

The Fire of 1873

Compiled by Don Porth

There were those who went to bed on the evening of August 1, 1873 worrying about fire - mostly firemen and merchants, perhaps, although by the time the city slept the next night every last citizen in her could claim some acquaintance with fire fear, either through loss of property or newfound firefighting experience, or just the diminishing of the great city.

It was hot on August 2nd. Drought gripped the city. Chinook winds poured down the Columbia Gorge. Chief Engineer Bruen might look at the blocks north of Morrison Street flattened by a fire in 1872 and feel pain, but he could look at the blocks south of Morrison, those saved - and feel pride.

Following the fire of 1872 there remained of Portland 22 hotels, 12 boarding houses, 9 restaurants, 7 newspapers, 6 real estate houses, countless retailers and wholesalers, breweries, banks, brickyards, soap factories, wagon makers, railroads - a bustling city of 12,129.

The city proper stretched from Burnside Street to Harrison, and from the river to 7th Street. Steamers plying the coast carried 110,000 tons of goods from Portland that year, and another 9,500 tons went to foreign ports. Huge brick buildings in Corinthian, Victorian, and 2nd Empire style rose, mostly north of Washington near the river. South of Washington were business houses of the middle class and the tenements of the poor.

Chief Bruen might look at his city with pride, but he must have smelled the dust and fir and brooded about cisterns that went dry in the 1872 fire, steam engines that took too long to work up a head of steam, hose rotted through in crucial times of need. It was very hot and very dry.

The furniture shop of Hurgren and Shindler was situated at First and Taylor Streets, a nondescript brick and wood structure that lay in the path of Officer Mercer as he sauntered back to the Oak Street precinct house each morning before dawn. This morning as he passed it, August 2nd, he saw smoke wisping from a window. And then, even as he peered closer to be sure before sounding the alarm, he saw running from the building a terrified salesman who had been sleeping in the rear of the store; and then the two of them together had their breath taken away by a great hissing roar as fire hit the varnishes in the basement sending flames rolling up the side of the building.

At 4:30 AM, with no one awake to climb the steeples to answer and amplify its clanging, the bell over Willamette #1 was a lonely voice against the voracious flames. Fifteen minutes later, as the bells over Willamette #1 clanged and citizens dashed into the streets pulling on their clothes, the fire had devoured the block, shooting through a livery and harness makers shop to the three story Metropolis Hotel, the Multnomah Hotel, and the Patton House. So hot was the fire, so all consuming, that it created a wind, which blew northeast, sending the flames hurtling across Front Street to the levee. The fire ran north eating up the wooden structures along the riverbank and with equal pace between 2nd Avenue and Front Streets.

No sooner had the fire started than it was obvious that it was too large for the volunteer force to handle alone. A call went out at dawn and soon the steamer Oneonta was making its way down the Willamette from Vancouver with 60 men and a hand pump, steaming the entire trip under 10 pounds

more pressure than her license allowed. Salem sent two engines and two hose carts on the Oregon and California Railroad after the Salem telegraph dispatcher delayed the train.

By the time the train highballed into the city in a record one hour and 49 minutes, the fire had reached almost to Portland's most prestigious hotel, the St. Charles, on the corner of Front and Morrison Streets. The Kellogg and Lick Hotels across Morrison Street were going up in flames and the Salem redshirts were dispatched to the imposing stone St. Charles to make the last stand.

The firefighters made their way to the top of the mansard roof and after leaning out precariously to raise a hose from below; they soaked the roof even as they baked in the heat of the fire pit that the Kellogg Hotel had become. Just as the St. Charles seemed lost to the flames enveloping Kellogg, the Kellogg collapsed. It imploded and fell on itself in a great flaming heap but in sparing the St. Charles it shot burning debris into Carter's wharf at the foot of Morrison where the men from Columbian Engine Company #3 fought the fire. As a hose on top of a warehouse on the wharf sent a stream of water over the smoldering engine and screaming men, Chinese passersby's were pressed into service to man the brakes on the hand pump. Everywhere frantic volunteers broke up furniture to fire the steamer or commandeered scows and boats to get equipment onto the river.

Just as the flames had turned night into day earlier, now the smoke turned day to night as the firefighters stood on the edge of the inferno. At last, in the early afternoon it seemed that the firebreak created by the fire-leveled block from the 1872 fire would stay the northward progress. And just as this relief seemed imminent, another fire broke out in the center of the block of 1st Street between Yamhill and Taylor.

By now, rumors of incendiarism were rampant and a group of enraged citizens surrounded the block in an attempt to nab the fire starter. The firefighters, meanwhile, had no time for the luxury of suspicion and pursuit. Vigilance Hook and Ladder rolled up with a steamer and two hand pumps and began pouring water on the block, as did Multnomah Engine Company #2, throwing up two streams from a cistern at 1st and Morrison Streets.

Orders were given to demolish the block north of Yamhill and Morrison. The men tore down awnings so they could get water up fronts of the buildings and then went to tear down the buildings themselves when the fire drew up, turning eastward instead, first roaring over several blocks of frame tenements inhabited by the Chinese and then north again through brick commission houses. Knee-deep in the Willamette River, the redshirts from the Willamette Engine Company #1 and Columbian Engine Company #3 watched helplessly as the flames rose over them. But the fight for the north commercial district was over: There was nothing short of the Morrison Street firebreak left to burn.

At the same time the fight for the St. Charles was going on, the fire had been sweeping southward from its point of origin taking everything between 2nd street and the river with it. Horses trapped in livery stables screamed and warehouses exploded. At Jefferson and 1st, the fire again met a natural firebreak, this time a thick stand of trees, but not before it had immolated Protection Engine Company #4's firehouse. It was a terrible blow to the men to lose their engine house, and one of them had stood in the deadly heat ringing the bell until the heat seared the bell rope in half. Finally, the southward progress of the fire was stopped at Clay Street.

After fighting the fire for well over twelve hours, the firemen could rest. The city, now largely in ruins, as the militia came in to take over and guard against looters. Only one of their number had been

seriously injured, Columbian Engine Company #3's foreman, Thomas Johnson, who had been knocked 15 feet to the ground by an explosion as he tried to enter Hurgren and Shindler from a ladder.

Twenty-two city blocks had burned. Damage was estimated at \$1.25 million on an assessed evaluation of only \$9 million for the entire city. Although never officially determined as a cause, arson continues to be suspected. In particular, arson against the Chinese by a racist group frustrated over the depression of 1873 was foremost in officials minds.

After the devastation of 1873, the City of Portland took a long, hard look at its volunteer fire department. Another ten years would pass before the introduction of a paid firefighting force but the handwriting was already on the wall. In 1873, Robert Holman, then foreman of Protection Engine Company #4, felt constrained to petition the Council for an allowance for a night-duty man, suggesting volunteerism was not sufficient to filling some tasks. Furthermore, volunteers tended not to take good care of equipment and it was estimated that as the department grew, the amount of money saved on repair or replacement of equipment would offset the expense of paying salaries in a more efficient paid system.

Before the demise of the volunteer department though, two more innovations would take place. It is ironical that in his 1873 report preceding the fire, Chief Bruen would make this statement concerning the alarm system:

"The best mode of Fire Alarm has been generally discussed among our firemen. The telegraph is considered among a great many as the most effective. The great expense of establishing this system presents serious objections against its adoption. (A) Bell tower in a central location and the city divided into four fire district (is) a more economical system, and one that will, in my opinion, answer all practical purposes for several years."

This request was prescient in the face of the disaster soon to follow. Two months too late, in October of 1873, the city ordered another bell weighing 4,200 pounds, 800 pounds of which were pure silver. This bell, when rung, could be heard all the way to Oregon City. But now there was a consciousness of fire and an urgency for preventing it that led to a replacement of the bell system altogether. On February 17, 1875, this ordinance passed the council:

"The Committee on Fire and Water for the City of Portland are hereby authorized to contract for the purchase and erection of telegraph wires, signal boxes, engine house gongs, bell-ringing apparatus and such other appurtenances as shall be required to establish a system of automatic telegraphic fire alarm provided: There shall be not less than ten signal boxes, four engine gongs; and one bell-ringing apparatus for large alarm bell and that the cost of erecting same shall not exceed the sum of seventy-five hundred dollars."