Volunteer Firefighters, 1858

By Unknown

In this photo, Stephen Skidmore, age 19, is shown sitting on the left in the front row with other members of Multnomah No. 2 Volunteer Fire Company. Skidmore was popular and well-liked, and when he joined the “Multnomah No. 2” in 1857, at age eighteen, it was a sign that he had “arrived” as a member of society. He died in 1873.

As they were in other early U.S. cities, Portland’s volunteer fire-fighting squads were akin more to the exclusive social clubs they graced than to the professional ranks of forces regarded as the norm beginning in the twentieth century. The importance of fire fighting ability was secondary to social standing for anyone who wanted to be a firefighter during this early period. In fact, membership in the Volunteer Fire Company depended upon being accepted by all current company members.

Throughout the 1860s, there were five companies of volunteer firefighters in Portland. In 1868 there were four “engine” companies and one “hook and ladder” company. Equipment and a building were provided for each company by the city. Willamette No. 1 and Columbia No. 3 had hand-operated pumps mounted on a carriage. Multnomah No. 2 (pictured) and Protection No. 4 boasted steam pumpers – although the heavier steam equipment still had to be pulled through the streets by the men themselves. Portland’s only hook and ladder company was called Vigilance.

Stephen Skidmore was not just a friendly volunteer firefighter, he became a prominent citizen and a wealthy Portland druggist. When he died in 1873, he bequeathed money to the library and for the construction of the Skidmore Fountain.

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