

The Volunteer Era 1850-1883

In 1850 it was inevitable that two amber rivers flowing west from the inland empire, one of wheat and one of gold, would elevate Portland from a stumptown at the mouth of the Willamette River to a major commercial and cultural center. Other contenders, diamonds in-the-rough waiting for circumstances to fashion them into the gem of the Pacific Northwest, vied for advantage up and down the Columbia and Willamette river system. There was Oregon City. There was Rainer.

In 1850 Portland was a village of 600 souls hemmed in by heaps of timber cut faster than they could be cleared; 134 shingled roofs; two houses finished in plaster, the rest rough hewn; one hotel, the California House on Front Street, above Alder. At night, moon or no moon, the tree stumps alongside the street glowed, whitewashed to keep buggies and drays off of them.

It would take a special class of hardheaded, hardworking promoter to turn this village into the City of Portland. Such a promoter was Colonel Thomas J. Dryer. Born in 1808, Dryer came West from New York to California with thousands of other Forty-Niners. He did not mine gold though; instead he ran a small newspaper. Coming North to Portland in 1849, Dryer founded the Weekly Oregonian.

Later this severe, hatchet-faced Yankee would rise first to the territorial legislature, and under Lincoln to Minister Resident to the Sandwich Islands; but in 1850 he was thinking that if Portland's future as still a dream it was also an investment worth protecting. It probably never occurred to him that Portland could not reach big city status even if he had to pull her up himself. When the dream became real and Portland began to grow, and then - as cities will - began to burn, Colonel Dryer had a better idea than the bucket brigades struggling up from the river to protect his investment: He began to editorialize for a volunteer fire department. When the department he envisioned was slow to form, Dryer went out and organized it himself. In 1850, 37 men stepped forward to fill out the ranks of Pioneer Fire Engine Company #1. It was better than a bucket brigade, this volunteer force with its hand pump, but just a start as far as Thomas Dryer was concerned.

One Monday evening in April of 1851, pursuant to a charter granted by the territorial legislature of Oregon incorporating the City of Portland, 167 votes were cast for city officers. Named were Mayor Hugh D. O'Bryant, as well as councilmen and a city recorder. Four council sessions later Thomas Dryer added the position of Printer for the City to his growing list of jobs. In the hope of encouraging a levy to pay for a steam engine, Dryer and the 37 volunteers of the Pioneer Fire Engine Company #1 tendered their service to the city at the ninth session of the council, May 6, 1851:

“...Recorder Caldwell moved that the foreman of the Fire Company formed in this city be heard which was carried. Thomas J. Dryer on behalf of Pioneer Fire Company No. 1 offered the services of said company of the City to aid in extinguishing fires. On motion of Councilman Thompson it was voted that the thanks of the Council be tendered to Pioneer Fire Company No. 1 and that the report of the Foreman be accepted...”

On May 26 an election was held and a tax levy approved for the purchase of a steam fire engine. But Pioneer #1 was destined to expire without steam. With the resolution on his desk Hugh O’Bryant balked:

“...The following resolution was offered by Councilman Slater and adopted by a vote of the Council: Be it resolved that the Mayor be requested to inform the Council what disposition has been made of the Ordinance levying a tax for the purpose of purchasing a Fire Engine and apparatus (sic). In compliance with the foregoing resolution, the Mayor submitted a communication, which was received and ordered to be spread upon the records. The following is a true copy thereof:

‘Gentlemen of the Council – In answer to your Resolution inquiring to know of me disposition I have made of the duplicates levying a tax to collect and raise a fund to purchase an Engine and Hoes (hose) for the use of the City I will say for your information that they are in my desk without my signature.
H.D. O’Bryant, Mayor.’”

And so already the grain of civics was sown around which would grow the ever more complex crystal of city government. At the house of Thomas Robinson on Morrison Street, leased for \$30 a month to the council for its meetings, the council proposed and Dryer and his men attempted to dispose at each cry of fire customers and proprietors alike bounding from shops or houses to do their duty. A single hand pump served, trundled by citizens with names like A. B. Hallock, George Flanders, Thomas Dryer - the city's future along rutted mud streets. Really there was just that one street, Front strung with single story clapboard structures that burned like straw. These men put their backs into it, some working the rockers feverishly while others filled the water box of the pump from buckets. Although no fire matters held the council's attention until the reorganization of 1853 - and one source alleges that the department stagnated for lack of leadership - the lack of mention might have been due more to success than failure, for the city continued to flourish. And furthermore, the small band did it on the cheap, its one pump sufficing when more were available; because two Farnham hand pumps loaded off the barge Mary Melville from Boston in 1852, taken on consignment by W. B. Otway, were simply stored and left to deteriorate in a barn. Perhaps it was again the tightfistedness of his honor O'Bryant that allowed the engines to sit unused and abused, or a flaw in the character of Otway who neglected them, later to "decamp from Portland in bad repute." While not the state of the art, the engines with their water boxes filled would throw a 5/8th inch stream 65 feet. This David Monastes discovered when he clapped the only two lengths of hose in the city on one of the Farnhams for a trial after refurbishing it. Eventually at least one of the engines was procured by the city and saw

service with Willamette Engine Company #1. For the time being though, the volunteers made do with their single pump - obtained through subscription by local merchants - dousing whatever fires the local citizenry could kindle by miscarrying embers to restart hearths, or dropping oil lamps, or starting chimney fires.

Meanwhile a costly steam mill fire at the foot of Jefferson Street made the need for an organized fire fighting force obvious. Under a new territorial charter, the city was officially granted the right to organize a fire department. C. B. Pillow was chosen Fire Warden on May 6th and a few weeks later Colonel Dryer became Chief Warden.

With Dryer heading the department under a new mayor, A. C. Bonell, and the tool of a standing committee to aid him, it was not long before the new volunteer force that would replace Pioneer #1 took shape. In the late summer of 1853 it was resolved:

“Resolved. That the whole city be a district for the organization of a Hook and Ladder company; and further, that all that portion of the city lying north of Washington street, be one district for the organization of an engine company and all that part of the city south of that street be another district for the same purpose.”

Committees were formed to buttonhole merchants for monies for a hook and ladder truck and two engines. Committees were formed to write by-laws and constitutions. On July 29, 1853 Vigilance Hook and Ladder Company #1 chose its officers and by August 1 they had adopted constitution and by-laws. Thirty-six men appeared on Vigilance's rolls. On August 6, 1853, Willamette Engine Company #1 passed its by-laws and constitution. There were 22 active members. A lot was donated on the north side of Yamhill Street by the firm of Northrup and Simons, and with donated lumber, nails, locks, etc. the first engine house in Portland was built. The engine that it housed was the old Farnham refurbished by David Monastes, now first assistant to the foreman of the 1st. It was with the Farnham that the men would fight fires until the arrival in 1856 of a Smith's New York "piano-box" engine.

In the northern district adoption of by-laws went apace with the southern district. In fact a joint committee for the writing of by-laws was established between the two companies - a first attempt at a citywide code for the department. With 29 members they chose the name "Northerner," but Northerner had neither house nor engine and for shadowy reasons dropped from history. No company would operate north of Washington Street until Multnomah Engine Company #2 was admitted by ordinance of the Council on November 25, 1856.

It is a matter of record that after all this organizing, on an autumn day in 1853 at an old frame building stored with hay on 1st Street south of Yamhill, Vigilance and Willamette first did duty together. The cry of 'fire' went up and not long after the men of the Willamette ran up tugging their Farnham and its rickety hose cart. Hoses were trained and the pump primed and manned as the water box was filled from buckets. Unfortunately, an errant corn cob found its way from a bucket into the box where it worked

its way down the hose before poking its head out the nozzle. As David Monastes worked to disconnect the hose and force out the cob, the structure burned to the ground.

Still, less than a year later on the 4th of July, the volunteer Firemen of Portland proudly paraded in their new uniforms: black pantaloons, red shirts, black cravats, and navy caps, down Front Street. Thenceforth they would be known as “redshirts.”

A scant 20 years after the fledgling fire department was called upon to fight its first fire, another fire consuming 22 blocks of prime commercial real estate would devastate the city and point up the shortcomings of the volunteer system, leading eventually to its replacement. In the intervening years, the city would grow rapidly as a gold rush turned it into a Mecca for the provisioners to pick and shovel artists on their way to make their fortunes. Ben Holladay would build his east side railway and the “Ben Holladay boom” of the ‘60’s was on. Thompson and Ainsworth would build their navigation block on the east side of Front. Increasingly there was much of value to burn. The fire department, while not strictly keeping up, was not far behind in progress. The problem was that a small step in the growth of a city could mean a gargantuan leap in the difficulties facing the firefighters. In 1854 the original fire limits of the city were set by ordinance:

"Beginning at the Willamette River and running through Jefferson Street to its intersection with Second Street, thence along Second to Ash Street; thence along Ash Street to the intersection of the Willamette River; thence along the waterfront to the place of beginning."

At the time, with the axes still ringing in the deep fir forest to the west as the city tried to kick itself free of the river, it was possible for a chorus of voices to carry the fire cry throughout the length and breadth of the village. Hose carts and hand pumps could be trundled up to any fire in a hurry, and water from the Willamette was accessible. It was possible to logroll over the purchase of equipment, then wait for months or even years as it came 'around the Horn' under steam and sail for delivery. But move too far from the river, spread the city limits too wide, and in a wink the task could become impossible. Private growth in those boom years was unimpeded by the conservatism that slowed public service.

Fire hazards were great, and growing. In 1850 the population was 600. In 1865 it was ten times that figure. Shipments of gold through the city totaled over eight million dollars in 1866. The following year the amount of gold moving through was surpassed in value by the amount of merchandise. Unlike the gold of the bankers, merchandise needed to be stored, and sold from stores. Not only was the city spreading, but also where once there had been single buildings separated by empty lots now buildings stood shoulder to shoulder on narrow streets.

A few merchants could afford the status of brick, but most built of fir. The Chinese that had worked on the railroads were packing into decrepit tenements near the waterfront. Lighting the narrow plank walkways were oil lamps set on posts. As long as the rains

came soaking and mossing over roofs, there was a measure of protection. But nature was not always accommodating.

The first order of business facing the new department was an adequate alarm system. In the late evening of October 29, 1858, the Pacific, leaving Couch's wharf, fired her signal gun, setting aflame Trevett and Company flourmill with the cannon's wadding. The small single bell hanging in the house of Willamette #1 failed to rouse the better part of the volunteer force around the town. The next day many a redshirt was red-faced staring at the smoking ruins knowing he had slept through the fire. With donations from nervous businessmen, a thousand pound steel bell was purchased. It sat in a bell tower at Front and Alder Streets from 1859 to 1862 when it was installed over Engine House #1. It was the main alarm bell, used to signal bells over the other engine houses. Nothing is foolproof, however, and the tones of some alarm bells so closely resembled the tone of church and school bells that Sundays became famous for false alarms. This was the alarm system when disaster struck in 1873.

The problem of water supply was solved by an ever-growing system of under-the-street cisterns mandated by the Council in January of 1856. The original nine reservoirs were 15 ft. square and 9 ft. deep, made of caulked and pitched staves. The upkeep on the sewer was high and later the city switched to brick.

Manpower was augmented by the addition of Columbia Engine Company #3 in June of 1859 and Protection Engine Company #4 in November, 1862. Columbia was outfitted with a Jeffers sidestroke engine and a carriage containing 950 feet of hose. In 1860 the position of Chief Engineer was made a paid position and firemen were exempt from jury duty. Finally, in 1868, 17 years after Dryer dreamed and O'Bryant vetoed, steam made its appearance in the form of two Sisby rotary engines, 3rd class - one going to Multnomah #2 and one to Protection #4. Nor was it any too soon for 1868 proved to be a bad fire year, a harbinger of two worse years soon to come.

The annual report from Wm. Bruen, Chief Engineer, to the Council for 1874, the year following the great fire, paints a skeletal portrait of the men and machines that fought that conflagration bravely, but with little hope of success.

Willamette Engine Company #1: 62 active members; 2nd Class Amoskeag steamer (new), 2 four wheeled hose carriages; 600 feet of carbolized hose in good condition. Located at Morrison Street between 1st and 2nd.

Multnomah Engine Company #2: 74 active members; one 2nd class (new) and one third class Silsby rotary engines; 2 hose reels and 1200 feet carbolized hose in good condition. Located 2nd Street between Oak and Pine.

Columbian Engine Company #3: 56 active members; one 2nd class Amoskeag (new), one four wheeled Amoskeag hose carriage (new), 700 feet carbolized hose in good condition. Located Washington Street between 2nd and 3rd.

Protection Engine Company #4: 60 active members; one 3rd class Silsby rotary engine, one hose reel and 500 feet carbolized hose in good condition. Located 1st Street near Jefferson.

Tiger Engine Company #5: 54 active members; one 2nd class Jeffers engine formerly used by Columbian #3, one hose reel and 500 feet of leather hose in good condition. Located 4th Street between Mill and Montgomery.

Vigilance Hook and Ladder Company #1: 26 active members; truck and equipment complete and in good condition. Located temporarily on 1st between Taylor and Salmon.

The Fire of 1873

There were those who went to bed on the evening of August 1, 1873 worrying about fire - mostly firemen and merchants, perhaps, although by the time the city slept the next night every last citizen in her could claim some acquaintance with fire fear, either through loss of property or newfound firefighting experience, or just the diminishing of the great city. It was hot on August the 2nd. Drought gripped the city. Chinook winds poured down the Columbia Gorge. Chief Engineer Bruen might look at the blocks north of Morrison Street flattened by a fire in 1872 and feel pain, but he could look at the blocks south of Morrison, those saved - and feel pride. Following that fire of 1872 there remained of Portland 22 hotels, 12 boarding houses, 9 restaurants, 7 newspapers, 6 real estate houses, countless retailers and wholesalers, breweries, banks, brickyards, soap factories, wagon makers, railroads - a bustling city of 12,129. The city proper stretched from Burnside Street to Harrison, and from the river to 7th Street. Steamers plying the coast carried 110,000 tons of goods from Portland that year, and another 9,500 tons went to foreign ports. Huge brick buildings in Corinthian, Victorian, and 2nd Empire style rose, mostly north of Washington near the river. South of Washington were business houses of the middle class and the tenements of the poor. Chief Bruen might look at his city with pride, but he must have smelled the dust and fir and brooded about cisterns that went dry in the '72 fire, steam engines that took too long to work up a head of steam, hose rotted through in crucial times of need. It was very hot and very dry. The furniture shop of Hurgren and Shindler was situated at First and Taylor Streets, a nondescript brick and wood structure that lay in the path of Officer Mercer as he sauntered back to the Oak Street precinct house each morning before dawn. This morning as he passed it, August 2nd, he saw smoke wisping from a window. And then, even as he peered closer to be sure before sounding the alarm, he saw running from the building a terrified salesman who had been sleeping in the rear of the store; and then the two of them together had their breath taken away by a great hissing roar as fire hit the varnishes in the basement sending flames rolling up the side of the building. At 4:30 A.M., with no one awake to climb the steeples to answer and amplify its clanging, the bell over Willamette #1 was a lonely voice against the voracious flames. Fifteen minutes later, as the bells over Willamette #1 clanged and citizens dashed into the streets pulling on their clothes, the fire had devoured the block, shooting through a livery and harness makers shop to the three story Metropolis Hotel,

the Multnomah Hotel, and the Patton House. So hot was the fire, so all consuming, that it created a wind, which blew northeast, sending the flames hurtling across Front Street to the levee. The fire ran north eating up the wooden structures along the riverbank and with equal pace between 2nd and Front Streets.

No sooner had the fire started than it was obvious that it was too large for the volunteer force to handle alone. A call went out at dawn and soon the steamer Oneonta was making its way down the Willamette from Vancouver with 60 men and a hand pump, steaming the entire trip under 10 pounds more pressure than her license allowed. Salem sent two engines and two hose carts on the Oregon and California RR after the Salem telegraph dispatcher delayed the train.

By the time the train highballed into the city in a record one hour and 49 minutes, the fire had reached almost to Portland's most prestigious hotel, the St. Charles, on the corner of Front and Morrison Streets. The Kellogg and Lick Hotels across Morrison Street were going up in flames and the Salem redshirts were dispatched to the imposing stone St. Charles to make the last stand. The firefighters made their way to the top of the mansard roof and after leaning out precariously to raise a hose from below; they soaked the roof even as they baked in the heat of the fire pit that the Kellogg Hotel had become. Just as the St. Charles seemed lost to the flames enveloping Kellogg, the Kellogg collapsed. It imploded and fell on itself in a great flaming heap but in sparing the St. Charles it shot burning debris into Carter's wharf at the foot of Morrison where the men from Columbian #3 fought the fire. As a hose on top of a warehouse on the wharf sent a stream of water over the smoldering engine and screaming men, Chinese passersby were impressed into service to man the brakes on the hand pump. Everywhere frantic volunteers broke up furniture to fire the steamer or commandeered scows and boats to get equipment onto the river.

Just as the flames had turned night into day earlier, now the smoke turned day to night as the firefighters stood on the edge of the inferno. At last in the early afternoon it seemed that the firebreak created by the fire-leveled block from the '72 fire would stay the northward progress. And just as this relief seemed imminent, another fire broke out in the center of the block of 1st Street between Yamhill and Taylor. By now, rumors of incendiarism were rampant and a group of enraged citizens surrounded the block in an attempt to nab the fire starter. The firefighters, meanwhile, had no time for the luxury of suspicion and pursuit. Vigilance Hook and Ladder rolled up with a steamer and two hand pumps and began pouring water on the block, as did Multnomah #2, throwing up two streams from a cistern at 1st and Morrison Streets. Orders were given to demolish the block north of Yamhill and Morrison. The men tore down awnings so they could get water up fronts of the buildings and then went to tear down the buildings themselves when the fire drew up, turning eastward instead, first roaring over several blocks of frame tenements inhabited by the Chinese and then north again through brick commission houses. Knee-deep in the Willamette River, the redshirts from the Willamette #1 and Columbian #3 watched helplessly as the flames rose over them. But the fight for the north commercial district was over: There was nothing short of the Morrison Street firebreak left to burn.

At the same time the fight for the St. Charles was going on, the fire had been sweeping southward from its point of origin taking everything between 2nd street and the river with it. Horses trapped in livery stables screamed and warehouses exploded. At Jefferson and 1st, the fire again met a natural firebreak, this time a thick stand of trees, but not before it had immolated Protection #4 engine house. It was a terrible blow to the men to lose their engine house, and one of them had stood in the deadly heat ringing the bell until the heat seared the bell rope in half. Finally, the southward progress of the fire was stopped at Clay Street.

After fighting the fire for well over twelve hours, the firemen could rest - the city now largely in ruins - as the militia came in to take over and guard against looters. Only one of their number had been seriously injured, #3's foreman Thomas Johnson who had been knocked 15 feet to the ground by an explosion as he tried to enter Hurgren and Shindler from a ladder. Twenty-two city blocks had burned. Damage was estimated at one and a quarter million on an assessed evaluation of only nine million for the entire city. Although never officially determined as a cause, arson continues to be suspected, in particular arson against the Chinese by a racist group frustrated over the depression of 1873.

After the devastation of 1873, the City of Portland took a long, hard look at its volunteer fire department. Another ten years would pass before the introduction of a paid firefighting force but the handwriting was already on the wall. In 1873, Robert Holman, then foreman of #4, felt constrained to petition the Council for an allowance for a night-duty man, volunteerism not sufficient to filling some tasks. Furthermore, volunteers tended not to take good care of equipment and it was estimated that as the department grew, the amount of money saved on repair or replacement of equipment would offset the expense of paying salaries in a more efficient paid system.

Before the demise of the volunteer department though, two more innovations would take place. It is ironical that in his 1873 report preceding the fire, Chief Bruen would make this statement concerning the alarm system:

"The best mode of Fire Alarm has been generally discussed among our firemen. The telegraph is considered among a great many as the most effective. The great expense of establishing this system presents serious objections against its adoption. (A) Bell tower in a central location and the city divided into four fire district (is) a more economical system, and one that will, in my opinion, answer all practical purposes for several years."

This request was prescient in the face of the disaster soon to follow. Two months too late, in October of 1873, the city ordered another bell weighing 4,200 pounds, 800 of which were pure silver. This bell, when rung, could be heard all the way to Oregon City. But now there was a consciousness of fire and an urgency for preventing it that led to a replacement of the bell system altogether. On February 17, 1875, this ordinance passed the council:

"The Committee on Fire and Water for the City of Portland are hereby authorized to contract for the purchase and erection of telegraph wires, signal boxes, engine house gongs, bell-ringing apparatus and such other appurtenances as shall be required to establish a system of automatic telegraphic fire alarm provided: There shall be not less than ten signal boxes, four engine gongs; and one bell-ringing apparatus for large alarm bell and that the cost of erecting same shall not exceed the sum of seventy-five hundred dollars."

The other innovation arrived at the twilight of the volunteer era - the use of horses. Working strictly with manpower was an increasing arduous task, as is clear from this excerpt from the Council minutes of January 4, 1890:

"The Fire Department still maintains its high standard of efficiency. Owing, however, to the rapid growth of the City (Portland's population was then 21,523) it is necessary that horses should be provided for at least two of the companies to haul the engines. The volunteer firemen have always responded with alacrity when called on at all hours of the day or night, but it requires time after the alarm is sounded for enough of the firemen to reach the engine houses to haul the engines to the scene of the fire, and after they do reach the fire they are exhausted from hard work hauling the engines over the rough, muddy streets and not able to do the hard work required of them, for which they receive no compensation. The horses should be kept ready for service at a moment's notice..."

Although as late as 1882 horses had still not been provided for, by the act of January 7, 1883 establishing a paid fire department, they were in service.