

Civil Service and the Growth of the City

"Portland Fire Department"

Compiled by Don Porth

By 1920, the Portland Fire Bureau seemed set for smooth sailing. It had a fully paid work force, a full fleet of motorized vehicles, a well established prevention effort, and a revamped work schedule. Things did move along well. With over 20 engine companies, four truck companies, two fireboats, and a variety of support vehicles, the department was well equipped to protect Portland and was growing at the same pace as the city in general. The department was now working to better refine their operations.

Fireboat operations became standard fare for protecting the city from the water side of the banks of the Willamette and Columbia Rivers. Technology was moving fast and the steam-driven fireboats known as the *Williams* (1904) and the *Campbell* (1913) had become obsolete. In 1927, three identical fireboats were commissioned to be built. These would become known as the *David Campbell*, the *Karl Gunster*, and the *Mike Laudenklos*.



Lt. Edward Boatright

The fire college was developed by Captain Edward Boatright. While training had always been an important issue to the fire department, 1928 would find the formation of the Fire College in Portland. This was the first, formal training program in Portland. It was expected that a rookie should be acquainted with the written training manual and demonstrate this in the fire training college to prove their competence. As part of the program, the first training manual was also developed. It was an extremely large book, in excess of 800 pages, that was probably an overwhelming document in the day. It became known as the "Boatright Bible," and many pristine examples remain in the fire department archives. It was an extremely comprehensive document for the day.

Another advancement in 1928 was the building of the Fire Alarm Telegraph facility. Prior to 1928, fire alarm telegraph was located in the basement of City Hall. The new facility would be built at the intersection of NE 21st Avenue and Pacific Street. This small structure would become the home of all fire dispatching for the next 65 years before it would be consolidated with police and medical dispatching at a new 911 center. In this era, the fire alarm system had considerable staffing in place. This included the Superintendent of Fire Alarm, line workers, electricians, and other support functions. Some were staffed by firefighters while others were civilians with specialized skills.

Emergency medical services in the fire service are largely thought to be a development of the 1970s. However, Portland deployed their first “First Aid Car” on June 30, 1933. Named for Mayor George Baker, the “Baker Car” was not an idea of the City of Portland, but of the State of Oregon.

The State Board of Vocational Education cooperated with other agencies in the state of Oregon in introducing work in first-aid to the City of Portland and the state at large. The Board granted Captain Fred Roberts, a Portland firefighter, a certificate for teaching "Resuscitation with the use of Oxygen Breathing Equipment."



1932 George Baker First Aid Car

Under the plan, 20-25 vehicles like the Baker Car would be deployed throughout the state. State and city police radio facilities would serve as a fast and efficient means of communication and safety control for the dispatch of these resources. Instructors would establish training courses in resuscitation with the use of oxygen breathing equipment and deliver it across Oregon.

Before starting out on the trip, the Baker Car, a 1932 Lincoln Sedan, was equipped with medical and first-aid equipment. The car contained a hospital stretcher, tools for extracting victims caught in machinery, and a complete set of bandages, splints, and other first-aid materials. The most notable piece of equipment was the “E. and J. Inhalator and Resuscitator.” This machine would administer the proper proportions of oxygen and carbon dioxide for victims of gas poisoning or acute pneumonia. It would also expand and contract the patient’s lungs under the ideal pressure for restoring normal breathing and heart action.



Capt. Fred Roberts

Additional first aid equipment included syringes, hypodermic needles in sterile packages, surgeon's face masks, forceps, scissors, retractors, emergency sutures, and drugs. Heavy muslin hammocks, arm clamps, and splints were carried for fractures. The vehicle had provisions for an attendant to sit at the head of the patient with a doctor beside. In fact, the vehicle carried sufficient equipment for a surgeon to perform a field operation.

Before the Baker Car saw service in Portland, it was campaigned around the state to show its capabilities. The City Council of Portland granted Captain Roberts' a leave of absence on approval of Chief Edward Grenfell and R. E. Riley, Commissioner of Finance. The State Board of Vocational Education agreed to pay Captain Roberts salary during his state tour with the vehicle.

Between the dates of June 17 and September 5, 1935, Captain Roberts visited 32 cities and communities and covered about 7,000

miles in the Baker Car. In this period, 107 public and private demonstrations were held.

When the Baker Car finally settled in to service in Portland, it responded to 325 to 350 calls per year. The car demonstrated its usefulness by responding to heart attacks, pneumonia, infantile paralysis, electric shock, drowning, carbon monoxide poisoning, all types of suicides, automobile wrecks, and newborn babies.

This successor to the Baker car was a bus-sized vehicle costing \$30,000. The cost, however, was not the burden of Portland taxpayers but rather a donation by mercantile king Aaron Frank, whose father was co-founder of Meier and Frank, the Portland department store fixture. Mr. Frank, a gifted amateur mechanic, had been so impressed by the Baker Car that he wanted to see a greater version, a colossus of mercy that could face down any emergency. The result was an enormous vehicle christened the “Jay W. Stevens Disaster Service Unit” in honor of Chief Jay Stevens who left the department in 1917.



Jay Stevens Disaster Service Unit

The Stevens Car carried portable power plants and could generate enough electricity to restore lighting to a good sized office building. It carried a range of electronic marvels, including floodlights, a long-range public address system that was audible two miles away, and a miniature radio station that sent special frequency broadcasts that could communicate directly with the specially equipped gas and smoke helmets worn by its rescue and fire-fighting squads.

It was also equipped as a complete emergency hospital with resources for surgery. It boasted the capacity to transport seven patients at a time. In addition to its miniature surgery suite the Stevens Car had a bevy of heavy rescue equipment. The brochure introducing it to the community touted its capabilities, saying it was able to handle:

“not only fire, but all such disasters as train wrecks, plane crashes, [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”

As the nation, the city of Portland, and the Fire Bureau recovered from the depression, pension reform was a hot topic, pushed to a great extent by Local 43. Also, the work schedule, which consisted of one day on, and one day off, was still taking a toll on members and days off were being negotiated. This would lay the groundwork for much of Local 43's work over the next decade.

As the United States entered into World War II, many Portland Firefighters were veterans of prior wars or civic minded enough to want to enlist in the war effort. It was estimated that 50% of the fire department personnel were unavailable at some time due to involvement in the war effort.

The war years were difficult for the fire department. Fire Chief Edward Grenfell noted that in fiscal year 1943-44, 10 people had lost their lives to fire, a 300% increase over the peacetime average. The \$2,677,444.90 fire loss amounted to more than the total fire loss for the six years leading up to the war. A problem unique to Portland was the large influx of wartime workers. This led to a congested housing situation. When coupled with the loss of 50% of his trained firefighting force to military service, history shows Portland suffered elevated losses. Chief Grenfell lamented that even when he could keep his companies up to strength, it was with substandard manpower, and where he could not, and his already overworked men were forced into overtime.

Times must have been fairly desperate from a personnel standpoint. An example of the staffing challenges faced in the day was mobilizing people like 15-year-old Jefferson Morris in 1946 as a substitute (volunteer). Morris would be hired at age 22 and serve a career with Portland Fire. "Fireman Jeff" would go on to become one of Portland's most beloved firefighters, serving as a Battalion Chief and public information and education officer. Morris would succumb to cancer in 1974 at the age of 43. Probably by no coincidence, the 1940s also proved to be the decade showing the most firefighter line of duty deaths over any other ten-year period. This unfortunate chapter was followed by steady improvement in the subsequent decades.

By 1940 the pension fund for retiring fire fighters was on the verge of insolvency and action was taken to establish a new pension and hours system. Firefighters petitioned the people of Portland for better hours in 1946. The 72 hour work week of the day put a tremendous burden on firefighters' personal lives. Adding a third platoon seemed the best answer, but it was expensive idea, essentially expanding the workforce by one-third. In a May referendum of that year, the people of Portland rejected a proposed 48 hour work week. Undaunted, Local 43, the Portland Firefighter's Association, continued to push a reduced work schedule. At the same time, the pension system for police and firefighters was under reforms. It too would be presented to voters and was passed in November 1948. It went into effect in July of 1949. Soon after, the present-day, three platoon system would be adopted in 1952. As the years passed, various adjustments to the three platoon system brought hours down to 53, and then 50 hours per week.

The pension reform of 1949 batched the Police and Fire Bureaus together under their own, unique pension system. This plan provided the security and benefits necessary to attract men into the Fire and Police Bureaus with careers rather than jobs in mind. It continued until around 2010 when all new employees to fire and police would be enrolled in a different public employee retirement system. The old fire and police system will eventually run its course and disappear from history.

By the late 1940s, the time had come for a new central fire station. Located at the corner of Front Avenue and SW Ash Street, the three story brick building would become the pride of the department. It opened with great fanfare and in its heyday would house two engine companies, one truck company,

one rescue (medical aid vehicle), an on-duty chief, and numerous pieces of specialty apparatus. It also housed the administrative functions of the bureau as well as the fire marshal's office. As the department and city grew, many of these functions would be moved to satellite locations. After 60 years of various adjustments and modifications to the building, a major overhaul occurred in 2010 that included seismic upgrades and provisions for accommodating both male and female firefighters.

A modernization program running from 1957 to 1963 streamlined and consolidated the department, reducing the number of districts from five to four in 1963 and the number of stations from 38 to 30 in 1957. This type of reorganization would occur every few decades as the City of Portland would grow and change. Freeways, streets, and the general arrangement of the city would render some stations obsolete, even within a few years of their construction.

The modernization program was a huge investment in infrastructure for the Portland Fire Bureau. With a fleet of new apparatus and re-located fire stations, the department was set to move into the 1970s and beyond.

