

The Jay W. Stevens Disaster Service Unit

The Stevens Disaster Unit was a bus-sized behemoth whose \$30,000 cost (over \$400,000 in 2007 dollars) was provided by mercantile king Aaron Frank, son of the co-founder of Meier and Frank, the Portland department store fixture. Mr. Frank, a gifted amateur mechanic, had been favorably impressed by the 1933 George Baker Emergency Car, but he envisioned a greater, even gargantuan, version of that ambulance – a colossus of mercy that could face down any emergency. The result of his scheming was a modified bus christened the “Jay W. Stevens Disaster Service Unit” in honor of a friend and former firemarshal. Nicknamed “the Coffee Wagon” for its resemblance to a mobile diner, it was the first civilian all-in-one disaster unit of its kind, a radical expansion of the ambulance that has never been surpassed. The colossus made its public debut on March 25, 1939, when the curtains of the Municipal Auditorium parted and the Disaster Service Unit was there on the stage for the assembled thousands to gape at.



Among the crowd was a modest Aaron Frank, who wasn't interested in accolades or public applause – unfortunately for him, several enthusiastic members of the Portland Fire Department were nearby and, amidst cheers, they seized hold of Frank and carried him kicking and screaming into the spotlight on center stage.

Municipal AUDITORIUM
ADMIT ONE to Reserved Section
Preview and Demonstration
JAY W. STEVENS
DISASTER SERVICE UNIT
RESERVED SEATS WILL BE HELD UNTIL 8 pm
PRESENT AT CLAY STREET ENTRANCE

SAT.
MAR.
25 7:30 pm
1939

Without question, Frank and his Disaster Unit deserved all the applause they received that night. He had given the city a vehicle whose portable power plants could generate sufficient electricity to restore lighting to a good sized office building and which were hooked up to a range of electronic marvels, including floodlights burning enough candle-power to illuminate an entire village, a long-range public address system audible two miles away and a miniature radio station that sent and received messages from the specially equipped gas and smoke helmets worn by its rescue and fire-fighting squads: in addition, it was equipped as a complete emergency hospital with resources for surgery and could transport seven patients at a time. It had a predictably overwhelming effect on a city whose previous conception of an ambulance was a stock hearse or a comfortable looking sedan with a cot in the back and an oxygen tank. One awestruck local reporter who stepped inside the white bus with the red highlights over the wheelwells found himself staring at a “multiplicity of mechanical miracles which [will] probably remind you of an artist’s conception of a world of the future.



In addition to its miniature surgery suite the Disaster Unit had a bevy of heavy rescue equipment and enough tackle to open a hardware store, and so, according to a brochure put out by the Portland Bureau of Fire, it was admirably equipped to handle “not only fire, but all such disasters as train wrecks, plane crashed, [the] collapse of tall buildings, bridges or elevators; shipwrecks, highway disasters, snow slides, earth slides, floods, jail breaks, riots, epidemics, explosions, mine or tunnel disasters, storms or any other emergency that might make headlines in the Rose City. Fortunately for the citizens of Portland the Stevens Disaster Car (as it was later called) was generally called out for less catastrophic emergencies, such as house fires and auto accidents.

The Stevens Car was a Kenworth model T-26 (serial #50456) powered by a Hall-Scott model 160 (serial #33662) 468 cubic inch inline 6 cylinder engine most commonly used in buses. In 1953,



Portland rebuilt and subsequently repowered the Stevens Car with a Hall-Scott model 480 (serial #480357) engine. This was a significantly larger engine of 935 cubic inches and required a longer front end be added to the vehicle, as can be seen in later photos of the vehicle. As of 2022, the Stevens Car was owned by the National Auto & Truck Museum in Auburn, Indiana. No plans for restoration were in place.

Aaron Frank died in 1968 but his “Coffee Wagon” stayed on duty, not being inventoried into a city warehouse for storage until May 9, 1972: by then it had been in operation for almost thirty-three years and had logged over 48,000 miles.

The photo shows Chief Edward Grenfell and Aaron Frank in front of the Stevens car behind the Central Fire Station in the 1950s.

