



By **BARRY WALLACE**

Special to the Sentinel

It was in the spring of 1976 that I touched down in Davenport. Adrift and restless, I found myself pumping gas for an old friend who had one of the stations in town.

It was a time of flux on the North Coast, with old and new on a cultural collision course. There were the conservative farmers who governed the surrounding fields of brussels sprouts. There were the long-established families who owned the businesses and wielded the political power.

Then came the slow infusion of newcomers: young families, artisans and the counterculture fringe. Some were disenchanted and escaping the mainstream, while others were focused and ambitious, working toward their own vision of this sleepy town.

This gradual yet steady transition led to some contentious local politics. But in true North Coast fashion, most came to accept, even embrace, the diversity. This was most evident within Davenport's tiny volunteer fire department.

The summons for this hearty band of townsfolk would come via a loud siren that would wail at all hours of the day and night, sending volunteers flocking up the hill to the tiny fire house tucked behind Pacific School.

Mill workers, mechanics, glass blowers, shop owners and hippies would fire up the ancient engines and roll out of town to an emergency.

When this eclectic group returned, they would congregate at the old Whaler Bar and, with their fire jackets still on, sip their beers and discuss the call (each member was entitled to a free beverage as payment for their efforts).

Sometimes the banter was light-hearted and upbeat, while other times the grim expressions said it all.

These men and women shared a common bond and so personified the community spirit that I knew I had to be part of it.

With a little lobbying and an abundance of youthful zeal, I eventually was handed an old badge and a set of turnout gear by Chief Gary Scofield.

Being one of the few members of the fire department who stayed in town during the day, I soon saw more action than I could have imagined.

The training program hadn't exactly been extensive, but I quickly found myself immersed in the horrors of high-speed auto

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THE Old Days in Davenport

Volunteering to go over the cliff
Davenport 4-13-02



Contributed photos

In the 1970s the Davenport volunteers did it all: from pumping water out of the creek to fill the fire truck's tank (top photo) to dangerous and exhilarating cliff rescues. In the photo above, writer and volunteer Barry Wallace sits behind the wheel of a 1941 engine.

Davenport

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accidents, occasional fires and the team's real talent — the steady stream of dramatic cliff rescues.

Like paramedics, firefighters and law enforcement officers everywhere, I found myself thirsting for the adrenaline rush that comes with critical incident response.

There was a surrealism in being lowered over a 300-foot cliff, racing the tide to rescue a trapped or injured victim.

Often these hikers would literally have their backs against the cliff wall, or would be completely surrounded by the encroaching ocean on an outcropping of rock.

We would strap them onto another line and together start the perilous journey back to the top, the crumbling shale rock bouncing off the climbing helmets we wore for protection.

The pounding surf was deafening in its fury, as the rescuer yelled directions into the radio to those manning the ropes on top.

At the same time, there would be a serenity that came with bearing witness to some of the most intense backdrops of natural beauty found anywhere, stretching from Santa Cruz to the San Mateo County line.

There existed an intangible dimension to the fire-rescue team. Like a frontier outpost, Davenport sat at the furthest reaches of county law enforcement.

Unless responding to a specific call (which could take forever), the Sheriff's Office simply did not have the resources to dedicate a routine patrol.

Like rural Americans everywhere, the firefighters did double duty as town overseers, not unlike the vigilantes from another time.

There was never a shortage of vagabonds in and around town, and on occasion the drunks and other criminal elements were gently (or not so gently) escorted out to Highway 1.

To my knowledge, there was never any tar-and-feathering that occurred,

but rarely did the problem at hand continue.

Retired Sheriff's Sergeant Lynn "Skip" Ballinger was a patrol deputy in the 1970s. His solo beat included Live Oak, Soquel, the Summit, as well as the entire North Coast.

"Going up to Davenport was like going back to the Wild West," he told me. "When you stepped out of your patrol car, you really felt like you were the marshal in town."

Like other deputies through the years, Ballinger appreciated the willingness of the fire department members to jump in and assist in an arrest when the fight was on.

"Just like the volunteers up in the (San Lorenzo) valley, they were always there to help," he said.

In the early '80s, the winds of change were blowing again. The small fire district, like so many across the land, became financially insolvent and ultimately disbanded.

Moving on, I left Davenport about the same time. The Department of Forestry took over. While volunteers still help protect the North Coast, the wildness and much of the flavor was gone forever.

There is a passage in Kurt Vonnegut's comic satire, "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater," that goes to the heart of volunteer firefighters. The title character is a wealthy yet disturbed man with an obsession:

"Your devotion to volunteer fire departments is very sane, too, Eliot, for they are, when the alarm goes off, almost the only examples of enthusiastic unselfishness to be seen in this land. They rush to the rescue of any human being, and count not the cost. The most contemptible man in town, should his contemptible house catch fire, will see his enemies put the fire out. And, as he pokes through the ashes for remains of his contemptible possessions, he will be comforted and pitied by no less than the fire chief.

"There we have people treasuring people as people. It's extremely rare. So from this we must learn."

Barry Wallace is now a deputy with the county Sheriff's Office.