

The Longest Serving Portland Firefighter

Compiled by Don Porth

It is no surprise that Portland Firefighters tend to serve a long career. But how long is long?

One of the benefits of being a Portland Firefighter has been a pension, available upon retirement. The structure of the pension would somewhat dictate the length of a career. Beginning in 1913, the "Fire Department Relief and Pension Fund" was payable after 25 years of service, or 20 years of service if the age of 50 had been attained. The next iteration, the "Fire and Police Disability and Retirement Fund" in 1949 would provide similar stipulations before a firefighter was eligible to collect their pension. So for many years, a minimum of 20 to 25 years of service would define a career for the purposes of pension eligibility alone.

Beginning July 1, 1949, the Fire and Police Disability and Retirement Fund would be configured so a pension benefit would stop growing at 30 years of service. This would pose the question, why work beyond 30 years? The answer, from a pension standpoint, is simple - because your benefit no longer grows. However, many Portland Firefighters would continue on the job for more than 30 years. As of the end of 2024, 57 would be known to surpass 40 years. Amazingly, four members have surpassed the 50 year mark. Averitt Reed Jr. (50 years), James Dillane (51 years), Edward Grenfell (52 years), and at the top of the seniority heap was Rudy Canuto with a whopping 55 years and 25 days of service with Portland Fire.



Rudolph "Rudy" Canuto would be born August 16, 1876 in Red Wing, Minnesota. His family would move to Portland when Rudy was school age. His path to school each day would pass by Engine 4, located at 1233 SW 1st Avenue. He would stop and talk to the firefighters to the point "he got to know all the boys."

One day, Firefighter Bill Keller, driver of Engine 4, asked Rudy to join as an "Extraman." On June 6, 1897, Rudy accepted.



Truck 4 at SW 1st Avenue at Jefferson Street

An Extraman was a volunteer that worked alongside the paid firefighters of the day. From 1883 to 1908, the Portland Paid Fire Department deployed one shift of firefighters, who worked 6 days in a row followed by 12 hours off. Each company had 3 to 4 paid firefighters supplemented by 4-8 Extramen, who were typically vying for a paid position should one open up. In 1908, a total of 24 hours per week were available to leave the fire station. November 1, 1919, a second shift of firefighters would be added to reduce the work week to 72 hours (one day on, one day off).



Captain Rudy Canuto in 1905

Rudy would become a paid member on February 8, 1898 and move through his career, gaining responsibilities as he gained experience. In 1906, he would become Foreman (Captain) at Engine 4.

In 1913, Rudy became an advocate for the two-platoon system. This would add a second platoon of firefighters to essentially reduce the work week by half (144 hours per week to 72 hours per week). On June 1, 1914, Rudy would be transferred to Engine 31, which was on the outskirts of Portland at SE 67th and Foster Road. Rudy felt this was directly related to "his beliefs" that were in conflict with the fire department administration of the day. The citizens would approve a ballot measure to add a second platoon during the election of November 5, 1918. The second platoon would begin on November 1 the following year.

Station 19 at SE Stark Street at 61st Avenue



In 1925, Rudy would leave Engine 31 and be assigned to Engine 18 at 2200 NE 24th Avenue, serving the Irvington District. He would remain there for 8 years before being transferred to Engine 14 in 1933. His stay there was short and he would move on to Truck 7 at 5340 N. Interstate Avenue. He would transfer back to Engine 14 for 10 months before finding the assignment at Engine 19 (6049 SE Stark Street) that would eventually lead to his retirement. His final 15 year run at Engine 19 would result in his retirement on July 1, 1952. This would total 55 years and 25 days of service with Portland Fire.

Rudy would live for less than 6 years before dying of heart failure on March 11, 1958. Rudy was 81 years old when he passed.

Captain Rudy Canuto in 1938



The second most tenured member of Portland Fire was Edward Grenfell. Edward was hired on December 28, 1904 and retired July 1, 1957 with 52 years and 6 months of service. He too was 81 years old. Most notable about Edward's career was that he was the longest serving Fire Chief in the history of Portland Fire, from 1928 to 1957, an incredible 29 years.

Both Rudy and Edward made remarkable contributions to the history of Portland Fire. May they rest in peace, having served honorable careers.

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