

Chimney sweeps burn out

'In many cases we can't even respond to tell them we can't respond to them!'

— Russ Unruhe, chimney sweep

By MARDI BROWNING-DOUGLASS
Sentinel staff writer

BOULDER CREEK — Mary Poppins can pack up her umbrella and get out of town, because she won't be getting a date with a chimney sweep for months. In fact, she would be lucky to even get one on the telephone.

Russ Unruhe, owner of Chimney Sweeps in Brookdale, has been in the business for nine years but his workload has never been as bad as the weeks since the Oct. 17 earthquake, he said.

"There are 12 chimney sweeps in the county, with maybe 20 employees overall," Unruhe said Wednesday. "Consider that there are 50,000 chimneys or more in the county and the problem is obvious."

Unruhe said that he took more than 4,000 calls last month and isn't able to handle the workload, and that his colleagues are all facing the same problem — job burnout.

"It's been really depressing, people say 'you should be happy, you've got so much work, so much money!' But it's really overload," Unruhe said.

"Some people are getting mad at us because we can't respond to them right away, but with 4,000 calls in one month it's just not realistic," he added. "In many cases we can't even respond to tell them we can't respond to them!"

Sean Camp, owner of Stove Works in Santa Cruz, said all local chimney workers are busy now and people have to be patient.

"We're real swamped right now and if you're trying to call any of us, you've had a hard time," he said. "I've disconnected my phones because I have more work than I can handle right now."

Camp said that impatience has caused additional problems for people who suffered damages in the Oct. 17 earthquake.

"I've already checked some chimneys that I inspected right after the quake and the cracks have opened up," Camp said. "If you got inspected right after the quake you may be one of the 1 percent or so who have damage from the aftershocks."

Unruhe said that some people have even rushed into chimney repairs and have had masonry done that won't cure properly because of aftershocks.

Unruhe said local sweeps are not raking in the money from quake-related damages as people imagine; in fact, it's just the opposite.

"Most of us are making less now than we were before the earthquake," he said. "We can't do replacements, we

can't do cleanings, we're just doing inspections for old customers."

Other sweeps are facing the same problems, Camp said.

"We were swamped before the earthquake ever happened," he said. "I've just finished doing some of my bookings that I had before the earthquake. I've lost a lot of money, because a lot of the chimneys I could work on are history now."

Unruhe is concentrating his work on former clients and in the San Lorenzo Valley, but his workload is still staggering.

"We've been thrown into a whole new world by the earthquake," he said. "I can't even begin to handle it all, there's no way, even trying to localize it. It's really an impossible situation and there's no way we can please everybody."

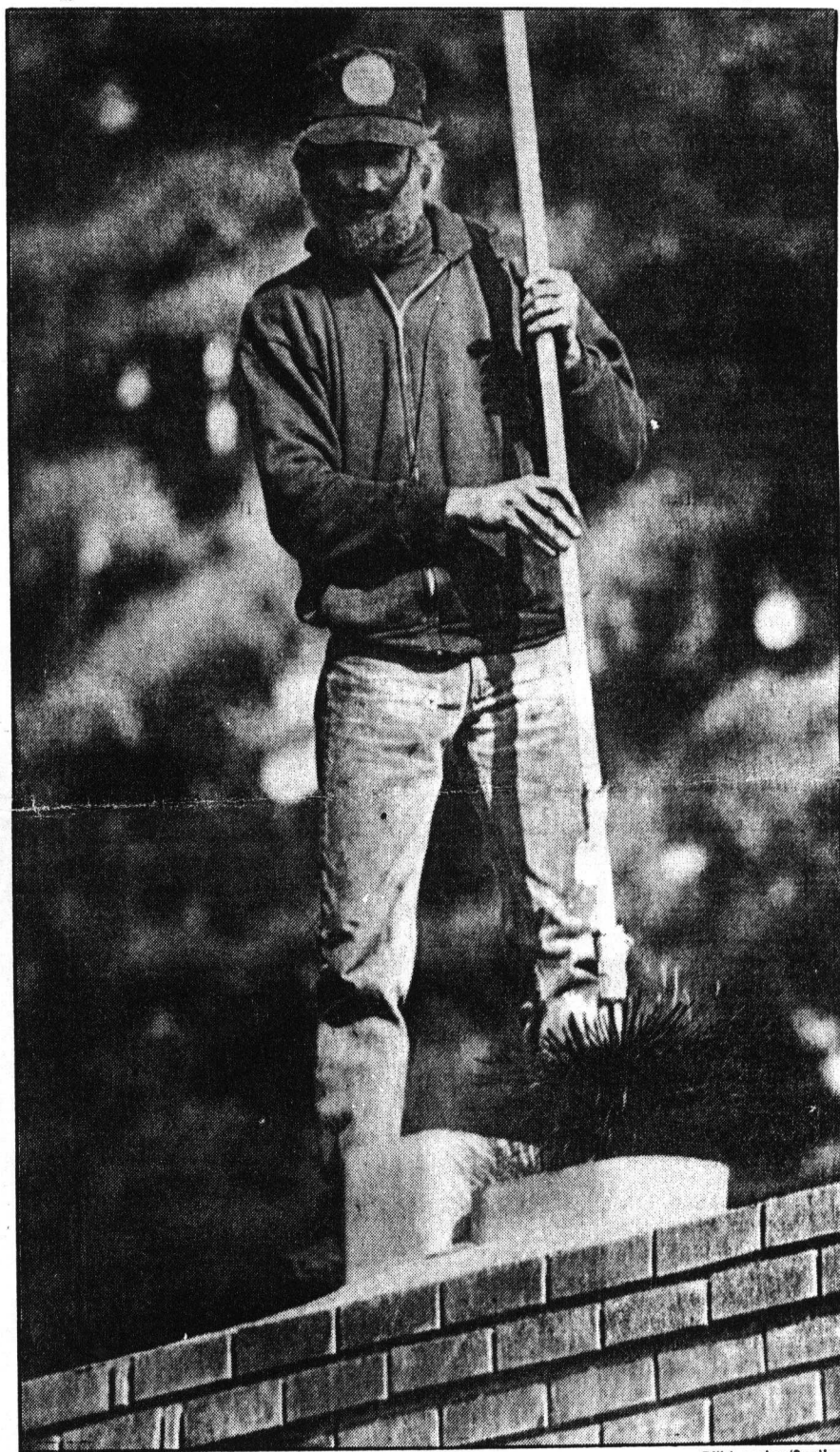
Camp and Unruhe held a question-and-answer session for San Lorenzo Valley residents Wednesday night at Boulder Creek Library. Only eight people showed up since it was a holiday, but all had suffered earthquake damage to their chimneys and were looking for answers. Terry Horak, executive director for YMCA of the Redwoods, said he lost five fireplaces at Camp Campbell in Boulder Creek and wanted to see if he had to scrap all five and rebuild or if any were retrievable.

"It's nice to go out and see people again and not have to look at their chimneys," Camp told the group before launching into a technical discussion of the kinds of materials to use when reconstructing a chimney.

Camp and Unruhe counseled patience to anyone awaiting chimney repairs. Most chimney workers are limiting their work to inspections and cleanup of dangerous conditions at this time, but they're worried that people will try do-it-yourself construction that may be unsafe, or get taken for a ride by an unqualified repair person.

"It's really depressing, a lot of people are being 'took' right now," Camp said. "That's why I'm trying to get people to just wait, to hold off on repairs until spring."

Camp said no one should have to pay more than \$125 for a chimney inspection, and that's only if the Chim-cam video camera is needed. This device is dropped down the chimney by the sweep to get an up-close view of the chimney's insides, to check for cracks. A basic visual inspection should only run \$50, and if a cleaning is necessary before the inspection it can run \$75, he said. If he looks at a chimney and it seems OK, he gets out the camera and



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Chimney sweep Russ Unruhe got 4,000 calls after the quake.

takes an up-close look.

"If there's no obvious visual damage then I'll get out the camera," Camp said. "Simply because I don't want the liability if I miss a crack."

Unruhe said that a lot of unqualified people are out there and that consumers have to beware.

"The only thing they need to do in this county to become a chimney sweep is to file a fictitious business name

statement," he said. "A lot of people just bought this sweep kit in the mail, and one that I know is just using a Sears Roebuck shop vacuum."

Unruhe said that having been in business for eight years is a bit of an albatross right now.

"It's almost a disadvantage to have been in business for so long," he said. "You have all these loyal customers who want your attention now, and you want to help them but you can't."