

The Sentinel

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A SUSPECTED 1,000 houses and other buildings are constructed in Santa Cruz County without permits, according to Dick Stubendorff, supervising county building inspector.

Wally Trabing's Mostly about People



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The man who came

in to see me has a bothered conscious. He's a family man who lives up in the Last Chance area. That's above Davenport.

Houses Without Permits

In 1976, he purchased acreage in these wild mountains and came to town seeking a building permit. He was turned down.

So he returned to Last Chance and built a two-bedroom house, moved in in 1978 and has made it his home sweet home ever since.

Except for the nagging feeling that he is some kind of outlaw, life is all right. But he really wants his house to be in compliance with the law, but if he came to town asking for a permit now, he is afraid that something "terrible" will happen.

He is not alone. There are some 50 to 60 houses and buildings in that area that arose without permits, he said.

This fellow, a Bay Area scientist who came to the area to try to make it as a novelist, said he had no problem getting the house built or buying materials. And he has never been questioned or approached for his outlaw approach to building.

It is not known how many this fellow speaks for, but he thinks the majority in Last Chance is worried about their image.

"The image of a wild, mountain community hidden furtively behind a locked gate and populated with maniacal, drug-crazed outlaw hippies is as fanciful as it is far-fetched. The denizens of Last Chance spring directly from the American middle class. They are literate, civilized, extraordinarily considerate citizens," he said.

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Last Chance area runs along the unpaved road of that name, for about six miles. It is twisty and narrow and dusty. About 100 people live along its length.

Stubendorff says the crux of the building code is to protect people in health and safety.

This nameless fellow says "the building code is written by contractors for contractors.

"I was very conscientious about building it to code as far as I could determine. I was advised by friends there to build up to code and lie low."

He built it on weekends with the aid of an all-around carpenter, and was never once bothered by county building inspectors.

"The only way the inspector is brought on the scene is when a neighbor complains to the permit department," he said. Stubendorff said, yes, that was right.

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Stubendorff admitted that the scene is a complicated one involving politics and bureaucracy.

"What some of those people up there (in Last Chance) have done is good, but some of it is very bad, also. Eventually a compromise will be reached with some softening of code rules. We might start with a test area and work with people to bring their places up to the revised code."

The Last Chance man says that he would like to see the supervisors adopt the state's "K-Code," which was passed to deal with softening the code requirements in rural areas.

This has been knocking about the county for years. Stubendorff acknowledged this desire but said it has not worked in some places, principally Mendocino County. The county is working on its own revisions.

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Where Last Chance got its name is, according to reporter Denise Siebenthal, a legend. She said old-time hunters figured that this remote area was the last spot where they might likely find a bear.

My nameless interviewee wants to put things right, even over the odds of what Stubendorff calls "an illegal subdivision" for starters, plus the many permitless houses.

I get the impression that it will all be worked out to the majority's satisfaction, eventually. It has been dragged into the public eye enough.

In the meantime, the man from Last Chance wants an image lift.

"Last Chance is a refreshingly simple place. PG&E ventures only just past the front gate. Most manage to provide their own brand of electricity. Some get it directly from nature, through photovoltaic cells, wind generators or water wheels or gas powered generators.

"Ours is a dear, rare place in late 20th Century America. It is a pristine oasis set in an earlier time that few of us can now recall except in childhood dreams.

"It is not true, however, that we represent an undesirable element and deserve to have our rights as citizens disregarded and trampled over, because we have chosen to live differently."