

The last fire call for 'Mac'

Felton's fire chief ready to call it quits

By MARK BERGSTROM
Sentinel staff writer

FELTON — Fire Chief John "Mac" McDonnell talks in a slow, folksy manner, using plenty of down-home sayings like "Katy, bar the door," and "off to the races" to describe a blaze he's battled or the storm of 1982.

He calls old friends and fellow fire officials "Mr. President." He calls his wife, Sally, "mother."

But while McDonnell looks and talks like a chief from a bygone era, he is anything but.

In fact, as he prepares to answer his final alarm as chief, he is calling for a sweeping change for the future of the Felton Fire District. His idea has ruffled the feathers of old-timers and hardliners.

McDonnell's message is that the days of the all-volunteer fire

department are numbered and that Felton should look to a merger with neighboring Scotts Valley Fire District.

He points to the steady flow of cars on Highway 9 as a sign of change in the Valley.

Not only do those cars now regularly back up from Felton to Ben Lomond, but the faces in those cars are different than when McDonnell came to the Valley 30 years ago.

"If you recognize one face out of 100 you're lucky today," he said.

"Like it or not, we've become a bedroom community for the Santa Clara Valley."

Gone, he said, is some of the spirit of volunteerism on which the Fire Department has thrived.

Newcomers to the area are accustomed to calling 911 for help, but they're not used to being the ones called upon to help, he explained.

Even among the current 25 active volunteers, nearly all work outside the valley.

Finding firefighters to respond to daytime calls is becoming more difficult. At the same time, the number of calls is steadily increasing.

"It's become a real problem," McDonnell said.

"If the horn went off now I think I'd get a maximum of four people," he said Tuesday.

"Last week we had a medical emergency call and only two volunteers showed up. Six minutes

later we had another call and we had to let the rig go out with two people who were not really qualified but they were all we had."

Merging with neighboring Scotts Valley would be a natural solution, McDonnell said, since

Scotts Valley would be able to put a three-man crew of paid, full-time firefighters in the Felton station around the clock.

Not only would the community benefit, but those Felton volunteers who are really serious about the fire service would have the opportunity for future full-time employment, McDonnell said.

McDonnell came to Felton 20 years ago after leaving the Santa Clara Fire Department, where he served for 10 years.

He worked at several jobs in and around Felton. At the same time, he joined the Fire Department as a volunteer.

He soon was hired to answer the fire phone and do clerical tasks.

The man who previously answered the emergency line was in his 80s and had begun to become forgetful.

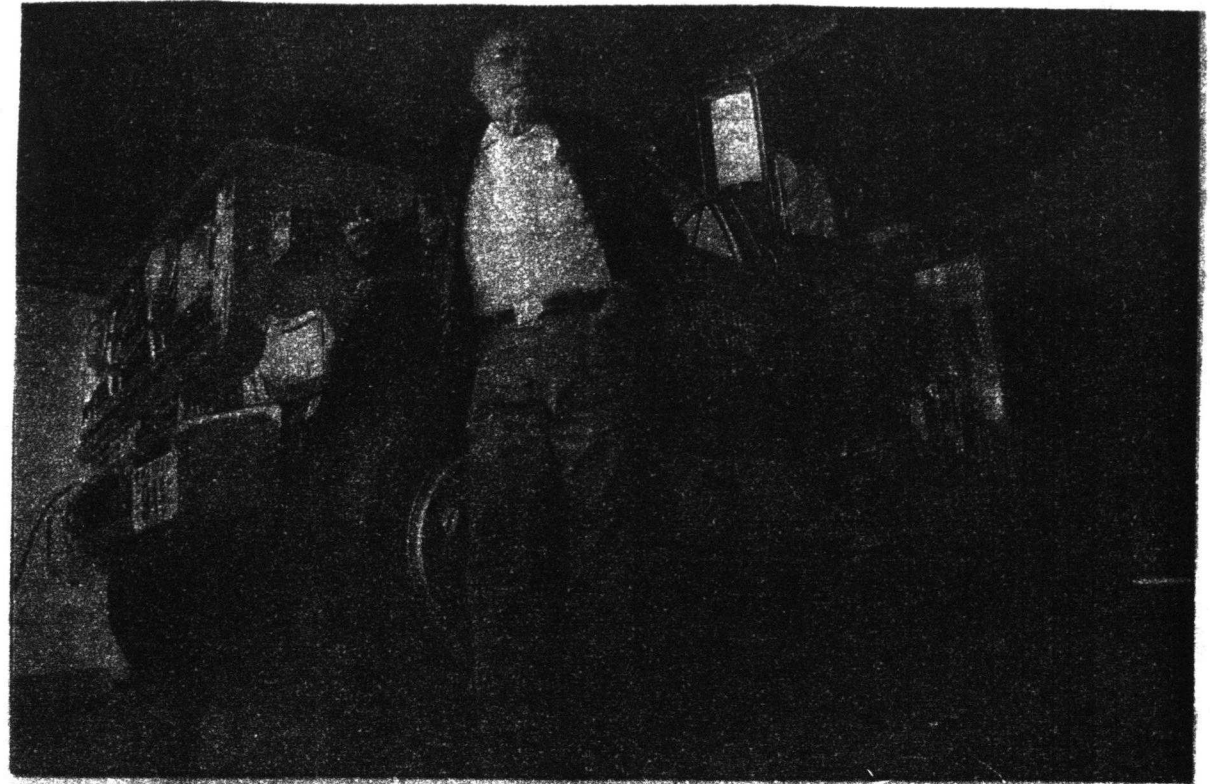
Even though they owned their own home on San Lorenzo Way, McDonnell and Sally had to move into a small apartment

over the fire-engine bays, to be close to the fire phone.

"Mother would take over the radio when I went out on calls," McDonnell said.

When an emergency call came in, McDonnell would blow the station siren to summon the volunteers.

He also would blow the siren at noon each day, if nothing more than as a test.



Bill Loveley/Sentinel

Retiring Felton Fire Chief "Mac" McDonnell says department should merge with Scotts Valley.

There were few calls back then. As time went on McDonnell stopped blowing the siren at noon.

"Too many times I was out on a call or just getting back. If I blew it two minutes late I'd get calls the rest of the day asking why," he explained.

It wasn't until about eight years ago with the establishment of the county's 911 system that McDonnell and his wife were able to move home.

McDonnell was one of the first firefighters in the county to be trained as an emergency medical technician in 1973. In the

ensuing years he has been first on the scene of nearly every medical emergency in the town.

When Ted Toft, the district's first fire chief, retired in 1976, McDonnell was selected as his replacement.

"The rest of the story is that I've been here ever since," McDonnell said.

Not quite. There are more than a few details to be filled in because McDonnell has been chief during a decade in which the county has suffered some of its biggest natural disasters, including winter storms in 1982

and '83, the Santa Cruz Mountains fire of 1985 and last, but not least, the Oct. 17 earthquake.

"I guess the only thing I missed was a hurricane," McDonnell said.

He's not likely to find one where he's going, either. He and his wife will be relocating in Reno any day now, as soon as the sale of their house here is final.

"My retirement is imminent," he said.