

**FOUNDING THE  
BIG SUR VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADE**



by  
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## THE FOUNDING OF THE FIRE BRIGADE

In 1972 the Molera Fire burned down the community's volunteer Fire Watch tower that overlooked the Big Sur Valley that had provided a primitive but effective early-warning system for detecting and reporting forest fires. Fire watches continued operations in a small trailer, but much more was needed to respond to future fire threats. I felt compelled to explore a more proactive solution of not just reporting fires but responding to them.

In the spring of 1974 I obtained a Charter from the Office of then California Governor Ronald Reagan based on an 1896 state law governing the constitutional powers of local communities to establish volunteer firefighting organizations. On August 1, 1974, the County of Monterey issued an Association Charter for the Brigade that more easily enabled us to work with the county government.

*I discovered Big Sur in 1968 when Fritz Perles invited me to teach writing at Esalen. I had developed some innovative methods while teaching at Portland State University in Oregon and Fritz somehow heard about it. I immediately fell in love with the area, resigned from the university and moved to Esalen. However, I soon became disenchanted with the crazed times of the era and moved to Malibu where I became an artist sculpting wax candles, which is how I was able to return to Big Sur and purchase the Coast Gallery in 1971.*

*The candle making increased my understanding of fire and the need for fire awareness and prevention. When I applied for a bank loan to make some improvements to the gallery, because of its remote location and the flammable Redwood structures, not to mention my candle-making studio, I included the cost of a portable, Gorman-Rupp fire pump. Lafler stream, which flows year-round down the canyon beside the gallery, was the water source. I mounted the pump on the bank with its intake in the stream and enough one-inch linen hose line to surround the gallery structures in case of fire. My candle helper and I learned to operate the pump in the event of a fire emergency.*

Three months after arriving at Coast Gallery in Big Sur, someone called the gallery, reported a fire in Coastlands and excitedly asked for anyone to come and help. My candle helper and I quickly loaded the gallery pump and some hand tools in my pickup, stopped at Deetjen's to gather a few volunteers, and raced to the Dillon cabin which was engulfed in flames and burning so hot that we couldn't get closer than fifty feet from the structure. Built by Big Sur pioneer and homesteader Sam Trotter, the Redwood structure was vulnerable. In only a few minutes, as a large number of people stood silently with tools in hand, the cabin fell to the ground. We watched helplessly as the roaring flames turned into simmering smoke.

As the smoke subsided, a giant of a man standing nearby exclaimed in the loudest voice I had ever heard, "Boys, all we can save is the god damned foundation". That was the first time I saw Walter Trotter, one of four brothers from the Trotter family, a mountain man whom I later knick-named, "The Paul Bunyan of Big Sur". Little did I know that three years hence Walter and I would have become the best of friends and that I would be appointing him as the first Fire Chief of Big Sur.

Without a local fire department, Big Sur homes were at the mercy of fires, both structural and wild land fires. I learned that the Forest Service was mandated to protect the forest, not homes, and the California Division of Forestry, which did protect homes in rural areas, was located in Carmel, some 33 miles north of Big Sur. Obviously something needed to be done to protect structures in Big Sur, but at the time I wasn't sure just what that "something" was.

Three months later a one hundred year storm inundated the gallery and, due to a faulty drainage culvert, it washed out 600 feet of Highway One. It took twelve months and 50,000 cubic yards of earth to replace the lower canyon and rebuild Highway One, and another six months to rebuild Coast Gallery out of recycled Redwood water tanks. All that time of disaster and rebuilding, Walter Trotter's comment that we could only "save the foundations" stayed with me.

In the spring of 1973 Nels Davies and I co-founded the Big Sur Chamber of Commerce that, unknown at the time, would prove to play a major, supportive role of the future Fire Brigade. In late 1973 I began researching methods of how to establish a rural fire department. Highly motivated but blissfully ignorant of the ultimate complexity of such a task, one of my phone calls was to the Governor's office where I learned that an old statute of 1896 allowed the Governor to charter volunteer fire departments in rural areas. It was not only the least expensive method of creating an organization; it also turned out to be the fastest and least fraught with bureaucracy. Shortly after filing the application, in the spring of 1974 I received the actual charter in the mail, signed and sealed by the Governor of the State of California.

On August 1, 1974, I chartered the BSVFB with the County of Monterey. The mission of the Brigade was to provide structural fire protection and fire-prevention education for the Big Sur community. We formed liaisons for mutual fire assistance with the California Division of Forestry for structural fire fighting and with the U. S. Forest Service for wild land forest-fire fighting.

In 1976 we delivered all of the founding records accumulated to date to a Monterey attorney Rick Brownyard in order to create an official non-profit corporation. However, after two years of unexplained delays, Brownyard informed us that he had lost the entire banker's box containing all of our original documents, including the Charter signed by Governor Ronald Reagan.

Although the Charters from the Governor's office and Monterey County certified the Brigade's status, on June 6, 1977 the By-Laws and Articles of Association were registered with the State of California and the Brigade became an unincorporated charitable Association.

### **WALTER TROTTER: FIRE CHIEF and FIRE THIEF**

*When I first came to Big Sur and leased the Coast Gallery with an option to buy it, I sculpted my sand cast candles from early morning to late at night in a Redwood garage converted into a*

*candle studio located in the parking lot and visible from the highway.*

*It was three long months before the first local resident came into the gallery to say hello and welcome me to Big Sur. The greeting took that long for good reason: the founding owner moved to Spain three years earlier. Her manager had turned the gallery into a drug center for hippies --- which had justifiably alienated local residents.*

*The first local person to welcome me and introduce himself was Walter Trotter, who arrived in a banged-up pick up with a load of freshly hewn Redwood posts. He said in a voice that echoed to the top of the canyon, "I heard you wanted some timbers". With that he tossed several 8 inch by 8 inch by 8 foot, freshly hewn Redwood posts out of his pickup as if they were toothpicks. They were so heavy I could barely lift one end of one post, which is why I instantly thought of him as the "Paul Bunyan of Big Sur". Walter's property was a half mile south of the gallery. He said he'd been watching me work late at night for weeks and he'd decided I wasn't one of those 'god damn hippies'. For two hours and as many pots of coffee, Walter told me fascinating stories about Big Sur.*

The moment I received the Brigade Charter from the Governor in 1974, with great excitement I drove to Walter's house and exclaimed, with as much bravado as I could muster, "Walter, I just got a charter signed and sealed by the governor that allows us to establish a fire department in Big Sur and I am officially appointing you the Fire Chief".

Walter mused for what seemed like a painfully long time, I began to fear I had overstepped myself. Then he said in his powerful, commanding voice, "Alright, I'll be the Fire Chief but I'll also be the God dam Fire Thief ---but you're going to be the God dam Foreman", he declared. In a moment, the deed was done! I was soon to learn about why Walter was also a Fire Thief. Like the man himself, the term had more than one meaning!

Walter immediately phoned Pat Chamberlain, one of the two resident California Highway Patrolmen in Big Sur and close friend of Walter's, and informed Pat, in no uncertain terms, that he was appointed to be the new Assistant Chief. Soon thereafter, the second Big Sur CHP officer, Kenny Wright, drove up and Walter commandeered him on the spot, "with no god dam questions asked".

### **COINING THE NAME, DESIGNING THE LOGO**

Having been an university writing professor for several years before becoming a candle maker and fledgling Big Sur gallery owner, I had developed an appreciation for language so, when researching names for the new fire department, I liked the old-fashioned British noun "Brigade". What else was in the name? The place, "Big Sur". The fact that it was an all "volunteer" organization meant the word "Volunteer" was needed. I wound up with the name, "Big Sur Fire Volunteer Brigade" which was a long name but it said everything and it had a nice ring to it as well.

*Designing logos has always intrigued me. To reduce the name of business or organization into a visual graphic has always been an interesting creative challenge. While a writing professor in Oregon I worked with a famous graphic designer, Byron Ferris, to develop a new logo for the Boyd Coffee Company and later for the Red Wagon Coffee Store. While a candle maker in Malibu I developed a Nautilus shell graphic as the logo for the Tidepool Gallery and, as the new owner of Coast Gallery in Big Sur, I resolved a photograph of a spiral galactic in space into a graphic that became the Coast Gallery logo.*

Of all the logos I've designed, I'm most proud of the one I developed for the Big Sur Volunteer Fire Brigade.

I had begun thinking about the logo during the early stages of founding the Brigade. When, on the cover of a Fireman's magazine, I saw a painting of a 19<sup>th</sup> century, horse-drawn fire pumper with the fireman cracking the whip above the horses, I

knew I had a great image to reduce into a dramatic graphic for the logo.

I contacted, Robin Coventry, an artist from Scotland living in Big Sur and showing at the gallery, and asked him to draw the image as a graphic and color it red and black --- the color red to symbolize fire and the color black to symbolize both the lack of fire or the aftermath of fire.

To frame the graphic I used the words “Big Sur Volunteer” to create the arch above the fire wagon and, for the arch below, I used the old fashioned British term, “Fire Brigade”. Because the very words in the name, “Big Sur Volunteer Fire Brigade”, would be an important visual part of the logo, I selected the typeface called “Old Baskerville” to convey a feeling of history and substance for the new organization.

All of the visual elements came together to create a classic logo. I printed stationery, envelopes and business cards, which became instrumental with the early fund-raising efforts and helped establish an image of stability and credibility with businesses and government entities with whom we needed to communicate.

It is rewarding to know that this classic logo has served the Brigade well and that it will continue do so for the life of the organization, which one hopes will be forever.



## THE “APPOINTED” CHARTER VOLUNTEERS

*To enlist and muster the first volunteer firefighters was much easier than originally thought because of Walter’s not-so-subtle powers of persuasion. To understand his “powers”, one must have some sense of the man himself: born into a homestead family and raised on the Big Sur Coast as a ‘man of the mountains’, Walter was also a man of integrity, intelligence and substance.*

*Although he stood only about six feet tall, Walter’s biceps were the size of an average man’s upper thighs. I always thought of his hands as ‘paws’ because of their size, which were so large a normal man’s hands was dwarfed when Walter shook his hand. His girth was substantial but it was all solid muscle. He had an enormous barrel chest and when he spoke in his deep baritone voice, his words were uttered as if they were a controlled bellow. His voice would engulf a person, dominate the space around him and reverberate so loudly throughout a room that it drowned out all other sound.*

*In size, strength and demur, Walter was the closest thing to a Grizzly bear one could be in human form, yet he had a heart and soul filled with kindness. In addition to his heart and hulk, he was also blessed with a mind that constantly amazed others. Not only did he have an intimate knowledge of every canyon and ridge along the Big Sur coast, he could compute numbers in his mind with astonishing accuracy, solve complex engineering problems with ease and think strategically with the dimensions of a chess player.*

With the above description in mind, try to imagine what little choice the young men of the coast had when Walter would approach them, growling in his good-humored manner, and tell them in no “God dam” uncertain terms that they were volunteering for the new fire department.

To cite only one example of Walter’s “power of persuasion,” the night of the first meeting of the new Brigade’s volunteers, Walter telephoned Julian Lopez, caretaker for the Castro Ranch below

Deetjen's Inn, and told him he had something for him and to meet him on the highway in five minutes. Julian rushed up to the highway and when Walter arrived, he opened the passenger door, reached across and pulled Julian into the seat. "We're going to the meeting, you're a God dam fireman now", he said to his newest volunteer. And that's the way Walter gathered the first nine members of the Brigade.

Nine of Walter's friends and neighbors became willing victims of his technique of mandatory volunteer recruitment.

The original, charter members of the Fire Brigade were:

1. Walter Trotter, Fire Chief
2. Pat Chamberlain, Assistant Chief
3. Gary Koeppel, Founder and Foreman
4. Peter Stock, Captain
5. Ken Wright
6. Frank Trotter
7. Julian Lopez
8. Ralph Dengate
9. Ron Thrash
10. Don Krausfeldt

### **WORKMAN'S COMP, FIRE RATINGS, INSURANCE**

One of our first concerns as a volunteer organization involved in the dangerous business of fighting fires was the need to protect the volunteers with insurance should anyone every become hurt. I researched insurance coverage and learned that Workman's Compensation was the minimum insurance we needed and the annual premium was \$1,000, which we did not have.

In 1975 I was elected as president of the Big Sur Chamber of Commerce. Because the new Brigade not only brought fire protection to local businesses, its very existence also reduced their cost of fire insurance. The Chamber voted unanimously to support the Brigade and donate their annual dues to pay for the annual premium of the Workman's Comp Policy to protect the Brigade members.

**This generous financial support continued for years and probably still does. The Big Sur Chamber of Commerce has always been one of the Brigade's staunchest supporters.**

**On June 19, 1979, I contacted the Insurance Services Organization (ISO) in the State of California Insurance Commissioner's Office to request a reevaluation of the fire rating for Big Sur. Insurance underwriters created ratings to determine the premiums for structures in the area rated. I learned that the Big Sur coast was considered to be "a rural wild land, hazardous fire area". Such an area was designated as "unprotected" and was given the highest and worst of all possible fire ratings, a Number Ten. These official state ratings were used by insurance companies to determine the premiums for residential and business fire insurance policies. I also learned that if we had a functional volunteer organization that the fire ratings for homes and businesses would be officially reduced from a ten to a nine, which may not sound like much of a reduction, but surprisingly enough it lowered the cost of fire insurance by nearly half.**

**A few years later I tried to further reduce the area's Fire Rating. But Big Sur had no water main fire hydrants and never could have, so the Insurance Commissioner ruled that the area rating could not be lower than level of "9".**

**But I learned a precedent had been established in other rural areas that actually did further reduce the rating. By mapping the water in stored existing tanks located on private properties along Highway One, and by installing hydrants accessible by fire trucks, we might be able to argue that out "rural hydrants" were strategically located and had ample water for refilling fire trucks.**

**It took two years, but the argument worked and the rating was eventually reduced to Number 8, though the insurance savings were not as great as with the original rating.**

## OUTFITTING THE FIRST VOLUNTEERS

Soon after the Brigade was founded and after Walter was finished recruiting his “appointed volunteers”, Chief Trotter, Assistant Chief Chamberlain and I drove to the Western Fire Equipment Company in Brisbane to purchase “turn out” or fire-fighting gear for the 10 volunteer firemen. This was the same company from which I had purchased my first Gorman-Rupp pump in 1971 to protect the gallery from fire.

*Enroute to Brisbane we stopped at a funky Mexican Restaurant in mid-morning where I had a cup of coffee and Walter and Pat ate an enormous meal of tortillas, beans, rice and very hot peppers. I was awed by the amount of food consumed before continuing our short journey.*

Because the Brigade was so new it had not raised any funds, so I pledged \$600 toward the purchase of turn out gear. Upon arriving at the largest fire equipment store in Northern California, we discovered an enormous showroom filled from floor to ceiling with everything needed by a fire department. As we strolled through the store, we must have had looked like large children turned loose in a candy store, transfixed by everything and wanting it all.

The sales clerk asked about the size of our budget, to which we replied \$600, but before I could add “for ten volunteers”, he quickly gathered up samples and assembled one complete set of turn out gear: coat and pants, helmet and boots, gloves and goggles. He tallied up the items and the total bill came to a little under \$600. The three of us looked at each other, nodding approval and satisfaction.

Then the clerk asked how many men we were outfitting and when I replied ten, he appeared excited and said, “Well, that’s a little shy of \$6,000 ---plus tax, of course”.

In an instant our mood went from elation to depression.

*(Before proceeding, for those who did not have the pleasure of knowing Walter, he was a large man of the mountains who had a way of filling any room with his commanding voice in a manner much like that of a Grizzly bear in a small cabin. One could not avoid listening when he spoke. And when he spoke, he often cursed, but he cursed in a manner and with a humor that was never offensive. He is the only person I'd ever known who could spew out a string of profanities to even the most gentle soul without ever insulting anyone. This was a remarkable talent unique to him; a talent for the unsuspecting fire equipment clerk had absolutely no preparation but who handled it well.)*

The salesman continued, "Would you like me to select some sizes and box up 10 sets of everything for you?"

Walter replied, bellowing loudly in his gruff but inoffensive manner, "\$600 is the whole god damned budget... for 10 men, you dumb son of a bitch!"

At first taken aback by Walter's size and voice, not to mention his obvious determination to outfit his men, the salesman chuckled and took an immediate liking to this plainspoken mountain man from Big Sur. He suggested we might want to look at some of the gear in the storage room upstairs that had been taken in on trade for new gear purchased by fire departments throughout Northern California. He took us upstairs to a room filled with old boxes containing used turn out gear of every color and style, most of which was branded with the names of different fire departments. The gear reeked strongly with the smells of smoke, sweat and years of unwashed use.

Walter told the salesman, "You want us to buy this junk?" You should pay us to haul it away"!

We must have spent two hours sorting through the boxes and picking out ten sets of everything we needed. Everything was mismatched: we had black and red helmets, yellow jackets and black pants, green and black boots...but, we had enough gear to outfit the entire Brigade.

We hauled everything we'd selected downstairs and asked the salesman the price for the lot. "Well, Chief", he replied with a smile, it looks like about \$600 worth of gear---including the tax --- but today we're having a clearance sale to make room for more trade-ins and so, for you, today, it's free for the taking".

We loaded it in the truck before the man could change his mind and headed south.

*On the way back to Big Sur, Walter stopped again at the same Mexican Restaurant where I had another cup of coffee while Walter and Pat consumed another enormous meal of tortillas, beans, rice and red hot peppers galore. We congratulated ourselves for outfitting the whole Brigade in one day --- and, at no expense! Walter mused, "Now that's what I mean by being a Fire Thief!"*

And that's how we outfitted the original 10 Big Sur Volunteer Firemen with their first set of turn out gear.

### **THE FIRST, ONE-DOLLAR FIRE ENGINE**

One of the most exciting days of my 17 years living at the gallery in Big Sur was the day I drove to the California Division of Forestry's central office in Monterey to purchase an obsolete and retired Fire Engine for the grand sum of one dollar, for which I even got a receipt.

Other than one nozzle and a few mismatched fittings in the toolbox --- without one foot of linen hose line --- the fire truck had been stripped bare. But the tires were inflated and had good rubber; there was enough fuel in the tank to get to a nearby gas station, the battery was charged and the engine started with ease. I stripped a gear or two while pulling away from the yard but felt elated knowing that our first fire engine was on its way to the new Fire Brigade in Big Sur.

The drive down the coast was uneventful, but the excitement of actually driving a fire truck was a day to remember! As a boy I'd

never dreamed about being a fireman, but that day I lived the dream of many boys: to be a Fireman and drive a Fire Truck.

I drove directly to Walter's barn where he and Pat Chamberlain had been waiting patiently. After hosing down the outside of the vehicle, we filled the 300-gallon tank with water and Pat started the pump engine, which he discovered needed some maintenance. In addition to being the Assistant Chief, because of his knowledge of engines, Pat also became the Brigade's Chief Engineer.

As I washed down the truck inside and out, Walter was already outfitting the Fire Engine with hoses, nozzles, fittings and tools ---- most of which we had "appropriated" and some had been "donated" by various agencies. We loaded several hundred feet of inch and inch-and-a-half hose lines onto the hose reels and racks that had been abandoned by the Forest Service at various wild land fires because the hoses were either too soiled to clean or were assumed to have been damaged and unusable.

Again, the Fire Chief had performed his other role as Fire Thief by scrounging almost everything we needed to outfit the Brigade's first fire engine. Some insensitive folks suspected that some of the new rolls of hose had been "involuntarily donated", or simply "appropriated", but such unwarranted suspicions were unfounded, or at least never proven.

Within two hours we had a fully operational fire engine that was ready to roll to a fire. What a day!

Four later, in 1979, after acquiring two or three more engines, we donated that original fire engine to the Mid-Coast Fire Brigade, which became their first engine. We gave it to them fully loaded and equipped, and we didn't even charge them the dollar we'd paid for it or get a receipt.

### **SLIP-ON PUMPER UNITS: THE MOSQUITO FLEET**

Two volunteers were required to be on hand before the fire engine could roll to a fire, one as engineer to operate the pump and the other to roll out the hoses and attack the fire. We discovered early

on that it was often difficult and took too long to get two Brigade members to arrive at the engine before we could respond, so we came up with the idea of using fast-attack, “Slip-on” units mounted in the back of pick ups to accelerate the speed with which we could respond to a fire.

We purchased four Gorman-Rupp gasoline pumps and mounted them on 100-gallon tanks that Walter welded together and added internal baffles to prevent water from sloshing around dangerously as the vehicle maneuvered the curves of Highway One when responding to a fire. Pat Chamberlain welded together the plumbing and we attached a wheel with 200 feet of one-inch line on top of each tank. We called the four Slip-ons our “Mosquito Fleet”.

We positioned the four units with Brigade members strategically up and down the coast. One Slip-on was permanently installed on my Jeep pickup, always at-the-ready at the gallery. Because the volunteer’s used their pickups for work and transportation during the day, their Slip-on units needed to be mounted quickly during a fire emergency, so we developed a pulley system so that one person could easily load the heavy, 160-gallon unit for a rapid deployment.

One incident in the Training and Safety section describes the life-saving and fire-fighting effectiveness of the rapid-response, Slip-on Units.

### **THE FIRST COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK**

We established relationships with the head ranger of the U. S. Forest Service (USFS) stationed in Big Sur, the incident commander at the California Department of Forestry (CDF) stationed in Monterey and the head dispatcher of the Monterey County 911 Emergency Center (911).

We selected Coast Gallery as the Big Sur Dispatch Center because it had four telephones to which I added automatic dialers and programmed each with the volunteers’ phone number for rapid dispatch. When a fire call came in to the Center, I directed the

**gallery staff to find and dispatch those volunteers who were available to respond either north or south of the incident.**

**Because the slip-on unit at the gallery was always “at the ready”, I rolled to fires as the gallery staff dispatched the other volunteers to respond to the scene. We had learned early on that a fast response was the key to knocking down a fire. It doesn’t take much water if the fire can be attacked soon after it begins---before it goes out of control.**

**Only land line telephones were reliable on the coast, but a volunteer had to be home to receive the call and most of them were working elsewhere, so we devised a system of Citizen Band (CB) radio communications that worked surprisingly well between the few emergency agency antennas, or “repeaters”, that were located strategically along the coast.**

**We all had creative “handles”, or call names, so we could tell who was communicating on the CB. I don’t recall any handles other than the ones for Walter, Pat and I, which were Papa Bear, Baby Bear and Momma Bear. Whenever Papa Bear transmitted a message over the CB, everyone took note.**

**I would be remiss not to credit the invaluable assistance of the California Highway Patrol and the Monterey County Sheriff’s Office for their unqualified support of the Fire Chief and his Fire Brigade. The two resident CHP officers, Pat Chamberlain who also served as the Assistant Fire Chief, and Kenny Wright, who supported everything---well, almost everything---the Fire Brigade did. The deputies who patrolled Big Sur on what was known as “Beat Nine”, contributed importantly to the communications network.**

**The local presence of the CHP and Sheriff’s office contributed essential links to the communication network consisting of the Fire Brigade, Monterey County 911 Emergency Dispatch, the California Division of Forestry, the United States Forest Service and the California Department of Transportation.**

## **TRAINING AND SAFETY, RESCUE AND RESPONSE**

Chief Trotter was a stickler for training and safety, and for response and rescue. Every week all of the Brigade members met at the Caltrans yard for training and drills. The volunteers knew they'd better have a very good reason if they were late or did not show up, which was a rare occurrence indeed, and for the best of reasons.

Caltrans head of the Big Sur maintenance crew, Ralph Dengate, had been one of Walter's first "appointed" volunteers. Not only was Ralph a dedicated fireman, he also permitted the Brigade to park the Fire Truck in the Caltrans Barn.

Although we responded to dozens of fires every year with the Slip-on units arriving first, one response exemplifies how important it is to arrive at the fire as quickly as possible after the dispatch.

Late one evening the 911 dispatch called to report a fire in a cabin across from River Inn. I arrived first with my Slip-on unit to find flames and thick smoke spewing from the second floor of the cabin. Two people were standing outside, appearing transfixed by the fire, and told me that there was a young girl upstairs and her parents were in a nearby bar. I charged up the steps, ventilated the windows, crawled through the thick smoke and found the child under the bed in the back room.

Assistant Chief Chamberlain arrived with another volunteer who gave the girl CPR while Pat and I suppressed the fire. When the parents returned from the bar, we took them and their daughter to the hospital in town. This incident proved how valuable the Slip-on units were for a fast-attack response and how well our hours of training for rescue had paid off.

## **EARLY AND FUTURE FUND-RAISING**

After persuading the Chamber of Commerce to pay for the annual Workman's Compensation Insurance, that left the larger question of how to raise funds for an all-volunteer organization to finance the gear and equipment needed to protect a large coastal area that

was populated with a few working class residents and hoards of international tourists. As usual, the answer came in the form of a person, in this case Lou Eisenberg, the son-in-law of Mrs. Hathaway who owned the large Hathaway Ranch that Walter Trotter oversaw.

Lou had been in business but was retired and had time on his hands, so he conducted a one man campaign by writing letters on our new letterhead stationery with its colorful logo to every member of the community, which he followed up diligently with persuasive phone calls. For several years Lou conducted this fund-raising campaign and raised money from the poorest to the wealthiest Big Sur citizen.

Lou's fund-raising success was based on an expression coined by Chief Trotter: "The Brigade Epitomizes Representation Without Taxation". He always took pride in the fact that no Big Sur citizen was ever taxed for the selfless services provided by the "All-volunteer Fire Brigade".

I always wanted to establish a major fund raising program from the sale of high quality logo products, such as hats, garments, cups and so on. Although I never had time enough to implement this program, in my opinion it is still viable today.

The idea is simple: to produce the BSVFB logo products and have a local entrepreneur to distribute them north and south along Highway One to businesses that would and sell them at a profit, which they could either keep or donate to the Brigade. The entrepreneur could be either hired or licensed by the Brigade or he/she could create a publishing and distribution business. Everyone profits, everyone wins.

Now with the Internet a marketing reality, the Brigade logo products could be advertised and sold online with a shopping cart. The same entrepreneur could also advertise and sell the logo products in trade-related and firefighter publications.

In addition to the tourist market of 3 million annual visitors to Big Sur, there are a large number of active and retired fire fighters

throughout America who would cherish owning a “collectible” product bearing the Brigade logo. I am sure there are mail and email lists of Firemen throughout the country. Of all the logos I’ve developed, the Brigade’s logo has the greatest potential for raising a considerable amount of money for the organization.

Are there any interested entrepreneurs or volunteers out there who would like to take this concept and “roll” with it?

## **THE MYSTERY OF THE MARBLE CONE FIRE**

One of the great mysteries that occurred in the Brigade’s history occurred on August 1, 1977 when the Marble Cone fire broke out in several places from lightening strikes within the Los Padres National Forest. The fire burned from Cone Peak to Carmel Valley and consumed most of the vegetation within the entire Big Sur and Little Sur River watersheds.

The fire broke out during the late afternoon and the 911 dispatch called the gallery to sound the alarm to the Brigade. I immediately found Chief Trotter to plan the Brigade’s response. Walter replied, “By the time the Forest gets their act together, it will be too late. I’ll take the dozer up the Coast Ridge Road and you roll the Brigade”, he directed.

We mustered the Brigade in force. Within an hour, sixteen volunteers on two fire engines and two pickups with slip-on units were rolling to the fire along the Coast Ridge Road. During the previous two years the Forest Service had provided extensive training and had outfitted each volunteer with Nomex (flame resistant) turn out gear and hand tools for combating wild land forest fires.

We all knew the basic tenet of any fire fighting was a rapid response and fast attack. The volunteers met up with Chief Trotter at a point on the road above the fire at approximately 6:00 pm. We were ready, willing and trained to attack that fire in its infant stage, but the Forest Service Incident Commander refused to allow the Brigade to attack. The Ranger knew the volunteers were covered with workman’s comp so insurance was not an

issue. For whatever reason: personality, policy, politics or “the economics of forest fires”, we were allowed to watch with growing anger as the original burn area grew quickly into a major conflagration. For the next two weeks the Brigade increased their vigil along the Big Sur coast to protect any endangered private property.

During the next 14 days, hundreds of fire fighters and dozens of engines, tankers and bulldozers were brought in from surrounding states. Most of the equipment and personnel were parked along Highway One waiting for orders that never came; most were never dispatched to the fire. A heavy layer of smoke covered the entire region --- north, south and reaching far out to sea --- and national news headlines screamed, “Big Sur is Burning”.

Little known to most people, including us at the time, the cost of a wild land fire in national forests had to reach \$10 million before the Forest Service’s budget could be replenished in order to replace used or damaged equipment. We soon understood that policy to be “the economics of forest fires”. Many people at the time suspected that the Marble Cone fire was allowed to burn until its cost reached that magic million-dollar number. The fire raced all the way to Carmel Valley before it extinguished itself at an ultimate cost of \$14 million, thus insuring a total budget replacement. It was the third largest forest fire in California history. If it is true that the fire was allowed to burn, it also became one of the most expensive, “uncontrolled control” burns in the history of the forest service.

It must be said that a handful of prominent politicians and power brokers from outside Big Sur conducted an historic and secret meeting during the same period of time, the subject of which was to launch the campaign to convert Big Sur into a National Park. It took the following four years to struggle against Big Sur’s supervisor, congressman and senator, as well as national environmental groups and the U. S. Park Service. Finally, with the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, the National Park proponent’s legislation was defeated and the coast remained free. It was a battle of David versus Goliath, and David won. Even

today many people wonder if the Forest Service's decision to 'let Big Sur burn' was not somehow related to the effort to develop the Big Sur National Park. We may never know the truth.

### **END OF THE BEGINNING AND ROLLING ONWARD**

*I resigned my position as Foreman of the Brigade in 1978 when I founded the Big Sur Gazette newspaper in order to create a voice for Big Sur residents whose property and lifestyle were threatened by a handful of zealots whose alleged motive was to "Save Big Sur". It took four years to defeat the powerful minority who schemed to establish the Big Sur National Park, which would have developed the area as a major tourist destination, driven out the residents of Big Sur and condemned all the private property within the proposed park boundaries. It was a David versus Goliath victory for the land and people of Big Sur. I call that era "The Battle for Big Sur" and, although I missed the Fire Brigade, I found the sweet victory of preserving personal freedoms and private property very fulfilling.*

*The Big Sur Gazette may soon be available online. If so, all of the archived articles will be available to the public. Of special interest are the Fire Brigade articles written by Frank Pinney in an attempt to educate the community about fire prevention and fire protection. These articles helped to establish the educational mission of the Brigade.*

My knowledge of the Brigade history ends here. In 1984 I moved to Carmel and lost touch with the Brigade's evolution, though I have never forgotten my memorable experiences.

Suffice it to say that Chief Walter Trotter was the binding strength of the Brigade; without his passion and personality, the Brigade would never have survived to become what it is today. When Walter Trotter passed away on March 11, 1990, the Brigade and Big Sur lost one giant of a man, a great man in so many ways.

After Walter retired, Pat Chamberlain became the Chief for a period of time, after which Frank Pinney became the Fire Chief and has served that important role for many years. Frank's

dedication and leadership has brought the Brigade into the twenty-first century and has established it as a formidable and highly respected fire department. The Brigade has become one of ---if not the best-- volunteer fire departments in America. Someday Frank Pinney may also memorialize his long tenure and many accomplishments as Fire Chief for the historic records of the Big Sur Volunteer Fire Brigade.

I am certain this brief walk down memory lane is incomplete and has certainly missed some important moments, memories and recognition of many early Fire Brigade members and supporters. I have tried to capture the basic facts and highlights of the founding. I can only hope that the surviving original volunteers will contribute to this brief history and that the volunteers who have served since the founding will, in due time, contribute their own experiences to the living history of the Fire Brigade.

It is personally gratifying to know that this volunteer organization has not only grown into a professional fire department, but also has evolved as a sustainable volunteer organization, the volunteers of which are highly motivated and dedicated to their selfless service in the Big Sur community. It is these volunteers who deserve the recognition, respect and gratitude from all of the residents and visitors who love Big Sur.

So ends the Story of Founding the Big Sur Volunteer Fire Brigade.



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