

A Firefighter Account From Multnomah Engine Company #2

Copied from a newspaper clipping in the Mary Bancroft Trevett scrapbook (no source cited) - Letter at Portland City Archives MSS 990

"Firefighting in the old day." Mr. Cullen has strong recollection of deep mud and hard work as conveyed in this letter to the editor of the Oregonian, date unknown.

As one of the real old time members of the Portland Volunteer Fire Department, I was very much interested in reading the very entertaining sketch of its early history, with much of which I was personally conversant, as published in the magazine section of the Sunday Oregonian. While I do not claim to be the oldest member of the department, I will state as a matter of fact, that I was a member of the old Multnomah Engine Company #2 from 1857 to 1860. We first had the little old Vaughn tub (human pulled hand pumper), after which we got our new machine, which was heavy, draught, and a man-killer on the brakes (pumping arms).

Frank Goodwin was our first foreman and Brooks Trevett, assistant and secretary. Later on, AB Hallock was foreman and, if my memory is correct, Joe Buchtel assistant. I recall, among others, as members at that time, George L. Story, AL Davis, Steve Skidmore, Joe Bachman, CL Ripley, Henry Lemine, and Abe Stuart.

It was no picnic to run with the machine in those days, when the streets were not paved, and often knee deep in mud. A portion of the time I ran with the hose and it was no common thing to be called out, perhaps on a false alarm, on a Sunday evening, when a fellow had on his Sunday-Go-To-Meeting clothes preparatory to talking his best girl to church. After running a mile to the fire and unreeling 500 or 1000 feet of hose in the mud a foot deep, and reeling it up again and hauling it back to the station, at the expense of a good suit of clothes, he was neither in presentable shape nor a pious frame of mind to attend the evening services.

I recall an incident: Returning from Vancouver on the steamboat one very hot day, I heard the clang of the fire bell just as we were landing at the dock. Losing no time, I rushed post haste to the engine house at Second and Oak Streets. The fire was in the old California House, on Second Street near Morrison. There were only six of us to pull the old machine out and a few more joined us on the way. It was a very hot day and an extremely hot old fire and we were very short handed. We worked like Trojans for two hours in the awful heat, and as usual, about the time we got the fire out, the shirkers came flocking in to be in time for roll call, and being fresh themselves they got hold of the ropes yelling "shake her up boys!" and started on a big run for the engine house. Of course, we who had pulled the engine out and put out the fire, were "all in." When we reached the engine house, a number of us collapsed.

Such were some of the experiences of the pioneer fire life.

John W. Cullen, 733 Fourth Street