

Aaron M. Frank

Honorary Fire Chief - Portland Fire Department

Source - Various

History does not share who or how many people may have been deemed "Honorary Fire Chief." However, clear evidence exists that at least one person was bestowed that honor. His name is Aaron Frank. Evidence exists on the badge pictured here.

Aaron Meier Frank was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1891. He graduated from the University of Oregon law school in 1913 and was admitted to the Oregon State Bar that same year. A member of Portland's prominent Meier and Frank families, Aaron soon became involved in the family store, Meier & Frank.

In 1916, he and Ruth R. Rosenfeld were married; they later had two children. Aaron became assistant manager of the Meier & Frank Department Store in 1922. In 1930, after Meier & Frank President Julius Meier was elected Oregon governor, Aaron became the company's vice president and general manager. After Julius Meier's death in 1938, Aaron became president of the store, a position he held until his retirement in 1964.



Specific details of how the honorary Fire Chief designation came to be are unknown. The inscription on the back of the badge tells that it was awarded on August 14, 1939. This was 4.5 months after Aaron had made the significant donation of a unique apparatus, intended to save lives in Portland.

The Stevens Disaster Unit was a bus-sized behemoth whose \$30,000 cost (in 1939 dollars) was provided by mercantile king Aaron Frank, son of the co-founder of Meier and Frank, the Portland department store fixture. Aaron was a gifted amateur mechanic and had been favorably impressed by the 1933 George Baker Emergency Car (Portland's first emergency medical response vehicle), 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 the former Fire Marshal of Portland (Fire Marshal from 1914-1917). Nicknamed "the Coffee Wagon" for its resemblance to a mobile diner, it was the first all-in-one disaster unit of its kind. 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 in all its glory, the audience of thousands, who had gathered for the unveiling, were in awe. Among the crowd was a modest Aaron Frank, who wasn't interested in accolades or public applause. Unfortunately for him, several enthusiastic Portland Firefighters were nearby and, amidst cheers, they seized hold of Aaron and carried him kicking and screaming into the spotlight on center stage.

As to why Aaron Frank wanted the vehicle named for Jay Stevens, Frank said, *"The car has been named in honor of Jay W. Stevens, whose unselfish service to humanity is an inspiration to all. His brilliant record of accomplishment in his chosen field is a tribute to his unique qualities of mind and heart. I'm glad to have this opportunity of honoring Jay W. Stevens at the pinnacle of his career in the service of humanity."*

Chief Edward Grenfell would say of the donation:

Portland's Disaster Service Unit was conceived, built, equipped, and donated to the Portland Fire Bureau by Mr. Aaron M. Frank, President of the Meier & Frank Company of Portland. Recognized for many years as one of Portland's first citizens in all activities looking to safety and public welfare, Mr. Frank has maintained a close personal interest in the Portland Bureau of Fire and it was his knowledge gained from personal experience with the Bureau that gave rise to the idea of a disaster service unit.

For more than a year, Mr. Frank devoted his time and efforts to so perfecting the unit that it would be lacking in nothing that might be of use in emergencies. Use of only the finest materials, equipment, and workmanship was the rule followed throughout construction.

The result of Mr. Frank's long and painstaking task is seen in the completed unit which the Portland Bureau of Fire now points to with the utmost pride as a monument to public protection and as a monument to public spiritedness of one of Portland's leading citizens.

The Portland Bureau of Fire is indebted to Mr. Frank for having placed at our command a unit which not only greatly increases the efficiency and usefulness of our Bureau, but which gives to the people of Portland and vicinity an added and distinctly new form of protection and an increased feeling of security.

In the long task of designing, equipping, and building the unity, help was given by many officials and citizens. Special mention should be made of the invaluable service given by Chief B.T. French, Chief Edward Boatright, Chief C.C. Ralph, Captain A.L. Sherk, Captain B.P. Johnson, Mr. Roy Love, Mr. Gordon Sloat, Mr. Nelson Woods, Mr. Jack Lowe, Mr. Arthur Lusted, Mr. Nels Oberg, Mr. Lawrence Duhrkoop, Mr. Walter Nickels, and Mr. Michael Zill.

Aaron Frank died in 1968 but his "Coffee Wagon" stayed on duty until May 9, 1972. By then it had been in operation for almost thirty-three years and had logged over 48,000 miles, providing a variety of emergency response services for Portland Fire.

Aaron Frank pictured with Fire Chief Edward Grenfell, who was Chief at the time Aaron made the gift.



For his part, the namesake of the vehicle, Jay W. Stevens, has a unique story as well.

Jay was born in 1885 and began his career in the fire service in 1900 when he became a volunteer firefighter in Weston, Nebraska. In 1903, at age 17, he moved to Portland, Oregon and joined the Portland Fire Department on June 1, 1904. He was quickly promoted to Lieutenant in 1905 then Captain in 1906. A tireless worker for the public good, Stevens continued his ascent in the fire department. He would be promoted to Battalion Chief in 1908.

In 1914, Portland, then a city of 300,000 citizens, elected to create a Fire Prevention Division of the fire department. The man chosen to lead it was Assistant Chief Jay Stevens. His assignment began on March 18th of that year. During his next three years, city fire losses dropped from \$1.7 million in 1914 to \$234,000 in 1917.

Stevens would leave Portland in 1917, not to rest on his successes, but to further the word of fire prevention. Before he left Oregon, he spent two months helping organize the newly formed State Fire Marshal's Office. From 1917 to 1921, he would head the "Fire Prevention Bureau of the Pacific," an organization on the west coast dedicated to the prevention of arson. This was taken over by the "National Board of Fire Underwriters" in 1921 and Stevens continued his leadership as the Assistant General Manager in the San Francisco office. In 1924 he began serving as the unpaid Fire Marshal of California, where he would continue his service under four consecutive Governors. He also served as the director of the National Fire Protection Association from 1922-1924.



As Stevens traveled the country to further fire prevention agendas, he would be named honorary Fire Marshal in 250 cities across the country. In one of his speeches to an assembly of 118 Oregon fire chiefs, he was quoted as saying "Fire inspections are fire prevention; fire prevention is fire protection." His "Portland Plan" for fire prevention would eventually become the fire prevention plan for the National Board of Fire Underwriters."

Stevens was known to still be promoting fire prevention in 1956 when he headed up the International Association of Fire Chief's campaign to promote home inspections. Twenty-two states would come on-board for the campaign. It all came full circle when Portland Fire would win an IAFC award for home inspections in the late 1950s.

Chief Stevens died on March 26, 1980 in Walnut Creek, California at age 95. He was affectionately known throughout his career as the "Father of Fire Prevention." His legacy also carries on in his family. His great grandson would become a firefighter in Gig Harbor, Washington.

Modest as he was, Aaron Frank likely gave little thought to the generous gift from Chief Grenfell and Portland Fire. In fact, family friends who worked for Portland Fire never knew this badge existed. It would not be until a short time after Aaron's son, Gerry Frank, would pass away that this discovery was made. During the distribution of items from Gerry's estate, this badge was discovered in the bottom of a box surrounded by various pieces of jewelry. Upon closer inspection, the realization of what this was came into focus.

Today, this unique and special badge rests in safe hands, preserved within the enduring family of a multi-generational Portland Firefighter family.

It is an honor and privilege to be able to share it in this story.

