or remodeled houses so they would burn easily and quickly. Metal parts of furniture planted in rooms were to be found later in the ashes. Building sites were chosen with reference to their distance from hydrants and fire stations. Combustibles were artfully arranged to give the right “flash” and alibis were prepared in advance.

Profits were large and the sporting chance a great attraction. As one of the accused said: “The insurance companies bet me a \$1,000 against \$14 that I can’t burn a house, and they give me three years to do it. It’s a better game than “the ponies.” However, the combined efforts of the arson squad and District Attorney Evans shattered the game in eight months time. Thirty-five arrests resulted in twenty-four convictions. Considering that arson is one of the most difficult criminal cases to prove, this record is remarkable.

By 1917, Fred's talents had reached beyond the Portland Fire Department. In September 1917, Fred would spend 60 days serving as the Chief Deputy State Fire Marshal. 1917 was the year the Oregon Insurance Commission was formed, with the assistance of former Portland Fire Marshal Jay Stevens. However, it apparently didn't suit Fred's sensibilities. He would resign and return to Portland, eventually becoming Portland's Fire Marshal in 1928. A November 1, 1917 "Oregon Daily Journal" article had this to say:

Roberts Quits Job as Fire Marshal

Salem, Oregon - Fred Roberts, who served under Insurance Commissioner Harvey Wells as Chief Deputy State Fire Marshal for 60 days, turned in his star Wednesday and returned to work in the Portland Fire Department as the Captain of an engine company. In the 60 days he devoted to state fire marshal work, he made an exceptional record for efficiency, according to Commissioner Wells, who expressed regret that he could not keep Captain Roberts in the position permanently.

A successor to Captain Roberts has not been selected as yet. It is understood that Governor Withycombe desires to have the appointment go to Jack Day, chairman of the Multnomah County Republican central committee but that Commissioner Wells does not see the matter in that light as he holds to the view that he can make a better record for his department with experienced firemen than politicians.

Fred would marry Eva G. Hathaway on September 12, 1921. The two never had children. Eva would precede Fred in death, passing away in 1951.

On June 30, 1923, Fred would become a Battalion Chief, overseeing District 3 emergency operations. While he remained interested and active in fire investigation, his focus was on overseeing fire crews. On December 1, 1927, he would be made Assistant Fire Marshal under then Fire Marshal Edward Grenfell. Grenfell would be appointed Chief of the Department on December 1, 1928 opening the door for Fred Roberts to become Fire Marshal on the same day.

Fire Marshal Roberts immediately began to modify the Prevention Division to a more comprehensive model. He inaugurated a new system of building inspection in 1930, thereby relieving company

Captains and Lieutenants of work which, up to that time, had been carried on by them. Under the new plan, thirteen members would be assigned to inspection work. These members would be required to have five years or more experience in the fire department and to have made a study of fire prevention a part of their preparation.

Fred would assign a Chief Inspector, working under the direction of the Fire Marshal, to head up the inspection of theaters, hospitals, institutions, and oil burning installations. For administrative purposes, the city was divided into eleven inspection districts with an inspector assigned to each. These district inspectors performed regular inspections and kept a close check on fire hazards in all industrial sections of their district.

Another inspector would be assigned to the schools of the city, including public, private and parochial. They would oversee fire drills, deliver fire prevention talks, and ensure that safety was maintained and fire ordinances enforced.

All Inspectors would be empowered to enforce the fire code in any instance. Property holders, occupants, or agents would be notified of, and be expect to abate, existing fire hazards. After a reasonable lapse of time, a follow-up inspection would be made to determine whether or not the notice met with compliance. If the notice was consistently ignored, an arrest would be made under the ordinance covering the violation. This latter, in the majority of cases, was unnecessary. In 1937, 44,593 inspections resulted in the elimination of 34,766 hazards.

Results of Fire Marshal Robert's indefatigable efforts to reduce Portland's fire losses are shown in the following table:

- 1928 - \$841,252.75
- 1929 - \$911,813.45
- 1930 - \$915,574.64
- 1931 - \$929,433.70
- 1932 - \$672,340.59
- 1933 - \$662,340.59
- 1934 - \$631,072.05
- 1935 - \$499,842.02
- 1936 - \$433,040.20
- 1937 - \$367,316.25

Fire losses in Portland for the first six months of 1938 set a new low record of \$100,000, a per capita loss of 27 ½ cents. Fire Marshal Roberts endeavored to have an annual fire loss of less than a dollar per capita. Since Fred was appointed Fire Marshal (from 1928 to 1938) not a single person had lost their life by being trapped in a building by fire.



Fire Marshal Roberts Innovations in Prevention

Under Fire Marshal Roberts administration, fire inspectors would meet daily from 8:00 to 9:00 AM to receive instructions, make reports, study, and discuss features of the work which arise from time to time. In addition to their regular daily rounds, inspectors were detailed to attend large public assemblies to enforce ordinances pertaining to such gatherings.

After each fire in Portland, the arson squad of the Fire Prevention Division would determine the cause, the amount of loss, the value of the property involved, the names of interested persons, and the amount of insurance to be paid.

The investigation staff, consisting of a Chief Inspector and two assistants also working under the direction of Fire Marshal Roberts, were especially alert for evidence of arson. When a fire appeared to be of incendiary origin, photographs were taken and evidence would be collected, labeled, dated, and preserved for a grand jury (if needed). In several cases, where it had been impossible to bring sufficient proof of arson to assure conviction of the suspect in court, the insurance companies had been convinced by the results of the investigation to refuse to pay the loss.

The Fire Prevention Bureau maintained a complete file of records. All fires entailing losses, dating to 1913, were recorded by a card filing system, listing names of all parties involved, cause of fire, whom or what was responsible, amount of loss, property valuation, the amount of insurance paid, and with whom the property was insured. A cross index by streets and by names of property owners made these records readily available at all times. Records of installation permits and inspections of appliances which might develop into fire hazards were also kept. On April 23, 1936, a new ordinance was drafted covering the installation of oil burners. Within two years, over seven thousand permits had been issued and inspections made of appliances coming under this ordinance.

Fire prevention is dependent upon the cooperation of the entire citizenry of Portland. Public spirit and law enforcement are powerful weapons in preventing fire. Pertinent ordinances enacted from time to time have greatly assisted the Fire Marshal in the discharge of his duties. The Fire Prevention Division worked constantly to obtain



public cooperation by special emphasis upon particular occasions such as Clean-up Week in the spring and Fire Prevention Week in October.

Notices reading "THINK, A False Alarm May Cost A Human Life" were posted on all alarm boxes. Such admonitions have little effect upon children, drunken persons and the plain garden variety of fool. One of the latter class had the fire department running around in circles at one time when he made it his pleasure to ride around town pulling alarm boxes in different sections of the city. An arrest, which netted a jail sentence, finally brought an end to his entertainment.

Portland has reason to be proud of the position attained in fire prevention through the work carried on by Fire Marshal Roberts and the fire department as a whole. The efficiency of the Fire Prevention Division was recognized nationally in 1925 when Portland placed first in the Inter-chamber "Fire Waste Contest" conducted by the *Chamber of Commerce of the United States*. Since that time the city has always ranked among the first ten places. Awards, made yearly to the cities of 250,000 population or more, are given in recognition of fire prevention activities and reduction of fire losses. The city must also give factors responsible for this reduction in fire loss to be eligible for the award. Recognition of merit for fire prevention activities from the *National Fire Protection Association* has been awarded to the Fire Prevention Division of Portland. Local recognition of valuable service in fire prevention has also come from the State Fire Marshal's Office.

Portland advanced from one of the poorest fire risks in the United States to one of the best. The continued and intensive work of the Fire Prevention Division and the efficiency of the entire Portland Fire Department are responsible for this distinction for reduced fire insurance rates and increased safety to life and property throughout the entire city.

Company building surveys were begun in 1946. By 1950 home inspections and other fire prevention programs were initiated. Both were enhanced by the greater manpower availability due to mobile communication technology.

Fire Marshal Fred Roberts would retire on March 17, 1946. He would pass away on June 29, 1957 and be laid to rest in Lone Fir Cemetery (Portland, Oregon) in Block 2, Section 237, Plot 3 North. His legacy as one of the most effective and influential Fire Marshal's to serve Portland lives on.

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