

# 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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## FACES OF BODEGA BAY

### Meet Mary Cook

Interview by John Hershey & Melinda Pahl



Mary Cook is a respected Bodega Bay original, especially when it comes to the history of our Fire District. Mary, her architect husband John and son Staven, moved to Bodega Bay in 1968. She worked at the *Bodega Bay's Post Office* for nearly 30 years. She is one of the original volunteers on the ambulance squad, founded in 1974. Called **BBAR** or *Bodega Bay Ambulance Rescue*, Mary and the other founders witnessed too many serious heart attacks and accidents to stand back when help took at least an hour to get to the Coast. They raised money, found and bought used ambulances from places like Truckee and trained in lifesaving EMT skills. Mary continued building the volunteer base by teaching others advanced classes in First Aid. They trained at the *Bodega Bay School*, ready

to "take care of each of our own" and others passing through Bodega Bay. They were dedicated, available 24 hours a day, keeping the ambulances at home, ready for immediate departure.

Mary is quick to give credit to others. At the Post Office, people like Shirley Ames, Glenice Carpenter and Mary worked together. In 1982, they remember when the bridge in Salmon Creek washed out, isolating Carmet and Sereno del Mar to the north. They managed to get the mail through with Highway workers help, using the construction crane to hoist US mail over the washed-out creek to the other side where it was picked up by postal workers that couldn't get to work. "It worked pretty well" Mary says.

## FACES OF BODEGA BAY

When asked about the start of the ambulance service, Mary invariably credits **Les Sansone** for raising the needed money to start BBAR and the **Bodega Marine Lab** as a first rate supplier of ambulance volunteers. She remembers being kept out of trouble when her authority went unrecognized by State Law Enforcement, until our **Resident Deputy Sheriff, Dennis McAllister** stood by her. She brought humor to the narrative by keeping the locals up-to-date on developments, writing now historical newspaper articles and naming the first ambulances (otherwise know as "crash wagons") with names like *The Great White Hope, Big Red and Goldilocks*. She saved lives as one of the original volunteers and trainers. She says she was never so happy to hear a tiny, crinkly kick in a space blanket and a baby cry ,when at first the infant was still and silent.

Mary and her family lived in an old beach house on Gleason Beach in the early days, with porches and stairs to the beach before erosion took down the houses on Highway One. She has a tale to tell about getting out in a hurry when the surf came perilously close. Then they actually moved the house itself to Calle del Sol, where she still lives today.

Her tender-hearted ways are unmistakable, teaching children with physical disabilities and with her love of wildlife. Her favorites are deer, hawks, and brown pelicans. She cared for and raised llamas, one named

Marigold. Marigold was 9 months old when she came under Mary's care and lived until age 25.

Mary helped find company for Burt Reynolds (another llama), a popular and regular guest at the old Fisherman's Festival who was extraordinarily lonely until they managed to add a few more llamas the following year. After the volunteers and attendees went home, someone needed to stay overnight at the festival to tend the llamas to prevent overnight mischief and mishaps.

Born and raised in Topeka Kansas, Mary earned her degree in Occupational Therapy and a Masters Degree from the University of Kansas in Psychology focusing on people with physical disabilities. Today, Mary Cook lives with her son, Staven, Bodega Bay treasured locksmith who took over the business from the same Deputy Sheriff, Dennis McAllister, that kept her out of trouble years earlier.

Those were the days in Bodega Bay, when fishing was the primary livelihood, Meredith Dock canners employed scores of local women, when people devoted lives to the community, raised their children here, volunteered and taught in the Bodega Bay School. Thank you to the Cook Family, John who drove the ambulance and more, Staven and Mary. Thank you. - *Author: Melinda Pahl, Rancho Bodega Historical Society, 6 Oct 2019*

*A regular appearance in our quarterly newsletter, The Faces of Bodega Bay is a photojournalistic record of people in our town: school kids, surfers, shop owners, fishermen, restaurant workers; a whole gamut of people who live and work in Bodega Bay and help make it the wonderful community that it is. These "environmental portraits" portray the subjects in their natural environment, capturing their character and telling their story through their surroundings.*

***FACES OF BODEGA BAY Project by:***

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## 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



# 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/>



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**Rancho Bodega Historical Society, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation  
 PO Box 1027, Bodega Bay CA 94923**

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### **IN THIS ISSUE**

#### **History of the Fire District**

It all began with boats exploding. The town knew it had to do something so it turned to Shirley Ames father, the late Dusty Rhodes. He started a fire department in West Sacramento and served as its Fire Chief. He did the same for Bodega Bay.

#### **Faces Project: Mary Cook**



Mary Cook is a respected Bodega Bay original. When it comes to the history of our Fire District. At the Post Office, Shirley Ames, Glenice Carpenter and Mary worked together.

### **FALL EVENTS**

**GRAND OPENING: EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN EXHIBIT** December 7, Saturday, 1:00 pm, 261 Main Street, Sebastopol. The West County Museum presents a collaboration of Sonoma County Museums with a look at some of the extraordinary women who contributed to our local communities in various ways. Contributions from the Bodega Bay Historical Society, Cotati Historical Society, Geyserville Historical Society, Healdsburg Museum, Petaluma Historical Library and Museum, Russian River Historical Society, Santa Rosa Historical Society, West County Museum and the Windsor Historical Society will fill our little showroom. This exhibit runs through March 15th, 2020. The Grand Opening on Dec 7th at 1:00 p.m. will feature distinguished guests including Lynda Hopkins along with highlighted individuals and family members of these women. <<https://wschs.org/calendar/>>

**HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE** December 7-8, Saturday & Sunday, 10:00 am–4:00 pm, Luther Burbank Home & Gardens, 204 Santa Rosa Avenue, Santa Rosa. Enjoy a 40-year community tradition and begin the season's celebrations by visiting the historic Home and Gardens of Luther Burbank. Experience the bygone days when you tour the home decked out in old-fashioned holiday finery inside and out. FREE PARKING is available at First & "D" Streets, and enjoy FREE RIDES on "Rosie the Trolley" to and from the Handmade Holiday Crafts Fair held at the Finley Community Center. 12 and older, \$3.00. Contact: 707-524-5445, burbankhome@lutherburbank.org

**OPEN COCKPIT: SANTA FLY-IN** December 14, Saturday, 10:00 am-2:00 pm, Pacific Coast Air Museum, One Air Museum Way, Santa Rosa. Admission is FREE for everyone this very special day! You'll get to look inside historic aircraft, sit with Santa, and have a lot more Holiday fun! Our Open Cockpit aircraft are the T-37 Tweet jet trainer, and the HU-16E Albatross amphibian. During Santa Fly-In, Santa Claus flies in to the Pacific Coast Air Museum on a helicopter to greet all the kids and listen to their Christmas wishes. <<https://pacificcoastairmuseum.org/events/open-cockpit-santa-fly-in/>>

*For more local events, visit our website. <<http://www.ranchobodega.org/events.html>>*