

# "Emergency Medical Vehicles"

Source: Rose City Rescue and Ryan Corbett Bell

*Excerpt from "A History – The Ambulance" by Ryan Corbett Bell*

*ISBN 978-0-7864-3811-2 Pages 200 through 208*

## **THE AMBULANCE - ROSE CITY RESCUE**

A particularly lustrous example of how a fire bureau augmented its historical mission by adding emergency medical service occurred in Portland, Oregon, during the height of the Depression, when a gift to the fire department ignited a statewide revolution in civilian emergency response. It started in 1933 when fourteen businessmen in "The Rose City" formed a committee to raise \$8,000 by public subscription to buy and equip a modern disaster car, which they donated to the Portland Fire Bureau for the exclusive benefit of, in their words, "this group of public employees who are engaged in a very hazardous service." Since 1924 the department's first aid apparatus had been a squad truck with some first aid equipment tucked in amidst the chemical fire retardants and rescue gear, but the committee invested its capital into a 1932 Lincoln sedan that was then re-engineered into what its sponsors believed was the finest emergency ambulance in the country, with its specially built trunk and interior cabinets bursting with a complete surgical kit and a miniature pharmacy of prescription medications (for use by any physicians who happened to be on hand), a full set of first aid materials, a combination inhalator and resuscitator, ambulance cot, chemical hot pads, canteens, grappling hooks, sledgehammers, crowbars, chisels, gas masks, tannic acid spray for burns, disinfectants, everything that could be wished for to rescue, relieve, or revive. The car was lacquered over in a brilliant red, souped up with a 100 horsepower engine promising a top speed of ninety miles an hour, and christened "The George Baker Emergency Car" in honor of the popular Portland mayor who was retiring that year after sixteen years in office. The new ambulance was officially given to the fire department at a gala celebration on Portland's Jantzen Beach, June 30, 1933, in a ceremony that included a demonstration of the crew's resuscitation skills with a staged rescue of a swimmer dragged out of the Columbia River and restored to life for the delight and edification of the assembled throngs.

While the original intent may have been to provide first aid to firemen, the crew made itself immediately available to the general public, and by 1935 it averaged 350 cases a year- including, in the reckoning of the aid car's skipper, Captain Fred Roberts, heart attacks, pneumonia, infantile paralysis, drowning, electric shocks, carbon monoxide poisoning, "all types of suicides," auto accidents, and struggling newborns. Had the Baker Emergency Car confined itself to Portland it would have repaid the investment of its philanthropic patrons many times over, but just as the sight of Union Army ambulances darting through city streets in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had educated the public about the utility of ambulances, so the Baker Emergency Car achieved similar results by undertaking a summer barnstorming tour of Oregon in 1935. The tour was initiated by Governor Martin, who had just formed a state "First Aid Committee" to encourage duplication of the Baker Car in a minimum of fifteen Oregon towns and cities. The Governor was not only impressed by the admirable record of the Portland squad, he was appalled to discover that in the entire state of Oregon there were only five

inhalator units in use, and a single certified oxygen instructor – Captain Roberts. Meanwhile, Washington State had more than 200 such devices in operation and California boasted at least 400 of its own (and further claimed that this equipment could be delivered to any citizen in the state within twenty minutes, something that Oregon couldn't begin to approach – even with the ninety-mile an hour Baker car to deliver the equipment). Even allowing for differences in population size, it was clear that, outside of the Rose City, Oregon was making a poor showing relative to the neighbors when it came to providing emergency medical service for her citizens.

Accordingly, Captain Roberts was asked to drive the vermilion mercy car up, down, and across the state in an effort to inspire local townships to replicate its services. In a summer tour that took him from the sands of Seaside to the Grand Ronde Valley in eastern Oregon, it was estimated that thirty thousand people had a chance to admire Portland's rescue car at over a hundred public appearances at fair grounds, skating rinks, library lawns, and fire stations: among the throngs meticulously recorded by the Fire Bureau's hard working public relations department were 508 doctors, 187 nurses, and over 500 Oregon firemen – as well as one newborn at Klamath Falls who was given four hours of oxygen resuscitation in an unplanned field trial. In all, the Baker Car visited twenty-six towns, and within a month twenty-three of them were raising funds to acquire their own first aid cars – pulp and paper mill workers outside Salem agreed to donate fifty cents each towards their local campaign, the Baker Elks Lodge staged a circus to kick off their fund raising rally, and everywhere city councils looked hard at their budgets for the funds to purchase an inhalator or a used ambulance: of their own. Even as Portland's smaller rivals raced to keep up, however, the city was on the verge of taking an unprecedented stride over the horizon of ambulance possibilities: in 1939 the Baker Emergency Car was going to be eclipsed by the debut of the Fire Bureau's massive "Coffee Wagon," an ambulance demonstrating the fantastic future of emergency vehicles.

This successor to the Baker car was a bus-sized behemoth whose \$30,000 cost (over \$400,000 in 2007 dollars) was carried by mercantile king Aaron Frank, son of the co-founder of Meier and Frank, the Portland department store fixture. Mr. Frank, a gifted amateur mechanic, had been favorably impressed by the 1933 George Baker Emergency Car, but he envisioned a greater, even gargantuan, version of that ambulance – a colossus of mercy that could face down any emergency. The result of his scheming was a modified bus christened the "Jay W. Stevens Disaster Service Unit" in honor of a friend and former fire-marshal. Nicknamed "the Coffee Wagon" for its resemblance to a mobile diner, it was the first civilian all-in-one disaster unit of its kind, a radical expansion of the ambulance that has never been surpassed. The colossus made its public debut on March 25, 1939, when the curtains of the Municipal Auditorium parted and the Disaster Service Unit was there on the stage for the assembled thousands to gape at. Among the crowd was a modest Aaron Frank, who wasn't interested in accolades or public applause – unfortunately for him, several enthusiastic members of the Portland Fire Department were nearby and, amidst cheers, they seized hold of Frank and carried him kicking and screaming into the spotlight on center stage.

Without question, Frank and his Disaster Unit deserved all the applause they received that night. He had given the city a vehicle whose portable power plants could generate sufficient electricity to restore lighting to a good sized office building and which were hooked up to a range of electronic marvels,

including floodlights burning enough candle-power to illuminate an entire village, a long-range public address system audible two miles away and a miniature radio station that sent and received messages from the specially equipped gas and smoke helmets worn by its rescue and fire-fighting squads: in addition, it was equipped as a complete emergency hospital with resources for surgery and could transport seven patients at a time. It had a predictably overwhelming effect on a city whose previous conception of an ambulance was a stock hearse or a comfortable looking sedan with a cot in the back and an oxygen tank. One awestruck local reporter who stepped inside the white bus with the red highlights over the wheel-wells found himself staring at a “multiplicity of mechanical miracles which [will] probably remind you of an artist’s conception of a world of the future.

In addition to its miniature surgery suite the Disaster Unit had a bevy of heavy rescue equipment and enough tackle to open a hardware store, and so, according to a brochure put out by the Portland Bureau of Fire, it was admirably equipped to handle “not only fire, but all such disasters as train wrecks, plane crashes, [the] collapse of tall buildings, bridges or elevators; shipwrecks, highway disasters, snow slides, earth slides, floods, jail breaks, riots, epidemics, explosions, mine or tunnel disasters, storms or any other emergency that might make headlines in the Rose City. Fortunately for the citizens of Portland the Stevens Disaster Car (as it was later called) was generally called out for less catastrophic emergencies, such as house fires and auto accidents. It was also sent out to major incidents occurring well outside the city limits when its special services were required, as with the time in 1952 when it responded to a collision between a Mercury sedan and a logging truck jack-knifed athwart a highway some thirty miles from Portland: the resulting fireball killed two men and injured three women, and in a macabre detail, it was noted that a Thanksgiving turkey sitting in the back seat of the sedan had been burned black. Aaron Frank died in 1968 but his “Coffee Wagon” stayed on duty, not being inventoried into a city warehouse for storage until May 9, 1972: by then it had been in operation for almost thirty-three years and had logged over 48,000 miles, certainly earning it a place in some Vehicular Valhalla.

Widely discussed in the press of the day, the Stevens Disaster Unit had many imitators, especially in the post-war years when a rising economy and newly unfettered manufacturing plants fueled a flood of new products. In the Eisenhower era of huge cars and fascination with scientific progress, such hyper-technical, all-in-one disaster units were a compelling article, and both large cities and small-town rescue squads invested in them. Ultimately, however, they proved impractical for most services – for example, while it was true that a super-rig could provide the tools to light up an accident scene and extricate victims from the tangled wreckage of a car crash, once the bodies were free the crew faced a dilemma: leave all the tools on the pavement and drive away with the patients, or let them wait in the back while all the gear was gathered up and stowed before taking off for the hospital. In addition, prior to the late 1960s there was no accepted curriculum to train non-physicians in advanced medical service so often the mega-ambulances rolled out with a crew holding Red Cross First Aid Cards and sitting in the middle of a small surgical theater surrounded by specialized equipment they couldn’t use (cost was also an issue, as replacement parts were more expensive for a vehicle the size of a bus than they would be for a sedan-sized ambulance). By the early 1960s few of the super-ambulances had survived, having given way to “modular” response squads consisting of separate vehicles for patient transport and heavy rescue.

Perhaps nowhere was this evolution realized in a more dramatic fashion than New York City, the metropolis that, fittingly, started our ambulance revolution in 1869. It was just two years after the “Coffee Wagon” made its first appearance that Manhattan caught up with Portland when Mayor La Guardia, after a visit to Oregon, enthusiastically welcomed his own “Super Truck” to the city police armamentarium in 1941. Physically similar to the Jay W. Stevens Disaster Unit, the new rig likewise carried its own generator to power the obligatory flood lights and was fully equipped as an ambulance, field hospital, and disaster command center. A news photo showed a vehicle that was nearly a dead-ringer for Portland’s Coffee-Wagon although perhaps a foot or three shorter and without the flame-red highlights. Impressive as it was, this new disaster truck was only the latest member of a storied New York rescue squad whose scope of services foretold the heavy-rescue paramedic teams of the 1960s – and beat them to it by forty years. Its history follows the entire trajectory of the super-ambulances, while also prefiguring the revolution in training and equipment that marked the beginning of the age of the paramedic and the emergency medical technician. While almost anonymous today outside of New York City, this police rescue squad had its own television special a decade before Jack Webb’s *Emergency!* introduced paramedic services to America, pioneered modern emergency response techniques at a time when horse drawn wagons were still seen on city streets, and after eighty years is still setting the pace for emergency services in the city where it all began.