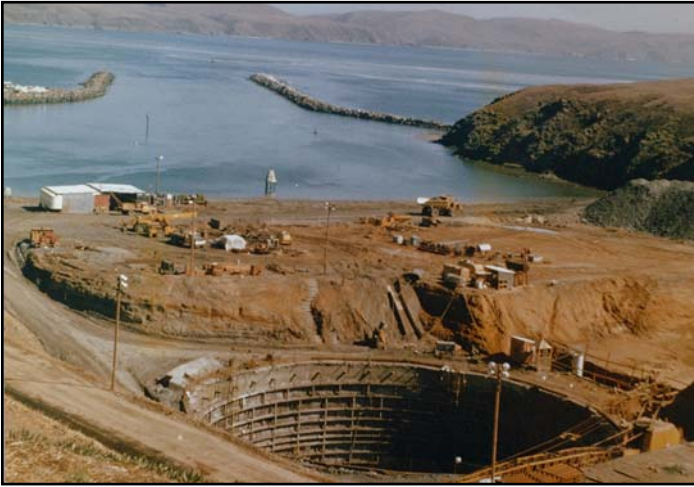


# RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Battle of Bodega Head

by Dianne Hales - 2024

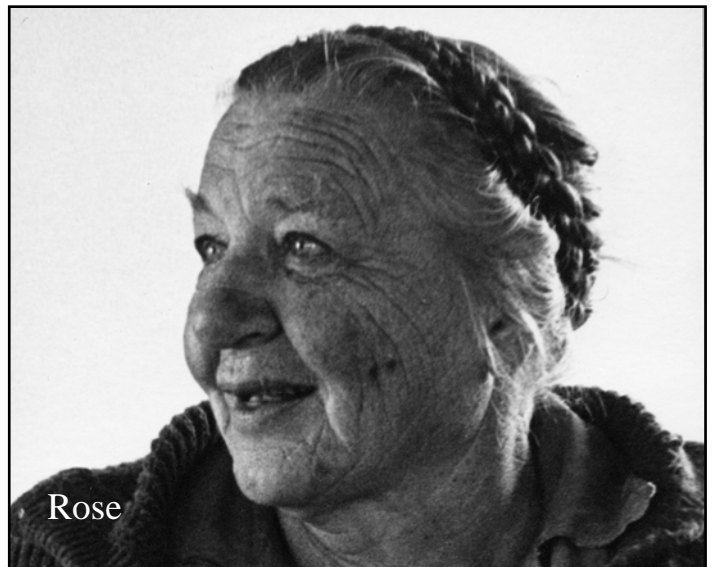


Remote and rugged, Bodega Head seemed an unlikely setting for an epic battle that pitted a mighty public utility against a motley coalition of ranchers, fishermen, scientists and concerned residents. Yet this determined band of citizens-turned-activists defied all odds to derail Pacific Gas & Electric's plan to build a nuclear plant within a quarter-mile of the San Andreas Fault. Their unlikely victory gave birth to the modern environmental movement and inspired generations of ordinary people to unite for an extraordinary cause.

Bodega Head's deep history began with the Coast Miwok, who settled the area more than 5,000 years ago. Spain, Russia, Mexico and the United States laid claim to

the land, which was divided into ranches in the 1860s. The Gaffney family, immigrants from Ireland, bought and grazed dairy cattle on the largest parcel.

An immigrant from Poland, **Rose Gaffney** came to the ranch as a teenager to serve as housekeeper and cook. In 1917 Rose married one of the Gaffney brothers. Working at his side for decades, she cherished the wild natural beauty of their windswept land. After her husband's death in 1941, Rose would brandish a baseball bat—or occasionally a shotgun—to shoo away trespassers from her beloved Horseshoe Cove.



Rose

As California's population and energy needs

***On November 11, 2024 at 7pm the Rancho Bodega Historical Society, in cooperation with Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods, and the Museum of Sonoma County present a webinar to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of PG&E's official withdrawal of its proposed nuclear power plant.***

*to register: <https://stewardscr.org/events/2024-the-battle-of-bodega-head-webinar/>*

## ATOMIC PARK ARCHIVES

soared in the 1950s, PG&E decided to build a nuclear-powered “Atomic Park” on Bodega Head. In 1958 PG&E representatives tried to purchase the Gaffney ranch. The feisty widow, who wanted to preserve this beautiful location for future generations, adamantly refused, triggering a years-long cascade of lawsuits and countersuits.



PG&E kept its nuclear plans secret, but a waitress at The Tides restaurant overheard PG&E men in suits discussing nuclear energy and spread the word. Despite opposition from locals, fishermen and marine scientists, PG&E plowed ahead with an access road that destroyed valued tidelands and clam beds in Bodega Bay. The utility also began excavating a massive crater that critics labeled the “Hole in the Head.” Its opponents became known as the “Hole in the Head Gang.”

In 1962, the San Francisco Chronicle published a poignant eulogy for the “doomed” headlands by its environmental reporter and a call to action from Karl Kortum, director of the SF Maritime Museum, urging readers to demand hearings by the Public Utilities Commission. In the heated proceedings, Rose Gaffney attacked PG&E’s promises as “Hooey!” Joel Hedgpeth, director of a marine lab at nearby Dillon Beach, warned

of dangers from heated water released from the plant. David Pesonen, a young Sierra Club staffer, testified about possible collusion between the utility and county officials. Nonetheless, PG&E’s plans won approval from the Public Utilities Commission.

Pesonen, who broke with the Sierra club to lead the Hole-in-the-Head Gang, transformed the ragtag squad into a savvy legal, political and communications lobby. At an informational meeting in Sonoma County, the head of the California office of the Atomic Energy Development & Radiation Protection infuriated the audience by urging them to leave complex issues like nuclear energy “to the experts.”



An outraged Doris Sloan, a mother of four, headed up a grass-roots campaign of leafletting, canvassing and letter-writing. Sign-carrying protesters marched outside PG&E headquarters. Popular musicians, including legendary trumpeter Lu Watters (an amateur geologist), performed protest songs, such as “*Blues over Bodega*,” that played on local radio stations. On Memorial Day, 1963, the Gang hosted a festival-like demonstration with live music and speeches

# BLUES OVER BODEGA

WALLY  
ROSE

\* LU WATTERS JAZZ BAND \*

BARBARA  
DANE



at Bodega Head. Its highlight was the release of 1,500 helium balloons, each tagged to represent a radioactive isotope that might leak from the proposed plant. The balloons flew hundreds of miles, landing in San Rafael and Oakland, sparking widespread concern and garnering national attention.

The ultimate death blow for the project came, not from a publicity stunt, but from science. Pierre Saint-Amand, a geologist with expertise in plate tectonics, became alarmed about the proposed plant's proximity to an active earthquake fault. On a covert inspection of the Hole in the Head, he discovered a "spectacular" fault slicing through the reactor site.

In March 1964 a powerful earthquake in Alaska intensified public fears. After more surveys confirmed the seismic risks, the Atomic Energy Commission declared the Bodega Head site unsafe. Under political and public pressure, PG&E officially withdrew its plans on October 30, 1964.

Six decades later the Hole in the Head, filled with spring and rainwater, serves as a testament to the power of people united to defend and preserve the natural world for future generations. On the sixtieth anniversary of PG&E's official withdrawal of its proposed plant, we celebrate the local heroes who saved a now-iconic part of the Sonoma Coast. ■