



Aptos Chief Richard Chinn

# When Chief

By MARK BERGSTROM  
Sentinel Staff Writer

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard," Aptos Fire Chief Richard Chinn boomed and a hush fell over the fire chief's conference at Asilomar.

Moments before, the others had decided that if they couldn't reach a burning building because of an insurmountable cyclone fence, they'd have to let it burn and try to protect neighboring buildings.

"You ram the damned engine through the fence, lay your hose and go into the building and put the fire out."

The other men listened as men usually do when Chinn talks about fighting fires.

It's been that way around his station ever since he walked through the door seven years ago, and you'd better believe

it's going to be that way until he walks out to retirement Monday.

Just as Chinn said he'd ram the engine through a fence to get to a fire at times, he's taken the same approach to upgrading the department and safety standards in his community.

"He's probably the most dedicated firefighter I've ever met. Unfortunately, he has as much tact as a hungry cobra," says district Commissioner Stew Davis.

Merchants dubbed Chinn "Little Caesar" as he set about enforcing a new district fire code.

He cited the cloistered nuns of the Poor Clares for carrying candles in their evening processional, the Lutherans for holding a candlelight Christmas Eve service and even took on the United States government.

"The chief told the Post Office he wanted sprinklers and a new hydrant at their new building," recalls Fireman Drew Johnston.

"They said we're the federal government and we don't have to. Chinn said OK, we won't fight your fires."

"Yeah, big business didn't bother him a bit," adds Fireman Russ Drury. "He taught people a new need for water."

But, Drury continues, Chinn enforced the code equally.

"It made it hard when we were out in the field in uniform; when we were firemen and they were the public," says Johnston, recalling how after a while any request a fireman made drew an instant argument.

No matter how many times Chinn explained he was only doing his job and seeing to it that nobody would die in a fire while he was chief, the protests came.

Several times Chinn's job was rumored to be on the line. It wasn't.

"We backed him because even though he enforced the code a little abruptly, we knew it had to be done," says Commissioner Walter Jordan.

Even when Chinn was prosecuted and placed on probation for calling in a false alarm of a helicopter crash when it was really only a drill, the board backed its chief.

Inside the department, Chinn steamrolled a new training program for what became an all-paid fire-fighting force, moved the department into two modern stations and began the county's first paramedic service.

The first rule Chinn taught his men is that fires are fought on the inside of the buildings, not from the street.

"I remember specifically the Bayview Hotel in which there was a fairly involved attic fire when the men arrived," Davis explains.

The firemen went into the attic to the source of the blaze (rule number two), put it out before it had spread any farther than when they got there (number three) and cleaned the place up before they left.

"The proprietor served dinner in the dining room that same night," Davis recalls.

Chinn Speaks, Men Listen

## REFERENCE

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"If you put the water there, baby, then you clean it up," is the way Chinn explains that rule — number four.

"One time we had a kitchen fire that burned a cabinet over a stove in a house. Before we left we swept and mopped the floor and washed the windows. We even did the dishes and stacked them on the counter before we left," Johnston remembers.

"It's good, it greatly lessens the trauma for the resident."

Chinn says it's just a matter of a higher level of service to the taxpayer. Aptos citizens have paid the price to the tax collector for that level of service. Without a peep.

In return, Chinn has demanded that they get their money's worth. Firemen do all firehouse and apparatus maintenance, for example.

Every man is also required to hold an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) certificate, which they earned through five months of study on their own time.

For this and more, Chinn and the commissioners have seen to it that Aptos firemen draw the highest pay and benefits in the county.

"I guess you'd say he's been a benevolent tyrant," Drury says.

The higher level of training has also paid off in advancements. "Our firefighters thought they were pros when Chinn got here, but shortly after he arrived he opened the captain's test up statewide and none of our men came close to passing.

"After seven years of his leadership and training, we had three of our own men pass in the top five on the last captain's exam and two of them were promoted," says Davis.

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He, fellow commissioners and the firemen cannot deny that Chinn's administration has been tough on everybody.

"But, we could not have gone from a 9B fire insurance rating — now you have to understand that's the lowest rating and means that a homeowner usually won't lose his foundation in a fire — to a 6 without a man like Dick Chinn," Davis explains.

"Yeah, regardless how people inside or outside the department feel, I don't think there was ever a time he wasn't doing what he was paid to do," adds Fireman Phil Scofield.

Taking over command Monday will be Nick Baumgartner.

like Chinn, a retired veteran of the Los Angeles City Fire Department.

"I was an engineer when he was battalion chief down in L.A. We were at the same station, but on different shifts and I was happy to keep it that way," Baumgartner recalls, playfully punching Chinn on the shoulder. "Right, Dad?"

Firemen feel Baumgartner will be more public relations oriented than Chinn. But, despite their criticism of the old chief's lack of tact at times, firemen concur with Captain Curtis Gabriel:

"I hope Baumgartner will have half the drive so he won't be bullied around."