

Stories by Ken Carter, 25-year veteran of Portland Fire 1949-1975

Getting “Tapped Out”

The firehouses in Portland had a ticker tape system. When a street box was pulled or when a telephone call came in to the Alarm Office, a coded series of numbers were transmitted to the engine houses indicating the closest street pull box to the fire address. The corresponding card, in the engine houses, listed the companies assigned to respond and designated who would fill in if one of the first-in companies were out of service. The Operator would give the address of the fire (if known).

The firehouses assigned as first-in companies would be tapped out. The lights would drop (a master switch would turn on all the lights in the engine house). The automatic door opener would be activated and electric hammer would beat on a big brass gong! This not only got our attention, but our eyes bugged out and our hearts pounded as we ran for the rig (no wonder heart attacks are a major cause of disability).

We would put on our heavy canvas pants with waterproof felt liner (turn-outs) by our beds. These were slid over knee length rubber boots. We could step into our boots, pull up our pants, slip suspenders over our shoulders, pull on a sweatshirt, and be dressed and on our way in seconds.

Most of the firehouses had the dormitories on the second floor. A brass pole was the fastest way down. You wrapped your arm around the pole and dropped the fifteen or twenty feet to the apparatus floor. If you were awake, pressure on your arm slowed the speed. If not, a rubber mat softened the landing.

Well...not always. A fireman at Truck 2 took the pole, wasn't fully awake, dropped and broke both of his ankles. He never returned to work.

Firehouse Cooking

Tom, a crewman on Truck 2, was cooking Thanksgiving dinner: turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy, sweet potatoes, olives, and all the fixings. Nobody screwed around with the cook. He shopped, he planned, and we helped, but nobody made suggestions, or asked questions. The Maestro was in full control. All morning the smells drifted through the engine house. Dinner would be at 2 p.m.

The turkey was golden brown. AH! Hotpads. Lift it out of the oven...OOPS! It tipped, then it slipped. Tom ran to retrieve it. It skidded in the grease and he kicked the turkey across the kitchen floor. NO ONE SAID A WORD. It was good, Damn Good!

The Olden Days...

Station 19 had been built at the turn of the century. The first floor was a horse barn. Cold and drafty, the stables had been in the rear of the apparatus floor. The horses were led out and positioned under the harness that hung from the ceiling. A trip rope dropped the harness over the horses. They could be snapped together and attached to a hose wagon. The horses quivering with excitement could be out the door in seconds. The Old Timers swore the horses could count the thuds as the punch poked holes in the tape when the alarm came in. Many thought the horses knew where they were supposed to go.

1950 was a cold year, cotton blankets, sawdust for fuel, 20 degrees. When the sawdust in the hopper was burned up, the fire would back draft into the hopper and fill the engine house with smoke. If any saw dust hung up in the hopper, she would burn back through and singe the rafters.

The Job

I wanted to fight fires. I looked forward to my extra shift at Engine 7. Something was always going on. It was a double house with an Engine, Truck, Chief, and his driver. Thirteen men in all. When they had alarms, stuff happened. Bells rang; doors opened; and guys went running to rigs. Out the door they went, sirens squalling.

Firefighters would be hanging on with one arm while putting on a turnout coat, bracing against the turns. You'd feel the power and hear the roar of the engine as the drivers shifted gears. It was fun. We could hear the Chief's siren up ahead leading the way

The officers of Engine 7 and Truck 4 would be yanking on the bell rope and pumping their sirens. We could see the column of smoke and the sky lit up. Then sniff the air. Tar paper - a warehouse; wood shingles - a house fire; lumber yards had a smell all their own.

At night you can hear the rigs moving up. The sounds of the sirens drift over the city. They're moving in St. Johns and Sellwood. This is a burner. The sirens are squalling on Front Avenue. You can feel the excitement in the air. We roll up, "LAY IN!"

Everybody has a job. Somehow they all get done. The truck crews open up, bust in doors, and break out windows. They throw up the ladders. We're right behind them, stretching hose and kicking in doors. We have enough men. "Bring up a 2 1/2 fog nozzle. Sweep the fire. Lay into your hose belt." The pressure from an open nozzle can knock you down. There are more guys coming. A Truckman or Hoseman will kneel on the hose, pressing it down on the floor to compensate for the back thrust from the nozzle. We have thirteen guys. We can handle anything.

It was great! This was The Fire Department I wanted.

Fireboats

In the spring of 1950 I was transferred to Fireboat 1, and was assigned to drive the Turret Wagon. The boat was tied up to a float in the river and a ramp led from the back porch

down to the float. The firehouse was a one-story cement building housing a dormitory, shower room, watch room and a kitchen on the main floor.

Portland had three boats providing coverage for the miles of warehouses and docks along the river. A four-inch water cannon (turret) mounted mid-ship could send a stream of water several hundred feet to wet down large fires. The Pilot was trained to balance the power of the engines against the back thrust of the stream from the nozzle. The boat, sitting off shore, could hang stationary in the current. A hard left or right rudder caused the boat to drift sideways, allowing the stream from the turret to sweep large areas of fire. It was a very effective way to fight shoreline grass and brush fires as well as fuel storage tanks and the creosote covered piling under docks.

The boat also served as a portable pumping station, able supply 10,000 gallons of water per minute, equal to the output of 7 or 8 fire engines.

Five men were assigned to Fireboat 1. A Pilot steered the boat, an Engineer maintained the engines, and a fire crew of 2, an officer and a hoseman, served as a deck hands. The fifth man (me) drove the turret wagon. It was a truck with a mounted turret and 2,000 feet of 4-inch hose that could be connected to the pumps onboard one of the boats to provide water for a large stream from the turret wagon or supply water for several land companies.

It was late summer. A grass and brush fire had. The first hose companies to arrive saw there were several acres on fire, threatening residential property. Hot spots of burning sawdust were sending sparks hundreds of feet in the air. A Second Alarm was called for. Boat 1 headed for the fire. I drove the Turret Wagon and met the boat on the old ferry slip at the foot of Spokane Street. The boat nosed into the shallow water and the deckhand threw a line ashore.

The fire had attracted a crowd. I pulled some hose out of the turret wagon and tied the rope to it. Some teen-agers asked, "Can we help?" I said, "Sure, pull this hose down to the boat." Fifteen or twenty kids grabbed that hose, took off at a run and nearly dumped me on my ass. They fed the hose out over the water as the boat crew pulled. They did in seconds what would have taken me 15 minutes, probably more. I used the stream from the turret to wet down several acres of brush then moved in close to drill a stream of water down into the hot spots of burning sawdust. This meant shutting down, dragging hose through the brush, re-connecting and hitting another hot spot.

The boat crew stayed most of the night. The land companies were on duty around the clock for 3 or 4 days. They never really put the fires completely out; it flared up every 2 or 3 years in the summer time.

Where There's Smoke, There's Fire?

We got a fire call, a small house. Engine 12 was first in. Smoke was rolling out. The fire appeared to be in the back. We skidded to a stop and I grabbed the booster and headed for

the back of the house. Cap ran up the front steps while Smitty put the pump in gear and followed me around back. We kicked in the kitchen door and sprayed the flames with fog. It was a small fire and we knocked it down without any trouble.

We opened some windows and checked to be sure the fire hadn't spread beyond the kitchen. We drug the booster hose back out front, and radioed in the recall (fire out signal). Cap was still lunging at the front door. He was trying to break down a solid oak door. He broke three ribs in the process.

While Cap was off sick, Engine 12 got a call to an address in the Laurelhurst district. "House full of smoke" was the dispatch message. Nobody was around so we opened the front door. Sure enough, she was full of smoke. We couldn't see a foot in front of us. We backed out, closed the door, and radioed for back up. Engine 9 laid in and stood by with 1 1/2 inch lines while the truck crew opened up. There was no fire anyplace. No hot spots that would indicate fire in the walls. We were stumped. Then someone found a furnace cover open and a trouble lamp hanging in the cold air return. The filter had ignited and smoldered, when the furnace kicked in, the fan pumped smoke through the house.

Not Always A Happy Ending

Flames shooting sky high are spectacular, but it was the smoldering room fires that were the killers. Engine 35 was a three-man house on SE 92nd, near Foster. They got an alarm at a single-family residence of frame construction with fire in the basement. When they arrived, people were screaming, "There are kids in the house!" The fire was going good with smoke was rolling out of the house. This was going to be a bitch. There were bedrooms in the basement, where the fire apparently started.

The Crew laid in and took a line in the front door. The fire had been smoldering for some time. Smoke and flames met them when they tried to work their way down the basement stairs. The next-in company was over a mile away. It would be 3 or 4 minutes before they arrived.

When the rigs pulled up, Engine 35's driver was trying to pull firemen out of the house who were unconscious or nearly so. The in-coming Officer radioed for more help. His crew helped lay the injured firemen on the lawn and went into the fire to try and locate the children. They went down too.

Engine 9 and Truck 6 were coming from 35th and Belmont along with another engine company from down on SE 25th. They found firemen in trouble. They got them out and radioed for more companies. All in all, eleven firemen were taken to the hospital suffering from smoke inhalation. They didn't get the kids out in time.

Lost In Smoke...

When you go in, your eyes burn, your nose runs, you can't see or breathe. If you stand up, the heat blasts your face. Balls of hot gasses roll along the ceiling, bursting into flame whenever fresh air is sucked upward. You can feel the heat on your cheeks. The sound of bacon frying is your ears cooking - you can hear them sizzle.

Stay low, crawl in. You can feel the heat before you see the flames so you know you're heading in the right direction. Time and distance lose all meaning.

I was working a fire where I was in alone. The smoke was thick. I could feel the heat and sense the glow. The fire was up ahead. I grabbed a couple a breaths of air and wet that sucker down. The truck crew would be coming in soon. I gave it one more blast then backed out. I didn't have a mask so I had to stay low and crawl. Fresh air will come in as soon as they open up - bust out some windows.

I couldn't see anything. I was on my hands and knees straddling the hose - it will lead me out. Crawl! I'm not getting any more air. Something is wrong. I was then that I realized there was a loop in the hose. I'd been crawling around and around in a circle. A truckman leads me out. I sat on the curb gagging and coughing. I'll catch my breath in a few minutes.

Knocking Down A Fire

We had been at Training 2 for about a month or so. About four o'clock one morning we got a call, "Fire in a book store." It was going good when we rolled up. Everybody was there. The whole crew from the main station: Engine 1, Truck 1, Training 2, and the First Aid Car. Engine 4 and Truck 2 also came down from Montgomery street.

The fire had been smoldering for hours. Training 2 took a 2-½ inch line in the front door. There were apartments over the store, and the truck crews were opening up and ventilating the upstairs. Ladders were going up and the hose companies were moving in on the fire on the ground floor.

Bob Beal, driver of the First Aid car, went up on the second floor to help evacuate. Next thing we knew there was a YELL and a ball of fire rolled down the stairwell. Bob was running for his life. He had a woman by the heels as he ran down the stairs, her head bouncing on each step. A sheet of flame rolled over them as they cleared the front door!

Engine 2's crew was pouring water into the smoke – they couldn't see much but could feel the heat and see a glow. Suddenly, a firemen walked out of the smoke. The nozzleman asked him, "Where did you come from?" He pointed up. He had fallen through the burnt out 2nd floor landing into the fire and ashes on the first floor. He wasn't hurt, just singed a little when he landed in the fire.

Engine 2 had the luxury of man power; six hosemen, an officer, and a pump operator. When we hit a fire, a couple men would throw up ladders, someone would bust in the door or windows, and we'd have water on the fire in seconds.

On day, we had this fire down on Front Avenue. A house was going good with flames coming out the windows. The first floor was fully involved. Smith and Leb took a 1-1/2 inch line in the front door and started up the stairs while Banjo and I followed with a 2-1/2 fog nozzle. We popped the nozzle as we went through the front door, just one blast. A cloud of steam filled the house and rolled out under the eaves. The fire was out. Smith and Leb stood there, water dripping from their helmets. I've never seen a fire knocked down, No! Knocked out, that fast. There wasn't a spark anyplace. It was a textbook stop.

No Smoking, Please

During the late 50's, the new Big Chief (Chief Simpson) and his wife lived in the apartment on the third floor of the central fire station. She had shot a moose on a trip to Canada and had it mounted and displayed on the wall of the station's recreation room. Somehow it griped the men. Nearly every day someone would stick a cigarette under the Moose's upper lip. Soon there was a notice on the central station bulletin board, "There will be no cigarettes in the moose's mouth." The next morning, there was a cigar. Chief Simpson had now taken on the affectionate nickname "Old Be No."

When the new central fire station was first built, "Old Be No" announced, "There will be no nails in the walls." The crew pleaded, "We need a calendar, can't we just put up a calendar?" "Okay, but that's all, one calendar." Be No replied. This was the opening we were looking for. We went down to the machine shop and cut a big spike in half. A small brad was welded to the end of it and it was pounded into the wall. Someone drew some jagged pencil lines to look like cracks in the wall and poured some broken plaster on the floor.

The Next morning the calendar was up, and the crew was waiting. "Be No" saw the spike and started to say something, but saw the half hidden smiles just in time. "You sons-o-bitches!" he screamed. He knew he had been set up.

Flammable Liquid Tanks

It was a cold night, down in the 20's, when the bell hit. Before we pulled out of the engine house, we could hear the rigs across the city moving. Larry turned left and headed up 23rd Avenue.

The rigs from central fire station are heading up Front Avenue. The adrenalin is flowing, we're really moving! Larry has his foot in it. George is pumping the siren and yanking on the bell rope. Yeah, it's just another fire, but it's something big.

You can't stay calm. You pull on your gloves, pull the stocking cap down over your ears, and flex your knees for the bumps. I hope we don't meet a freight truck or worse yet another fire engine at an intersection. We won't hear them over our siren and they may not be able to hear us.

Two tanks are burning. Flames rise hundreds of feet in the air. There was an explosion that blew the covers off the gasoline storage tanks. We've got several million gallons of gasoline burning. If she's not cooled down, and soon, the other tanks will over heat and blow one by one. Each tank, 50 feet in diameter and 30 or 40 feet high, holds a lot of fuel. An earthen dike around each tank is designed to hold spills. But during a fire the flammable liquid starts boiling, spills over, ignites, and boils faster.

We have to get water on the sides of the tank and fog up in the air over the fire to cool the fumes coming off. Any water in the tank causes the fuel to foam, froth, and boil over. We crawl in low. There's plenty of air, the fire is creating a draft. We set up large nozzles and sweep back and forth over the fire, keeping the stream high so that the spray evaporates, and doesn't get into the tank causing the fuel to churn and boil more.

As the fire cools, a column of thick black smoke drifts overhead. It's still hot and will burst into flame as air mixes with it. We're down under it, kneeling in water, trying to shield our faces from the heat. A spray drifts back from the nozzle and if you stay in behind that, you can keep from getting burned.

The smoke is going hundreds of feet in the air. As fresh air mixes with it, balls of flame roll through the smoke lighting up the sky. The wind pushes the smoke and flames over us. The tops of telephone poles burst into flame like a row of wooden matches igniting one after the other.

We're hoping someone is looking out for us and will pull us out before we get trapped. You have to go a lot on FAITH and TRUST in this job. It seems like the smoke is getting blacker. That means we're gaining on it. We look up at the sky, it's not as bright as it was. You just kind of feel things are slowing down. It begins to get quiet. People are walking around now and the flames aren't quiet, as high. You just know "We've stopped her!"

You get up, stretch, and look around to see what the other crews are doing. Now you look back to see how much hose we'll have to pick up. It's covered with oil and soot and so are we. We wonder what time it is? Is there any coffee? We won't get to bed tonight, it'll be another hour before they start sending companies home. We were "First-in" so we'll probably have to stay. Maybe they'll put on relief crews.

Our hose will have to be uncoupled and drained before we can roll it. Sometimes they bring up a flatbed truck for the relief crews to roll and load the hose onto. Then they drop it off at the engine houses. We still have to wipe down the rig and load clean hose tonight. The "On-coming shift" will scrub down the dirty hose and hang it to dry. We'll wash our turnouts next shift. Tonight, we'll grab a shower, and hopefully get some sleep.

Smoke is Poison

With smoke inhalation, often you don't know anything is wrong. It's the small house or room fires that get you. You go in low with a 1-1/2 inch fog nozzle. The fire is creating a

draft, and as long as there are flames, fresh air is coming in around you. But if the fire has been smoldering, carbon monoxide gas is being generated and it's cumulative effects give you no warning something is wrong. The first clue is when you start bumping into things. If you start stumbling and it takes two or more tries to get through a doorway, you better get out, and fast.

This fire was putting out thick smoke and I was backing out. The truck crews was breaking windows and opening doors. I stumbled over some hose and was a little wobbly going down the stairs. The next thing I knew, I was waking up. When I came to, I was looking at the sky. I thought, "People sure look tall when you're laying on the ground." Art asked, "What's wrong with Nick?" (Larry had started calling me "Nick" and it stuck) Larry said, "Oh he got a little smoke. The First Aid Car is on the way."

I drifted in and out of consciousness. The first Aid Crew picked me up, and I was able to walk into the emergency room, but I passed out while they were loading me on a gurney. When I came to, I was still in my turnouts with my helmet sitting on my chest. They hadn't done anything! They hadn't even washed my hands and face. The clock on the wall said 10:15. We responded to the fire about 8 o'clock. I'd been laying there for over an hour.

I could hear someone on the phone in the next room trying to locate people from the city or fire department to authorize treatment. Most of all authorize payment. I was tempted to walk out. Let them try and explain that! But I wasn't sure what kind of shape I was in. The duty nurse must have found someone to okay payment because now three or four nurses hovered around, putting me on oxygen. I wonder how much that cost the City? Then they put a blanket over me, helmet and all.

Someone You Know...

Sometimes you think, "It's just a fire, not our house."

We rolled. A train had hit a gasoline tank truck at a crossing. The truck was a mass of crushed burning metal. The train was sitting in a pool of flames. There were a dozen fire companies on-scene. We went in low, sweeping the fire back with fog lines. As we pulled our hoses between the boxcars there was an explosion. "WHUMP!" We ducked for cover but the fire didn't flare up. We moved forward, "BANG!" Then two more "Bangs." The tires were popping.

Spraying water into the gasoline will dilute the mixture and it will go out. Gasoline doesn't explode like the movies, but people can still die. Larry recognized the truck; it was his uncle's rig. We couldn't put the fire out but we could see the body. We couldn't get to him. We couldn't save him.

Neighbors

Engine 22's house was a tall brick building set flush with the sidewalk in a block of small store fronts. In this old run down part of town, there were shops and businesses on the ground floor. Narrow stairs led to the apartments on the second and third floors. The storefront held a pawnshop, a cafe, a couple of taverns, and miscellaneous shops. The apartments were cheap and catered to the wino, the down and out, the destitute, and the prostitute. Many of the men skimped by on a small pension. Some of the lofts and storage rooms had been divided up. Chicken wire cut the space into 8 by 10 foot cells. These were the typical "Flop Houses" that housed single men on the lower West side.

The firemen would give the Old Timers our leftovers. It was a world I had never come in contact with. One of the firemen was assigned to hose the urine and vomit off the sidewalk each morning. More often than not, there would be blood splattered on the driveway of the fire station.

Water, Water Everywhere!

Engine 4's house was a big old two story building scheduled to be replaced by the new house being built on SW 5th Avenue and College Street. The guys were young. I was 35 at the time. Most of the crew was in their mid or late 20's. It was a fun house. Something was always going on.

Once a month, we had window day. Everybody pitched in and ladders were extended to the upstairs windows. The buckets of soapy water, wet sponges, and garden hoses were too much of a temptation. A little water would get spilled, a wet sponge would get thrown, and then a bucket of water would get dumped on the men below.

Once a garden hose sprayed the men on ladders, it became an all out war. The compressor unit was fired up and the booster hose was stretched. The stream easily out-reached the garden hose. The booster team chased the garden hose team into the back yard. Not to be outdone, the engine crew laid in a 1-1/2 inch line from the hydrant. A full fledged water fight was under way. Charlie Gray bent the hose double, kinking the 1-1/2 inch line to shut off the water. The men shoved the nozzle up under his turnout coat, and were asking him, "What are you going to do now?"

About then the Chief showed up. "I don't want to know! But every drop of water better be cleaned up when I come back. You've got one hour." He drove off laughing to himself.

Smoked Out

Some times the public is deceptively calm. The first in companies had arrived a few minutes before Bert and I showed up. There weren't any firemen in the lobby yet. I asked the deskman where the fire was. Very calmly he answered, "Up on the 10th floor." The building was a high rise retirement complex. Four or five of us got into the elevator and pushed the button for the tenth floor.

When the elevator stopped, the bell rang and the door opened. There was smoke down to our knees. We couldn't see anything, and no one was around. We dropped to the floor and crawled forward. We could feel the heat on our faces. Something was burning up ahead, but we still couldn't see anything or anybody. I looked back just in time to see the elevator doors close. We were stuck, in the smoke, no water, no radio, and no idea how much fire we were facing or where the other firemen were. I crawled toward the heat and found a davenport blazing.

The windows in the hallway of an air-conditioned building can't be opened. I crawled down the hall looking for a house line or a fire extinguisher in one of those cabinets that say, "In case of fire break glass." I couldn't find one. I had pushed the button for the elevator, when it came back up, I stuck my foot in the door to keep it from closing. No more firemen or equipment could get to the floor, but at least we had a way out if we needed it.

The first group of firefighters had found an unlocked apartment door, went in and opened some windows to get some fresh air. Then they were able to locate a fire extinguisher and wet down the davenport. The others stretched a house line and put the fire out. There wasn't a lot of fire or much damage, but for a few minutes it was one of the worst spots I've ever been in.

The Zidell Fire

One of the worst, most costly fires ever was the Zidell Shipyard fire. It was a hot summer day - August, I think. It was about 80 degrees with a twenty to twenty-five mile an hour East wind blowing. A welding torch probably set fire to the oil soaked planking. The workmen tried to put the fire out with fire extinguishers, not realizing the fire was burning in the beams below. The East wind drove the heat and flames under the docks spreading the fire. By the time they realized what was going on, "It was too late, IT WAS TOO LATE!"

An alarm was turned in, but the fire already had a ten or fifteen minute head start. The fireboat was ten minutes away. By the time they arrived the piling under the docks was fully involved and the fire was being driven under the shipways and was spreading to the huge metal-clad buildings.

Engine 10, the first-in company, laid in and set up a 2-1/2 inch fog nozzle in one of the buildings. The fire had spread to the rafters nearly 100 feet over their heads. They couldn't reach the flames. A ball of fire chased them back out. The wind whipped through the flames into their faces. The fire rolled over them and spread to other buildings. The sparks and embers were carried up and onto the surrounding hills, setting brush and grass fires. Nobody is sure what happened next.

Greater alarms were called, additional engines rolled in. The fire was beyond control. The fireboat swept its main turret over and under the docks. The sheet metal cover protected the fire and the force of the stream pushed air that fed the fire under the docks. This was

a God DAMN inferno! Sheets of burning plywood were carried a mile or more. Grass and brush fires spotted the west hills. Engines sent to fight the grass and brushfires, were diverted to save homes. Rigs with boosters were told to patrol and do whatever they could. "Save houses if you can!"

Portland had dispatched all their fire equipment. Fire crews and rigs were coming from the neighboring towns of Beaverton, Tigard, Lake Oswego, Gresham, and as far away as Hillsboro and Hood River. Some twenty fire rigs moved into Portland. We were out of rigs. Citizens were advised to wet their roofs down with a garden hose. There were no more fire engines available.

The fireboats were sweeping the docks with their 4-inch nozzles. Land companies were setting up portable turrets. Brush fires were burning out of control and showering sparks a mile or more up into the West hills. We had dozens of houses on fire. The patrolling fire rigs did whatever they could. They would hit a brush fire, fill their tanks, drive along the face of the fires and attack the next hot spot. The main fire at Zidell's couldn't be slowed. She burned until there wasn't anymore to burn.

Two or three fire engines burned up. A Chief's car was destroyed but as far as I know, nobody was killed. It was one tough "Son of a Bitch!"

SW Hall was another near "Fire Storm." An apartment house was on fire and the fire was spreading to the houses up Hall Street. A "Greater Alarm" was called. Engine 2 was assigned to come in from the upper side. There were no hydrants available so we emptied our booster on the last house on fire. Larry Miles, had been a hoseman at Engine 15 so he remembered where a hydrant was. We hoped it was close enough. Engine 2 laid-in 1,200 feet of 2-1/2 inch hose. Lieutenant Mile's rig, a company from North Portland, also laid-in their 1,200 feet of hose. By using all our 1-1/2 inch hose we could get between the two houses, cooling down the fire and wetting down the side of the next house. We were able to keep the fire from spreading. As the fires on SW Hall burned down, we could keep them under control with boosters.