

Bonny Doon

Bonny Doon Firemen: A Proud Bunch

By DALE POLLOCK
Sentinel Staff Writer

Fire protection has been on everyone's mind this past summer, but residents of unincorporated areas, without their own fire departments, may have been especially uneasy.

The Bonny Doon Volunteer Fire Team offers a striking example of just how much can be accomplished in terms of fire safety, along with pride in a community and a fierce desire for independent status.

In 1960, a group of Bonny Doon residents, led by the late Frank Hellenthal, started a fire safety team, using hand-pumpers loaded onto backpacks. A firehouse, on land donated by Hellenthal, was completed in 1972 and dedicated a year later, built totally from local donations and volunteer labor.

Infrequent calls and lack of training techniques hampered the efforts of the more ambitious fire fighters, but according to Chief John Forbes, "In the last couple years, we've developed fast."

Currently, the Bonny Doon team is fighting to shuck off both their civil defense status and their subordinate position to the state Division of Forestry, headquartered in Felton. Another stumbling block is the past reputation of the team as "the cardiac crew," based on the advanced ages of many of the founding members. "We're trying to change that image," promised Forbes.

The means of those changes come in increased participation (the team now boasts 26 volunteers, with more help waiting in the ranks), improved equipment, and more fire fighting training.

Still, asserts Fire Commissioner Jim Solden, "We're

just getting the financial crumbs off the table." Solden is referring to what the Bonny Doon team regards as a monetary stranglehold on budgetary funds imposed by the state and county.

The county contracts Division of Forestry to handle all schedule A fires, which include structural blazes and rescue work, while the state contracts with the Forestry firemen for schedule B fires, such as wildland conflagrations.

"They're taking large amounts of money out of here," asserts Forbes, in referring to \$20-23,000 in fire protection taxes that are levied on Bonny Doon, and channeled through the Forestry office. Chief Robert Voss of the Forestry Division admits that his department answers the same calls as the Bonny Doon team, often arriving after the local team to fires in that area. "They've done an excellent job," he stated, adding that "We're prepared to assist in any way."

Meanwhile, the Bonny Doon team struggles by on a budget of \$3,000, raised from local barbecues and pancake breakfasts. This is not enough to provide the needed communications equipment to summon volunteers, or replace some of the vintage Korean War fire trucks that were shipped down by civil defense.

"We could significantly raise our level of service with \$22,000," claims Forbes, citing that on its own the team has purchased their own self-contained breathing apparatus, and built a 400 gallon mini-pumper, all on that stretched-out budget.

According to County Fire Marshal Mel Angel, the Bonny Doon team has a lot of work to do until they can form its own fire district and keep those tax dollars. Angel cited the team's conversion from civil defense to volunteer status this year as "working to their benefit; in the last year, both the Division of Forestry and Bonny Doon have made great strides." To alter their current status, Bonny Doon firemen would have to persuade the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAF-CO) to allow them autonomy, along with persuading Bonny Doon voters to support a separate fire tax.

The real fear expressed by Forbes and his co-volunteers is that other fire districts will gradually encroach on Bonny Doon's sphere of influence, and eventually annex the area into their own specific districts.

Because of the widespread layout of the Bonny Doon area, reaching from Empire Grade down to the ocean, the firemen feel they are the only ones truly competent to service their area. "We're already offering

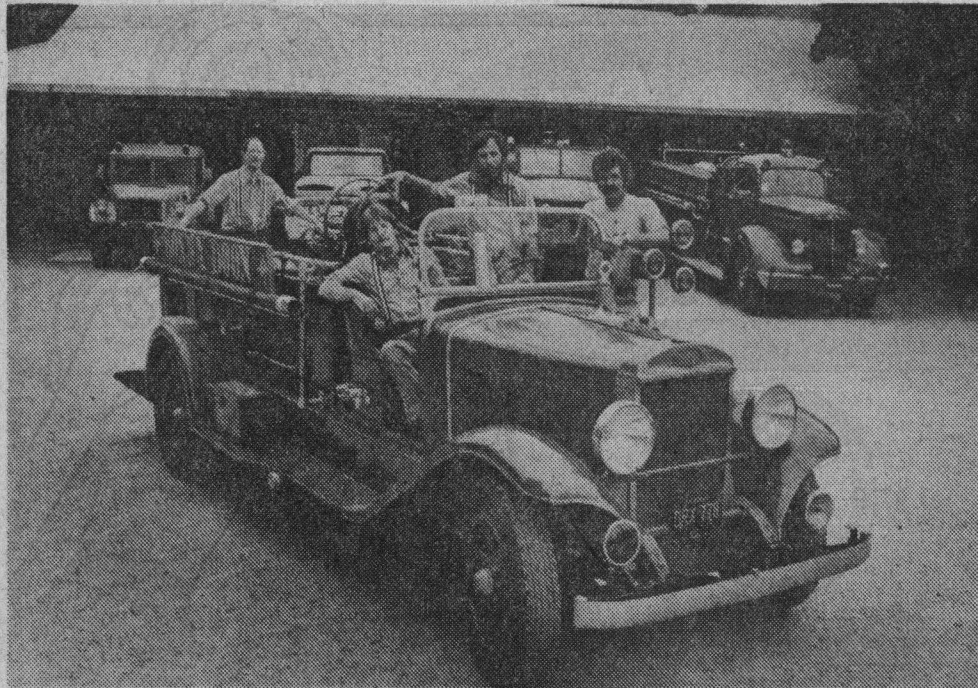
blanket coverage," said Forbes, explaining manned trucks are available in the inaccessible areas 24 hours a day.

"Who knows better about Bonny Doon than the guys who live here," asked Volunteer Fireman Michael Hurley, pointing to a large map of dirt trails, little-known shortcuts, and precipitous uphill climbs.

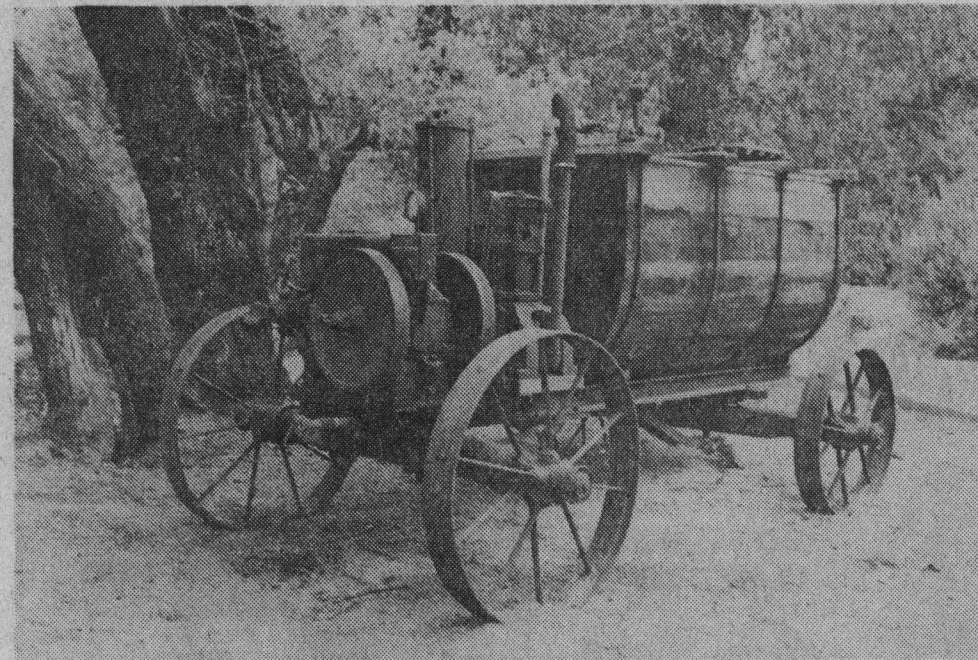
The firemen are emphatic in their assertions that they are qualified, eager and conscientious in their application of the most advanced firefighting methods. "It's very evident that Bonny Doon needs its own fire department," concludes Forbes. As an example of the

team's growing reputation, the members proudly display their award-winning antique motorized pumper, which captured third place at a recent Santa Clara County fire muster.

Things have changed quite a bit since the early days of Bonny Doon firefighting, when methods were as antiquated as the 1930's fire engine. In a few short years, however, the Bonny Doon Volunteer Fire Department has grown up fast, and in the hope that the initial growing pains will lead to a newfound maturity, they're letting residents, neighboring fire districts, and the county know about it.



The members of the Bonny Doon Volunteer Fire Team sit astride their award-winning antique motorized pumper. Sitting in the foreground, from left, are Michael Hurley, Captain John Forbes, and Fire Commissioner Jim Solden. Dave MacDonald mans the rear end.



At first sight a vintage firefighter, this antique in reality is a weathered bug sprayer. It still occupies an honored position at the Bonny

Doon Firehouse, where the team once depended on equipment from this era.