

# The Thomas Gavin Story

*Compiled by Don Porth*

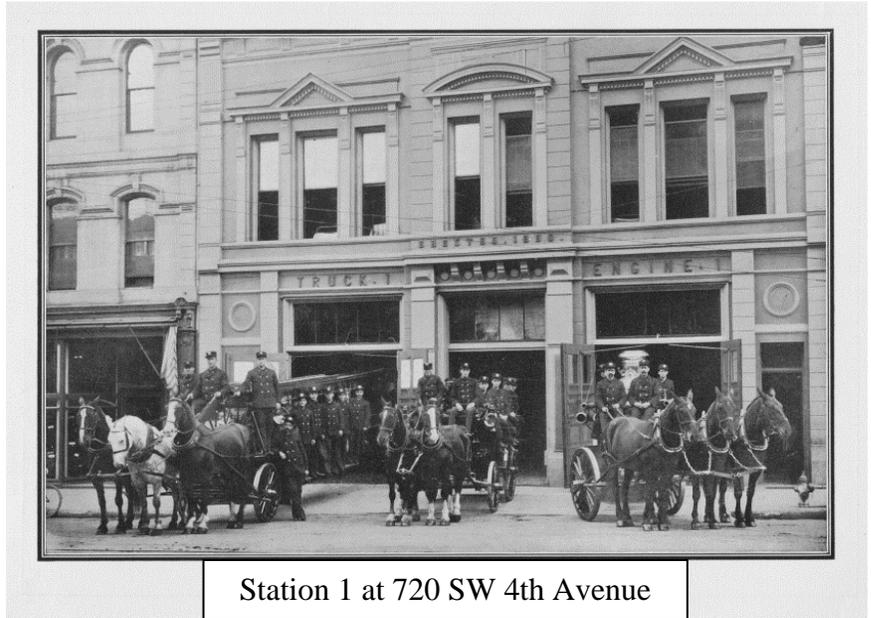
Thomas Gavin was born December 13, 1875 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. While it isn't known what brought he and his family to Oregon, he arrived before he turned 33. He was hired by Portland Fire on April 8, 1908. His previous occupation was listed as "auto mechanic." This had to be a rare vocation since the automobile was only beginning to be a common thing in the United States at that time.

Thomas would be appointed to Truck 1, which was located at 720 SW 4th Avenue. It would not take long for Portland Fire to recognize a special value Thomas brought to Portland Fire. Fire Chief David Campbell was a champion of motorized fire equipment and pushed the city of Portland to allow the purchase of motorized fire engines. To prove his point, Campbell arranged the purchase of the first automobile, a 1909 Pierce Arrow Sedan. This would serve as Chief Campbell's department car.

He would routinely use it to respond to fires, arriving before horse drawn apparatus, in order to prove his point about automotive speed and reliability. But Chief Campbell did not drive, he assigned a driver to do that work. That man was Thomas Gavin.

On March 10, 1909, likely about the time the Pierce Arrow arrived in Portland, Thomas Gavin would become the full time driver and auto mechanic for Chief Campbell. This would lead to Thomas being present when one of the most notable events in Portland Fire history would occur.

At 7:45 am on June 26, 1911, Box 267 was called for a fire at the Union Oil Company, which sat at the corner of SE Water Avenue and Salmon Street. The fire would involve commercial oil tanks located in the heart of East Portland. Crews were unable to control it and explosions from erupting tanks could be heard



Station 1 at 720 SW 4th Avenue



Truck 1 and Crew in Front of the Station at 905 SW 4th Avenue

and felt. Thomas responded to the call by picking up Chief Campbell at his home at 466 Jefferson Street and racing to the fire. As they crossed the Hawthorne Bridge, both men could see the magnitude of the incident. Chief Campbell took control. Not long after, Campbell realized the fight was too dangerous to continue from inside the building. He entered the building to call out to all firefighters, ordering them to leave immediately. The last of the crews were able to withdraw but before Chief Campbell could exit, the building collapsed, killing David Campbell.



Chief Campbell at the Wheel of his 1909 Pierce Arrow and Gavin at his side

The city would mourn this devastating loss. Campbell's funeral would come two days later and be an event like the city had never seen. The funeral procession wound through the city, beginning at SE 7th and Alder at the Elks Temple Building and ending at Campbell's grave in Riverview Cemetery. Driving Campbell's Chief's car in the funeral procession was the ever-present Thomas Gavin. Next to him, on the seat, lay Campbell's helmet and coat. At the place where Campbell's feet would rest lay his faithful Collie, "Cole."

Chief Biddy Dowell would succeed Campbell as Chief. In July of 1911, Thomas would not only be the Chief's driver, but also become responsible for training all future drivers of motorized fire apparatus.

Campbell's dream of a motorized fire department began to take shape only weeks after his death. July brought the first two motorized fire engines into service in the city of Portland. The two matching American LaFrance pumpers were purchased alongside the last two horse-drawn steam apparatus to be purchased.

During his term as driver for Chief Dowell, Thomas would perform beyond what he likely believed he ever would. On January 29, 1914, Thomas was driving Chief Dowell to a rooming house fire at SW 1st Avenue and Harrison Street. They were the first to arrive to the fully involved building fire. A



man named O. Eckland was trapped on the second floor of the building. While Chief Dowell coordinated the firefight with the other arriving apparatus, Thomas found a ladder and put it up to a second floor window. He climbed up and entered the building. He found Mr. Eckland and carried him to safety from the building.

For this remarkable rescue, the newly formed *David Campbell Memorial and Medal Fund* (the precursor to today's David Campbell Memorial Association) wanted to

bestow Thomas with recognition of his valor. The Fund had been chartered on June 21, 1913 to help gather and expend funds to build a memorial to the fallen Chief. They also established a valor award program, but had not yet created the physical award medal. On June 26, 1915 during the annual remembrance of Chief David Campbell, Thomas Gavin was issued a certificate, recognizing his valor and promising his David Campbell Gold Medal when it was completed. On June 26, 1917, three years after his heroic act, Thomas finally received his David Campbell Gold Medal for valor, the first ever issued.

Thomas would remain in his Auto Mechanic/Chief's Driver role until August 18, 1920, a couple months after the department became fully motorized and literally put horses out to pasture. Thomas would become a hoseman and "Driver Inspector," likely meaning he was assigned to a fire company for his normal work, but remained responsible for training and evaluating drivers of motorized fire apparatus.

Thomas would serve at Engine 18, located at 2200 NE 24th from September 30, 1923 until the station temporarily closed on July 31, 1933. He then moved to Engine 12 at 203 NE 28th until March 23, 1937. At this time, he would transfer to Engine 34 located at 4828 NE 33rd Avenue until his retirement on November 30, 1940.



Thomas retired at 65 years of age, but he would not enjoy much time living the retired life. He would die of pulmonary congestion on April 17, 1944. But he would leave a unique and everlasting imprint on Portland Fire for his unique service.

Unknown Crew Members at Station 12  
203 NE 28th Avenue





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