Portland Paid Fire Department
1883-1904

Even as the City of Portland smoldered after its disastrous fire of 1873, the Oregonian smoldered over the volunteer fire department. At one point during the conflagration, an editorial went, all that was needed to prevent the loss of the John P. Walker factory was a stream of water; but nowhere was there an available engine to put one up the building. The water supply was hopeless. Furthermore, a code was needed to widen the streets and keep flammable materials out of newly rising structures.

The editorial was a seed, a thinking man's plan for the prevention and cure of fires that would lead to the establishment of the Portland Paid Fire Department, The PPFD submitted to the Council its budget as follows, January 3, 1883;

Chief Engineer’s Salary	$2,000
1st Assistant’s Salary	500
2nd Assistant’s Salary	400
Secretary	900
Superintendent of Fire Alarm	600
Salaries (5) Companies (48) Men	22,140
Rent of Offices for Commissioners	325
Purchase of 14 Horses	3,500
Four new hose carts	1,800
Harnesses and Repairs	650
Horse Blankets	200
No. 2’s Engine	4,000
Horse Feed	2,400
Shoeing of Horses	275
Coal and Wood	450
Oil and Sponges	500
Coke	400
Medicines	50
Supplies for Maintaining Fire Alarms	500
Fitting up Commissioner’s Office, Books and Stationary	750
Alteration of Engine Houses	2,500
Repairs on Apparatus	2,500
Water for Year	3,000
Construction of new hydrants	1,200
Construction of new Cisterns	3,000
Telephone	300
Gas	500

Paying the department ensured the permanent presence of 3 regular and 7 extra (part-time) firemen on duty in each engine house. This represented a tremendous boost in efficiency in responding to alarms. But the elimination of one problem often leads to the creation of another: paid men can become bought men. The department, formerly volunteer, now served at the pleasure of the Mayor and Board of Fire Commissioners. Between 1883 and 1895 alone there were five different Chief Engineers appointed.

It is instructive to follow a little running controversy in the Portland Paid Fire Department, occurring at the halfway point of the gay nineties. Not only does the episode - or series of episodes - highlight the problems involved in running a department on the spoils system, it also gives opportunity to introduce a main player of the next decade and a half - David Campbell, affectionately known to one and all as "our Dave."

The month is May, the year 1895. The removal of chief Engineer Joseph Buchtel is widely recognized as being imminent, and the old Chief is fuming. Not only has his support of Mayor George Frank been unflagging but he has gone to the trouble to shake down his firemen for funds to fight a proposed city charter that would reduce city and county salaries, in particular Mayor Frank's.

But there is nothing that Joe Buchtel can do. He has several problems: He is 65, retirement age. Even though he is a vocal backer of Mayor Frank's against Joe Simon's proposed new charter, Buchtel is still remembered as a past supporter of Simon's. Finally, Chief Buchtel has made an enemy of Chairman of the Board of Fire Commissioners, S. R. Farrell. Successfully engaging in politics takes a clairvoyance that Joe Buchtel did not have. It seems that before Farrell was elected to the Board, he had requested from Buchtel permission to renovate a wooden building in the fire limits; when Buchtel refused, citing the law, Farrell vowed to get him. Now a power on the Fire Commission, Farrell is carrying out his threat, agitating against Buchtel. So, despite the fact that Buchtel's tenure as Chief Engineer has been marked by improved organization and growth in the department, despite the fact that he had the public backing of the insurers carrying contracts with the city, Joseph Buchtel had to go. Mayor Frank is in the process of consolidating power and that means mollifying the fire commission.

Enter David Campbell, "our Dave," Joseph Buchtel's 1st Assistant Engineer. After some wrangling, Campbell is tapped to replace Buchtel. In truth it is a wise and popular choice. As a firefighter, whether working the ropes or giving orders, Campbell is renowned. Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he moved first to Youngstown, Ohio and finally to Portland in 1881. Campbell was well known and popular with the press, the local citizenry, and his redshirts, and was respected by his peers up and down the Pacific Coast and inland. A bear of a Scotsman, quick-witted and quick-tempered, he is one of the few men who would be remembered and respected for being beaten up: Our Dave, it seems, was an amateur boxer of some talent. His last bout was against Jack Dempsey - not the heavyweight "Manassas Mauler" Jack Dempsey who came later, but Jack Dempsey, "the Nonpareil," middleweight champ at the time. "The Nonpareil" more or less sneaked into Portland with the intention of bilking a few suckers by fighting anonymously, a ploy that

fooled no one. Campbell had enough of a reputation to make him a betting interest, and so he stepped into the ring with Dempsey to the cheers of hundreds of spectators. Although Campbell's grit would ever fire the imagination of his followers, inciting them to see a closer fight than was in the ring, in fact "the Nonpareil" was nonpareil that day, thoroughly outclassing Campbell, breaking his nose, and ending his amateur career.

On February 26, 1892 David Campbell had been made 1st Assistant to Buchtel, and on June 1, 1895 he replaced him as Chief Engineer. It is interesting, then, that on the day Campbell is appointed The Sunday Welcome editorializes that David Campbell will have a long and prosperous reign if, and only if, the department "is not used to further the schemes and ambitions of local politicians."

But the 1890's are the heyday of machine politicians everywhere, the golden age of the philosophy. 'Don't make no waves, don't back no losers.' S. R. Farrell, the vengeful commissioner, who had his way in chasing out Buchtel, is about to fall on his own sword: On January 21, 1896 a letter from Chairman Farrell is made public in the Oregonian. In the letter Farrell complains of cuts made in his budget by the City Council. His request for $101,000 has been pruned, first to $89,000 and finally to $85,000. This, according to Farrell, will mean a reduction of force by four companies, which will lead to a rise in insurance premiums that would wipe out the proposed cuts. Nobody likes a complainer. By this time it appears that Mayor Frank felt confident enough in his own power not to have to do Farrell any more favors. Shortly after Farrell's letter appears in the Oregonian, Frank calls in the entire board and asks them if they could not see their way clear to backing both his own candidacy, plus that of senatorial candidate: Mitchell.

On February 5, 1896, this item hits the paper:

> Fire Board Is Out
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> "Mayor George P. Frank yesterday morning removed the Portland Board of Fire Commissioners from office. His action is regarded as a grand coup in the interest of the political faction of which he is a leading representative, and as an effort to establish himself and his friends in office. He made a demand upon the board of commissioners that the members pledge political fealty to him, or go by the boards, and as a result their successors have been appointed...The question naturally is presented as to what effect this sudden change will have on Chief Campbell. It is likely that he will have to go, but not quite yet. He and Mayor Frank have had several closed interviews concerning the situation, the effect of which, it is believed, is a promise to throw the strength of the department vote to the support of Mayor Frank and his supporters."

The politicization of the fire department was everywhere deplored as dangerous, even in a time when the spoils of political victory were considered the divine right of the victor, and on February 16th one of the new appointees, W.W. Terry, declined the appointment for just that reason.

The entire matter was just another shovelful of dirt on a political grave Frank had been digging for himself as it turns out. In June of 1896 he is swept out of office in the wake of a nationwide mania for political reform. Populist candidate Pennoyer replaces him.

And business-as-usual begins again. On August 5, 1896, Fire Commissioner Paul Wessinger is asked by Pennoyer to resign. He is asked to resign first because he refuses to endorse the presidential aspirations of William Jennings Bryan. On top of that, Pennoyer and Wessinger are feuding over Pennoyer's reinstatement of fireman Harry White, the foreman of Hose Company #1.

Harry White also happens to be a political hack who has gotten out quite a few votes for Mayor Pennoyer. At this time, R. D. Inman is chairman of the fire commission. Earlier, when Inman had run for office, White - backing another horse - had made insulting remarks about Inman, remarks for which Wessinger suspended him. Pennoyer promptly reinstates him and Wessinger resigns.

The same day Wessinger resigns local insurers send Pennoyer a communiqué denouncing the politicization of the department to which Pennoyer replies: "I can attend to my business without their interference, and they may attend to theirs without my interference. Justly, this remark haunts Pennoyer for a long time. The citizens of Portland do not view their protection from destruction as strictly Pennoyer's business. Even less do they like to be told that the ranks of experienced firefighters are being depleted as jobs are handed out to greenhorns whose only qualification is a vote for W. J. Bryan.

That the spoil's system is having a deleterious effect on firefighting capabilities is clear: A fire breaking out in a photography shop on Washington Street between 11th and 12th takes with it a plumbing shop, carpentry shop, steam dye works, and corset makers shop before inexperienced redshirts can plug into a cistern with enough water to put up a stream. Reports begin coming in of steamers losing their way to fires and of teams in the hands of green drivers bolting.

On August 29, 1896, R. D. Inman resigns over the White issue. Commissioner Beach resigns. Pennoyer appoints a new commission.

The story ends in a full circle: It began in 1895 with Chief Buchtel shaking down his men for money to defeat a proposed city charter unfavorable to Mayor Frank; in October of 1896 firemen began noticing a reduction in their pay. It seems that a year later, after helplessly watching commissioners and chiefs come and go, their wages are again being garnished to finance a lobbying effort against another proposed charter - this charter depriving Mayor Pennoyer of the power to appoint commissioners.

Meanwhile, a frustrated David Campbell begins suspending new firemen for incompetency. On September 30th, Campbell is removed by the new commission. Finally, to complete the cycle, Pennoyer himself must have his comeuppance just as Mayor Frank before him. His future fate is made clear by this item appearing at the time:

> "Baleful Pennoyer said to be responsible for the hot weather in the East and the failure of the fruit crop - suspected that he kicked the bottom out of the reservoir."

If the pre-civil service days of the Portland Paid Fire Department were the heyday of machine politicians, they were also the Heyday of another kind of creature less wiley but more committed: the fire horse. From 1882 when Vigilance Hook and Ladder Company requisitioned the first fire horse in Portland until 1911 when the last went on the auction block, no sight was more awe-inspiring than a pair of big matched geldings in harness, breaking at a gallop from the bays of the engine house. These draught animals were brave and bright, sometimes beautiful, but most importantly they knew their job - they were an integral part of the battle against fire during the era. An old hand at training the horses once claimed that with enough sugar cubes you could train a fire horse in a week; this is probably more a testimony to the intelligence of the stock than the simplicity of their task. For in competitions held all over the world, the fire horse again and again proved their instincts.

While good instincts were expected from any fire horse, it was individual behavior quirks and acts of bravery that would make firemen lament the passing of their favorites as the era came to an end. Colonel, a white gelding 21 years in service as of 1904, would become so excited at the sound of the gong that twice he left the engine house before his driver was ready. Pulling his hose cart and following the steamer, Colonel deduced from its direction the box it was responding to, and then he galloped on to the hydrant nearest and there waited to be hitched.

Firemen wept as a horse named Roachy, sick and near death in his stall, died trying to rise at the sound of the bell.

And then there was Jerry, a big roan with 21 years service in 1911, perhaps Portland's most heralded fire horse. Jerry was so smart that men swear he winked when he heard them making favorable comments about him. He got off to a shaky start when, in 1892, he was sent downtown with an engine to pump out flooded buildings, bolted, killed his harness mate, destroyed the engine and dislocated a shoulder. He never again would run on paving after a fall he took that severed an artery in his leg, and he had a bad habit of letting himself out of the firehouse and walking the streets. But he served long and well and became a fixture, best known for gallantry as he snatched a hat off his handler, tipping it if a lady was passing.

Some of the horses collapsed under the strain after a few years, some burned in performance of their duty. Still others dropped dead in the collar after a run to a fire. Some were like Blind Dick who hauled the supply wagon when he grew too old to run with a steamer - when his handler came to his stall and told him he had just been auctioned, Blind Dick laid down.and died.

The era of the horse passed much the same way as Blind Dick: quietly. No sooner had Chief Campbell purchased a staff car, consistently beating all other apparatus to alarms,

than the last of the bran mash and manure was being shoveled out of the stables under the regular's bunkrooms. It was inevitable.

On the heels of the political skullduggery of the 1890's came a series of moves in themselves minor but taken together forming an overall thrust for a more streamlined, independent, well-prepared firefighting force. Three main areas concerned the reformers at the time: the elimination of extra men in favor of a fully paid department; the acquisition of a fireboat; the change of administration from the political patronage system to a civil service system. In the eye of these storms that would rage from 1900-1904 was David Campbell, reappointed Chief Engineer in July, 1898, usually out front of reform or - in the rare case of foot-dragging, such as on the civil service debate - addressing himself to specific problems in an even tempered cogent manner. A quick temper 'our David' may have had, but he also possessed a Scotsman's shrewd instinct for playing his cards close to the vest, which consistently earned him both respect and victory. As Chief, his quickness to a fire, his bravery and intelligence in coordinating the firefight, remained legendary. Until his death fighting the Union Oil fire on June 26, 1911, he would continue to roam the landscape of city politics, always standing a bit taller and shining a bit brighter than his opponents, at home with his rank and file smoke eaters as well as his learned colleagues, the nation's other Fire Chiefs.

By 1900, the budget of the fire department had shrunk to $80,100 from $150,500 in 1893. New construction techniques and materials were making the construction of tall business houses commonplace, and yet there was not an engine in use in Portland capable of throwing an effective stream on a building taller than five stories. Scaling ladders and safety nets were still the spectacular attraction at high-rise fires. With the ladders, one story tall structures with iron grapples at one end and a single upright running up the middle of the rungs, teams of firefighters mounted the sides of buildings, the first man scampering up the ladder grappled to a first floor window ledge and pulling another ladder up behind him to secure it to a window ledge above, climbing the ladder as another man followed him up with another ladder to throw up to the third story, and up and up until the side of the building looked like a pueblo as firemen worked furiously, lowering victims on ropes. There was not a horse of the twenty-five in the department younger than fourteen years of age; new hose had not been purchased for two years. With the annexation of Albina and East Portland, the city now sprawled on either side of the Willamette. The Fire Department that serviced it in 1900 consisted of 6 engine companies, 4 hook and ladder companies, 5 hose companies, 4 chemical engine companies, administration, and supply department. Full time drivers and engineers were paid approximately $65 a month and that was their job: driving or working the engines. Most of them were listed as living at the engine house. The actual job of connecting hose and fighting fire belonged to the 68 extra men who worked on an emergency basis and were paid from $15-25 a month. Burning flues caused 3 times more fires (97) than any other; "rats gnawing on matches" caused one. Loss due to fire in 1900 was $74,000, considerably less than most of the previous seventeen years, which is striking, considering the reduced state of department revenues. The controversy over the extra men was not substantially different than that over volunteers. True, for $20 a month the City could require them to take training and maintain equipment, but fighting fires was

still in the hands of absentee firemen - laborers and pressmen and chair makers and druggists who, at the sound of the alarm, had to throw down shovels or pull down shades and hike themselves to a station, sometimes miles away.

They were brave and dedicated for the most part but they were jobbers, not professionals. In addition, it became more obvious as the debate continued that a full paid force would defray its own costs in lowered insurance rates, as well as in maintenance and repair work which was at the time contracted out. In many ways though, such arguments of cost-effectiveness were abstractions for the analysts to play with. It was fire that forged the department, and it was fire that would shape its direction. Flame and smoke, damaged property and lost lives: the Standard Box factory fire, the Wolff and Zwicker Ironworks fire of 1902, the Dekum block fire of 1903; after each fire the conduct of the department was carefully scrutinized. It did not help the extra men that, after fire destroyed the Sherlock and Bacon buildings in 1903, the Chinese returned to find valuables they had carefully laid away in trunks now missing. They accused the firemen, and David Campbell - in a rare episode of loose-lip ness - allowed that it would have had to have been extra men because his permanent paid men were too disciplined to steal. Finally, on January 16, 1904 the City Council resolved to create a fully paid department. Expenditures in salary went from $72,000 in 1903 under the call system to $108,000 in 1904.

As opposed to the fully paid fire department decision, the outcome of the fireboat debate was always a foregone conclusion. It was not a question of 'whether' there would be a boat, but of 'when' and 'who would pay for it.' In 1901 Portland was the number one exporter of wheat in the Pacific Northwest and number three in the country. Wharfs constructed primarily of wood stretched miles north along the waterfront. A strong air current whipping underneath these wharfs made the rapid spread of any fire inevitable. After a yearlong controversy on whether a fire boat would be financed by subscription by local businessmen or by the City, the state legislature approved on January 26, 1903 a $60,000 levy for the Portland fire boat.

Initially the decision was made to use the money to refit the Ernest A. Hamill, a tugboat. It. was not much of a plan, if for no other reason than that, with a 5'6" draft, the Hamill would not have been able to close in on the docks. Instead, the contract was awarded to the Willamette Iron and Steel Works, Portland, for a large, steam-powered craft. Named for then Mayor George H. Williams, the apparatus was designed to pump 24 tons of water per minute and cruise at 10 mph. She was launched on February 27, 1904. Facing her first real test at a waterfront machine shop fire in September of 1904, she might have reminded anyone old enough to have attended Portland Volunteer Fire Department's first fire in 1853 of David Monastes' bad luck with his old Farnham. At the sound of the alarm the George H. Williams put out from her berth and steamed proudly under the Morrison Bridge, stopping opposite her objective. Her pumps were turned on but to the dismay of onlookers - especially her Captain, W. H. Whitcomb, who later was speechless with anger - a small trickle dribbled down her side. A stoker had failed to light a fire in the number two boiler. The Williams sat idle until she built up steam then launched a magnificent stream - which pushed her into the middle of the river. There she again sat building up another head. Meanwhile, $70,000 worth of real estate went up in smoke.

Expensive mistakes are not easily forgiven and everyone from Chief Campbell down to the stoker, who was fired, paid heavily in the press coverage. Once the personnel problems were ironed out, however, the George H. Williams proved invaluable.

Much like the fireboat, the Civil Services was by 1900 an idea whose time had come, its institution assured by the very men who least wanted it. From its inception in 1883 to the advent of the Civil Service in 1903, the Portland Paid Fire Department seemed a tree too ripe in votes and money for the Mayor or the Council not to shake. During these same years, however, first the Populists and then the Progressives were sweeping machine politicians out of office (sometimes replacing them with their own machines). As early as 1900, a popular initiative sent a proposal to the state legislature for a new city charter for Portland providing for a civil service. In a controversial move, Governor Geer vetoed a bill for the new charter. This was March 1901 and at the time the newspapers, the police commissioner, and Chief David Campbell were not favorable to the concept. Campbell would later loudly and publicly proclaim for the increased efficiency and higher morale that the civil service brought with it, but it was long after the question was settled. On January 23, 1903 a new city charter was filed in the office of the Secretary of State and on that day Mayor George H. Williams appointed a Civil Service Commission. After months of research, the commissioners, on March 7, adopted a classification system grading all employees according to function and compensation. Rules for the administration of impartial testing of civil service applicants were outlined, as well as physical standards.

It was these physical standards and the fixing of satisfactory athletic tests that became the stalking horse for the critics. Rumors were freely released that most of the police and fire departments would be lost because members could not make height or weight. Some of the rumors originated with the police chief himself, which led to a sharp session with the board during which he failed to back up his claims with facts. Campbell, again the levelheaded administrator, avoided trouble largely by avoiding the press and pursuing his gripes on a factual basis. This was wise because fears concerning the wholesale abandonment of experienced firefighters turned out to be unfounded: the rehire rate for those of his men reapplying under civil service was 100%.

With the advent of the fully paid department, the civil service and modern apparatus, the department entered into its modern era. The city meanwhile was growing by leaps and bounds, the new boom brought on by yet another gold rush - this one in Alaska - and the Lewis and Clark Exposition of 1904. The city directory estimated the population in 1905 to be between 161,000 and 163,000 a number which "does not include the Chinese population; (and) it does not include the residents of the North End (by this we mean the disreputable residents)." This compares with a census figure in 1900 of 90,426. The business entries in the directory for 1900 amounted to 40,400; for 1905, 72,847. To provide services for the growing city, the fire department spent $182,120 to man and maintain 1 fireboat, 9 engine companies, 8 truck companies, 4 hose companies, and 4 chemical companies. As apparatus they claimed 1 fire boat, 11 steam engines, 10 hose wagons, 3 four-wheeled hose carts, 4 two-wheeled hose reels, 1 first class hook and ladder truck, 1 second class hook and ladder, 3 third class hook and ladder trucks, 1

village (hand) truck, 4 chemical engines, assorted horses, engine houses, tack, etc., 870 hydrants, nearly as many alarm boxes, countless cisterns. There is but one figure left to quote before moving on: $860,420 in fire losses for 1905 - more than twice the amount for 1904 and the third highest total (by several hundred thousand dollars) since 1883. 1905 was just plain hard luck for the Portland Paid Fire Department.