

# Multnomah Fire Department

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One of the many things most of us take for granted in our daily lives is our local fire department. It took nine-eleven, when 351 firefighters (men and women) gave their lives trying to rescue the hundreds of people trapped in the twin towers to bring attention to what these people do for us. They are on duty twenty-four hours every day, ready to respond to any emergency. My wife and I went to the Fiesta Bowl in Tempe, Arizona on January 1, 2002. Before the game started, a very emotional ceremony was held in the middle of the field where twelve members of the NYFD were honored. When they left the stadium, I had an aisle seat and with many others got to shake their hands as they left the stadium as our way of saying "thanks." I will always remember that day.

In our little community of Multnomah, we had our own fire department for twelve years between 1939 and 1951 before we were annexed to Portland. This article is my way of saying "thanks" for what those men and women who served on our fire department did during that time. They were almost all volunteers and gave countless hours, day and night, to help keep us safe. To tell the whole story of fire fighting in Multnomah I must start at the beginning of our community. During the early part of the twentieth century and prior to 1939, how did they fight fires when they occurred when the search for water, the firefighters' main weapon, was a high priority?

## The Early Years

Where Multnomah Village now stands there was nothing but fir trees and meadows lying between the small communities of West Portland and Hillsdale. Most of the trees were cut down by the Maghetti brothers who lived in Hillsdale. A few hearty pioneers like Matthew Barron settled by a creek to have water available. With the coming of the interurban railway, developers rapidly followed, planning additions for future homes, and digging wells for the water that would be needed. Ben Reiland, a Portland attorney, platted two additions, Home and Wildwood, where Multnomah Village now sits. One large well was dug on the northeast corner at S.W. 35th and Capitol Highway. Reiland installed an elevated wooden tank to store the water. Water mains were laid to supply the lots in the two additions. Unfortunately, the water was of a very poor quality as was the water from the other wells dug in adjoining areas. Heavily laden with iron and sulfur, the water had limited volume. The wells left little room for expansion, in each addition; growth was essential for the community to succeed.

Several promoters began proceedings at Portland's City Hall to obtain water. Records show that in July 1912 Ben Reiland, A. R. Morgan, and the Provident Trust Co. petitioned the City Council for permission to purchase Bull Run water and to pipe it to the Multnomah area. The petitioners agreed to install a four-inch cast iron supply main at their own expense. It was to be 4,000 feet in length from what is now S.W. Nevada Court to the present Capitol Highway. On August 30, the Portland Water Board agreed to this proposal with all the materials to be deeded to the city. Local residents would have to pay double the amount city residents paid and to pay it to City Hall. The petitioners then felt the four-inch mains restricted the amount of water; they petitioned the local board for a six-inch line that would do a much better job. All agreed and by January 14, 1913 all parties agreed to the six inch mains. They further agreed to guarantee a monthly income of at least 6% on the cost of the necessary connecting main inside the city to be installed next to the city boundary. By February 1, 1913, the water began to flow to the local mains. Many felt this was the second big happening in the Multnomah

district, the first being the coming of the railroad. By July, the City Attorney ruled that the mains belonged to the original owners.

As new developments were completed and water was extended to them, the original petitioners felt it best to consolidate. They formed the Southwest Side Water Company. Along with several others, it took stock in proportion to the lands and area supplied. For the next decade, the stockholders made a profit. In July 1919, the legislature passed an Enabling Act under which local areas could create their own Water District. The first such Water District in the southwest area was the Maplewood Water District voted on October 11, 1919. It did so well that Multnomah, Ryan Place and Capitol Hill areas formed the Home Water District October 18, 1924, five years after the Maplewood Water District. The first Board of Commissioners were: A. W. Molin, Chairman, J. V. Patton both from Capitol Hill, J. E. Tuhy of Ryan Place, and William B. Small and Charles F. Larson from Multnomah. Archie Graham served as superintendent for the next several years maintaining the system and collecting water bills. The district was composed of 1.61 square miles, bounded by the Maplewood Water District on the west, the Portland City limits east to S.W. 14th Avenue and then to Dolph Court and north to 40th and S.W. Vermont. The area had a population of about 3,000 with water service to 717 families.

The first annual report of the Home Water District on December 31, 1925 stated that the total amount to purchase the old system was \$32,136.55. Construction of the new system was \$99,094.12 (the sale of the bonds covered this amount). Income was \$10,611.84 with expenses of \$10,218.51 showing a balance on hand of \$393.33.

The financial statement also stated that during the fall of 1925 approximately 15,000 feet of eight-inch and 11,000 feet of six inch iron pipe were added to the system. About 15,000 feet of two-inch galvanized iron pipe was used in extensions and interconnections. The district now had two reservoirs; one concrete on Buckingham Heights (capacity 200,000 gallons); one elevated steel tank on Capitol Highway (capacity 100,000 gallons). These tanks were required by the City of Portland on all outside districts. The statement also stated a considerable amount of two-inch pipe left under the ground was being salvaged from time to time for use in extensions and services. They stated the value of what had been accomplished would be shown for many years as better and cheaper water service. Also recommended were the installation of fire hydrants and the establishment of a fire department, with proper equipment to serve the community to reduce the amount paid for fire insurance on the buildings.

In January 1926 the Multnomah Booster Club discussed what would happen if a fire started in the main business district. Just a few feet of fire hose was stored at the schoolhouse and calling the Portland Fire Department was all that could be done. They decided to buy more fire hose and they felt by doing this their fire insurance premiums would decrease.

By February the Home Water District adopted new rules governing the use of water, as few people really understood what they could and could not do. The rules stated the procedures for paying their water bills and their responsibilities caring for their meters. A water tank on Capitol Hill was tested and the water turned on that week. In March Ralph Wilcox, president of the Booster Club, stated arrangements had been made to purchase 500 feet more fire hose, each merchant paying a certain sum. That same month Multnomah had its biggest fire to date. The house belonging to N. Barron behind where today's Pagenwood building is located "burst into flames" started by a small explosion that shook the ground. People came in all kinds of dress from all over. Neighbors christened the new nearby fire hydrant spraying water on the flames and called to Portland for help. The fire department arrived and within seven minutes, they also were spraying water on the flames. It was the most

spectacular fire Multnomah had ever seen. Webster's, a nearby restaurant, furnished sandwiches and coffee for the firefighters. It was hoped that before another such fire happened Multnomah would have its own fire department.

In May of 1926, the Boosters' Club had already purchased 400 more feet of hose and had negotiated for a hose cart and an electric siren. A volunteer fire department was formed and involved mostly businessmen. The fire equipment was stored at the Wilcox Garage (later Beardsley's Garage). In June, they looked for a chemical engine they could buy and found a used one they could afford. It could be operated by hand or hitched to the back of an automobile. In July a grass fire started and the siren blew. The new volunteer firefighters arrived and had the fire under control but not before it destroyed one house.

That same month the Boosters announced they had purchased two chemical engines, each contained 45 gallons of chemicals and each with 100 feet of hose, making it better than one big engine with a 90-gallon tank. The tanks were mounted on two big wheels, one being about 4 feet wide, which could be pulled inside an ordinary store building. The other one was 5 feet wide. The hose was kept in a wire basket on the side of the tank. The cart could be pulled by hand or attached to the back of an automobile. These additions were also stored at the Wilcox Garage. In case of fire, you were to call Broadway 2225, which was the Wilcox Garage.

On July 21, 1926 a meeting was held in the Thomas Hall to officially organize a permanent volunteer fire department. All those presently serving were urged to attend. The 400 feet of hose and one chemical engine stayed at the Wilcox Garage, the other one at the Multnomah Service Station whose phone number was Main 6754. A small building would be erected there to house it until winter when it would have to be placed in a cement building to keep the chemicals from freezing.

The next month in August, the new volunteers were put to the test. Apparently started from spontaneous combustion, an early morning fire began destroying three buildings in Multnomah. It destroyed the Conger Print Shop, the Multnomah Transfer and Ice Co, and the Capitol Fuel Co. office. Also partially destroyed was the Multnomah Stage Co.'s garage. First to respond were the telephone and Southern Pacific linemen. A few minutes later, the newly organized Multnomah Fire Department arrived and began spraying their chemicals on the flames. The Portland Fire Department sent out two engines; inside of an hour, the blaze was under control. Total loss was figured to be in excess of \$15,000. The Multnomah Press published a list of all the merchants in Multnomah who had contributed to the volunteer fire department. Almost every merchant in town was on the list and the department had the support of the whole community.

In December 1926 a huge fire was averted in Multnomah when a can of burning oil exploded in Edward's garage. Bruce Edwards happened to come by his shop and seeing the flames sprayed Pyrene on the flames getting it under control. The Multnomah Volunteer Firemen arrived with their chemicals but the fire had already been extinguished. If Edwards had not arrived, the whole community of Multnomah business could have been destroyed. It emphasized the importance of having a good local fire department. Another bad chimney fire was extinguished in January 1927. In August 1927 Ralph Wilcox sold his garage to E. Wayne Ketchum who then was in charge of one of the chemical engines.

In the early days my family always had lighted candles on our Christmas tree. Then before Christmas 1927, the Portland Fire Department issued new rules that lighted candles would not be used on the trees. "Only electric lights should be used and special care taken to see the wiring was properly done

and that the lights could not come in contact with any inflammable materials.” In addition, it was best not to use cotton for snow and after Christmas the tree should be taken out right away as the needles become dry quickly causing a lot of December fires. If a person should catch on fire “throw the person to the ground and cover him or her with a rug or blanket and wrap it securely to exclude air and smother the flames.”

In February 1928, the Multnomah School petitioned the Water Board for a fire hydrant to be placed in front of the school. As a result, two were placed, one on the west side and one on the east. In April a lot of grading was done around Multnomah and the citizens were asked to call if any of the water mains were damaged.

In July 1926 Mr. Ruring, manager of the Capitol Theatre, had his double garage destroyed as well as his new Ford Convertible. Local firefighters got to the blaze before it reached his house.

At the end of August the new fire station was completed on the back lot of the Multnomah Drug Store. It was an ideal place for the hose cart and chemical engine being on a slight rise and could easily be taken to a fire if attached to the rear of a car. The next month the bunkhouse on John Feuz’ farm burned. The Multnomah Fire Department responded but it was too late, the fire had consumed the building. The local paper stated there had been two thousand people witnessing the fire.

In October 1928 Alex Bergeron, a local cement contractor, was elected the new fire chief. He was put in charge of the chemical wagon and hose cart. He also was put in charge of all the local fires and to be assisted by Mr. Ellis and Mr. Stewart. The local businessmen were usually the first to fires as they were right there at the time.

The fire gong used to alert people of a fire was unfortunately rung occasionally by some of the local boys just for fun. The community was informed such activities might result as in the old story of a boy calling “wolf” too many times.

In January 1929 in the evening, the local firefighters were called to the Pam Gault home just off Capitol Highway where apparently a furnace had overheated. The Gaults were not at home. The firefighters unfortunately found their chemicals frozen and the fire hose would not reach from the fire hydrant to the house. Even if the hose had been longer, it wouldn’t have forced enough water out to put out the flames. The Portland Fire Department arrived too late to save the home. A total loss, the insurance company stated a new home would be built right away.

In January 1930 the volunteer fire department was called to a blaze at the Capitol Theatre in downtown Multnomah where they kept a continuous stream of water on the blaze until the Portland Fire Department arrived and the flames were completely extinguished. A large hole had been burnt in the roof. The fire apparently started backstage destroying the back stage, the pipe organ and six rows of seats. Smoke and water damage was so great the walls would have to be repaired. The Multnomah Insurance Agency said the theatre would be rebuilt immediately.

During the ensuing years, the local fire department was kept busy with mainly small local fires and accidents. In July 1936 two homes were destroyed even though the local department was there. Their small hoses and wet sacks only kept the fire from reaching a third home. The second home was fifty feet away from the first house but still caught fire and burned.

In December of that year a blaze in Multnomah destroyed the large garage behind the Ellis Pharmacy and Multnomah Grocery on S.W. 35th Street. Smoke damaged both of these structures owned by :Lloyd Ellis. In the garage, a stagecoach and an automobile were destroyed. The prompt action by the engine company from Portland was credited with saving the whole town of Multnomah.

### **Multnomah Fire Department 1939 to 1951**

By the mid-thirties the Multnomah business community was the shopping center for all of southwest Portland south of Beaverton. It had grown like “Topsy” and yet for fire protection they still relied on the business people and their make-shift volunteer fire department along with getting fire engines to come from Portland, Beaverton, or other close fire departments. It was the drive of the Multnomah Booster Club that pushed to get a real fire department, with trained volunteers and firefighters with the proper equipment to handle any local emergency.

In writing of these years I have been very fortunate to be in contact with Norm Schwinge who was one of the very young volunteers who replaced the permanent ones who had to go to war. Norm started in the fall of 1943. He and a number of other young men, most of them graduates of Multnomah School in 1941, volunteered with many others to fill in until they too were called to serve the latter part of the war. He has written down some of his memories of that time. I will quote him by indenting and quoting what he has written for me. I have really appreciated hearing his memories and writing about them for future generations to better understand those times.

In January 1938 the Multnomah County Commissioners called a meeting to be held at Multnomah School, February 17, 1938. Its purpose was to organize a fire department for the community of Multnomah. A representative from the district attorney’s office officiated and served as chair at the meeting. Multnomah population was much larger than many areas that already had their own fire department. Prior to this meeting local residents met at Paul Rising’s office in Multnomah to prepare the agenda. All civic minded people were urged to attend and especially the present volunteer firefighters. The evening of the 17th a large crowd of 88 people met at the school auditorium. Frank Sears, chief civil deputy for the district attorney was in charge. Charles McGee was elected temporary secretary. Mr. Sears opened the meeting stating its purpose and then the following officers were elected:

- William Seigfried, President
- Werner Raz, Vice President
- Charles McGee, Secretary
- Mr. Levibs, Treasurer
- A. C. Bull, Legal Advisor

Directors elected were:

- Mr. Fonda
- Ryan Place
- Ralph Meets and A. W. Molin, from Capitol Hill;
- Judge William A. Ekwald and Fred Slate from Multnomah

These officers and board would work out the details for organizing a fire department and appointing a fire chief who in turn would select his assistant and three or four firefighters. Only two of the officers would be paid. Any other compensation would be determined at the first officer’s meeting, which

would take place in the near future. The area of the fire district would be the same as the Home Water District (area previously stated). The overall goal of the department would be to get a good firefighting organization as soon as possible.

On August 28, 1938 the urgency of having a fire department became apparent when a fire broke out again at the Capitol Theatre. The following report was written in the Spring 2000 edition of the Multnomah Historical Association newsletter:

*"On Sunday August 28, 1938, while young Bill Cate relieved Dick Malloy, the projectionist, on his dinner break, Bill heard a loud noise. Looking at the screen, he saw that the film wasn't moving and there was a small flame at the corner of the screen. He cut off the arc lights, shut down the machine, and grabbed the small fire extinguisher. It was too late; the fire was everywhere in the booth. Several hundred people were in the theatre at the time. Bill calmly had them file out in an orderly manner. The Oregon Journal reported that the projectionist immediately closed the fireproof doors. Neither the smoke nor the flames got out of the projection room. Although the Portland Fire Department was called, they would not come because Multnomah was outside the city. Local citizens fought the blaze and brought it under control in a short time. Insurance covered the fire loss for the building owner E. J. Berneche and for the Dickinson's equipment. The building was rebuilt and young Cate was made a full-time projectionist, a position he held until 1940. On September 15, three weeks later, the theater reopened with all new equipment in the operator's booth. Mrs. D. held a free show to announce the reopening of the theatre."*

In September Earnest Riley, Superintendent of the Water District, announced that 5,100 feet of new iron pipe would be laid two inches down by sixty men from the WPA, in his Multnomah district. Thirty-five new fire hydrants would be installed in appropriate places. The government would pay about \$20,000 and \$8,500 would be paid locally. The project was to be completed by November 1938.

To start a fire district it was necessary to have 51% of the property owners agree. Although it would greatly reduce the rate for fire insurance, it was still difficult to convince some owners the necessity of having their own fire department. However, enough signatures were obtained and a four-mill levy was imposed with a bond issue. All necessary steps were being taken.

By April 1939, it was announced that work had begun on the new fire station building which was located next to Weatherly's store (now part of Thinker Toys). The building would be 32 by 37 feet with a dormitory on the second floor. It would have the equipment on the main floor with a provision for a full basement. The WPA obtained a grant of \$9,400 and the cost to the fire district being about \$4,500. The building would be of concrete tile construction and employ 22 men. To pay cash for the equipment about \$7,000 in six percent bonds were sold in denominations of \$100, purchased from W. A. Seigfried, president of the district.

It was interesting to note at this time Al Schmidt started Multnomah's first ambulance service in the Ellis garage. He would eventually work with and become a part of the new fire department.

A new fire truck for the district was ordered to be ready in sixty days. In the meantime, residents were told that they were now covered with fire protection. They could call the Portland Fire Department who would respond. Only these numbers: AT 5787, 1279 or 1829 could be used to call for immediate response.

On May 31, 1939, it was announced that William Surplice had been appointed chief of the Multnomah Fire Department No. 3. Chief William (Bill) Surplice was an old hand at fighting fires. He first volunteered at the age of 17 and spent a good part of his life in that capacity. He helped start both the Yakima and Puyallup, Washington fire departments as a volunteer while working 8 hours at night as a mechanic with the Shell Oil Company. He was presently living in West Portland and it was agreed the department would pay for his telephone and some travel expense.

The chief's first job was to enlist as many volunteers as possible. He would need about thirty, 18 to 28 years of age, with some exceptions. They received no compensation, not even on fire calls. Regular meetings would be scheduled in Multnomah to learn basic procedures in firefighting. He stressed the importance of the job would make them into real firefighters as quick as possible.

The first truck arrived on July 22, 1939. Purchased with tax dollars it would be kept temporarily in the Ellis garage until the firehouse was finished. The next day Chief Surplice had his first fire drill. He had the truck out so everyone could see it. The first six men to volunteer were there; Ken Twombly, Bryan Emerson, Harold Gellatly, who worked with Surplice at the Shell Oil Company, Maurice Hart, Al Schmitz and one other, not known. The townspeople enjoyed seeing what they had purchased. Later the fire truck was on display in front of the schoolhouse.

In August 1939 the people could see the new two story structure being completed and could see its beauty and attractiveness set back about thirty feet providing a neat and spacious frontage. There was still a lot to complete in the interior but it was felt it could be finished in two weeks. Meanwhile engine number two was ordered by Chief Surplice and some of the volunteers helped finance it along with friends. All this time Lloyd Ellis from the business community was there to help them anyway he could.

On October 1, 1939, the new fire station officially opened for business. When engine number 2 was finished, the two engines could carry 500 gallons of water. Chief Surplice made a point of telling everyone to call Cherry 1515 to report fires and to call Cherry 2774 for all other calls. He didn't want the fire line to be tied up with non-business calls. The new volunteers worked long and hard. Chief Surplice took a personal interest in each; their problems became his. Every week there was a drill and training on how to handle the truck. Two nights a month, they studied the different causes and types of fires and how to handle them. They also learned what would happen if not done correctly. The mission of the department was to get to the fire in the shortest time and to do the least amount of damage to the home or place of business. At least four men were to be in the station after eleven P.M.

To encourage the young men Chief Surplice told them "it is a thrill and excitement to ride in the truck; it makes one feel he is doing something worthwhile for the community." On October 5 and 6, 1939 the first engine was parked in front of the Capitol Theatre and the fire department staged a show on safety first and fire prevention, depicting the horrors of carelessness. The proceeds from the show went towards equipping the new fire station, although the firefighters themselves would build most of the needed equipment.

In 1940, it was becoming apparent that with the war raging in both the Far East and in Europe it was best to start bolstering up our defenses and be prepared for any situation. Our National Guard unit had their enlistments frozen and plans were started for a national draft.

During these early years the volunteers and their wives worked hard on various events to raise money needed to keep the equipment in good working condition and to let people know of their service to the community and their needs for more volunteers as the regular firefighters kept leaving for the service.

Early in 1941, the following ad appeared in the local paper:

*“Opening now for those who qualify. Instruction for war trained firemen ‘there is no limit on age or youth as long as the applicant possesses the physical, mental and character requirements.’ Especially wanted is more ‘sleepers’ for night duty.”*

On March 20, 1941, an article in the Oregonian reported that three fire chiefs in our country, one being from Portland, would go to London to learn how fires were being fought there and return and teach our departments. While there they actually fought fires and returned to give information they had received to the local fire departments in the best way to fight large fires. In September of that year, Chief Surplice attended one of the conferences put on by the Pacific Coast Fire Chiefs, seeing films of actual fires set by raids on London and how they were fought. The Chief returned to teach “his boys.” As the volunteers began leaving for the service, they were replaced by 16 and 17 year old boys.

After Pearl Harbor Chief Surplice and his wife, Gladys Mae moved into the apartment upstairs in the firehouse in Multnomah. They would stay there for the remainder of the life of that department. After the Surplices had been in their new apartment several months, Mrs. Surplice, or Mae as the volunteers called her, asked that the following article be in the local paper. They were getting too many unnecessary calls:

*“Very few people realize what happens at the fire house in case the fire phone rings. Here is what happens when you dial CH 1515. At the fire house two large gongs serve as the telephone call bells, one in the office and one in the private apartment of Mr. and Mrs. William Surplice. Let us assume that this call is a daytime call: Mrs. Surplice will answer the phone and take down the address and at the same time throw the switch starting the siren. The day crew comes on the run from different parts of the street while Mrs. Surplice calls those who are available by phone for fear that they have not heard the siren. The out calls are made over another phone, not the fire phone. She then remains on guard, so to speak, to inform any late comers of the address and most available route. The route charts are always available, giving the best and shortest route to street sections from which a call might come. Instead of a day call let us now assume that the call comes at one o’clock at night. We call CH 1515 and two gongs start ringing, waking everyone at the fire house. The crew who “sleep in” jump out of bed and into boots over which are laid their waterproof clothing. As soon as the men are into their boots they are also partly into their other clothing so all that remains is to pull up their trousers and slap their suspenders over their shoulders and down the brass pole they slide jump puts them onto the truck where they await for necessary orders from Mrs. Surplice or from the chief or other person in charge. In this case the fire phone is answered both at the main phone and at the extension so that a complete check will be had on the address in case one should misunderstand. If the orders are “NO GO” the crew takes their time walking up stairs with a disappointed look on their faces to pull off their boots and return to bed. If the alarm is not a mistake, whoever is in charge grabs the chart of the road to the fire section and out goes the truck. This may seem like a long story but it has it’s point. When a call is made over CH 1515 to make an inquiry it takes the whole crew to answer the phone for no calls are supposed to be made on this phone except in case of fire. The phone under the name of William*



*Surplice, CH 2774, is answered the same as any phone is answered and causes no undue alarm.”*

In August 1942 the commanding general of the Oregon State Guard unveiled a large plaque at the Multnomah Fire Station containing the names of 180 men from our community and vicinity who were then serving in the armed forces. Also in August 1942 a third fire truck was added to the Multnomah Fire Department. Holding 500 gallons of water it was built especially for fighting brush fires. It would be used for the community of Multnomah but would be available for the county and road departments. Now our fire department had three trucks to deliver 1000 gallons of water. This new addition included a 75-gallon booster pump, 400 feet of 3/4 inch hose, 400 feet of 1 1/2-inch hose, a ladder, hand extinguishers, shovels, axes, and two backpack Indian fire fighters. That same month the Portland and Multnomah county fire departments were designated salvage depots by the civilian defense coordinator. Local citizens were asked to bring rubber, metals of all kinds, rags, burlap, hemp rope, old clothing, mattresses, and draperies. Women were asked to call on homes for salvage. A three-color poster was put up in every fire department for this purpose.

During many of the summers, when it was fire season, the water pressure gages would fall because of lack of rain. The fire departments were worried there would not be enough water to fight fires. The Portland Fire Department was rated as a two, which was very good. Multnomah's was rated a six, which was not very good. This really concerned Chief Surplice.

By 1943 nearly all of the men who had originally volunteered for the fire department had left for the service. Chief Surplice was very concerned as to what he could do in case of a real emergency. That summer was also very hot and he feared a possible water shortage. Here I want to quote from Norm Schwinge's "The Teenage Firemen Who Saved the Town:"

*“Pearl Harbor. World War II had begun for America: Multnomah like many small towns everywhere, saw their young men rush to join the armed forces. Many were already in uniform, as jobs were scarce for unskilled boys still in high school. An unexpected victim of this process was the Multnomah Fire Department RFD # 3. Suddenly the 6 bed dormitory above the engine floor was empty and the town was without its instant response that the young men who lived there provided. The remaining members were family men who would have to dress and drive from home when the siren wailed. That extra response time could cost property and possibly lives. Chief William Surplice and the Board of Directors knew it was time for desperate, if unorthodox methods. The Chief knew Norm Schwinge, as Norm's older brother Bob and two cousins had been firemen and his mother did laundry for the department. “Do you have 8 or 10 buddies your size who would like to be firemen?” he asked. At 15 we all pretty much had our full growth and were strong and healthy. ‘You bet!’ We all saw this an opportunity to do our part in the war until we were old enough to enlist ourselves. The initial group consisted of:*

- *Don Olander, Multnomah School class of January 1943,*
- *Gene Olander, January 41,*
- *Gene Sheehan, January 41,*
- *Don Mabon, June 1941,*
- *Don Williams, June 1941,*
- *Dick Layman, June 1941,*
- *Virgil Spencer, January 1941,*

- *Don Best, June 1941,*
- *Norm Schwinge, June 1941.*
- *Kent and Eldon Slate from other schools*
- *Jack Davis from other schools.*

*None of us had driver's licenses as we were all too young, and none knew how to drive, as many of our families didn't own cars. So, the first order of business after getting us outfitted in turnout gear was making us capable of handling emergency vehicles. At that time the Department had 3 fire trucks and a first aid car. The trucks were big, clumsy, slow and cold blooded, requiring double clutching and judicious use of the choke and spark. Engine 3 was especially thrilling to drive at emergency speed as the 500 gallon water tank did not contain baffles and the sloshing of the water caused the front end to wave alarmingly to oncoming traffic. Engine 1 was a special challenge too as the brakes were inadequate for its weight and if you missed a gear on the hills and curves of our territory it was hold on and pray time. But learn to drive them we did. Another sign of the desperate nature of the times; we were too young to qualify for driver's licenses, even for cars, much less for emergency vehicles, so we did without. Miraculously, there was not a single accident or even a scraped fender,"*

On September 20, 1943 a large fire of undetermined origin at Alpenrose Dairy located at S.W. 45th and Vermont Street destroyed a hay barn and a large quantity of feed as well as a nearby milk house and materials. Fire trucks from Multnomah, Portland, and Beaverton were called out as well as men from the sheriff's office and the Veteran Guard and Patrol. Five trucks in all fought the blaze. The cattle and trucks were quickly moved to safety. Henry Cadonau, the owner, estimated the loss at \$23,000.

*"Fate didn't wait in giving us our baptism of fire. Within our first week as firemen, the hay barn at the old Alpenrose Dairy (then 45th and Vermont) burned to the ground. We returned to put it out several times in subsequent days as the wet hay kept re-igniting, We all learned the basics of hose handling quickly. Training was thorough. Every Sunday was a special drill day, supervised by Chief and Assistant Chiefs Harold Gellatly and Lynn Cavitt. These drills often wound up at the Pancake House on Barber. As soon as the chiefs felt we were ready, one man was assigned to each engine with the rank of Lieutenant and the responsibility for the complete maintenance and readiness of each engine and all its equipment. We reveled in the responsibility and the silver braid in our caps."*

On February 27, 1944 the Oregonian reported, "Buildings Burn at Multnomah." On Saturday morning early, February 26, 1944 a fire that endangered most of the Multnomah business section before it was under control did an extensive damage to two buildings according to the Sheriff's office. Two persons, an 81-year-old man, and an invalid woman were carried to safety from second floor apartments. Damage was estimated in thousands of dollars. The blaze damaged two two-story buildings, one at 7822 S.W. Capitol Highway and the other one at 7826. The blaze originated in the basement of Bahnsen's Cafe in the Collis building, apparently set off by a defective water heater. It spread through the basement of both buildings and ranged upwards through both floors. Damaged were the restaurant, Multnomah Electric and Al Call's Ice Cream and several apartments. Firemen carried 81 year old Collis down a ladder from the apartment. A soldier and Marie Ellis, a first-aid expert, attached to the Multnomah Fire Department carried an invalid woman from her apartment." (Now the real story from Norm):

*“The big payoff came one night . A worker on his way to the graveyard shift at the shipyard reported flames under what was then John’s Market. All the merchants in those days stored their cardboard and wooden boxes in their basements. They were burning intensely by the time we had hookups to the available hydrants and were pouring water from two-one half inches. Our concern was the fire spreading to all the adjoining buildings which was a real possibility if it couldn’t be contained under the market. Men in the basement were soon in waist deep water, with the pressure from the lines blasting them back across the room. In 2 to 3 hours the inflammables in the basement and first floor were controlled with the exception of a broken gas line that was feeding the flames. The location of the main gas shut off was unknown, probably under the street paving and any government office that might have knowledge of its location were, of course, not open at 2 A.M. Chief ordered the huge glass window above the gas line smashed and we took turns hanging headfirst in the flames, trying to shut off the line itself. You were only good for 10-15 seconds before the gas made you woozy, and had to be pulled up and walked into the fresh air while the next man took his turn. After what seemed an eternity, the leaking line was finally secured and the fire declared out. The town was saved. The concerned merchants whose property was in jeopardy, hurried to give thanks and Al Call brewed up some most welcome coffee at 3 A.M.”*

On March 3, the Multnomah Press gave a post mortem view of the fire and added:

*“The fire siren did not blow that night but the firemen were notified by a passer-by. It turned out for the best as the street was not cluttered by various and sundry firefans and their cars and dogs. Our hats are off to the unselfish and zealous assistance given the fire department by business men and one young lady, Miss Marie Ellis. Gas and ammonia fumes from broken lines made work unusually hazardous. To workers we give due credit for the fine job in saving our business district and salvaging as much as possible the several business places that were burned.”*

Another noteworthy Multnomah fire was when a passer-by noted smoke coning from the Multnomah Presbyterian Church the latter part of November 1944. The flames were fierce and had made good headway before the alarm sounded. The damage amounted to about \$5,000 as it destroyed the Beginners department, Sunday School rooms above and below. The entire church would have to be renovated and cleaned because of the smoke and water. Reverend Moore and his congregation were very grateful for the fire departments rapid response in containing the fire and for not using excessive water, which would have caused even more damage. The close neighbors to the church were very grateful that the fire was kept from spreading to the whole neighborhood.

*“On another occasion, the Presbyterian Church was afire and the smoke so thick we needed gas masks for the first time. This was many years before airpacks became standard equipment. The only other fire that we briefly fought cost us a fireman’s life was at a motel in Tigard. The entire structure was filled with dense smoke, so the center of the fire couldn’t be determined. Chief ordered two of us up on the roof to cut a hole to ventilate and clear the smoke. The other man was perhaps six steps ahead of me when he suddenly vanished. The fire had burned not quite through the roof, but had so weakened it that his weight caused him to drop into the center of the fire. Fortunately, it had also burned through the floor and he fell a completely through into the crawl space under the building and crawled out to safety. This was also a late night fire and as usual, attracted a few drunks who wanted to ‘help.’ As one of the drunks attempted to take a line away from one of our men, it attracted the attention of Captain Lou Domkee. Lou was a big, tough, rawboned man that could have posed for the Marlboro Man*

*ads. Lou's size, plus the spanner wrench he was tapping suggestively, quickly convinced the drunk that in interest of his continuing good health he find other interests."*

The huge important role the young fifteen and sixteen year old volunteers played cannot be emphasized enough. If it hadn't been for these young men and a few women, who usually drove the trucks, the Multnomah Fire Department could not have existed.

*"We teenagers were proud to be doing men's work and taking men's risks and the town's merchants gave us their respect. The firemen's caps we wore were the closest thing to a military uniform that we would all wear for the next 2 or 3 years. It wasn't all work and risk, of course. We still had the love of practical jokes. The dormitory was above the engine floor with the traditional brass pole to slide down, and we all soon acquired the knack of awaking when the alarm hammer cocked before hitting the bell. New men were welcomed to the dormitory life by "wiring" their bed with the fine, nearly invisible wire from the Ford coil and a train transformer. They were allowed to drop to sleep before a sheet of blue fire under and above the sheets jolted them wide awake. Everyone else was apparently sleeping soundly, so the victim usually assumed it was a muscle spasm. A second shot cleared up that misunderstanding. We continued to protect what was actually most of the west side of Multnomah county until we all left to join the military ourselves."*

As World War II began to wind down most of these young volunteers were nearing seventeen and eighteen years of age and were themselves going into the service. Gradually many of the older veterans began to return. When the war did end in September 1945, the Multnomah Press in a column written by Marguerite Davis listed the names of the firefighters who had served their country. They were:

#### ARMY:

- Dick Preble
- Bob Schwinge
- Milton Saunders
- Gordon Johnson
- Bill Hurn
- Ted McCuen
- Elton Slate
- Claude Allen
- Arno Odell
- George Woodley
- Bob Wendland
- Lawrence Edwards
- Bill Barron
- Wallie Galway
- Herbert Penson
- Charles Sperley
- Gordon Edwards

#### NAVY:

- Bob Peebler
- Tom Mummy
- Dick Layman
- Don Mabon
- Don Williams
- Bob McCormick
- Don Best
- A.M. Hjerke
- Charles Premo
- Claud Ethan
- Lawrence Marshall
- Maurice Wilson

#### COAST GUARD:

- Rollo Grant

## MERCHANT MARINE:

- Eugene Sheehan
- Miles Ralston
- Lloyd Ellis

Gold Stars honors the boys who have given their lives for their country:

- Ted McCuen, who lost his life in Germany
- Bob Wendland, who lost his life in Bataan
- Walter Miller, listed as missing

Men listed as still on duty at the fire department when this list was compiled in late 1944 were:

- Chief Surplice
- Lynn Cavitt
- Harry Lawrence
- Ken Twombly
- Russell Handley
- C. J. Ethan Sr.
- Oscar Sandvick
- Norman Schwinge
- Harold Gellatly
- Bert Parker
- Robert Edwards
- Louis Domkee
- Bruce Edwards
- W. McAlpine
- Kent Slate
- Virgil Spencer
- Don Germain
- Arthur Wendland
- Ted Lau
- Phillip Thextron
- M. E. Laycock
- Del R. Meinhart.

Surplice, Gellatly and Twombly have been members since the crew was first organized. Lloyd Ellis now with the Merchant Marines was also one of the first. Mildred Domkee, a Red Cross First Aider, accompanies the department to all fires. In this connection it should be of interest to know that the Inhalator, endorsed by various organizations, and used in conjunction with artificial respiration by the O. C. D. Medical Unit was now given to the department and carried in the squad car.

*“After the war we all returned safely and most resumed the Fire Department membership while attending college or beginning careers.”*

It was up to Chief Surplice to decide which of the present crew and which of the returning veterans would return to their duties at the fire station. Those selected continued their training and education with regular meetings held by both the Clackamas and Multnomah County fire departments, rotating alphabetically to be sure all were included. A roll call was made of all the fires that had occurred and the results so the firefighters could all learn from them.

A special election was held on December 2, 1946 to first secure a firehouse large enough to house all the fire equipment and to be able to keep them in top condition. The present Multnomah Fire House held only two pieces of equipment, the one engine, and the squad car; the other two pieces were parked down the street in a garage, adding precious minutes getting to the fire. Secondly, the department needed money to operate the coming year and to pay the firefighters more than the \$1.00 a fire they received. Certainly not much for the risk involved. This present fire department had been adequate for seven years but the tremendous growth of the community required change. It was also time for another state inspection and if more money was not appropriated, the department could get their rating lowered

and insurance rates increased. The cost for inadequate protection would far exceed the amount needed to make the department the kind desired. The request for a \$50,000 levy to build a new firehouse was defeated by a vote of 116 to 120. The measure for \$12,000 for running expenses for the next year passed 131 to 105. The following week the department answered three fires in the Multnomah area. In January 1947 the Home Water District improved service in the area by constructing three concrete reservoirs, which included a 955 cubic yard one made of concrete, 205,000 pounds of reinforced steel and a 3,500 C. Y. excavation, some clearing and placing of pipes and fittings.

On January 10, 1947 the local paper wrote about Chief Surplice and his volunteer firefighters:

*“Although called out with but a few hours rest from an early morning fire that had all but exhausted them, they responded quickly to an alarm with courtesy, efficiency and consideration. They took care of the emergency and not only stayed on the job until the danger was past, but gave valuable information on how to prevent future occurrences. Their regard for the smallest detail of property and shrubbery, thorough understanding of their business, cheerful help, and prompt action has earned the gratitude and appreciation of the whole community.”*

The Multnomah community was extremely proud of their fire department and appreciated the “good press.” That same month the fire department responded to eight fires in five days. The next week they had four fires.

One of those was to Speck’s Fix It Shop to fix a broken gas line. Gas masks were needed and Mr. Speck was given five minutes of oxygen with an inhaler as he breathed too much gas.

The latter part of the month there was a large brush fire that burned over two hundred acres on Skyline Boulevard. Six fire departments responded fighting the fire and five more fires required the help of the department that month.

On May 27, 1947 another levy was again proposed for \$50,000 to build a new fire station. Many of the same arguments were used for this levy as had been made for the prior one. The levy presented to the public read,

*“for the purpose of acquiring sites for constructing necessary buildings to house the fire department equipment of the district and for acquiring additional firefighting equipment and accessories and the making of necessary repairs to the property, equipment, and buildings of the district and improvements thereon.”*

This time the levy passed with a vote of 362 to 58.

During this time, the home of Dora Fuhrer on Scholls Ferry Road was destroyed. She later stated,

*“Thanks for the help of the Multnomah and Beaverton fire departments, for their efficiency and promptness in saving all of my possessions and removing them from the house without damage.”*

Boys and girls from the neighborhood, with instruction from the firefighters made a chain line with gunnysacks, which they dampened with water from the cow’s drinking tank to beat out the fire from the burning garage. Some of the boys took the cow and calf out of the barn into the pasture.

In January 1948 the department's fourth fire truck arrived. The Oregonian reported:

*“With the arrival of an American-La France multiple service rig, one of the latest for the Multnomah Fire Bureau, the small city adjacent to southwest Portland now boasts one of the finest firefighting set-ups in the state, Fire Chief William Surplice said Thursday.”*

The new rig was installed with other equipment in the headquarters at 7780 S.W. Capitol Highway. The bureau now had four fully paid firemen and a 20 member volunteer crew. The latest mobile equipment listed was a 750-gallon pumper, 180 feet of hose, two ladders of 35 and 45-foot extensions and a 200-gallon water tank. It also has a 204-horsepower V-12 engine and a five-man enclosed cab. This is added to the two pumpers and a tank already established at the headquarters. Chief Surplice is in charge of the bureau, with Harold Gellatly as first assistant.

The men in the fire department were all well trained and they enjoyed participating in various fire related contests throughout the state. Multnomah captured the top award in the hose relay in Baker City at an annual meeting of the Oregon Association of Fire Chiefs and the Oregon State Association of Fire Chiefs. Locally the firefighters demonstrated in Portland by putting up two frame structures, which were lighted and then extinguished in a wet water demonstration. Oil pit fires were smothered by various methods as the department demonstrated their fire fighting techniques.

That year the Multnomah Fire Department and their volunteers kept busy but with mostly small fires,

The next big issue to come before Multnomah that would affect the fire department was again the one of annexation to Portland. A meeting was set up at the Pancake House on Barbur Boulevard for October 12, 1948 to actively discuss it. Gabriel Pascuzzi was selected as chairman and Sidney P. Lathrop as secretary. It was decided to publicize the advantages and the benefits of annexation. They felt advantages to be: An economical answer to the staggering problem of adequate sewage and sanitation; wider fire protection; safeguards to property owners through the protection of the city's zoning regulation in bus transportation; opportunity for a program of parks and recreational facilities; benefits of better police protection and traffic control measures with less expensive taxation.”

The fireboard appointed a committee to look into the legal aspects of annexation, as it would decide the abandonment or absorption of the local fire district. The City of Portland made it clear they would not allow an annexation that only covered part of the fore stated issues; it was all or nothing. The Multnomah Boosters Club members were generally against any form of annexation to Portland.

After meeting with city officials, the fire department learned the city would assume the liabilities of fire department No. 3. They would have a much greater resource of personnel and equipment to call upon in the event of a major fire or catastrophe than was now available to Multnomah. It would definitely be advantageous for the people in this area to become a part of Portland.

After much work on both sides of the issue on annexation of Multnomah to Portland, the final vote was against annexation; although everyone felt the issue would come up again as Portland continued to expand and grow.

The latter part of May 1949 the Multnomah Fire Department hosted a three county meeting of Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas at the Multnomah School. Chief Miles Woodworth from the Portland Fire Department gave an excellent talk on the subject of fighting fires before they happen and

saving property by familiarizing firefighters with the hazards and risks in their area of duty. A representative of Neep Equipment Co, of Portland presented an electric hand lantern to the Multnomah Fire Department, which they had won at the recent state convention in North Bend.

In June 1949 the Fire Department observed their tenth year in Multnomah with a sociable evening party honoring the firefighters and their wives. Motion pictures, cards, and social activities made the occasion memorable. A huge birthday cake was presented, decorated with a miniature fire truck. Chief Surplice and his wife made the first cut with a fire axe. The department invited people to visit the fire hall and become acquainted with the equipment and personnel guarding the community.

In the early morning of June 19, 1949, the Multnomah Theatre was damaged for about \$50,000 according to Charles Slaney the owner. The alarm was turned in by a baker across the street before 3:00 A.M. when he noticed flames coming through the roof. The flames had made such headway that if it hadn't been reported that early the whole town of Multnomah would have gone up in flames. Water damage from the backed-up water in the theatre damaged a good part of the Tualatin Valley Electric and Hardware store next to the theatre. Mr. Snyder, the owner of the adjoining store stated the fire department did a wonderful job, performed like veterans, and had the fire out in about an hour. A crowd of about 140 people watched the spectacular blaze even at that time of the morning.

In July 1949 there were several local fires. The fire department began holding meetings on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday each week. Four of their officers were also attending a school put on by the Ethyl Corporation on prevention and methods extinguishing gasoline fires. Regular drills were suspended during the warm weather but special drills on using gas masks were still being held. During this time of the year, the department usually had their annual picnic by the Tualatin River.

August 1949 the fire department announced they had been called out 105 times so far year. They continued to keep busy. For example: August 26 a residence fire on S.W. 35th, September 1st a grass fire by Barbur Boulevard, September 3rd another grass fire on 53 and Florida, September 14th another grass fire on Taylor's Ferry. That same evening a grass fire on S.W. 62nd, September 7th another grass fire on 55th and Illinois and on September 8th a sump pump was overworked which caused it to burn out. At this time of year the fire department urged residents, with winter season about to begin, that all flues and furnaces should be checked by qualified cleaning firms. A cracked flue could be very dangerous.

The first week of November 1949 a barn burned at 57th and Miles Court. the firefighters really had to work to save the house. A little later, a fire started on S.W. Spring Garden Road from an overheated oil furnace. A day later a flue fire on S.W. Spring Garden Road, another fire on S.W. 19th and Barbur Boulevard with another fire the next day on S.W. 26th in the 8800 block. This was followed by three more flue fires, making it apparent many people didn't have their chimneys checked and cleaned before winter set in.

About that same time the Tualatin Fire Department, when returning from a fire, saw a house burning on Barnes Road and called the Multnomah department who immediately responded. A week later a home on Taylor's Ferry Road burned to the ground with all the owner's furnishings, a faulty oil heater believed to be the cause. I report these fires so readers can get a sense of what the firefighters and volunteers did during that time. Yearly each June, the firefighters had a conference in Salem, Oregon. In May, the volunteers began practicing for the conference competitive drills and contests. The "Mustle Head" comedy division of the Multnomah department put on their "Comedy of Errors" at Twin Harbor, Washington.



Also in March 1950, the issue of being annexed to Portland again became a big issue. The "*Citizens Committee to Remain Independent of the City of Portland*" was busy circulating sheets presenting their views against annexation. Their position:

*"Fire protection in which the readers have already invested their tax funds is excellent. The local department now for two years has stated they are capable and proud of the services they are able to render to the community."*

The other side answered back by saying of the fire department:

*"The fire department employees would have the option of staying on the same job. The City of Portland would assume all the assets and liabilities of the Multnomah department. Fire alarm boxes would be installed along with other equipment necessary to bring the station to city standards. Fire insurance premiums would be reduced 37%."*

For each of the disadvantages the local committee presented, the city had an answer for their concerns.

The month of April was very busy. Meetings held at the Multnomah School by the committee opposed annexation. Members of the Southwest Home Owners Association also held meeting and were for annexation.

On June 25 1950, the North Vietnamese invaded South Korea. All the fire departments in Oregon were advised to recruit enough men to have at least 15 men for each truck. The reserve firefighters would drill once a week as a measure of civilian defense. The local paper reported Paul Jarrett, Rural Fire District No. 2 of Parkrose, as senior rural fire chief to be named the coordinator for all the rural fire departments in Multnomah County. Only 11 of the men needed had signed up so far. In a few days drill and schooling would start. The local paper ran the following ad:

*"Men needed must be at least 25 (except a few husky 16 year olds, with parent's consent) and others over 30. The state fire marshal is the chief of the fire departments for civilian defense of the state. All trucks and men are subject to call anywhere in the state in the event of a natural or a wartime emergency."*

The local paper for the month of August 1950 stated, "Outbreaks of Fire Finish a Long Period of Inactivity." Calls never stopped for the Multnomah Fire Department; the month of August had a flurry of brush fires that kept them busy. In addition, the issue of annexation continued in everyone's mind. Some small districts like Maplewood were petitioning the City to take them in and some of the other smaller districts would vote in September on whether or not to be annexed to Portland. Most of the remaining homes in the Home Water District would decide on November 7, 1950.

Grass fires continued to keep the fire department busy. Most of the people involved had never even asked the department for a fire permit. The department stated,

*"Don't burn that pile of rubbish without phoning in to ask for a fire permit. The number to call is Cherry 3144."*

As soon as these fires subsided, the fall chimney fires began. Fortunately by the end of October they, too, subsided. Education of the public became more important. During October, firefighters addressed

300 students at Capitol Hill, while 265 Multnomah students visited the station followed by another visit of 174 more students from Multnomah School. All pupils received pamphlets on fire prevention and stickers with the fire station numbers to take home and put by their telephones. The department received some letters.

On November 7, 1950 the people voted. The next day the newspaper headlines read "*Annexation Accomplished - New Status Puts Challenge to Identity of Community.*" The article went on to say:

*“By a respectable majority, this area now becomes part of Portland. From here on out, the petty divisions and conflicts within the area should die down and all groups band together in one happy family.”*

The paper lists the advantages. It pointed out everything would not change right away and the city needed everyone’s cooperation. There were those who now thought that Portland should change its name to Multnomah because of the background of that name in Oregon’s history. However, as you now know that did not happen.

Surely all those in the Multnomah Fire Department had to wonder how it would affect their future. Some hoped they could stay and work for the City of Portland, others felt their experience with the department would be something they would always remember, but would rather stay either with their regular job or maybe look elsewhere.

On July 20, 1951, the volunteer firefighters of Multnomah Fire District No. 3 had their farewell dinner at Redmonds on the Hill. 61 attended the dinner and ceremony including the firefighters, their wives, five directors, their wives, and secretaries. The retiring directors were Ed Mathews, A. W. Molin, R. J. McRell, William Robinson, and Fred Slate. Charles E. McGee is the present secretary. Most of these men had been with the department from the beginning. The president of the association and one of the original firefighters, Captain K. R. Twombly presented each member with a gold badge as a present from the department. Directors and the secretary were presented with initialed tie clasps.

President Twombly talked about how they all got started and about many of the highlights of their years working with Chief Surplice and his wife, Mae. Three of the original firefighters were still serving. These were Chief Surplice, Captain K. R. Twombly and first assistant chief, Harold Gellatly, each with twelve years of service.

Other terms of service for the fireman were:

#### Eleven Years

- H. C. Irons,
- C. J. Ethen Jr
- Lynn Cavitt
- H. S. Lawrence

#### Ten Years

- C. J. Ethen Sr
- T. W. Mummey
- L. E, Marshall

#### Eight Years

- N.W. Schwinge
- A. C. Odell
- V. L. Spencer

#### Five Years

- T. Wendland
- W. S. Shrum
- Leo Weidner

#### Four Years

- J. A. Davis
- J. A. Lorenze

#### Three years

- H. K. Davis
- B. L. Hottman

#### Two Years

- G. W. Olander
- Ed Messinger

- P. R. Premo
- H. D. Dieter
- W. A. Choruby
- E. D. Weber
- R. R. Redman
- W. A. Bentson
- Ed Colvin

#### One Year

- D. M. Best

These were just the men present, many others served during the past twelve years.

A brief history of the department was included and praise given for Chief Surplice and his wife, "Mom" as she was called by the firefighters and, told the training they were required to take. Two of the firefighters transferred to the Portland Fire Department and it was believed ten of the volunteers joined the Portland Fire Department in this area. Rather than disband, the volunteers remained a social group. Norm Schwinge wrote:

*"In 1950/51 when Multnomah became a part of Portland, several members chose to become Portland firemen, including Virgil Spencer at their present rank, Lieutenant Spencer was killed a few years later while directing his crew. A Portland fireboat was named after him. For those of us who served in those brief years, it will live in our hearts and memories."*

Multnomah was officially annexed to Portland after the 1950 election, but the city actually took over the fire department on August 1, 1951. The volunteers from the old district who wanted to remain were hired by the Portland Fire Department chief, (Edward Grenfell (1928-1960).

The Portland Fire Department continued to operate out of the old Multnomah station for a number of years keeping busy with local fires. The first fire in the town of Multnomah itself was on the evening of April 11, 1954 when a fire again broke out in the Multnomah Theatre. It continued to burn into the early hours of the next day. This fire resulted in the permanent closure of the Multnomah theatre.

In May 1958, the city voters approved a \$3,000,000 levy *"To build new stations, purchase equipment and modernize the 'fire alarm' system."* It was hoped this money would greatly improve nine stations. And this levy led to the purchase of a large lot on S.W. 30th near Dolph Court and just a block north of Barbur Boulevard. After plans were developed, a large brick building was built at what would become 8720 S.W. 30th in Portland. This building still houses the department serving the Multnomah community.

The Portland Reporter stated:

*"New features included a drive-thru entrance, automatic opening devices for the doors controlled from the central fire station. When trucks leave the station the doors close and lights are turned off, a precaution so the firemen's dinners will not get scorched."*

The station would now be No. 18, the number of an old station at 2200 N.E. 24th that apparently had been abandoned.

The official opening of the city's ninth new station was September 27, 1960, a Sunday, from 1 P.M. to 5 P.M. The plaque outside the station records the date and names the City Commissioner, Stanley W. Earl and Fire Chief Hal Simpson.

The department was kept busy from the start. One important fire call at this new station was received on November 3, 1977, a fire in the heart of Multnomah. At 8:45 P.M., a late working employee at Beardsley Auto Parts store at 7833 S.W. Capitol Highway heard noise of someone on the roof, apparently an arsonist, and went to a nearby tavern to place an alarm. It was a four-alarm fire; more than eighty firefighters fought the blaze. The building, an old wooden structure, sat between a leather shop and a cleaning business. If the employee hadn't called when he did, the whole town of Multnomah, again, could have burned. No building remains where the auto parts store was.

Steve Hunter, a 27 year Portland Fire Department Veteran, recently gave me a tour of this building. Although it is now 47 years old, it was immaculate with pictures on the wall of this and the old station. The kitchen area was well stocked. I was shown an 1949 manual with the name W. S. Shrum in it. He was an old veteran of the Multnomah Fire Department. In addition, I saw their current manual. He brought me his uniform that they wear to formal events, such as funerals. It was a military style uniform and had badges and ribbons on it showing his meritorious service awards. All who today live in the Multnomah area can be proud of our fire department and appreciative of the men and women who serve.

In June 2003, Portland Fire & Rescue began looking for a new site for Fire Station No. 18. Wanted was a site near the intersection of S.W. Capitol Highway and Barbur Boulevard. Early in 2006 Mike Speck, Sr. Facilities supervisor, Portland Fire & Rescue announced:

*“Portland Fire & Rescue is pleased to announce the purchase of the new site for Fire Station No. 18. The site is located just south of the Capitol Hwy. and Barbur Blvd. intersection. The site referred to as the Firestone site, adjacent to the old Firestone Inn, 10299 S.W. Barbur Blvd. The site is 21,395 sq. ft. in size and is in a commercial zone. The purchase price is less than the actual amount that was originally budgeted for the land cost.”*

From article in the S.W. News:

*Although not yet in the new building, which hasn't been started, I am sure we still can count on the great service we have had from that department and all its paid firemen and the volunteers who so gallantly do such a superb job.*

Portland Fire would eventually abandon the move of Station 18. It remains on Spring Garden Road.

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from Lowell Swanson - author

This article is much longer than I anticipated, but I try to get in all the important facts for future generations who want to know about these early years in the community of Multnomah and the surrounding areas. I hope that you won't get too tired reading all of it.

As usual, I thank all of the many people and establishments that have made this article possible, The Oregon Historical Society, the Multnomah Library, main branch, with all their references and microfilm and people to answer questions. And especially to Norm Schwinge, for his continued interest in those days as a volunteer fireman for the Multnomah Fire Department who gave me the incentive to research and write this record of the fire departments in the greater Multnomah area. And, to my wife, Nadine who always helps me with my grammar and corrects my spelling. And to June Smelser, my editor, who finally puts it all together.

