

Country doctors help volunteer firemen keep Valley alive

By JOAN RAYMOND
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A medical emergency in the San Lorenzo Valley triggers a lifesaving network of cooperation among volunteer firemen, doctors and ambulance crews.

The emergency teamwork is particularly crucial in isolated areas of the Valley where the nearest hospital in Santa Cruz can lie more than 30 minutes away.

Under "Code 3" (red lights and siren) conditions, the trip from Boulder Creek to Community Hospital is about a half-hour.

Travel time is longer from more remote areas such as Lompico or Saratoga Gap beyond Boulder Creek.

If a car goes over one of the steep banks so common in the Valley, it may take firemen many precious minutes just to reach the victim before rescue can begin. Heavy winter rains or heavy traffic can further delay the rescue.

Despite the difficulties, however, Valley doctors who work with the firemen say emergency care in the Valley is very good.

"I don't think it could be much better," said Dr. Kenneth Reed of Boulder Creek, who has been on so many emergencies, he was made an honorary member of the Boulder Creek Fire Department many years ago.

Dr. Reed, 51, is what you might call a "country doctor," although he considers himself more of a hybrid of the species. One of his specialties is the treatment of rattlesnake bites.

"He's like a doctor from the old school. You name it, he's done it," said Boulder Creek Fire Chief Bud Tomlin, whose respect for the doctor is probably as great as the doctor's respect for the firemen.

Dr. Reed doesn't go out on calls so much anymore with the fire department, although 10 years ago, he would go out on as many as 100 calls per year.

Things have changed. "We had to provide more care at the scene of the accident then," Dr. Reed recalled. Up until several years ago, it would take an ambulance dispatched from Santa Cruz as long as 45 minutes to reach the scene of an accident in some areas of the Valley.

Now that an ambulance is stationed at Highlands Park in Ben Lomond, an ambulance crew can arrive at the accident scene almost as fast as the firemen, sometimes faster, depending on the location.

Also, firemen are better trained and equipped than they were in the past. They have Emergency Medical Technician (EMT-1) training, said Dr. Reed.

Volunteer firemen take 90-hour courses at Cabrillo College, which teach them how to evaluate emergencies, and how not to overreact, an important ingredient in proper emergency care.

Also, the firemen observe emergency

room procedures and ride with ambulance crews as part of the training.

Doctors Anthony Tyler and Steven Leib of Felton are a new, younger breed of country doctors, who as modern family physicians undergo more rigorous training than the general practitioners of yesteryear.

They both work with firemen on emergency operations.

The firemen are "tremendously professional," according to Dr. Leib, 30, who opened his Felton practice a year ago.

Dr. Leib responded to a recent emergency in a treacherous area of Fall Creek where a man fell 70 feet down a steep mountainside, suffering serious injuries.

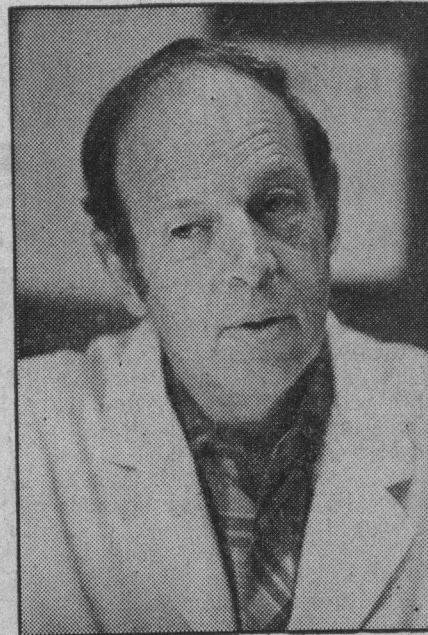
The rescue call brought a response from 26 volunteer firemen, park rangers and Department of Forestry firefighters.

Dr. Leib finds it "amazing" that the firemen "are not only courageous firemen. It's not beneath them to make pancakes to raise extra money for more equipment."

Dr. Leib regularly meets with the Felton fire crew to go over the ways emergencies are handled. He has completed advanced cardiac life support training.

Dr. Leib considers himself a country doctor, but one who combines the community spirit of the house-calling doctor with the latest techniques in modern medicine.

Dr. Tyler, 29, whose office is across



Dr. Kenneth Reed

Highway 9 from Dr. Leib's, is another family physician who works with the fire department in emergencies.

Drs. Tyler and Leib seem to be taking over where Dr. Ashby Steele left off.

"The archetypical country doctor is Dr. Steele. The rest of us pale in comparison," commented Dr. Leib.

Dr. Steele, nearing his 81st birthday,

retired in July after 52 years of medical practice.

He had moved to the San Lorenzo Valley in 1947, when there was only one doctor in Boulder Creek (who shortly left) and none in Scotts Valley.

He had graduated from the University of Arkansas medical school in 1929 — "when we didn't have such things as specialists." He said he had always wanted to be a doctor.

He was practicing medicine in the days before antibiotics, mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, CPR and chest surgery — the days when heart victims were treated with shots of adrenaline to the heart.

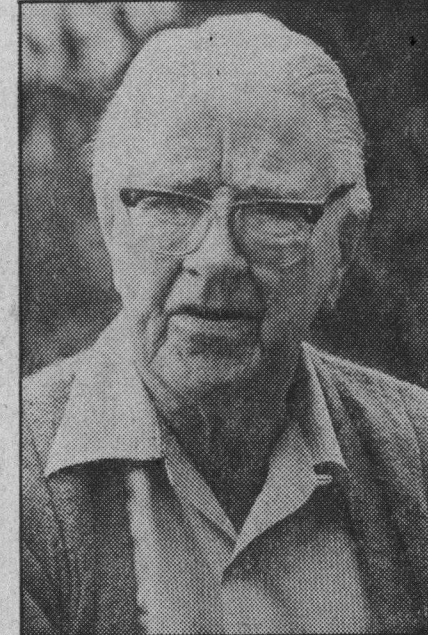
"When I was in medical school they were just starting to use electrocardiograms," recalled Dr. Steele, while reminiscing in his circular Felton home with its stretching view of vineyards sweeping back to a panorama of the Valley.

After leaving a 15-year medical career with the Veteran's Administration, Dr. Steele took on a position at the old county hospital in Santa Cruz at a time when the regular staff there consisted of one physician.

Dr. Steele was 46 years old at the time — a rather late age for such a major career change, but he said he had tired of working for government, and also had taken a liking to Santa Cruz.

He and his wife, Myrne, bought the first electrically-heated house in Santa Cruz.

He worked at the county hospital by



Dr. Ashby Steele

day and in San Lorenzo Valley at night, then, one year later, made the move to become Felton's country-doctor-in-residence.

He remembers the \$5 house call and \$2.50 office visit.

One doctor warned him there was not enough business for a doctor in the Valley, but Dr. Steele never found the warning justified. He said he had no less than five

patients in any given day.

He traveled his circuit in a 1947 Chevrolet, which sometimes doubled as an ambulance: "I used my own car when an ambulance wasn't around. Otherwise you'd have to hang around until the ambulance got there." The cost to the patient for Dr. Steele's "ambulance" was nothing.

He remembered: "I used to get an awful lot of calls at night. I nearly always did them by myself."

He added: "An awful lot of emergency calls are really not emergencies — people are just scared."

Some of the emergencies — in which Dr. Steele was greeted either by a pistol or a shotgun — probably would be handled today by the sheriff's department.

Today, said Dr. Steele, "most people don't even call a doctor. They call the fire department or an ambulance."

Eleven years ago, at the age of 70, Dr. Steele was honored for his 25 years of service to the San Lorenzo Valley.

Although he is now retired, he is an honorary member of the Felton Fire Department and still administers athletic examinations to local high school students. The cost for the examinations is the same now as it has always been with Dr. Steele: Nothing.

There was a time when some of those high school students were the same youngsters Dr. Steele had delivered as babies 15 years earlier.

A scholarship fund has also been established in his name for San Lorenzo Valley students.

Dr. Steele keeps a police scanner at home, but he says "it's nice to turn on the scanner now and know that someone else will go.

"It was an awful lot of fun though," he added.

How is the emergency service in the Valley today?

Dr. Steele feels it's "wonderful." Like Dr. Reed, he remembers a time when there were no emergency room doctors at the local hospitals.

Things could be better, though. The doctors commented there could be more advanced and portable equipment for the treatment of heart victims and even more training for the firemen.

"But, we're going in the right direction," concluded Dr. Reed.

Citizen response to emergency is crucial

Even the best emergency medical service system is ineffective unless the victim or bystander recognizes there is an emergency and knows how to start that system rolling, says Maria Finegan, paramedic coordinator at Dominican Hospital.

The biggest delay in getting help to the scene of any emergency is in the victim or bystander recognizing there is, in deed, an emergency.

Often, says Finegan, a heart attack victim will wait around for hours, hoping the pain in his or her chest and arm is from indigestion.

"Half the people who die of heart attacks die before seeking help," she says.

That holds true in other emergencies, Finegan explains. A person who finds a pan of grease on fire on the stove may think he or she can handle the situation. Instead of summoning the fire department, the person takes the pan off the stove and throws it in the sink, igniting the kitchen curtains. "Before they know it they have a structure fire," Finegan explains.

Once an emergency is recognized, it's important to know to get help by calling the 911 (nine-one-one) emergency number.

"People have to know that's the number to call for fire, police or an ambulance," Finegan explains.

Even though the 911 emergency number has been in effect for more than three years, some people needing help still call the operator or dial the old seven-digit fire department or police phone numbers. Those calls must be forwarded to the 911 dispatch center, creating needless delay.

When making a 911 emergency call, says Finegan, the caller should be able to provide the exact location of the emergency (the street number) and the nearest cross streets.

Once the call has been placed, the location needs to be made visible, especially at night. "Turn the lights on, unlock the door and, if possible, send someone out to the street to direct

emergency crews in," Finegan advises.

House numbers should be visible from the street to avoid delay in locating the address.

In addition to making the location accessible, the caller needs to know how to control the emergency until professional help arrives.

If the victim is not breathing, is choking or bleeding, the three to five minutes it takes for the fire department to arrive can be a nightmare for a helpless witness — and the victim.

To teach county residents what to do until help arrives, Division Chief Eldon Nagel of the Santa Cruz Fire Department, Capt. Mike Fixter of Central County Fire and Finegan have organized Project Save, a training program offered through Dominican Hospital.

To date, more than 1,500 persons have been taught cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) plus techniques for choking, bleeding, poisoning, burns and near drowning. Classes are given twice a month.

Additional information and registration for the three-hour class is available by calling Dominican Hospital.

Those without training can gain valuable information during an emergency by consulting the "Survival Guide" published in the front of the telephone book. Finegan terms the guide "an excellent source of information."

The county Emergency Medical Care Commission has been dealing with improving the emergency medical system. That 10-member panel now is reviewing citizen training in CPR.

"Citizens in Santa Cruz County, primarily in my (San Lorenzo Valley) district need to know more about self-help, including CPR and basic first aid," says Linda Belom, chair of the Emergency Medical Care Commission.

Belom is one of five consumers appointed to the commission by the Board of Supervisors.

Citizen involvement, through knowledge of basic life support, "would be very advantageous" to the county's emergency service plan, Belom said.



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