

Portland Fire & Rescue Ladders

Compiled by Don Porth

Ladders have always been one of the most essential tools of Portland Firefighters. In fact, the first company to officially provide fire protection for the citizens of Portland was Vigilance Hook and Ladder. Their service began August 2, 1853. The record does not show nor describe the number or type of ladders they used, but they were likely simple and limited. Until 1866, history describes their vehicle as a "common wagon" for transport of ladders. In 1866, a purpose built, hand-pulled ladder wagon would be purchased by the city (and remains in Portland Fire ownership today). It would serve until 1880 when a 2nd Class (60 foot) Hayes aerial horse-drawn ladder truck would be purchased to serve the city.

Early ladders were made of wood. The preferred material was old-growth Douglas Fir timber, indigenous to the Pacific Northwest. Douglas Fir was lightweight, strong, flexible, and plentiful. Rungs were more typically of hardwoods.



While it is not documented as to when it began, Portland Fire employed a woodshop that would build their own ladders specifically for firefighting purposes. With proper care, these would last many, many years. Even when damaged, they were often disassembled and re-made into a shorter or narrower ladder.

Proper maintenance by firefighters was crucial. A tough finish of gym seal was used as a protective



coating. When necessary, the old finish would be scraped off, the ladders sanded, and then re-coated with gym seal. This might occur several times a year for busy companies. The relative age or experience of wooden ladders could often be measured by how rounded the corners would be from the re-finishing process.

Wooden ladders would remain the favorite of Portland Firefighters well

into the 1980s. However, ladder standards would become such that wooden ladders could no longer withstand the rigors of testing, and were found to break during annual ladder tests. Aluminum ladders became the standard and over a couple year period of time, had replaced all wooden ladders in Portland, with the exception of attic ladders that had managed to be kept on some companies.

Ladder styles were numerous, including Pompier Ladders, Attic Ladders, Straight Ladders, Extension Ladders, Poled-Extension Ladders, and Aerial Ladders. Each served a purpose and were valued by the firefighters who used and cared for them.

Ladder operations have changed dramatically over the past decades. Early Portland was occupied by buildings making up no more that 3 to 4 stories in height. As buildings grew, so did ladders. Eventually buildings would outgrow the height ladders could achieve. Building codes would provide solutions to fire safety that would



require fire escapes, protected interior stairwells, and

sprinkler systems. Portland Firefighters will always need ladders, but the size, material, and evolutions will continue to change, challenging firefighters of today and tomorrow to continually evaluate their ladder needs and practices.

