

# Thirty-eight years later, he hopes to soften up Boulder Creek fire chief is retiring

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Sentinel staff writer

**BOULDER CREEK** — Fire Chief Bud Tomlin has dodged deadly mudslides, pulled lifeless teen-agers from smashed cars and watched warily as 100-foot trees fell like overgrown bowling pins all around him.

But it's a 2-year-old girl he remembers most clearly.

About 20 years ago, Tomlin and other Boulder Creek firefighters pulled the toddler from the San Lorenzo River after she had tumbled in during an outing with her family.

Things looked bleak, but the firefighters started cardiopulmonary resuscitation. They managed to restart the girl's breathing, and she recovered at the hospital.

"Saving a child, that's the best thing," said Tomlin.

After 38 years on the job, Tomlin is leaving the Boulder Creek Fire Department at the end of this week.

He rose from volunteer firefighter to chief during those nearly four decades, and saw the Boulder Creek Fire District grow from 500 residents to nearly 10,000. Thirty-eight years ago, the department could expect about 50 calls a year. Now it regularly tops 800 calls a year.

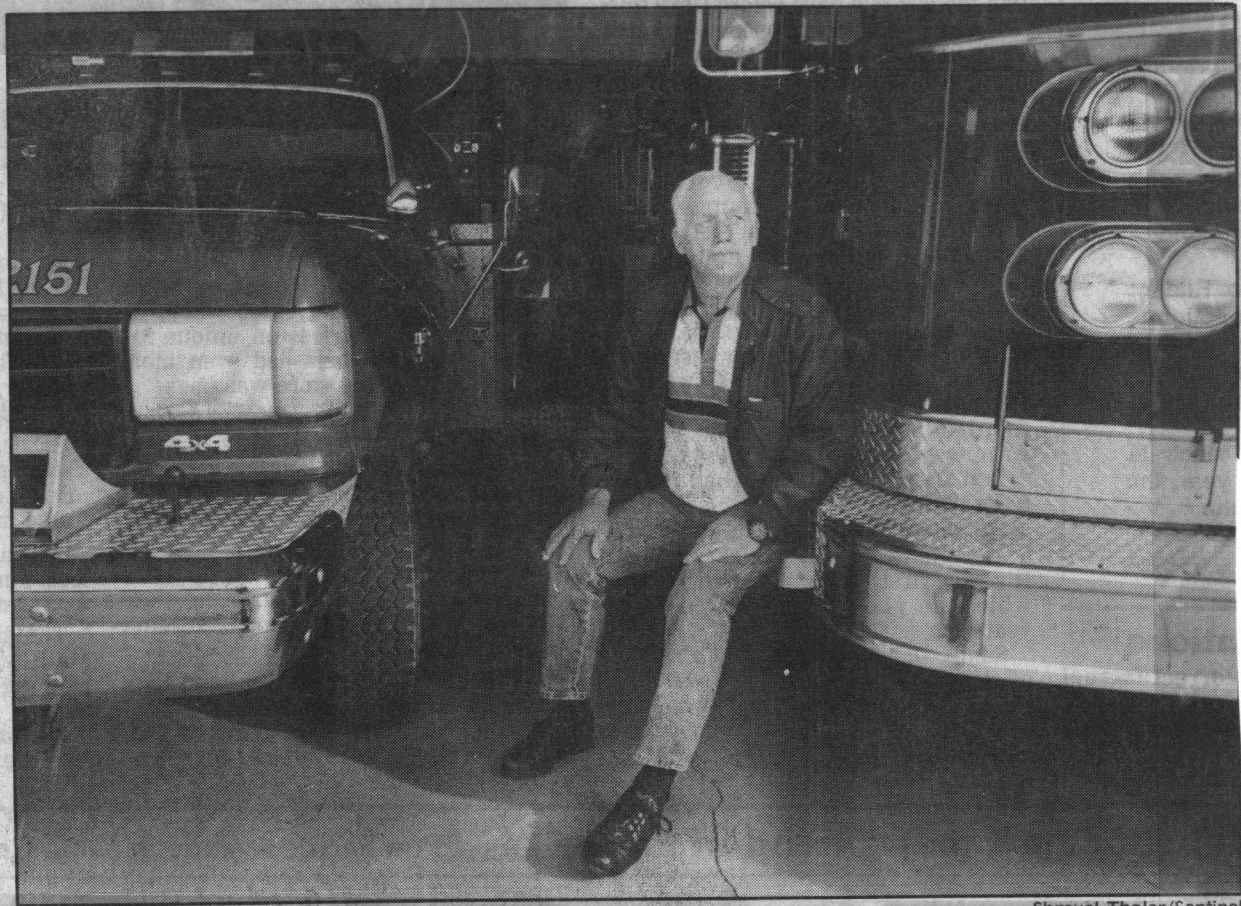
"It used to be that 90 percent of the people we dealt with I knew on a personal basis," said Tomlin, 63. "You'd be doing CPR on a husband and know darn well the person's not going to make it, and then have to deal with the wife. ... Now, more and more, they're strangers."

Members of the fire district's board of directors hope that the new chief, Sam Robustelli, will bring fresh ideas into the department.

"We needed new blood," said Director George Cress.

Jay Baker, president of the fire board, said "business will go on as usual" after Tomlin leaves, but

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Chief Bud Tomlin has seen his district grow from 500 to 10,000 people.

# Fire chief retiring

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"when someone who has been there 38 years retires, that leaves kind of an empty spot."

Both Cress and Baker praised Tomlin for his dedication to the department, which is one of the largest volunteer fire districts in the state with some 32 firefighters.

"Bud has been an excellent chief," said Baker. "He's put in a lot of time there. ... When he was just a volunteer, he used to work at the Fire Department all the time and do repairs on the trucks. Sometimes he'd work until midnight."

"I've known Bud since he was a little boy in school up here," added Cress. "He's a very intelligent boy."

Tomlin graduated from high school in Boulder Creek in 1950, the next-to-last class to graduate from the old school before San Lorenzo Valley High School opened to valley-wide enrollment.

## All-around athlete

He lettered in football, basketball, track and baseball for the school, which graduated just 19 students in Tomlin's class.

Tomlin was good enough to earn scholarship offers in football and track from UC Berkeley and UC Santa Barbara. But he turned them down, preferring to stay close to home and work as a meat-cutter.

"I knew I was going to be a butcher," said Tomlin. "It wasn't a tough decision, and I don't have any regrets."

Tomlin worked at the Red and White Market in Boulder Creek after graduating from high school. He moved on to Shopper's Corner, where he worked until joining his father-in-law in the garbage busi-

ness in the San Lorenzo Valley.

He gave up the garbage trade in 1970 and started a 20-year career as a rural mail carrier with the Postal Service in Boulder Creek.

In 1990, the fire chief's job, which Tomlin had assumed when Bill Kleyne retired in 1970, became a paid position and Tomlin left his job at the post office to devote full-time to the department. The chief now makes \$46,000 a year.

## Urged to volunteer

It was Kleyne who convinced a 25-year-old Tomlin to become a volunteer firefighter in 1957. He rose to captain in 1963, and was named assistant chief in 1965.

"It's been tremendously enjoyable," said Tomlin. "Being able to go out and help people is rewarding. ... But being in a command position makes you hard. That's one of the things I regret the most. Maybe when I get out of here I'll soften up."

Tomlin's career coincides with some of the valley's most memorable disasters:

- The 1974 freak snowstorm that dropped up to 16 inches overnight, trapping residents and causing hundreds of trees to fall.

"With the amount of trees coming down, people couldn't believe it," said Tomlin. "We were out at Brookdale (Huckleberry) Island and it was still snowing and all the power was out ... and we could hear those trees falling all around us."

## SLV man of the year

Tomlin was named San Lorenzo Valley's Man of the Year in early 1975, in large part because of his work during the snowstorm.

- The 1982 deluge that caused

huge mudslides, including the horrific one at Love Creek that buried people while they slept.

"We lost three people in Boulder Creek," said Tomlin. "We got a call right away that a lady sleeping in bed had been buried by the mud. We got there and cut holes in the walls and dug through the muck and got her. ... We tried CPR, but she was declared dead."

- The heavy rains in January and March of this year that kept firefighters on the job for mind-numbing hours.

"Most often you never hear what happens to people afterward," said Tomlin. "I'm not one for blowing my own horn. You do what you can. If you save a life, that's great. You really don't need to know who it was."

Tomlin said he plans to fish and hunt during retirement, and he'll do that while staying close to the home in Boulder Creek that he started planning when he bought the acre-size lot in high school for \$750.

"I'll never leave here," said Tomlin.

Tomlin's proud of the healthy financial picture he's leaving for the Boulder Creek department, but he said he won't be looking back with regret that he decided to retire.

"I see people I worked with at the post office all the time and they ask, 'What do you miss?' and I say, 'Not a damn thing.' And it's going to be the same thing with the firehouse."

*A retirement dinner for Tomlin is planned for Jan. 27 in Boulder Creek. To reserve a spot, call 338-2181 by Jan. 12. More information on a time and place will be available at a later date.*