

Sellwood Fire Department History

By Dana Beck
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On a typical overcast, slate-grey winter day in Portland nearly a century ago, the tolling of the fire bell at Sellwood's Fire Station #20, then located at SE Tenino and 13th, signaled a call to arms for local firemen.

Responding to a fire on unpaved roads, as *"The Bee"* at the time lamented on one particular occasion, the fire engine hit a Ford coupé – and then rammed another car – in its haste to get to the scene of the blaze.

Undeterred by this mishap, the determined Engineer at the wheel then plowed through four blocks of mud to arrive at a smoked-filled house at 7th and SE Nehalem. There, the fire crew swept into action, dousing the flames at the rear of the house. The firefighters also made sure the occupants were safely outside, with no casualties reported.

But, during the subsequent fire investigation, a handmade illegal still was determined to have exploded and caused the fire. Police officers, who arrived quickly after the fire truck's arrival, seized 250 gallons of homemade mash. It was not reported in the paper whether the fire engine was cited for hit-and-run.

In the time of Prohibition, when it was illegal to buy or sell alcoholic beverages, some people tried to make them – which is as illegal today as it was then. The owner of the singed home was promptly hauled down to the police station and arrested for manufacturing liquor. Just an incident in the life of a firefighter in Sellwood, almost a century ago!

However, there was a fire station in Sellwood way back in the later 19th Century, when Sellwood was an independent town for a few years, and the firefighters were all volunteers. It came about at a meeting held at Sellwood City Hall on Umatilla Street. Those in attendance voted to organize a fire protection committee, and the first task for committee members was to assemble a firefighting crew for the town – and that same night a fire brigade was organized. Twenty robust and dedicated men immediately volunteered their services, and prominent businessmen J.E. Reinke was chosen as the foreman to lead the crew.

Everything seemed to be in place, and Sellwood Volunteer Fire Company No.1 was officially formed. Once the meeting was adjourned, the people of Sellwood seemed to be content that they had a firefighting crew sufficient to handle any emergency.

It apparently wasn't until the next day that residents realized that if they had a fire department, they still lacked a fire truck, firefighting equipment, hoses, and even a fire station to house all the apparatus needed for an emergency! William Hogg offered his barn at 11th and SE Spokane as temporary quarters for the fire crew, until one could be built.

At the start of the hunt for a place to build a firehouse for the fire brigade, Sellwood administrators called upon the City of Portland's fire department for funds to build a firehouse. But there just wasn't enough money in the firemen's fund to assist the volunteers of Sellwood – or any other community in the Rose City. As a consolation to Sellwood, however, and to start its drive for firefighting equipment, Portland Fire Commissioner Sylvester Farrell presented to the new fire brigade a Babcock

hand-held fire extinguisher, and a deep-toned bell to be used to alert the town of any catastrophe. Basically, though, the community was still on its own.

Like a political candidate campaigning for supporters, the volunteers' foreman, J.E. Reinke, petitioned business associations around the city and made rousing speeches to religious groups, fraternity organizations, and other groups, seeking cash contributions for construction of a new Sellwood firehouse, and all the needed equipment.

With only a limited budget, Sellwood's volunteer firefighters relied heavily on their newly-formed Ladies Auxiliary, created in 1896, to supply the fire brigade with the needed fire equipment. Fundraising took the form of monthly dances, celebrations, and other promotions, organized by the ladies to help supply the Sellwood volunteers with axes, pike poles, hand saws, and lanterns.

Fire brigade foreman Reinke was finally able to secure a piece of property owned by the city at the corner of SE 13th Avenue and Tenino Street, and lumber from the Sellwood Saw Mill was donated to help construct the new fire station. Local carpenters volunteered their talents; and on April 10, 1895, an impressive 28-by-80-foot, two-story firehouse was finally built and ready. Two double-bay doors provided access for the hook and ladder, and the hose wagon that was later purchased.



The deep-toned fire bell was hung high over the station's entrance. A hose-drying tower was set in the middle of the structure, so 20 and 30-foot hoses could be hung to dry after use, to extend their serviceability. There was, upstairs, a lot of open space, to be rented out as a community hall – where dances, firemen's balls, holiday celebrations, and neighborhood meetings could be held – with the rent money to be used for buying additional firefighting equipment.

Water cisterns installed around the community made it easier for the "fire boys" to connect hose wagons to a cistern or a city hydrant, for pumping

water by hand to fight a fire. But the volunteer fire brigade had their work cut out for them – unfortunately, getting the fire apparatus to a fire, by foot, in a timely manner – was a real problem.

Most roads in Sellwood in the 1890s were of hard-packed dirt, and only a few of the main streets – like Umatilla, or Spokane – were even planked, to provide a better surface. During rainy winters, the husky boys and athletic strongmen of the Sellwood volunteer fire brigade had a hard time dragging a water hose truck through the mud to the scene of a fire. 13th Avenue, which had streetcar rails running down the middle, was still otherwise just a dirt road. And when the "fire laddies" finally arrived, they were already worn out from hauling their equipment from the firehouse to the fire!

In 1900, the Ladies Auxiliary again came to the rescue of the fire brigade. They raised enough money to pay for the installation of electricity in the Sellwood Firehouse. But having electricity was just not enough; the editor of the *"The Bee"* at the time often wasn't very complimentary about the speed with

which the fire brigade got to the fires. Some articles described how a burning house was already in ashes by the time the fire team pulled up.

"The Bee" news reporting of the era included a catastrophic blaze at the Portland Woolen Mills. In 1901, the drying sheds there caught fire. When the fire brigade arrived, they set about using water drawn from Johnson Creek to quench the flames – but, as unhappily had happened on many other occasions as well, the subsequent water pressure from the hoses was insufficient to have any real effect on the raging flames. The Portland Woolen Mills was a total loss.

Other conflagrations of the time included the Miller barn at the corner of 17th and SE Miller, which burnt to the ground because an oil lamp had fallen into a pile of hay. The Volunteer fire crew did arrive in time to save the structure – but they found that the nearest fire hydrant was three blocks away, further away than their hoses would reach. The men were reduced to having to fight the flames with a bucket brigade – an inadequate response, and an embarrassment for any firefighting crew in 1916.

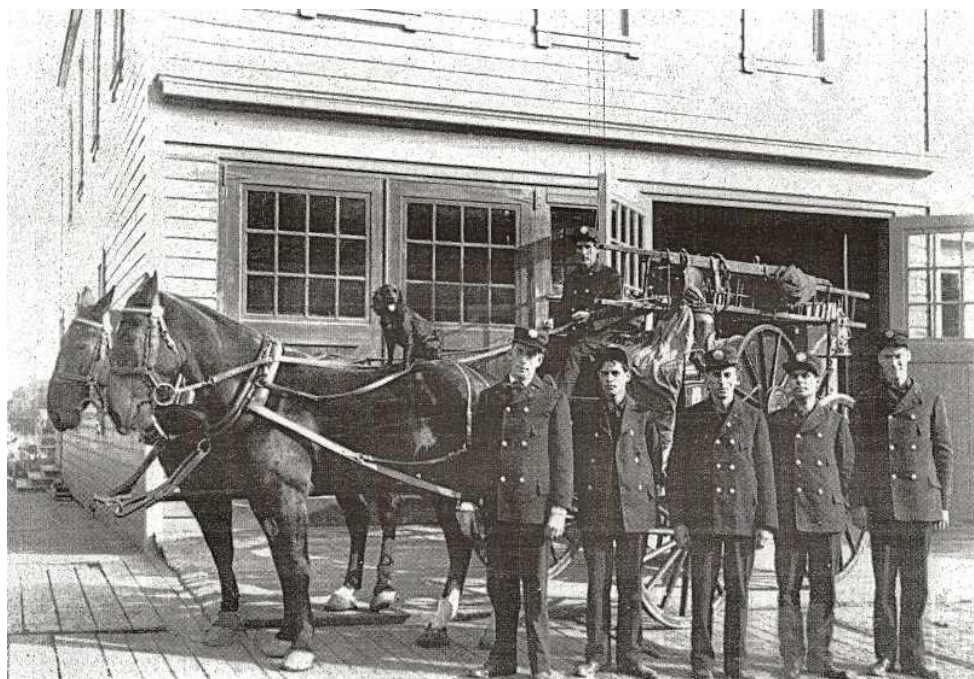
Then, in 1911, Sellwood faced an actual fire scandal, when fire Captain George W. Stokes had to appear before a Fire Executive Board – where he was found guilty of drinking on the job, sleeping through an alarm, and jeering junior firefighters. The Board members recommended reducing his rank, and reviewing his work ethic again in the future.

Other interesting fire incidents that were not directly related to firefighting were reported in the pages of *"The Bee"* such as the time when Willis Hamilton and his wife returned home to find their front door ajar. They promptly called the fire department – to ask them to call the police! But instead, the Sellwood fire crew arrived at the crime scene with loaded rifles and shotguns. Alas, the criminal was long gone by the time of their arrival.

When called to help fight a raging forest fire near Mt. Hood, Sellwood firefighting volunteers brought back an abandoned bear cub that was adopted by Captain Stokes, and which served as a mascot.

After nearly twelve years of grueling yet exciting times, the era the volunteer fire brigade came to an end. In 1907, the City of Portland combined the city's north and southeast fire stations with the fire stations on the west side of the Willamette River, forming the Municipal Fire Department. Paid and trained firefighters replaced the volunteers, and they moved into the newly-named Sellwood Fire Station #20, after the volunteers boys had cleaned out their lockers and left.

The tall false-fronted firehouse was remodeled, at that time, to provide stables in the ground floor of the building for the addition of horses. Horses were much faster and more reliable in hauling fire equipment to fires than were a bunch of men struggling with ropes. A double



folding door was added to the front, for exit and entrance of horses and wagons, and permanent living quarters were added upstairs for those who would be living at the station fulltime.

If watching young firemen muttering curses under their breath while they strained to haul hose and ladder wagons to a fire by hand had provided entertainment to the public, now the gallant charge of a team of horses pulling fire wagons was even more exhilarating to bystanders.

The rumbling of hooves on the pavement, and even on hard-packed dirt, could be heard from blocks away – and the sound of the fire bell was cause for any merchant or patron to stop what they were doing and rush out to the street to watch as the fire wagons rumbled by. For those who were lucky enough to see the team depart their quarters, the bay doors would swing open, and a horse harness was lowered from the ceiling to connect the horses to the fire wagon. Once ready, a shout from the team leader sent the wagon, and the men hanging precariously onto the rear of the wagon, off to fight their next fire.

Often firefighters had to contend with crowds of spectators at the fire – as housewives, bored with their daily tasks, nosy neighbors, and unsupervised children gathered around a smoldering house for entertainment. Sometimes bystanders even hindered the fire brigade itself as it worked to fight the fire. Today's modern firefighters can relate to that problem.

Men and boys never tired of the spectacle of watching horses and fire brigades in action. Boys often waited in the shadow of the firehouse when the horses returned from an alarm, volunteering to take the horses out for a "cooling down" walk after their strenuous run. Meantime the daily activities of firefighters included cleaning stalls, feeding oats and bran mash, and washing down the horses' legs. Firefighters became good horse-keepers, and even oiled and polished the hooves of the station horses to keep them from wearing down.

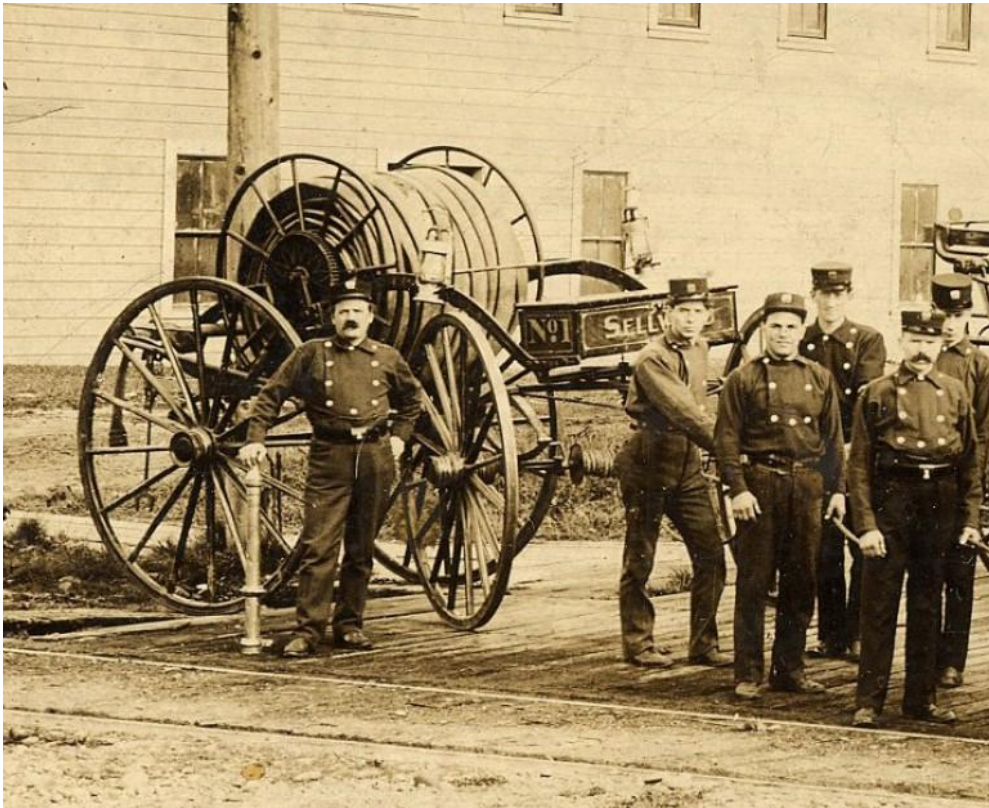
After their hard day's work, Portland firefighters were paid between 36 cents to 40 cents an hour, back in 1925.

Dogs also proved valuable companions in firehouses. Most of these dogs were trained to clear the way on the fire route, and to keep other dogs from interfering with the team of horses on their way to a fire. They also kept curious boys and overzealous onlookers away from the fire hydrants, or the burning structure itself.

Dalmatians are often associated with firehouses, inasmuch as they had the speed and endurance to keep up with the fire wagons, and were considered more compatible with horses than other breeds. But, from historic photos of the Sellwood Engine House, other dogs served at the station as well – a black spaniel, a golden retriever, and an American pitbull (Staffordshire terrier) among them.



One reported tragedy was the death of "Pouch", a dog who had been the Sellwood Fire Station mascot in 1916. He was found dead by fireman Sleighten – or so said The Oregonian – struck down by a passing auto; he had been a favorite with the neighborhood children for over ten years.



In the following years, Sellwood Engine Company #20 purchased a hook and ladder truck, four chemical fire extinguishers, and a horse-drawn Amoskeag hose reel wagon. An American LaFrance Metropolitan steam pumper hauled by three horses was later added to the fleet.

The romantic era of the firefighting horses came to its end when Portland's Chief Fire Engineer, David Campbell, began showcasing the new

gasoline staff car he'd recently bought for the Portland Fire Department. By beating horse-drawn vehicles to a fire, he attempted to convince the voting public and firefighters that motorized vehicles were the future of firefighting. Autos were cheaper and faster, compared to horses, which also produced as a byproduct 50 pounds of waste per day.

Although Campbell recognized the need to modernize the fire department, he underestimated the relationship between firemen and their horses, and horses' popularity by the public, and it wasn't an easy sell – but in the end it was clear he was right.

After only thirteen years of horse-driven service to the community, the citizens of Sellwood and its firefighters sadly saw their beloved fire

horses sold off to area farmers. Some of them were reduced to hauling milk or vegetable wagons – still often delivered to homes the old-fashioned way.

In 1914, some 64 horses were replaced by 23 gasoline-powered fire engines, and by 1920 the last firefighting team of horses had been retired.

As the Portland Fire Department turned from fire horses to motorized fire trucks, "*The Bee*" shifted its attention to the condition of the Sellwood firehouse: "The old firehouse is falling down" it declared,



and the editor encouraged the city to pony up for a new Sellwood fire station for the new gasoline-powered emergency vehicles.

Many of Portland's old wooden firehouses were indeed outdated by then, and certainly in need of replacement. The Fire Department looked to one of its own, Battalion Chief Lee Gray Holden, to design a more modern fire station. Subsequently, Holden gained international attention with what he came up with – the first Bungalow-style fire station design, intended to blend in better with the homes surrounding it.

Although he was at best an amateur architect, Holden went on to build twenty-four bungalow-style stations (eleven of them still exist today), which made Portland well-known across the nation in the



fire community. And, during his 40-year service, Holden also designed various fireboats for the Portland Fire Department, too.

The "*Oregonian*" and "*The Bee*" announced the date of January 25, 1921, as the official completion date of the station – which was built at a cost of \$10,300. The interior included a living room with a stucco fireplace, a men's dormitory with a bathroom (with a shower and bathtub), and with private lockers lining the wall.

A full basement beneath the fire station was used as a workshop, and 20 firefighters were assigned to the station on a rotating basis.

Captain W.A. Wilson, who was the official photographer for the Portland Fire Bureau, used a portion of the basement of Station #20 as a darkroom for processing his photos. A set of swinging doors made of imitation brick, to match the exterior, opened up to store the single fire engine in the garage section at the front of the building. A wooden windowbox was included on the outside, for a while, to give the firehouse the feeling of a typical English style cottage!

For the next 31 years the little bungalow fire station served the area. Then, in the 1950s, the fire department decided once again to replace its aging firehouses around Portland. In 1957, a three-million-dollar ballot measure was passed by voters – and Sellwood Fire Station #20 was shifted to a new building at its current location in Westmoreland: 22nd Avenue and SE Bybee Boulevard, at the north end of Westmoreland Park.



The old fire station building on 13th Avenue was rented out for special events, and at one time was a training center for traffic surveyors employed by the State Highway Department. By the start of 1963 the Sellwood Youth Activity Group had taken over the little building; and although it was still owned by the Portland Fire Department, it even later became a home for the Sellwood-Moreland Boys Club. A basketball hoop was placed on the front driveway, and boys from around the neighborhood were welcome to come inside for a game of pool, or to sign up for the seasonal soccer and football leagues that formed in the summertime.

Girls were also welcome at the club, but were not allowed membership until the 1990s, when the organization was renamed the "Boys and Girls Club". The local club subsequently moved north onto a block formerly the location of a Safeway store, on SE Milwaukie Avenue at Rex Street in Westmoreland – recently redeveloped as the "Meetinghouse" full-block apartment house, after the Meyer Boys and Girls Club moved south into Clackamas County.

In 1990 the "Sellwood-Moreland Improvement League" neighborhood association (SMILE) saved the beloved former Sellwood fire station – buying it from the Portland Fire Department. Hundreds of hours of volunteer labor, restoration, and remodeling, updated the vintage fire station – and today it is a resource for the neighborhood, and is known as SMILE Station. It is used for SMILE meetings, as well as other meetings of all sorts – and it's also rented out by SMILE for wedding receptions, celebrations, family gatherings, and other events.

One more story before we're done.

Over 100 years ago, in 1914, a small boy asked Captain Edward L. Boatright of the Sellwood Fire Company if he could mend his broken toy wagon to give to his brother for Christmas.

This was the first spark that led to the beginning of the "Toy and Joy Makers" project, wherein fire stations across Portland – then and now – collect toys to give out to less-fortunate children during the Holidays.