

Portland's Fire Horses

Source: Varied

From 1882 when Vigilance Hook and Ladder Company requisitioned the first fire horse in Portland until 1920 when the department became fully motorized, no sight was more awe-inspiring than a pair of big matched geldings in harness, breaking at a gallop from the bays of the engine house. These draught animals were brave and bright, sometimes beautiful, but most importantly they knew their job. They were an integral part of the battle against fire during the era. An old hand at training the horses once claimed that with enough sugar cubes you could train a fire horse in a week; this is probably more a testimony to the intelligence of the stock than the simplicity of their task.



While good instincts were expected from any fire horse, it was individual behavior quirks and acts of bravery that would make firefighters lament the passing of their favorites as the era came to an end. Some of the most noted fire horses are listed here:

Colonel, a white gelding, was reputed to be the fastest fire horse on the Pacific Coast. He would become so excited at the sound of the gong that twice he left the engine house before his driver was ready. Pulling his hose cart and following the steamer, Colonel deduced from its direction the box it was responding to, and then he galloped on to the hydrant nearest and waited to be hitched. So thoroughly ingrained was his sense of duty that once, when confined to his stall because of a lame leg, he kicked the side out of the stall in order to respond to a sounding alarm. Colonel put in 21 years of service and lived to be 33 years old, dying in 1915.

Jerry, a big roan with 21 years of service in 1911, was perhaps Portland's most heralded fire horse. He was lead horse on Truck 2 at Fourth and Montgomery. He got off to a shaky start in 1892 when he was sent downtown with an engine to pump out flooded buildings. He bolted, killed his harness mate, destroyed the steam engine, and dislocated a shoulder. In his early days, Jerry threw every ounce of his strength against his collar as he and his straining partners pulled their brilliant red truck at break-neck speed over the mud, cobblestone, plank, or wood block streets of Portland. Later, when progress brought the smooth asphalt pavement, the eager Jerry tempered his speed somewhat, particularly during the rainy season,



following numerous bad falls on this slippery new surface. After taking a fall on slick pavement while responding to a fire at the Hazelwood Creamery building, he ruptured an artery in his leg. He gathered himself up and finished the run but was laid up for quite a while.

Jerry, with his teeth, could pull the rope, which opened the firehouse doors when an alarm sounded. He had also been trained to grasp his master's cap by its visor and to tip it politely when a lady passed. He died in harness after making a long run to a fire.

Blind Dick - Some of the horses collapsed under the strain after a few years. Some burned in performance of their duty. Still others dropped dead in the collar after a run to a fire. Some were like Blind Dick, who hauled the supply wagon when he grew too old to run with a steamer. When his handler came to his stall and told him he had just been auctioned, Blind Dick lay down and died.

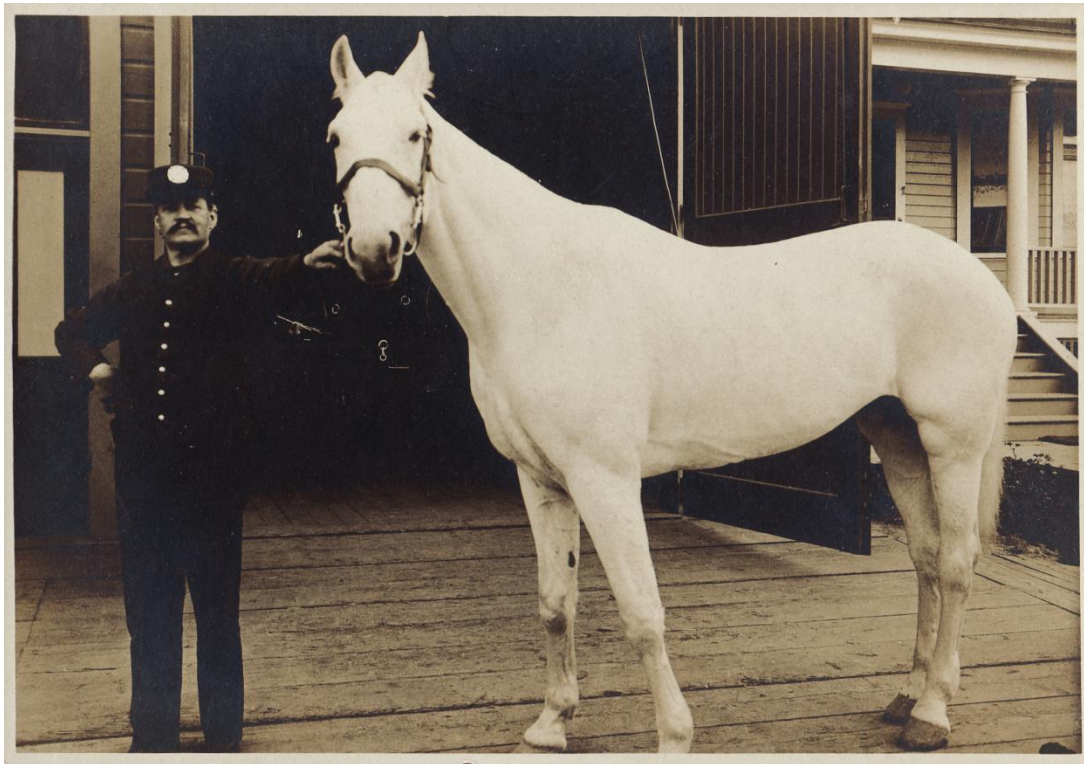


Dolly, a pure white mare working at 21st and Nicolai put in many years of service. Her driver could drop the lines and she would dutifully follow him like a dog until he would again take his place on the engine. Dolly was always the first to be under harness, ready to go.

Prince, a jet black of unusual intelligence was formerly the chief's horse and has a record of knowing about as much as there is to learn in horse language. He has learned the language of the gong perfectly. At the sound of the bell at the noon hour he will leave the stall instantly. If three taps are struck, he will return quickly to his hay as if nothing has happened. If more than three strokes sound, he will rush under the harness and chafe until he is on the run.



Roachy, a favorite of the men at Station 9 in Sunnyside, was dying in his stall when the alarm sounded. The old horse pricked up his ears, raised his eyes in a beseeching, wistful manner, and made a gallant effort to respond to the call to duty. He struggled in vain and gave up his life then and there in a last endeavor to reach the harness. Firemen wept at the sight.



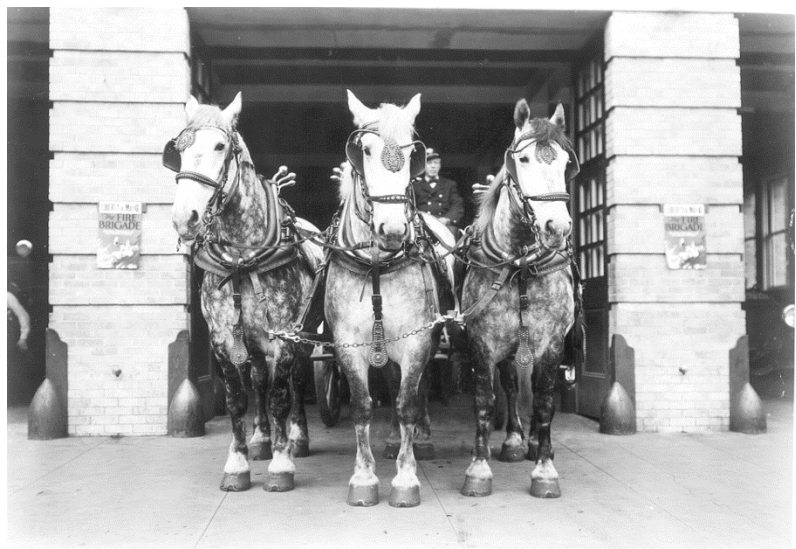
Mack, Dad, Bill, Eagle, Hank, Queen, Chief, and Bismark were other noted and memorable fire horses.

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## Snorting Horses

Source: Sunday Oregonian  
July 18, 1965

SNORTING HORSES, perfectly matched provided frequent thrills for Portlanders as recently as 1920. Harnesses dropped from overhead brackets, were snapped on in seconds, and off they went to the fire. Youngsters fought for the privilege of walking the glamorous creatures to cool them off after their gallant dash. (Oregon Historical Society).



By Frank Sterrett  
Chief Photographer, The Oregonian

It's no fun to go to a fire anymore, and do you want to know why? It's mechanization, that's what it is, and mechanization is taking the joy out of life.

Going to a fire in the old days of horse-drawn fire equipment was the tops in free entertainment. Even the best people went to fires. One would see some friends there and you could get some good bets as to how long it was going to take to put it out. Most of the time they didn't.

A classic example of the way things went was a kid back in Kansas City and a fire started in a livery stable one Friday. It was still going strong that night when I went home to bed. The next Saturday, the fire jumped a whole city block, and burned a hole in the ground. The whole town would have burned that weekend but the wind shifted and the local fire boys got credit for having saved the city.

### **Horses Fast**

There was always plenty of water to fight fires but what they lacked was the savvy which modern firemen use.

Today, that Kansas City fire would have been in complete control within fifteen minutes if our Portland fire department were on the job. I know. I watch our guys at their work, they have great skill, are highly trained, and to my way of thinking, the best in the business, anywhere.

Speed is of great importance in getting to a fire. Contrary to what people today might think the old horsedrawn outfits had plenty of speed, at least in getting out of the fire station and on the way to the fire.

The wagons were backed into the barn facing the front entrance and along side of the wagons there were open stalls for the horses. The horses kept the bits in their mouths at all times so no time would be lost. These bits were of the loose type which didn't interfere with their eating. On a cold winter night the fire barn was a nice cozy place because the heat from the bodies of the horses warmed up the whole place.

The harness which attached to the rigs was suspended from the ceiling. The front doors were closed with big strong springs. When a call came in the watchmen on duty pressed a button which released the horses and tapped out the box number of the location on a big bell in the barn.

### **Portland Had Plenty**

The driver of each rig would be the first to spring into the drivers seat and with the horses who had already trotted over and under the harness, all he had to do was pull a rope over his head and the harness dropped onto the horses' backs. Another fireman in the meantime went to the heads of the horses and when the harness dropped he snapped the collars shut and they were ready to go. A mere matter of a few seconds time.



When the doors popped open the horses went tearing out with a speed that was something to see. The only thing that slowed the horse drawn rig was distance. If they had to run a great distance it was necessary to walk the team for a short time in order to permit them to regain their wind. This is what people meant when they said, "they got their second wind."

Portland, like all great cities, has had its share of big fires and one that I remember was in June 1911. This was the Union Oil fire over on the east side of the river. This was the fire in which the lovable and great Chief David Campbell was killed by a falling brick wall. It had been suggested that the men move into the building to fight the fire, but the chief insisted that he go first into the building to see if it was safe.

A memorial to this great man is on 18<sup>th</sup> Avenue and West Burnside Street along with twenty other brave firemen who have lost their lives in the performance of duty from 1890 down to today.

The Union Oil fire was a tough one to fight in those days of horses. Oil fires are almost impossible to extinguish with water alone. The fire lasted about 24 hours and most of the work done was to try to stop the blaze from spreading to surrounding structures. Today oil fires are no great problem with chemicals and modern methods.

The automobile fire engine replaced the horses in 1920 in Portland.

It would be hard to describe the excitement of the turnout of the old horse drawn outfits. The noise was terrific. Each rig used a gong type of bell, which was very loud. The noise of the galloping horses, and the steam whistles blowing, and the iron tires on the wagons created a bedlam that was out of this world.

When the rigs reached the fire, the horses had to be unhitched and walked for about a half a hour in order that they would not get stiff joints. This is where the kids came in for some fun. You were a big shot at school if you could go back and brag about having walked a team of fire horses at a fire. Also there was always coffee for the firemen and the kid who walked the horses was permitted to have a cup. That's how I got started to drinking java. I have walked fire horses in my time.

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Old Fire Horses Get Good Homes

Source: The Oregon Daily Journal

On or about April 17, 1904

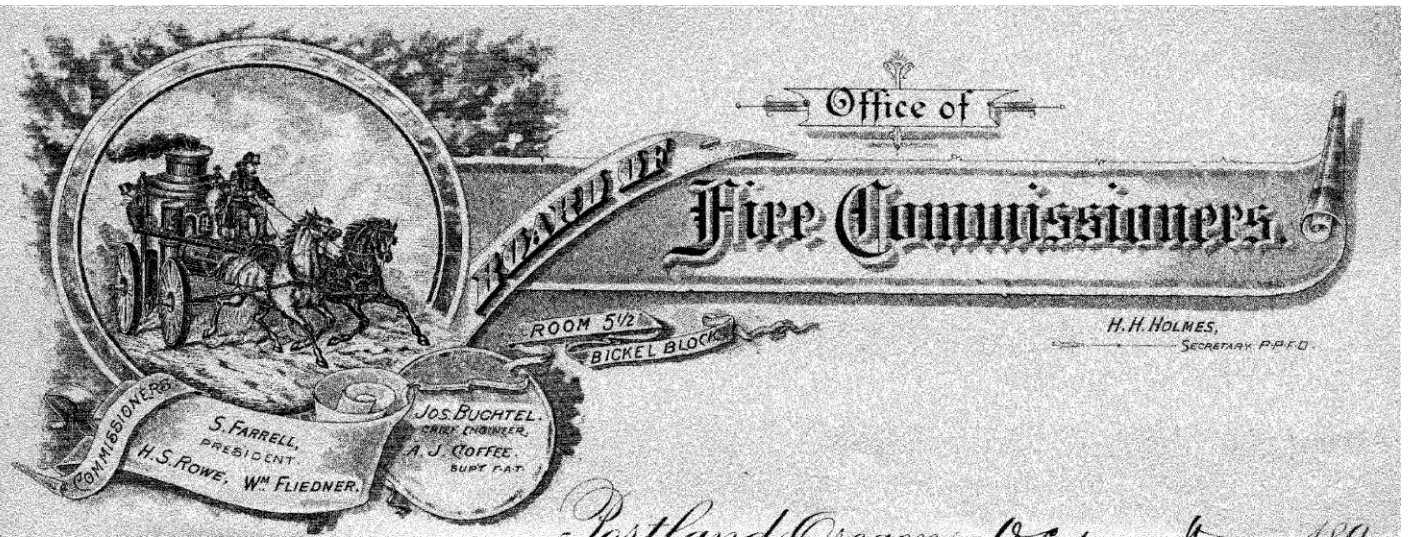
Eleven aged horses which have served Portland in the fire department between 15 and 20 years will not be sold at public auction and turned out into the world to whoever may purchase them and be subject to hard work the remainder of their lives. At a meeting of the executive board, to be held at 4 o'clock this afternoon, W.T. Shanahan, secretary of the Oregon Humane Society will offer to place the old horses in homes where they will be given care and comfort, and Mayor Williams, H.W. Goddard and H.C. Wortman, the latter two constituting the purchasing committee of the executive board, will recommend that the offer be accepted.

"I can place the horses with good, kind people, where they will be cared for as befits their long service to the city," said Mr. Shanahan.

“If Mr. Shanahan says that he can provide homes for the old, faithful fire horses, I favor giving them into his care,” said Mayor Williams. “If sold they would bring but a mere bagatelle, anyway, and I would like to see them cared for. Of course, the charter provides that if they are sold it must be a public auction. In that way there is no telling where they would go. They might be sold to hard masters and made to do hard work and be abused.”

“I would like to see the old horses loaned out to good people so that they would not have to do much work,” said Mr. Goddard. “I am favorable to Mr. Shanahan’s plan.” Mr. Wortman concurs and will advocate the plan at today’s special board meeting.





Portland, Oregon, Oct 10th 1894

I the undersigned John Lell hereby agree to haul away the manure from Fire Department Horses as designated by the Board of Fire Commissioners at a rate of forty nine cents per horse per month and agree to remove the manure daily from such fire Horses as may from time to time be required by the said Board, and I also agree to perform the work in a good and proper manner to the complete satisfaction of the Board of Fire Commissioners

Witness

H. H. Holmes

Accy P.P.O.

(Signed)

John Lell

To Commence work
Sept 15th 1894