

## *SUNDAY OREGONIAN JULY 18, 1965*

SNORTING HORSES, perfectly matched provided frequent thrills for Portlanders as recently as 1920. Harness dropped from overhead brackets, were snapped on in seconds, and off they went to the fire. Youngsters fought for the privilege of walking the glamorous creatures to cool them off after their gallant dash. (Oregon Historical Society)

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It's no fun to go to a fire anymore, and do you want to know why? It's mechanization, that's what it is, and mechanization is taking the joy out of life.

Going to a fire in the old days of horse-drawn fire equipment was the tops in free entertainment. Even the best people went to fires. One would see some friends there and you could get some good bets as to how long it was going to take to put it out. Most of the time they didn't.

A classic example of the way things went was a kid back in Kansas City and a fire started in a livery stable one Friday. It was still going strong that night when I went home to bed. The next Saturday, the fire jumped a whole city block, and burned a hole in the ground. The whole town would have burned that weekend but the wind shifted and the local fire boys got credit for having saved the city.

### **Horses Fast**

There was always plenty of water to fight fires but what they lacked was the savvy which modern firemen use.

Today, that Kansas City fire would have been in complete control within fifteen minutes if our Portland fire department were on the job. I know. I watch our guys at their work, they have great skill, are highly trained, and to my way of thinking, the best in the business, anywhere. Speed is of great importance in getting to a fire. Contrary to what people today might think the old horsedrawn outfits had plenty of speed, at least in getting out of the fire station and on the way to the fire.

The wagons were backed into the barn facing the front entrance and along side of the wagons there were open stalls for the horses. The horses kept the bits in their mouths at all times so no time would be lost. These bits were of the loose type which didn't interfere with their eating. On a cold winter night the fire barn was a nice cozy place because the heat from the bodies of the horses warmed up the whole place.

The harness which attached to the rigs was suspended from the ceiling. The front doors were closed with big strong springs. When a call came in the watchmen on duty pressed a button which released the horses and tapped out the box number of the location on a big bell in the barn.

## **Portland Had Plenty**

The driver of each rig would be the first to spring into the drivers seat and with the horses who had already trotted over and under the harness, all he had to do was pull a rope over his head and the harness dropped onto the horses' backs. Another fireman in the meantime went to the heads of the horses and when the harness dropped he snapped the collars shut and they were ready to go. A mere matter of a few seconds time.

When the doors popped open the horses went tearing out with a speed that was something to see. The only thing that slowed the horse drawn rig was distance. If they had to run a great distance it was necessary to walk the team for a short time in order to permit them to regain their wind. This is what people meant when they said, "they got their second wind."

Portland, like all great cities, has had its share of big fires and one that I remember was in June 1911. This was the Union Oil fire over on the east side of the river. This was the fire in which the lovable and great Chief David Campbell was killed by a falling brick wall. It had been suggested that the men move into the building to fight the fire, but the chief insisted that he go first into the building to see if it was safe.

A memorial to this great man is on 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue and West Burnside Street along with twenty other brave firemen who have lost their lives in the performance of duty from 1890 down to 1960.

The Union Oil fire was a tough one to fight in those days of horses. Oil fires are almost impossible to extinguish with water alone. The fire lasted about 24 hours and most of the work done was to try to stop the blaze from spreading to surrounding structures. Today oil fires are no great problem with chemicals and modern methods.

The automobile fire engine replaced the horses in 1920 in Portland.

It would be hard to describe the excitement of the turnout of the old horse drawn outfits. The noise was terrific. Each rig used a gong type of bell, which was very loud. The noise of the galloping horses, and the steam whistles blowing, and the iron tires on the wagons created a bedlam that was out of this world. When the rigs reached the fire the horses had to be unhitched and walked for about a half a hour in order that they would not get stiff joints. This is where the kids came in for some fun. You were a big shot at school if you could go back and brag about having walked a team of fire horses at a fire. Also there was always coffee for the firemen and the kid who walked the horses was permitted to have a cup. That's how I got started to drinking java. I have walked fire horses in my time.