

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Capturing the History of the Bodega Bay Fire & Ambulance Service

by Andrea Granahan, Special to Sonoma West Times & News



Shirley Ames, dau: Dusty Rhodes



Dennis McAllister, Deputy Sheriff



Captain Lou Stoerzinger



Barbara McElhiney, Board Member

It all began with boats exploding. That's what a gathering at Bodega Bay learned about the history and evolution of the local fire department at the joint meeting in September of Rancho Bodega Historical Society and the Bodega Bay Fire Protection District.

It was an eye-opener for many Bodega Bay residents who did not know of the department's colorful history. In 1953 the post-war fishing fleet had grown, the boats were powered by gasoline, not diesel. Fumes gathered in the vessels holds and were set off by a spark when they started their engines. "The explosions would wake us in the early hours. They rocked the town. You'd feel them even more than hear them," said Shirley Ames. "Men would be badly burned, and boats badly damaged."

The town knew it had to do something so it turned to Ames' father, the late Dusty Rhodes. Before moving to Bodega Bay to open a service station, he started a fire department in West Sacramento and served as chief. He did the same for Bodega Bay. The town began its first responder efforts for \$300 by purchasing a used fire engine. The first firehouse was built by volunteer labor on land donated by the Aikens family. The town held dances and other fundraisers to buy the materials.

At first the fire department limited itself to fires. As the fleet switched to newly developed diesel engines, the volunteer fire department was needed less often. But there was a new problem, a need for Emergency Medical services. The 911 system did not exist, and getting help took an hour at best.

In 1975 Bodega Bay organized itself again. It formed BBAR, Bodega Bay Area Rescue. Local volunteers took advanced first aid classes, and the town raised the money to buy a used ambulance. "We had no home base so whoever was on duty took the ambulance home," explained Mary Cook, an original BBAR volunteer.

Volunteer dispatchers used red telephones as a emergency line to call the volunteer ambulance driver into action.

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History of the Bodega Bay Area Fire & Rescue Services



Andrea Granhan



Annie Murphy Springer



Sue & Fred Wedel



Fire Chief Sean Grinnell

continued from page 1: The Fire Chief, fisherman Paul Wedel, by this time, also had a button in his house his kids were told to ‘never’ push. It would set off an alarm. “Once a kid pushed the button, and I had to rush down to the firehouse to let everyone know it was a false alarm,” Sue Wedel recalled.

The rudimentary system worked well for a few years. It was a burden for the volunteers in round-the-clock 24 hour shifts, caring for accident victims, with the help of Sheriff Deputy Dennis McAllister, trained in cliff rappelling. Three ambulances later, the EMT-trained volunteers realized they needed to hire help. They turned to the fire department and asked the growing town for tax support. The fire department and BBAR merged to form one first-responder department. In January 1982 the coast was slammed with a massive storm. Bridges washed out, roads washed away; a house was swept away in a mudslide, the cliff under the firehouse melted in the downpour, leaving the building just 18 inches from the edge. A crack in the firehouse floor developed. OSHA got involved. The town had to build a new firehouse. The Fire District Board made it clear to the community that it was in everyone’s best interest to raise money. The town taxed itself.

Today the \$300 fire engine and cracked firehouse has evolved to a state-of-the-art fire station that houses 14 full-time employees, 12 volunteers, two interns and four part-time employees. It serves a 34 square mile area for fire protection and an even larger area for medical services, 24 hours a day.

At this historical meeting, the newcomers to Bodega Bay made it clear they felt grateful for what the old-timers had done to move with the times, when a once small fishing village was developing into the sought after destination that Bodega Bay is today. - excerpted from *Sonoma West*, 19 Oct 2019



Photos by John Hershey at:
<https://hershey.smugmug.com/Events/Bodega-Bay-Fire-History-Event/>

History of the Bodega Bay Area Fire & Rescue Services

History of the Bodega Bay Area Fire/Rescue Services Bodega Bay Volunteer Fire Department Established 1953



Established to protect area residents and the gasoline fishing fleet.

- Organized March 18, 1953 by motion made by Roy Faught, 2nd by Col. Lee Miles that we have a volunteer fire department.
- The first Fire Engine was purchased for \$350.00 on April 6, 1953.
- Dispatch: Used telephone system to advise of a call.
Did not respond to medical emergencies.

Bodega Bay Area Rescue (BBAR) 1975 - 1985

- Born out of necessity, BBAR was organized on January 5th, 1975. All Volunteer. The ambulance was stationed at volunteers' homes while on duty. Volunteers rotated locations according to who was on duty. Volunteerism was extraordinary because they devoted "most of their lives" organizing, training and being on duty. Twenty volunteers initially. Records show 29 people trained at one time. Provided service to Bodega Bay, Bodega, Valley Ford, Sonoma Coast and sometimes Jenner.
- Early ambulance crews were trained to the Advanced First Aid level. A few crew members were RN's.
- The Sheriff's Department provided the first Emergency Medical Technician. Training. Attendants were required to be EMT's. Drivers could still be Advanced First Aid trained. No Paramedic back up provided from Sebastopol until 1978. Prior to this time the funeral home ambulance in Guerneville or an ambulance from Santa Rosa or Sebastopol would provide service to the Bodega Bay area.

History of the Bodega Bay Area Fire & Rescue Services

Bodega Bay Fire Protection District 1984 - present day

1984 -- Ballot measure initiated to create a fire district merging BBAR, Inc. with the Bodega Bay Volunteer Fire Department. Voters passed the ballot measure that created the Bodega Bay Fire Protection District.

1984 -- The first new apparatus purchased, a Type One Engine.

1985 -- The new fire district hired four firefighter / EMT's to operate the Ambulance and to staff the fire station.

Until 1988, the fire station building was shared with the Bodega Bay Fisherman's Association. The ambulance responded to all fire calls in addition to all medical incidents.

1994 -- The ambulance was upgraded to provide paramedic level services.

1995 -- A third person was added to cover weekend shifts.

1996 -- A third person was added to all shifts.

1997 -- Crews moved into the new fire station located at 510 Highway One.

As of today, Sept 2019, the Fire District is staffed with a

- Full-Time Fire Chief
- Part-Time Administrative Assistant
- Three Captains, one for each shift
- Four Paramedic/Firefighters
- Two Firefighter/EMT's
- Nine Firefighter/Interns
- Two Reserve Firefighters
- Four Volunteers

