

## Gaffney & PG&E Oral History Transcript

Documentary filmmakers Annette Arnold and Cathy Wild introduce us to Rose Gaffney and the Sonoma County folks who helped lead the opposition against PG&E's proposed nuclear plant in Bodega Bay in the early 1960s. PG&E was interested in over 400 of Rose Gaffney's 600-acre ranch on Bodega Head. By eminent domain, the power company condemned 64 acres of her land and forced her to sell. Her ferocious fight to preserve her land led to a unique expression of local environmental activism, which became part of the template of grassroots anti-nuclear movements in the United States from there on out. It would take until 1964 when the Alaskan earthquake happened for PG&E to say, well, I guess it's really not a very good idea to have a nuclear power plant on top of an earthquake fault.

Transcription of an oral history interview recorded for Sonoma County Museum's exhibition: Sonoma Confidential

Rose Gaffney was a woman who came to California and Bodega Bay around 1911. As a young girl, Rose Gaffney went to work as a maid for the two Gaffney brothers, who owned a big portion of the middle part of Bodega Head. She was engaged to be married to one of the Gaffney's and the day before the wedding he was shot in a barroom brawl in Bodega and died. Rose was pregnant at the time, so the other Gaffney brother, Bill Gaffney, married her. After he passed away in 1941, she moved to Salmon Creek and lived there for the rest of her life, but she kept the property out at Bodega Head, leasing it in the late '40s to the Mann's, who were local sheep ranchers.

Originally the Gaffney's had about 600 hundred acres. In the 1960s, PG&E wanted to build a power plant and were interested in over 400 of their acres. PG&E later came back and said they didn't need that much, but they did condemn 69 acres of her land, which she had to sell against her mighty will. Condemnation was under eminent domain, which is to do something for the public good. But, PG&E is not a Federally funded company, it is the largest, independently owned power company on the planet. So, some how or another, they got jurisdiction to do this.

Rose started arguing in court with PG&E and it started getting into the papers. So, people in the area became aware of what was happening. Because PG&E had the right of eminent domain they were able to condemn her land and purchase it from her but, because of her battle, she ended up getting a \$1,000 an acre, whereas her neighbors, who sold to PG&E under the same ruling, only got \$500 an acre. Later, PG&E decided they weren't going to build a nuclear power plant there, they were going to turn around and sell her land to the park system for \$4000

an acre. She again sued them, took them to court, and received the difference.

It was in 1958 that PG&E decided that Bodega Bay would be the perfect place to construct a nuclear power plant. In 1962, the plans started escalating. This is after a whole generation of school kids, after World War II, had been taught about the wonders of this magical, clean, cheap source of electricity so, it was a go. People were excited about it. The local people, at first, thought it was a great idea. Then there was the handful of people, Rose Gaffney at the helm, marine biologist and director of a marine station at Dillion Beach, Joel Hedgepeth, San Francisco museum curator, Karl Kortum and his brother, a young Cotati veterinarian, Bill Kortum, and a Berkeley law student working for the Sierra Club at the time (who later, as a lawyer, took on PG&E two more times), David Pessman--who had to sway public opinion. This group was happy to use Rose Gaffney as kind of the figurehead, because she could get away with stuff verbally, and really rustle people up and ruffle feathers and the rest of the group quietly did the facts and figures underneath the scene, and it was like this force, like an earthquake starting to shimmy and shake and things started to happen. Family and friends, the entire Bodega Bay area started to draw together, people like Hazel Mitchell, a waitress at the Tides Restaurant, came into the fray. And also at this time, Hitchcock is filming his movie, *The Birds*, in 1963. And he used Rose's farm house in the film. So, when Tippy Headren gets in the boat and rows across the bay to the big house that's out there where Mitch lives and Jessica Tandy--that was Rose Gaffney's house with a false front on it.

It actually took, with all the court cases, until 1964 when the Alaskan earthquake happened for PG&E to say, well, I guess it's really not a very good site. They had chosen Bodega Head because they could pull water in from the harbor and run it through the reactor plant and then spit out the used water on the ocean side—it was a perfect location economically for them. Both the park system and U. C. Berkeley were also interested in the land when PG&E came along. They didn't care that the site was on top of an earthquake fault. PG&E argued that earthquakes are really not that detrimental and we don't need to worry about this power plant being built here, we can build it on ball bearings to shake with the earthquake. But, what happened with the Alaska earthquake was that it showed that earthquakes can be very devastating.

There was a public meeting held in December of 1962 and it was broadcasted on KPFA in Northern California. It was rebroadcast in Southern California and a geophysicist heard this and came up to join the cause. It was P. R. Santamon, who was the Navy's top geophysicist and he had just come back from Chili where he had been studying the devastating earthquakes that had happened there. He wrote an official report that said, of all the places this is literally one of the worst places

you could build a nuclear power plant. And his credentials couldn't be discredited.

The whole movement against PG&E and building a nuclear power plant out there was responsible for the second anti-nuclear event in all of the United States. It has become a kind of template for grassroots movements and was one of the first times these types of events had fun and music incorporated into them instead of just having serious meetings. One time Lou Waters, who was a real big time jazz musician in the late '40s, came out of retirement to perform for an event put on by a group in the movement--The Northern California Association to Preserve and Protect Bodega Harbor, sometimes called the Hole in the Head Gang. Hundreds of people came and they recorded the song, Blues Over Bodega, and they ended up making a whole album out of that, and Blues Over Bodega actually became a hit. At this event, they had a 1000 helium balloons and each one had a tag attached to it that said--this represents a molecule of radioactive fall out, if you find this please contact your local newspaper. They late these balloons go on a typical, slightly windy day out at Bodega Head and they just start flying across the bay and over the next week they were found in San Francisco, Novato, Petaluma, and a cluster of them that were tied together landed in the fountain in City Hall in San Rafael. Over 2,000 people wrote the newspapers. That day, and a lot of the things that happened through the entire course of fighting against the power plant at Bodega Head became part of the template of grassroots movements from there on out. We can be proud of that in Sonoma County.