

# **The 1980's and Beyond**

## **"Portland Fire & Rescue"**

Compiled by Don Porth

In the early 1980s, growth in the City of Portland was at an all time high. Portland began to annex communities to the East while Gresham, a city a few miles East of Portland, did the same. The unincorporated areas between the two cities received fire protection from Multnomah County Fire District #10, a rural fire protection district that had evolved from the merging of many small fire districts in the east Multnomah County area. It had grown into the second largest fire department in the state of Oregon.

Annexations of this unincorporated body allowed Portland and Gresham Fire Departments to take control of the building and equipment of each fire station's response area as they achieved annexation of 51% of each station's response area. Talks began between District #10 and Portland Fire & Rescue and it was agreed that District #10 would contract its services from the Portland to provide fire protection for their remaining area, most of which would be annexed by Portland. An intergovernmental agreement was crafted and on July 1, 1984, and the two departments become one. All personnel would now be employees of the City of Portland and District #10 would manage the stations and equipment until such times as annexations turned those assets over to Portland or Gresham.

One of the most notable changes was to firefighter training. On July 23, 1984, the first firefighter training academy would be held. This was also the first joint training effort for the newly merged fire agencies. Rather than on-the-job training from day one forward, new hires would attend a 12 week training academy, serving an 8 hour day, 5 days per week. After graduation from the academy, trainees would be assigned to Station 23 and spend 3 months on the Engine, 3 months on the Truck, then complete their 12 month probation period assigned to a regular in-service company. After probation, trainees would become regular members and be assigned as station openings allowed.

By the mid 1980s, the population served by Portland Fire & Rescue would grow to over 500,000 citizens. With between 700 and 800 employees (depending on the status of the contractual service agreements with Fire District #10 and Clackamas County Fire District #1), the organization maintained 4 person crews on apparatus and most areas of the city were well covered.

In 1986, Portland Fire & Rescue would extend into Clackamas County and enter into an agreement similar to that with Fire District #10, this time with Clackamas County Fire District #1. The same arrangement with stations and personnel was established.

In July 1992, District #1 would choose to not renew their contract with Portland, withdrawing two fire stations back to Clackamas County, but leaving all employees. In 1994, District #10 would do the same thing. These moves caused great flux in the number of stations, employees, and staffing circumstances. Promotional lists were often disrupted and assignments to stations or staffing in general were often in turmoil.

With the increasing need to serve medical emergencies, a push to begin to have all uniformed members certified as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) is made. This effort would begin around 1984 and by the late 1980s would finally be complete. While the majority of members were EMT-Basic's, Paramedics were trained or hired to staff Advanced Life Support Rescue units, and eventually Paramedic Engine Companies.

While the managerial structure of Portland Fire & Rescue was often adjusted, a significant change was made in 1986 with the establishment of four divisions: Emergency Operations; Fire Prevention; Planning and Development; and Management Services. All but Management Services Division would be headed by a Division Chief who would report directly to the Chief. Management Services would be headed by a civilian finance specialist who would also report directly to the Chief.

In 1988, the Portland Bureau of Fire would officially change its name to Portland Bureau of Fire, Rescue, and Emergency Services. This was done to reflect the growth in emergency medical and other rescue services. While these services had been provided for many decades, they had finally surpassed fires as the primary workload of the organization. Emergency medical services would continue to grow, eventually becoming approximately 75% of the service provided with fires dropping below 5% of the call volume. A new logo and patch would follow two years later to reflect this change.

As the fire service became more specialized, so did Portland Fire. In 1988, all uniformed members would be certified as Hazardous Materials Technicians Level I. This was not to replace the Hazardous Materials Team that had formally existed since the early 80s, but to rather supplement response efforts during a hazardous materials emergency. A dedicated Haz Mat Team was available and team members would have significant training and tools at their disposal. They were also operationally and financially a part of a statewide response program funded and coordinated by the State Fire Marshal's Office. Portland was one of several strategically placed units across Oregon.

In 1988, the Fire Prevention Division developed a fee based approach to conducting life safety inspections in the community. Traditionally, the vast majority of the Fire Bureau budget came from the general fund of the city, allocated to the Fire Bureau then distributed to the various Divisions by the Fire Chief. General Fund dollars came primarily from property taxes of homeowners in the city. For various reasons, one of which was to place some of the financial burden of fire code inspections back on the businesses who were responsible drove the need for business inspections, the fee-based program was developed. It intended to charge a base fee along with hazard fees when different code violations were found and not promptly corrected. The goal was to offset approximately 50% of the financial burden from the fire prevention budget and place it on inspectable businesses. This also allowed for an increased number of inspectors to allow a greater frequency of inspections in business occupancies across the city, many of which might operate for over a decade without a code compliance inspection. The program allowed inspection frequencies to be advanced greatly.

In 1989, the Fire Prevention Division is reorganized to include one Fire Marshal, two Assistant Fire Marshal's, and several Senior Inspectors to oversee the operational units within the Prevention Division. Operational units would include: code enforcement; plan review; public education; and fire

investigation (sometimes managed by a Captain). The balance of the Prevention Division was made up of Inspectors or Lieutenants (assigned as inspectors).

Computers would make their way into each fire station in 1992. Soon after, mobile data terminals (MDTs) would be installed in emergency apparatus to allow more information to be available for responding crews.

In 1993, Portland would hire the first Accelerant Detection Canine to work in the state of Oregon. Charlotte would be under the care of handler Lt. Greg Keller. She would serve for a decade and, after retirement, die of natural causes (not from anything related to her work).

In 1994, handwritten company journals, the mechanism used to officially record the activities of each company in the city, would be replaced by a computerized system of record keeping.

1994 would also see Portland Fire & Rescue establish the "Firefighter Trainee Program." This was an effort to improve the diversity of the organization. At that time, sworn personnel included 3 women and 24 non-caucasian members out of 600 uniformed personnel. Within 5 years, 18 women and 65 non-Caucasian members made up the 630 uniformed members.

A new fireboat, the "Vern Buss," was launched in 1996. It was 42 feet long and utilized two 2,800 gpm pumps to fight fire. It cost \$500,000. Vern Busse was a battalion chief who had played an instrumental role in the advancement of the marine program for Portland Fire.

In 1998, a general obligation bond of \$53 million dollars was passed to provide station relocation, ADA improvements, and non-gender specific sleeping and bathroom facilities for all stations. The work would begin about 2000 and be completed in 2010. 1998 would also recognize an official name change to the organization, this time to a more simple "Portland Fire & Rescue." This was a common trend among area and national fire agencies.

In 2012, the first woman to serve as Chief of Portland Fire would be appointed to the position. Seven years and two Chief's later, the first African-American (also a woman) would be appointed as Chief (August 8, 2019). Portland and the nation in general would become more sensitive to racial and cultural balance in the years following.

Portland Fire's story continues. The events of today that seem to merely reflect the business at hand will evolve into history as their significance evolves. Time will tell. Those that have lived and worked for Portland Fire would likely not characterize much of their careers as historic, but at some point it becomes just that.

The story continues....