

Portland Fire's Work Schedules

Compiled by Don Porth

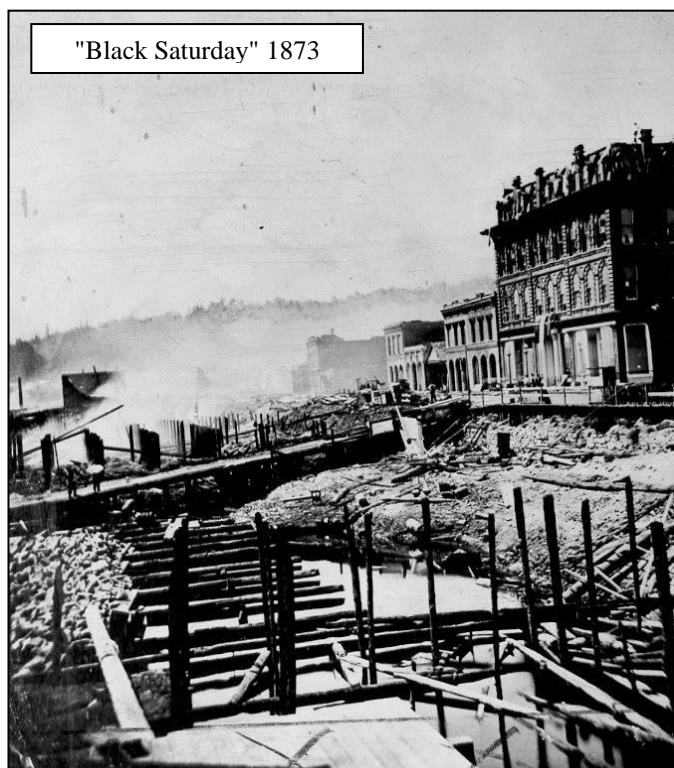
Portland Firefighters enjoy a reasonable work schedule and benefits that are appropriate for the dangers and commitment to the job of firefighting and emergency response services. However, it has not always been that way. The work schedules of Portland Fire have changed over the decades as the city and the department have evolved.

Portland Fire began response services to the citizens of Portland on August 2, 1853. Vigilance Hook and Ladder was the first company to form and went into service that day. Willamette Engine Company #1 would follow on August 6th of the same year. Over the next 30 years, Multnomah Engine Company #2, Columbian Engine Company #3, Protection Engine Company #4, Tiger Engine Company #5, and Couch Engine Company #6 would follow.

During the early days of the Portland Volunteer Fire Department (1853 through 1882), citizens volunteered to make up the work force in order to protect the city and the citizens of Portland. The need for fire protection was never more evident than it was during the conflagration of August 1873, which became known as "Black Saturday." On that day, 22 square blocks of the city would be destroyed by fire. Calls for help were heard from Salem to Vancouver, who both sent resources to help fight the fire. The volunteers did not lack effort, but training, resources, and the capabilities of the era all limited their efforts and showed the shortcomings of a volunteer workforce.

Black Saturday would be the impetus for the evolution of the Portland Volunteer Fire Department into the Portland Paid Fire Department. This would occur in January of 1883. While "paid" became part of the name of the department, it cannot be compared to the paid fire department of today.

In the volunteer era, each volunteer fire company typically had a roster of 30 to 50 members ready to respond on their behalf. The firehouses of the day were, in some ways, like a social club that encouraged the volunteers to visit the firehouse, thus being available at any moment for an emergency. Some volunteers actually made the firehouse their residence, which made them available during the night. These strategies proved effective in keeping volunteer firehouses staffed and ready.



In 1882, at the end of the volunteer era, there were approximately 300 members among the seven volunteer fire companies. The Portland Paid Fire Department was set up differently. The number of companies were pared down from six engine companies and one truck company to four engine companies and one truck company. Each of these five companies consisted of 3 paid members and typically 4-8 "extramen," or volunteers. There was only one working shift, which meant no relief from duty. While the number of available firefighters suffered a dramatic reduction, greater expectations for capability and availability were the tradeoff's. Below is the staffing recorded over the first twelve years of the Portland Paid Fire Department.

Year	Permanent Members	Extramen	Total	No. Companies
1883	18	34	52	5
1884	20	40	60	5
1885	20	50	70	5
1886	20	50	70	5
1887	20	50	70	5
1888	22	58	80	5
1889	22	58	80	5
1890	28	72	100	6
1891	32	84	136	8
1892	58	112	170	8
1893	58	112	170	8
1894	62	73	145	8

Work Shifts

With the advent of the Portland Paid Fire Department (PPFD), firefighters were paid to be on duty at all hours of the day. This ensured a reliable and timely on-duty response. The work shift consisted of one platoon of firefighters who worked 6 days in a row, then had one day off. The day off likely rotated among the paid members and the slack was picked up by the Extramen, who themselves were positioning for a paid position should one open up.

Many firefighters either lived in the fire station or lived very close by. It was not uncommon for several homes in close proximity to a fire station to become the residences of firefighters. These homes would move to other firefighters should a transfer or promotion take place.

Firefighters of that era were likely happy to be paid and to have the benefit of a regular job. The city of Portland had a population of about 18,000 in 1883 and five fire companies were likely not overburdened. However, growth came steady over the next few decades and the PPFD would grow with it.

The Two Platoon System

Portland was much like other large cities in the evolution of their fire department. Around 1910, other cities began experimenting with a second platoon of firefighters to allow firefighters to have some kind of life outside of the fire service. Portland Firefighters lobbied for this same benefit.

The Two Platoon system would effectively add another crew of firefighters who would rotate on and off duty on alternate days to provide continuous coverage. Under the one platoon system, firefighters logged approximately 144 hours of work per week. Adding the second platoon would cut that in half.

With the backing of the Central Labor Council and the Civil Service Employees Union (forerunners to the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations), firefighters organized their plea for a second platoon and pitched the idea to Portland Fire leaders. Fire Chief Bidley Dowell was not in favor. He was quoted in the Oregonian newspaper on September 12, 1916, saying:



"It is a fad. But personally, I don't like it and am against putting it into effect. It would mean, right off the bat, an increase of at least \$200,000 a year in the cost of the department and would, in my opinion, lessen efficiency."

The following day, a letter to the editor of the Oregonian from Eugene E. Smith laid the situation out differently. He wrote:

"I note you report the circulation of a petition among the members of the fire bureau relative to the two platoon system.

As you credit the Central Labor Council and one of its affiliate organizations, the Civil Service Employees Association, for being responsible for the petitions, I feel that it is due the public to know that neither the Council nor the Association are connected in any way with this movement for it has never been before either.

Inquiry among firemen developed the following information:

A movement having its inception from the firemen themselves has resulted in a petition being generally circulated among the members of the fire bureau. This petition is being generally signed.

It petitions the Chief of the department and the Mayor to approve of, and to cooperate with, the signers in an investigation of the merits of what is termed as a two platoon system.

There is a rule in the fire bureau making it mandatory that such approval be gained before a fireman may do anything that he believes to be for the good of the service or for his betterment.

The fireman's loyal service to the city should command more appreciation than a volley of figures, assertions, and unfavorable and intimidating resolutions that serve to prejudice the voters and taxpayers against them prior to the hearing petitioned for. This is particularly

unfair as the firemen are bound helpless by a rule imposed upon no other class of civil or private employees.

While this is not a move by the Central Labor Council, it is needless for me to say that the Council will be found to be in entire sympathy with any cause emanating from the ranks of the firemen that is calculated to better their condition or remedy an onerous one, and that is found on proper investigation to be reasonable and sound."

Closer association with the Civil Service Employees Association would later be stated more obviously and much of the literature in favor of adding the two platoon system would appear to be somewhat boilerplate, likely from other labor efforts across the country.

Petitions in favor would be presented to the city, signed by 320 of the 417 firefighters employed in 1916. Literature was also distributed to citizens. A January 15, 1917 flier in favor of the two platoon system provided the following information (paraphrased for clarity):

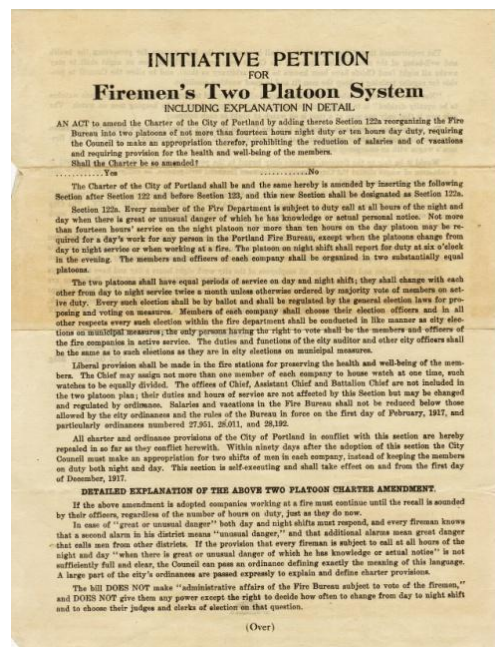
- 301 firefighters filled out a survey about their personal lives
- 209 are married, 92 are unmarried
- Of the 209 married firefighters, 143 are fathers
- Of the 209 married firefighters, 26 support dependents other than children
- Of the 92 unmarried firefighters, 45 support dependents
- Of the 301 firefighters surveyed, 66 are homeowners, 235 are renters
- Every man reporting expressed a belief that the two platoon system would encourage investment and home owning.

Numerous appeals would be laid in place to compel voters to favor this ballot.

In an effort to appease firefighters, City Council would offer a change in the work schedule, having firefighters work 5 days in a row with 1 day off, then repeat. The city claimed it would require the hiring of 8 additional firefighters to accommodate the change. This did not go into effect.

On June 4, 1917, the voters would reject a ballot initiative (28,699 against, 10,402 in favor) regarding the addition of a second platoon. By mid July, the Mayor would intervene and offer a work schedule change to 4 days on duty followed by 1 day off, then repeating. While this was an improvement, it did not satisfy the firefighters.

So contentious had the issue become that firefighters were quitting, leaving the department understaffed and creating other problems. This is likely why the City Council and the administration



of Portland Fire finally got behind the change. In an October 28, 1918 letter to the public from the Executive Staff of Portland Fire, this was put forth:

To the public: We, the undersigned, Chief, Assistant Chief, Battalion Chiefs, and Fire Marshal, of the Portland Fire Department, have had an opportunity to study the two platoon system since its adoption and installation by the Council, September 10, 1918, which was found necessary on account of the difficulty in keeping the Department at its proper efficiency.

This emergency was caused by the resignation of many of the experienced men, and the inability to get men to fill their places. Since the adoption of the present system, a great many of the old, experienced men have returned, and we have had no difficulty in keeping the Department up to its full quota.

The Bill that will be submitted for the approval of the voters at the election, November 5th, is entirely satisfactory to us, and we do not hesitate to state that, in our opinion, the two platoon system gives a more efficient fire department and we most earnestly request that voters give it their approval at that time.

Signed:

BF Dowell - Chief Engineer

M Laudenklos - Assistant Chief

JE Young - Battalion Chief

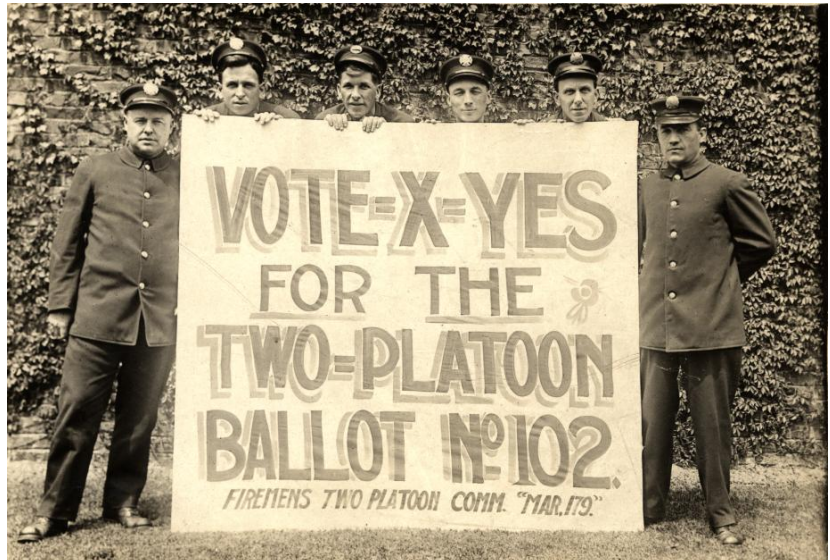
L Holden - Battalion Chief

Edw Grenfell - Fire Marshal

Another ballot would be prepared for the November 5, 1918 election. This time, it was endorsed by City Council. In fact, at their meeting on September 10, 1918 they would implement a trial of the two platoon system. Voters would pass the initiative in the November election. The ballot would read:

An Act to amend the Charter of Portland by adding a new section to be designated as Section 122a authorizing the

reorganization of the Bureau of Fire into two equal platoons, providing for not more than fourteen hours night service nor more than ten hours day service, subject to call at all hours in case of great or unusual danger of conflagration, requiring liberal housing conditions for firemen and authorizing additional annual tax levy not exceeding four-tenths of one mill for such purpose. Shall the Charter be amended? Yes / No



As all of this was happening, organized labor was coming into the scene. As was mentioned earlier, the Central Labor Council and the Civil Service Employees Union (forerunners to the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations), played a role in an organized approach to placing demands on the reluctant city leaders. Portland Firefighter's had formed an association called the "City Firemen's Union #15776 of Portland, Oregon." The details of the organization are not known, but it likely aligned Portland Firefighters with the different labor organizations and gave them a collective voice on behalf of many members.



Captain Alfred Horn

In order to become a formal member of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), Portland Firefighters had to become a formal labor organization. On December 10, 1917, the members of the City Firemen's Union would vote to affiliate with the Central Labor Council and the Oregon State Federation of Labor. The vote passed with 165 yes votes and 10 no votes. This made them eligible to join the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF), which convened their national organizing meeting on February 28, 1918. Portland Firefighters would become the 43rd local chapter to sign-on and would receive official notice on March 9th. Alfred Horn would serve as the first President of Local 43, replacing Clyde Hughes, who had guided the effort to reach the point of acceptance.

Now an organized labor association, Local 43, with the help of the IAFF, would continue to push for the second platoon.

History would indicate that the two platoon system, while being passed in the November 1918 election, would be implemented on November 1, 1919. On that date, at least 83 firefighters were hired into Portland Fire.

This would put the issue to rest and the two platoon system would become the standard for the next 27 years. The rank and file would swell to over 500 firefighters during this time as the city would grow and staffing standards would be implemented for engine and truck companies.

A Third Platoon

Fire departments across the United States had begun using a third platoon to relieve the work burden on firefighters and reduce the work week from 72 hours to 56. Portland was no different and efforts began to push for this change. On September 11, 1945, at a meeting of Portland Firefighters Local 43, a committee was formed to work toward a 48 hour work week.

A third platoon was likely in the works by May 23, 1946 as Local 43 instructed the Committee to establish a design for the 60 work week by July 1, 1946. They were to further design a 56 hour work week by July 1, 1947 and a 48 hour work week by July 1, 1948.

The issue of the third platoon would be put to voters on November 5, 1946 and it was handily approved to go from a 72 hour work week to a 60 hour work week. One week later, on November 11th, 76 firefighters would be hired. Seven months later, on July 1, 1947, an additional 76 firefighters

would be hired. In all, between November 11, 1946 and December 24, 1949, Portland hired approximately 297 firefighters. likely to supplement the additional shift of firefighters.

Another factor working heavily in favor of a third platoon was the end of World War II. From 1943 to 1945, at least 239 Portland Firefighters were absent for military service. Local 43's minutes would show their concern that returning veterans would not have a job. As the surrenders took place in May and August of 1945, members would begin to return. This may have fast-tracked the third platoon in order to create additional positions for returning veterans.

The 60 hour, three platoon system would settle into a 56 hour work week. Each of the three shifts (platoons) of firefighters worked 24 hours on duty (one day) followed by 48 hours off duty (two days). Two other shifts would replicate the pattern during the subsequent two days. This schedule would last until the 1980s. The addition of Kelly Days (a scheduled day off within a 28 day period) would become the standard to reduce the work week to 53 hours per week.

In 2023, a significant change to the shift pattern would occur. Referred to as the "One Three, Two Three" schedule (Suppression Schedule), the rotation became 24 hours on duty (one day), followed by 72 hours off duty (three days), then 48 hours on duty (two days) followed by 72 hours off duty (three days). This pattern would then repeat using a three shift (platoon) rotation. Pilot testing began in March of 2022. By the beginning of 2023, it was implemented into most of Portland Fire. The 24/48 (24 hours on duty - one day, followed by 48 hours off duty - two days) shift schedule remains with the term "Traveler Suppression Schedule" and is used by some specialties and those filling in for vacation/sick leave. This reduced the work week to 50.4 hours per week.

Time will tell how long this schedule will remain. Much depends on staffing levels, call volume, and the evolution of the work firefighters perform. At the time this story is published, both labor and management seem pleased with the arrangement.

What seems, at a glance, to be an established standard has actually evolved significantly since the origins of the volunteer era. As the saying goes...the only constant, is change.

As of 2024, Shift Schedule Duration:

Volunteer Era - 30 years

One Platoon System - 35 years

Two Platoon System - 28 years

Three Platoon System (24/48) - 76 years

Three Platoon System (1-3-2-3) - 1 year and counting

#END#

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