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The Hood Mansion

PLUS:

Pieta Tavern

Civil Defense



You Will Be the
Army for Your
Own Defense:

Civil Defense in Sonoma County, 1950-1963

by Courtney Clements

If a hydrogen bomb had hit the Sonoma County courthouse in 1952, it would have devastated an area from Mark West Springs Road to Bellevue School to Fulton Road to beyond Summerfield Road.

This ominous report appeared in the *Press Democrat* on April 1, 1954, but it was not an April Fool's joke. The description of this catastrophe may have been a bit conservative. Three years later, a Ground Obser-



Medical Volunteer Armband
Courtesy Sonoma County Museum

ver Corps volunteer, standing on top of the courthouse on the morning of October 7, 1957, reported seeing a flash of light emanating from a test blast in Yucca Flat, Nevada, 75 miles north of Las Vegas.



Looking over the communication system at Healdsburg's Civil Defense headquarters, ca. 1953. Courtesy Healdsburg Museum.

During the Cold War, was it likely that the Soviet Union would attack Sonoma County? Probably not. However, unwilling to risk being caught unprepared, Sonoma County in the 1950's and 60's readied itself for the possibility of nuclear war.

The nuclear age began in 1945 when the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. Four years later, the Soviet Union exploded its own atomic weapon, setting off the Cold War. For the first time in human history, the concept of mutually-assured destruction became a reality as each country developed more powerful weapons.

In 1950, Congress authorized the creation of the Federal Civil Defense Administration to prepare American communities for a nuclear attack. The FCDA, however, functioned primarily as an advisory body, leaving actual civil defense program implementation to state and local governments.

Sonoma County responded immediately by establishing civil defense offices at the county and city levels. The Board of Supervisors funded seven regional coordinators in Cloverdale, Guerneville, Healdsburg, Petaluma, Sebastopol, Santa Rosa, and Sonoma. Individual towns established and funded their own offices. Civil defense officials mobilized the community by offering classes in first aid and recruiting volunteers to serve as auxiliary police officers, firefighters, and medical assistants.

In 1951, Healdsburg defense coordinator Louis Luciani told an assembled crowd that in case of attack, "Healdsburg will have no army, no national guard; you will be the army for your own defense." This admonition was repeated often to recruit public participation in civil defense activities. Although it is clear that not everyone in the county rushed to volunteer or built a fallout shelter on their property, the *Press Democrat* reported that civil defense meetings and first aid classes were



Participants in a Civil Defense training course, posing with State of California CD truck #63, 1956. Courtesy Healdsburg Museum.

well attended.

By June 1951, Santa Rosa had recruited enough block wardens to cover its 23 civil defense zones. The wardens, trained in rescue, fire-fighting and first aid, were seen as the first level of official response to a defense alert. The Ground Observer Corps, which kept a lookout for enemy aircraft, established 21 posts around the county, from atop Healdsburg's city hall to the porch of the Richardson store in Stewart's Point. (In 1954, Mrs. William A. Duer received the Distinguished Service Award, the highest award given to civilian members of the GOC by the U.S. Air Force for managing the Sebastopol post.)

Even Boy Scout troops were trained for messenger services, although what this entailed was not clear. Local amateur radio operators were recruited to assist in communications in the event of an emergency. In 1952, the Sonoma County Civil Defense office reported that one in 18 residents was a civil defense volunteer.

Local officials used a variety of print and audio-visual media to mobilize county residents. The *Press Democrat*, in addition to reporting the state of international tensions, kept readers informed of local

meetings, classes and events. Gilson V. Willets, chief of Public Affairs and Information for Sonoma County Civil Defense, wrote a weekly column that appeared in several county papers during the early 1950's.

Beginning in 1951, KSRO broadcast weekly programs about civil defense which featured interviews with federal and state officials. Two federally-produced films, "How to Beat the A Bomb" and "The Medical Effects of the A Bomb," were shown at a meeting at Analy Union High School on June 11, 1951.

A booklet entitled "Survival Under Atomic Attack," published by the U.S. government, was circulated to all Californians in 1950. "You can live through an atom bomb raid," the pamphlet began, "and you won't have to have a Geiger counter, protective clothing or special training in order to do it."

It went on to describe an atomic blast, explain the nature and effects of radioactivity, and advise readers to protect themselves by seeking shelter, avoiding open food and water containers, and refraining from starting rumors which might cause a panic.

These early preparations culminated in a simulated atomic attack

drill on February 20, 1952. At 9:34 a.m., Police Sgt. H.D. Huntington received a call alerting him of a possible attack. Within six minutes, all of Santa Rosa's civil defense officials had been notified of the alert and began to mobilize police and fire resources. At 10:18 a.m., the air raid sirens began to wail, followed by the buzz of unseen aircraft, and the sound of police sirens sounded throughout the city.

For sixteen minutes, cities of Santa Rosa and Petaluma pretended to be under a nuclear attack. Police with loudspeakers stopped traffic and directed pedestrians to the nearest air raid shelter. At Santa Rosa Junior High School, students pulled down window shades, propped open classroom doors, and took shelter under their desks.

Although police and communication services worked well to inform and direct residents to shelters, not everyone heeded their direction. A photograph on the front page of the *Press Democrat* shows a woman looking out of a window in the Rosenberg building. The caption read that she "flunked her first air raid test by standing in [the] most dangerous spot in the office."

In spite of some citizens who seemed not to appreciate the seriousness of the exercise, civil defense officials hailed the test as a great success. In December 1952, county officials again demonstrated their vigilance by responding immediately to an alert from the attack warning system. Although the "attack" turned out to be a false alarm triggered by a rainstorm that short-circuited the system, the California State Civil Defense Office newsletter proudly reported that Sonoma County's "civil defense leaders took the signals seriously and manned their headquarters."

By 1954, federal as well as local officials determined that Sonoma County would not be a likely target of Soviet aggression. However, the

county was considered critical to national and regional civil defense efforts. In August 1954, the regional FCDA office was relocated from Berkeley to Santa Rosa "as part of a national program of dispersal from target areas." This new headquarters, located at the Naval Auxiliary Air Station, coordinated civil defense activities in California, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Hawaii, Guam, and American Samoa.

In addition to its federal responsibilities, Sonoma County was also considered a probable destination for hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing attacks on Mare Island and San Francisco. It was believed that prevailing winds would protect the county from radioactive fallout, thus increasing the likelihood that the county's role would be one of providing shelter after an assault. Evacuation, shelter, food distribution, transportation, and medical plans were created to deal with the potential deluge of victims.

Not everyone embraced the cause of civil defense with equal enthusiasm. Dissenters were numerous and vocal. One gentleman who refused to go inside a building during the 1952 air raid drill confidently told a *Press Democrat* reporter that "they won't attack Santa Rosa."

Letters to the editor indicate that some portion of the population thought that preparation for a nuclear attack was ludicrous. A local peace committee advocated using resources to negotiate a solution rather than to prepare for war.

Interest in civil defense also seemed to correspond to fluctuations in international affairs. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the county office reported an increase in calls about stockpiling food and supplies rather than constructing fallout shelters, which had been more of a priority during the Berlin crisis one year earlier. During the Cuban crisis, officials speculated that with Soviet missiles only 90 miles from Ameri-

can shores and war seemingly imminent, there would be no time to construct a shelter.

Federal, state, and local civil defense activities continued into the 1980's, but without the sense of immediacy that characterized preparations in the 1950's and early 60's. Public interest in civil defense may have waned as the likelihood of war between the superpowers decreased.

Also, as the American public learned more about the true effects of a nuclear assault, it became clear that duck and cover drills and bomb shelters were probably futile. That is not to say that civil defense efforts were a waste of time or resources, as many of these offices evolved into disaster and emergency services organizations that continue to serve American communities today.

If you served as a Sonoma County civil defense volunteer, built a shelter on your property or have any photographs or documents relating to this topic that you are willing to share, I would be interested in speaking with you. I am conducting research on local civil defense activities (1950-63) for a master's thesis in history at Sonoma State University. You may contact me at 539-8663 or

DISASTER INSTRUCTIONS

OFFICIAL
U. S. Govt
Instructions for all
people living in
SANTA ROSA
TOWNSHIP

SANTA ROSA TOWNSHIP CIVIL DEFENSE SIRENS
will hereafter be set off in the following manner:

ALERT SIGNAL

A steady blast of five minutes duration. (This signal means civil defense forces are to mobilize. Further instructions will be given to the public by radio. If KSRO or other regular stations are not on the air, turn to 640 or 1240 on your radio dial. If none of these stations are on the air it means a P. G. & E. power failure. Then use your car radio or a battery set. Instructions will also be given you by sound truck.)

TAKE COVER SIGNAL

A wailing tone of three minutes duration. (This will indicate actual attack is imminent and you should take the best available shelter — behind, under or in any shelter available. Lie on the floor next to an inside wall away from any windows.)

THIS IS IMPORTANT
IN AN EMERGENCY, IT MAY
Save The Lives of Your Family and Yourself

San Francisco Bay Area is a TARGET AREA and therefore their instructions covering a disaster differ from ours.

Santa Rosa Township is in the SUPPORT AREA. FOLLOW OUR INSTRUCTIONS.

HANG THIS CARD IN A CONSPICUOUS PLACE IN YOUR HOUSE
(Remove and destroy any previous instructions you may have received.)

SAMUEL B. HOOD, Director Civil Defense
Santa Rosa Township

Disaster Instruction notice. Courtesy Sonoma County Museum.

ssscac@earthlink.net. Thank you.

SOURCES:

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