

Molalla Ambulance Service: A Long History Of Emergency Service To The Community

By Tim Woods, EMT-P

In 1924 the Molalla Volunteer Fire Department was formed, and a creative fundraiser, now known as the Molalla Buckaroo Rodeo was used to raise funds for the city's first fire truck. It was with the same creativity that public funds were raised for the community's first ambulance under the leadership of Fire Chief Ossie Marson in 1948. Although emergency first aid had always been provided by the Fire Department, now the medical equipment including a "resuscitator" could be carried on a single piece of fire department apparatus, and the patient could be quickly transported to the Oregon City Hospital.

There was a national movement in 1966 after a report called "The White Paper" was published by the National Academy of Sciences which identified many deficiencies of the existing emergency medical services. The U.S. Department of Transportation developed new standards and training programs for Emergency Medical Technicians or "EMT's". Molalla Fire Department jumped on the bandwagon, and by the early 70's had several volunteer EMT's who manned the ambulance. The ambulance at this time was a Cadillac, and provided patients with a smooth, quiet ride to the hospital.

Another movement was a foot in the early 70's after a pioneering program in Miami, Florida, to give EMT's even more advanced training in cardiac care and other advanced medical procedures. These advanced EMT's were called "Paramedics". The public became aware of this program after a popular TV show called "Emergency" aired on ABC and portrayed two Paramedics working for the Los Angeles Fire Department. Molalla Fire Department sent two active volunteers to a paramedic program that was held at the Oregon Health and Sciences University in Portland. One of the two later became the first EMS Chief over the Molalla Ambulance Service. He was Charles "Mick" Kelly, and was hired by Fire Chief Ken Stafford.

For a while, the Molalla Ambulance Service operated as a separate entity, with its own board of directors and budget which was based on user fees and insurance billing. Yet, just as it always had, the ambulances were housed at the fire station. Another one of the early volunteer paramedics was Joe Misso, who later became Molalla's Fire Chief.

In 1987, the Volunteer Ambulance Service handed over all of its assets to the Molalla Fire District, and the two entities became one again. After Charles Kelly retired, full time Molalla paramedic Grant Brough stepped up to manage the EMS Division, and hired two other full time paramedics in 1989. It was apparent at this time, that due to growth and 911 call volume, the ambulance would not be able to continue with only volunteer staffing. The organization of having a paid paramedic with a part-time volunteer staff continues to this day.

The call volume for Molalla Fire District in 1980 was 733 with an average of 2 calls a day. Approximately 80% of the call volume was medically related, or calls that the ambulance was dispatched to.

Each year since the call volume has been climbing. In 2000, Molalla Fire District had the largest year ever with 1,740 calls. That is an average of 5 calls a day. The following two years were even busier, approaching 2000 runs per year.

The EMS division of the fire district has two ambulances. They are the large modular box (Type 3) medic units, and carry the latest technology in cardiac monitoring, and emergency medications. One unit has a portable respiratory ventilator and a Doppler (ultra-sound) monitoring device.

New challenges face the fire district, with a 10% annual population growth. State Highway 213, which divides the district in half, has been named "blood alley". It is the third worst highway in Oregon in relation to traffic accidents and fatalities (next to Highway 26/Mount Hood and Highway 18/Oregon Coast).

Dense subdivisions are cropping up all over the City of Molalla. One is under way with 186 homes, which will push all the way to Vick Road to the north. Another subdivision is proposed for the old Avison Lumber Mill Property, which will add another reported 900 homes. A second shopping complex is also being proposed near the current Safeway shopping center. Brentwood Industries, a cabinet-manufacturing firm is also expanding, and will be the largest cabinet manufacturer west of Mississippi.

With each expansion in homes and commerce, more people are moving into the area; and this directly equates to more call volume.

In 2001, the fire district broke ground on an addition and major renovation of its main fire station. The only portion of the building standing was the truck bay and a south wall. The fire station was dramatically updated with telecommunication ports for use as an EOC (Emergency Operations Center) during disasters or major events. There is a larger training classroom area, and a more efficient living area for resident

firefighters and medics. The administration area added more offices and a conference. The new station was back on line in August 2002.

Along with 911 responses, members of the ambulance service are also on hand to take blood pressures each day. The “Vial of Life” program was initiated recently, to help those with medical conditions relay important medical information to emergency personnel. The “Vial of Life” kits are available at no charge from the main fire station. CPR and First Aid courses are taught at the station for a reasonable fee. Person who would like to register for an upcoming course can do so by calling (503) 829-2200.