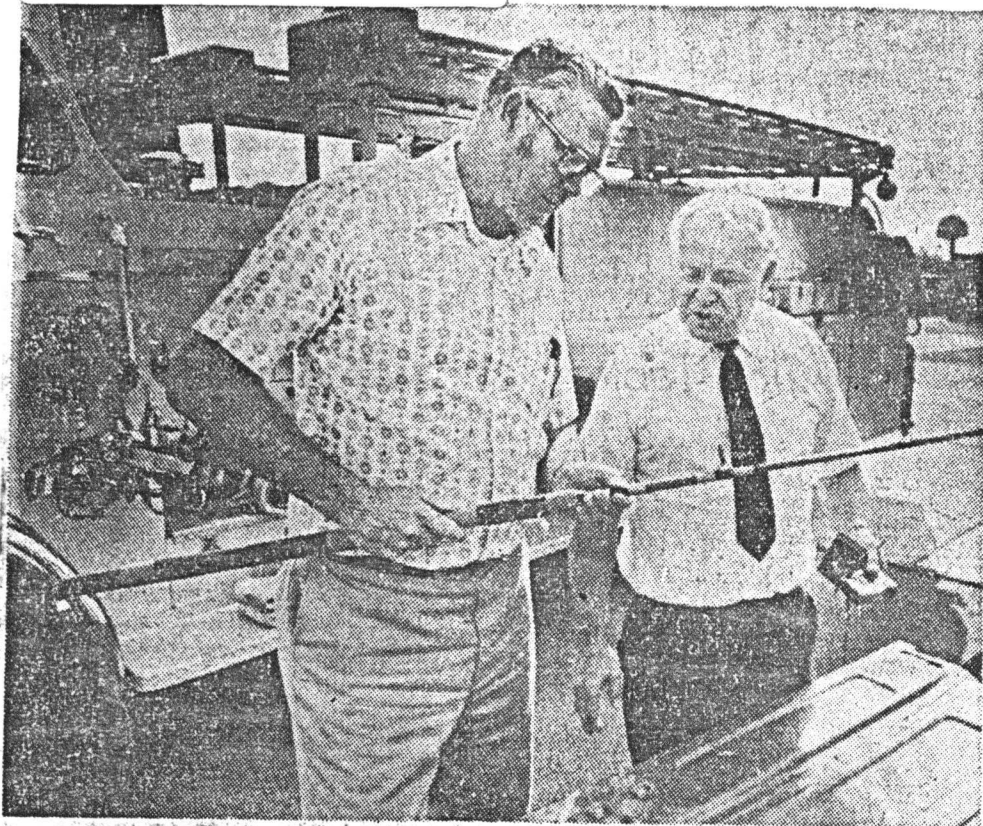


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Chief Chinn (right) and Live Oak Chief Dick Pound prepare for a fishing trip.

## *It's Strictly Business When Chinn's On The Job*

By MARK BERGSTROM

Sentinel Staff Writer

Some public officials are accused of doing nothing.

Then there's Aptos Fire Chief Richard Chinn. He catches hell for doing his job too well.

Well, why shouldn't he, some say; after all, he did slap citations on mother superior after his men intruded on the sanctity of a cloistered convent.

Then, too, he did call in a false alarm of a helicopter crash when, in fact, it was just a drill.

And now he's cited the Christ Lutheran Church of Aptos for conducting a candlelight service on Christmas Eve.

That's all been adequately covered by the news media (run into the ground, Chinn says), making him the best-known chief around.

The stories and TV pictures have conjured up a picture of him as a chief who relaxes at home with his helmet and rubber boots on; his eyes glued to the fire code and his hand on an extinguisher as his wife, Evelyn, prepares sup-

per over a grease-free stove.

"Nah," says Chinn, "I don't take the job home with me.

"I do tell my wife about interesting people I've met that day, but mostly we talk about the kids and the grandchildren."

His reading usually centers on fishing, his favorite hobby. Or, he might be found working on his stamp collection.

But, when he's at the fire house, that's a different story. Despite his relaxed demeanor and warm smile, you'd know at a glance he's the chief.

It's business there. With a capital "B." But, that letter might well start his critics spelling Big Brother.

"We find we have too much government interference no matter how it's disguised, that's true," he says.

"But, I'm in a business that I can justify interference. I'm trying to protect lives and property."

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# Strictly Business When Chinn Is On The Job

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Nobody's ever died in a fire since Chinn has been in Aptos, some 6½ years. That's his standard reply to charges against him.

But now with retirement only August away, he knocks on wood when he says that. He doesn't want anything to happen now.

Does that apply to any more controversy?

"If it needs to be, I'll be counted," he says.

Chinn feels his controversy — "Now this is not meant disparagingly" — stems from the nature of Northern California.

"People are not used to many rules," he said, "maybe that's why they move here."

Chinn spent the first 30 years of his career with the Los Angeles Fire Department, reaching for by reading "easily a thousand books and three thousand articles" and earning the rank of battalion chief before his retirement and move to Aptos.

"People in Southern California are used to rules and used to obeying them."

Sure there are rules in Santa Cruz County, and there was a fire code in Aptos when he arrived on the scene. But, he said, he found out not everybody followed those rules. Not everyone had to.

"When I came here some people could burn and some people couldn't. Now nobody can burn," he says.

For, along with enforcing a tough fire code, he believes in enforcing the code equally.

That's why, he says, when he refused to allow unenclosed candles in the area's restaurants, he applied the same section to churches.

Every year, he says, people are burned and killed by candles. That's why the law's on the books; that's why he enforces it, he explains.

The Lutherans, as did the Presbyterians and Catholics a few years back when they were cited for using hand-held candles, are protesting infringement of the First Amendment.

Chinn says he finds part of the chief's job distasteful, and having to enforce the code against the churches is one of those times, he says.

"But that's not because I'm particularly looking at the First Amendment..."

He won't buy that argument. Candlelight services, he believes, are decided on by local pastors. "It amounts to entertainment," he says, right from the hip as always.

Anyway, he maintains, he has never stopped a church from holding such a service. "We waited until it was over, then we went in and wrote the citation."

The latest Christmas Eve incident came after Chinn warned all area pastors he would issue no permits for candlelight services.

"I won't issue a permit for something that's wrong," he asserts.

Chinn doesn't stand as firm, he says, on interpretation of the code in non-danger areas.

"I had a guy call once who wanted to know if he could use 3½-inch house numbers instead of 4-inch as specified in the code.

"I asked if he was kidding. Hell yes, I told him, use the numbers.

"I don't have a closed mind, but I won't buy a pig in a poke, either!"

And despite the outcries and fame — "I don't love this (publicity) by a damned sight" — Chinn feels he's doing his job.

"I found chaos here," he said of his arrival in Aptos. "Everybody was an officer, there were only three firemen.

"Firemen put out fires, these gold badges (pointing to his) don't do it," he says.

"The first thing I did was to teach the people, who, by the way were demoted to firemen without a cut in pay, to be competent at an emergency.

"That's the number one job of a fireman."

He and his men overhauled the apparatus and built a training tower, all at no cost to the taxpayer. He worked on water problems and revised the code.

Then the first-ever inspections of commercial buildings came, and so did the controversy.

The district's fire rating dropped from a 9B to a 6, resulting in a 40 percent premium savings for commercial property owners and a 12 percent reduction on homes. The rating and premiums will soon drop another notch.

Next month Aptos will begin a pilot paramedic program, the first in the county, but just another first for the department. The service will be free, but the burden will not cost the taxpayers a penny more.

Chin stands for his firemen. He says they're the best trained so they deserve to be the highest paid, too.

He also stands for the taxpayers, whom, he says, deserve the most protection for their money.

So, when the waves from the recent storm were smashing a beachfront home, he and his men went down to shore it up.

"Our people know when we go, we'll do something," he said. "They've paid for it," he adds.

...getting their money's worth in this county, it's