

The last one to get to a fire

Fire Bureau's 'tillermen' speeding into history with all sirens wailing

Bill Ladd makes his living by hanging on for dear life — but he's still a member of a dying breed.

Ladd, a 17-year veteran of the Portland Fire Bureau, is a "tillerman," the fellow who steers from the little rear-end cab on the big hook-and-ladder truck for B Shift at Station 4.

He's the one who keeps the tail of 54-foot-long Truck 4 from side-swiping parked cars or whipping into oncoming traffic when driver Mark Hansen turns the rig at high speed.

He's also the one who hooks up the ladder pipe if the truck officer decides water should be shot on a fire from the truck's 100-foot aerial ladder, which sits poised on the trailer like a stainless steel cobra.

And Ladd is one of just nine active tillermen left among the Fire Bureau's 875 employees. Just a decade ago, the bureau boasted 27 tillermen, but budget cuts and technological advances have made the job all but obsolete.

"Yeah, there aren't many of us left on active duty," says Ladd, 41. "And if they keep buying these new trucks without tillercabs, they won't need us at all."

"Tillering," as firefighters call it, was developed back East in the 1880s as a way to shoehorn long, horse-drawn ladder trucks down narrow cow-path streets. After the turn of the century, internal-combustion engines replaced horses when Christie Front-End Drive



By Rick Bella

cabs were bolted on the front end of the rigs. Portland saw its first "tillered" rig in the 1920s, an old-fashioned hook-and-ladder, and since then, the bureau has kept a fleet of tillered trucks deployed around the city. However, over the years, the number of tillered ladder trucks has dwindled, and only three remain in active service.

Although many tasks now undertaken by the modern Fire Bureau also are performed by ambulance teams and police, tillering remains a firefighting specialty.

"You're all alone back there, 10 feet above the ground, and it can seem lonely," says Ladd, who has been a tillerman virtually all of his firefighting career. "But the main thing is you have to anticipate the driver. You have to know where he's going, or you'll be in a mess."

The tillercab is cramped, something like a sit-down phone booth dominated by a steering wheel. The cab, which has sliding doors on both sides, has virtually no controls, except for the little three-blade fan, the heater and the lone



The Oregonian/KRAIG SCATTARELLA

Bill Ladd mans the tillercab, where he steers the rear wheels of Truck 4, a 54-foot-long ladder truck.

parked on the street and it was real narrow. A tree was hanging out over the street and I couldn't avoid the branches. Dinged up the tillercab a little bit but nothing major."

Another tillerman was trapped in his seat after an oil truck lost its brakes and slammed into the tillercab. Others have found themselves dodging cars and trucks whose drivers don't seem to understand how long a fire truck is.

Ladd says the trick to tillering is to think in mirror images. If the driver is turning right, the tillerman must turn left to swing the tail end wide around the turn and bring it back in when the turn is completed. If the driver is turning left, the tillerman must start by turning right. And all the rules are flip-flopped for driving in reverse.

windshield wiper. An intercom allows the driver and tillerman to converse while they're under way, 50 feet apart. But most of their communication is far simpler and is relayed by buzzer: One buzz for "stop," two for "go ahead" and three for "back up."

As a check in the heat of battle, the cab is outfitted with a safety switch on the floor. If the tillerman hasn't stepped on the switch, the driver can't start the 42,000-pound truck and go roaring out of the fire station with the tail end unattended.

"All kinds of things can happen when you're going hot and heavy," says Ladd. "I had my first real accident a little bit ago, near the Civic Auditorium. There were cars

"I worked with the same driver for 12 years, until just a couple of months ago," says Ladd. "It got so we knew exactly what we were going to do before we did it. It took me and the new driver a while to get used to each other, but we're doing well."

"You know, most tillermen oversteer when they first start out. It takes you a few runs to calm down and try not to do much. That's what we tell the new guys."

That is, until one day soon, when there won't be any more new guys, when the word "tillerman" will be spoken in the same breath as "ice man" or "milk man" and the art of tillering will be reduced to one more story that grandchildren will listen to in amazement.