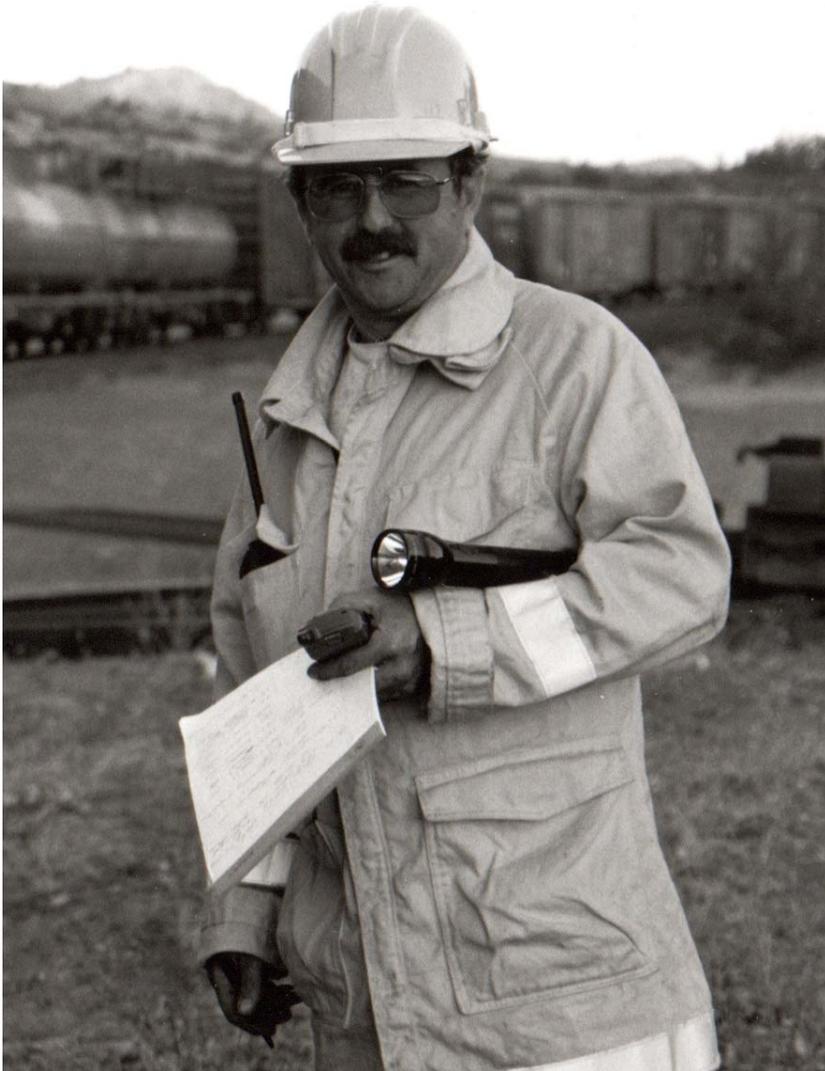


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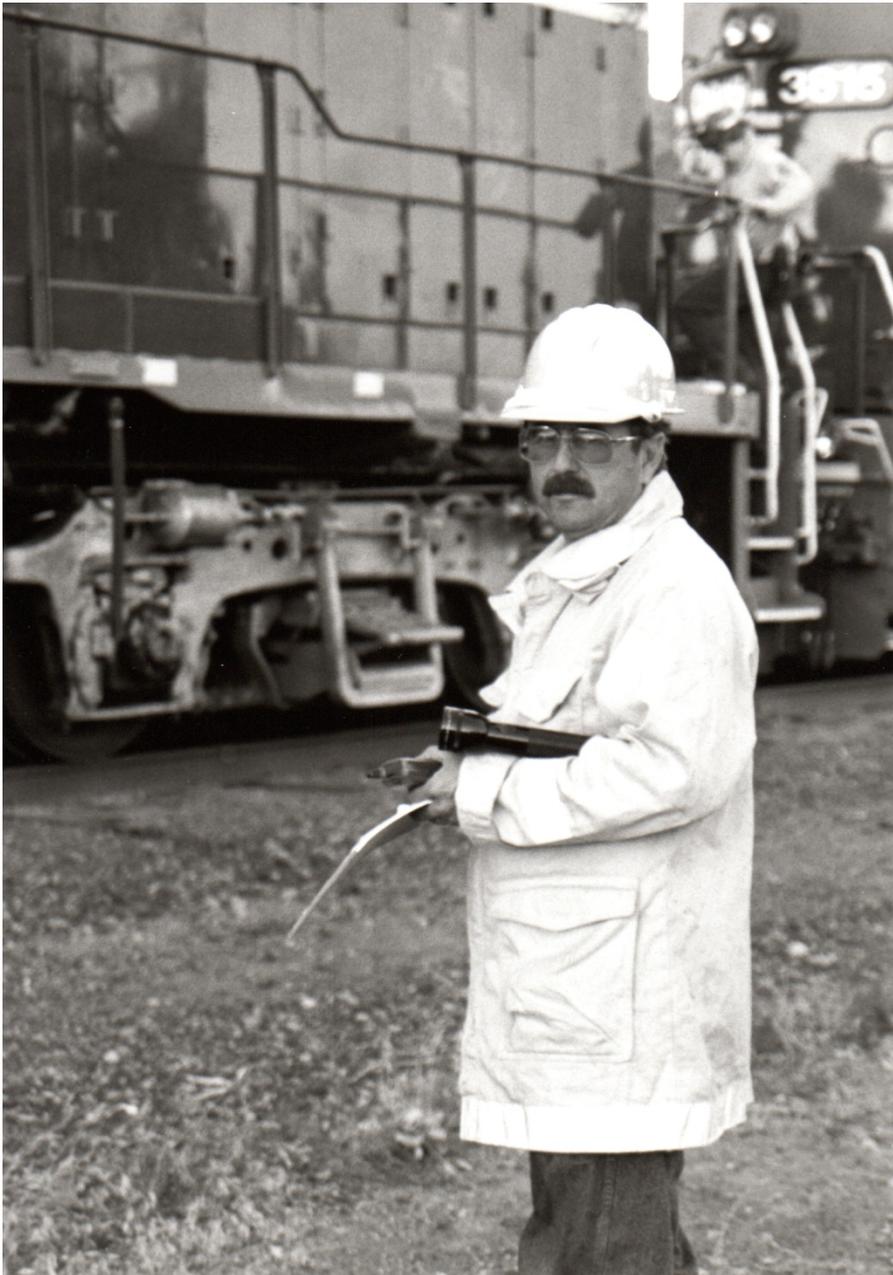
10. While some have branded Colestin's Chief as an instigator of problems posed by a renegade backwater district, and others have referred to him as "that guy who goes around calling himself Chief," Steve Avgeris remains seriously committed to his appointed volunteer job, which he has held for the past 18 years.

Learn more about the man, the responsibilities of the job, and the tireless dedication and personal qualifications Steve has met its challenges with. *Page 12.*

Article (begins on page 2):

STEVE AVGERIS, Chief of the Colestin Rural Fire District since 1981, has been fighting fire since he first accompanied his father on a fireline at the young age of five. His experience and training as a firefighter, backed by a lifetime of working in the woods in challenging conditions, have given rise to an individual most aptly suited to this job.

However, it is his personal integrity, commitment, and dedication in the face of the job's constant demands, and an ability to sustain a vision of the larger picture and the greater overall value of the work, that distinguishes his character as a fire chief.



Fire Chief STEVE AVGERIS inspects a railcar on the Central Oregon & Pacific Railroad's train in Hilt last July.

Steve Avgeris has a profound, experiential understanding of the damage that fire is capable of.

The Colestin Fire on August 10th, 1981, started by children playing with matches, burned over 600 acres and damaged over 2 million board feet of timber, about two-thirds of that loss sustained by the Avgeris' property.

Also potentially devastating, was the threat to life: the Colestin Fire occurred in the most rugged terrain *and* the most populated area along Colestin Road.

With no local fire district then in place, the firefighting response became a "project fire" involving numerous fire agencies, none of which had clearly defined jurisdictional responsibilities for the Mt. Ashland / Colestin area.

In order to avoid such confusion and to have a local firefighting mechanism in place for potential future events, local residents formed the Colestin Rural Fire District over the next two years.

By August, 1983, a charter for the official formation of a local fire protection district was issued by Jackson County. The District covers 21.3 square miles, and now protects about 150 homes, mostly situated in "rural-urban interface" zones, recognized for their vulnerability to wildfire.

Although Steve Avgeris was the unanimous choice of local residents first participating in the Fire District, he initially held his post as Chief by popular agreement, as did the other early officers of the District.

Upon the legal formation of the District, however, official positions became necessary. In the Jackson County election of November 8th, 1983, the first five legal Board members of the Colestin Rural Fire District were elected. Directly thereafter, Steve was officially appointed by the Board as the Fire Chief.

From the beginning, Steve took on the job with complete dedication and commitment. A lifelong Colestin resident, he instinctively understood that the raw materials that converged to produce the Colestin Fire exist in potential form every summer.

With a growing population in the Mt. Ashland-Colestin area, Steve also shared the concerns of many residents that fire incidents would become less limited to wildfires, forcing domestic fire safety to become a necessity, and ultimately, a year-round process.

Building a crew for both wildland and residential firefighting, formulating a long-range plan for training, locating good, affordable equipment, and pulling in additional volunteer help to round out the district's services are Steve's constant pre-occupations.

Whether a fire occurs in the forest or at a private residence, the combined elements of fuel, an "arc, spark, or flame," and one careless, unintentional or unaware moment, is all it takes. Steve knows this better than he knows the back of his own hand.

During a lightning storm, Steve can often be found keeping a vigil over the valley from the Four-Corners logging road look-out area several miles above his home, where visibility extends to most of the valley.

Despite a demanding work schedule in the woods, he makes time during the height of fire season to patrol the local roads with an eye to any sign of fire.

The radio at his home stays on fire dispatch channels, and the phone conveys little else than fire-related news from 911 and other fire agencies, and the questions or concerns of local residents. It has been this way at the Avgerises' for the last two decades.

In the beginning, Steve didn't have to look far for volunteers. Several of his first firefighters came from the ranks of his own family: his brother, John, with whom he formed his own company, Hilltop Logging, was always available, and could be depended upon as a seasoned firefighter and cat operator. In addition to conscripting his company's timber workers on

occasion, he also got his mother to support firefighting services, by donating a 100-year land lease for the use of her property, on which the District's fire house was built, in 1990.

By the age of 19, Steve was married, and the couple had two children. His wife, Cheri, became a firefighter, a base station dispatcher, and a well-trained Emergency Medical Technician, gradually developing the Medical Response Unit functions of the fire district to the high-caliber level of service that it now provides.

Their two children, now both married, each with two children of their own, were also involuntarily drafted: their daughter, Christina Lehman, became CRFD's primary base station operator, amidst other various tasks; now living in Hilt, she still assists the fire district occasionally in this capacity. Their son, Christopher, also became a skilled dozer operator and firefighter. Together, the family originally formed the district's initial response unit to a fire call.

When a fire call comes, Steve is usually into his firefighting gear, out the door, behind the wheel of an engine and on his way within minutes, while the base station contacts other firefighters and first responders.

It was his rapid response to the CORP train derailment in 1996, as a ruptured tanker carrying formaldehyde began leaking into the nearby creek in the central part of the Colestin valley, that prevented extensive toxic contamination to the environment.

Alerted to the train's impending accident that day by the train's unusually high pitch, indicating excessive speed, and by the loud crash that followed as 35 cars derailed, Steve arrived first on the scene.

After checking train personnel for injuries, he found the tanker spilling its contents, and acted quickly to redirect the fluid. Orville Eary of the ODF later praised his effective response, stating that Colestin's Chief "did everything right."

Many years of both formal and experiential firefighter training have reinforced Steve's cut-and-dried, "don't mess around" attitude.

That training began early in Steve's life: Born in 1951, he was barely 5 when he experienced his first lightning fire, during the summer of 1955. Steve begged his father, George Avgeris, to take him along.

Despite the obvious danger, George evidently saw the situation as a learning opportunity for his young son, and so, with his brother, John, Steve helped to fight the fire. From then on, he spent his summers watching for fires, particularly along the railroad near

What are the responsibilities of the Fire Chief?

As mandated by Jackson County fire agency laws and under the articles of incorporation and the by-laws of the Colestin Rural Fire District, the Fire Chief is appointed by the District's Board of Directors, and reports directly to the Board. The Chief manages; the Board administrates.

General Job Description: The Chief is responsible and accountable for all activities dealing with fire and rescue response systems of the Fire District, including fire and emergency medical response systems, all training programs and all fire prevention activities, maintaining fire prevention, meeting all fire codes and regulations, making all reports on fire incidents and calls, oversee equipment acquisition and maintenance, public safety, all personnel and their safety, and oversees meeting safety committee and workman's compensation/OSHA standards and regulations, public relations, observing legalities, and meeting Jackson County guidelines and statutes.

Specific Job Requirements: The Fire Chief shall:

- Appoint Assistant Chief(s)
- Appoint the Chief Medical Officer
- Appoint the Training Officer, and to oversee all training
- Approve all volunteers
- Oversee equipment and recommend supply purchases
- Provide input to the Budget Committee and the Board regarding the Annual Budget
- Keep the Board informed of activities of the department at its monthly meetings
- Serve as the emergency response manager for all fire and medical occurrences within the District or when the District is asked to provide mutual aid
- Develop the training calendar for each year
- Serve as the chief spokesperson on behalf of the District on matters related to emergency services
- Represent the District to other agencies
- Serve as a liaison on behalf of the District to other appropriate agencies

the family's residence, and learning how to firefight at every opportunity. While he assisted on numerous fires during his youth, his first big fire, on September 23rd, 1963, occurred when he was just 12 years old.

Over the course of his lifetime, Steve has fought nearly 200 wildland fires, and several structure fires. Many of the fires during the '60's, particularly from 1963 to 1969, were train and lightning-caused fires, as well as a few escaped campfires.

Steve's formal training began at age 15. From 1965, through 1968, he trained with the U.S. Forest Service as a wildland firefighter 8 hours a week, every week, throughout the fire season. Also from youth until the last few years, Steve has also trained annually for wildland firefighting with the Oregon Dept. of Forestry.

In 1986, all of southern Oregon's fire agencies (including Jackson county Fire Districts 3 and 5, ODF, and the U.S.F.S.'s Rogue River Nat'l. in Medford and its Ashland Ranger District) sponsored a structure fire training. Steve and a few other Colestin volunteers were among the rural agency trainees that attended.

Acutely aware of the need to maintain a current working knowledge of the various facets of his job, Steve takes advantage of new training courses whenever he can. In addition to basic training, he has taken part in a number of specialized training events.

Through the California Dept. of Forestry, he received instruction in Fire Incident Command and Fire Weather. Through an 8-hour intensive course held by Jackson County's Rogue Valley Fire Prevention Co-operative (formed during the severe fire seasons of the latter 1980's, to address fire hazards facing rural-urban interface-zone residences), he learned arson investigation procedures.

CDF also gave a course train inspection procedures, involving train brakes, brake shoes, track conditions, combustion and exhaust tubes, and spark arresters. Steve has used this training in numerous fire situations involving the CORP train.

Although the job does not specifically require it, Steve has also taken Basic Life Support training, and an initial and refresher course in First Responder aid (one level below Emergency Medical Technician), which includes extrication and in-field trauma care.

Expanding his scope through training comes with the territory: for instance, because of the high number of illegal activities this past fire season which violated fire danger restrictions in our area, Steve and several other core District personnel will be taking a law enforcement training program, in order to be firmly

grounded in correct legal procedures when enforcing fire danger restrictions.

While staying on top of training opportunities can require deferring other interests periodically, directing and conducting firefighting trainings for CRFD is even more time-demanding, both in terms of preparation and in setting aside the regular days or evenings to meet with volunteers.

From January and well into prime-time fire season, Steve maintains a rigorous training schedule, coordinating sessions with CDF or other agencies for particular parts of the training.

He also enlists the talents and skills of other professional firefighters, some of whom live in the district, to augment training sessions.

Tim Stewart, CRFD's Assistant Fire Chief since 1984, has worked with Steve extensively in the past in conducting trainings. More recently, local resident and past professional firefighter Sheila Maher has also conducted trainings, allowing Steve a winter off from direct supervision of the training program.

While teaching firefighting is a hands-on activity, other aspects of being Fire Chief require a more detached, pragmatic viewpoint. While Steve will readily admit that the easiest part of his job is recommending equipment purchases to the Board, he is aware of the significant gap between asking and receiving.

Most of the district's equipment has been purchased through hard-earned fundraising and donated dollars, with occasional grants dedicated to certain items.

Even with the tax base local residents finally voted into existence only a few years ago, cash flow funds are always minimal, due to the costs of increased insurance coverage, and the need for adequate clothing and communications equipment, for firefighters' safety and effectiveness.

Through a personal network of friends and acquaintances in many places, and with a sense of good timing and a degree of ingenuity, Steve has often steered through many of the financial barriers to attaining needed equipment.

He takes advantage of opportunities to accept, at no or low cost, good used equipment for the district whenever possible, and keeps maintenance costs on the district's vehicles as low as possible by doing much of the work himself, or by enlisting the help of other handy District volunteers.

While working with friends and neighbors comes

naturally to Steve, the most stressful part of his job is walking the political and legal tightrope.

When fire and rescue response involves entering the jurisdictional territory of another agency with which Colestin does *not* have a mutual aid agreement, ensuring that the fire district does its job and fulfills its function without overstepping its bounds can become a test of endurance, and sometimes, a nightmare.

The necessity of responding to fire calls that involve CRFD or Hilt VFD in a medical emergency on the I-5 corridor, which is within the District's boundary, or a fire within the railroad's easement, which is not legally under our jurisdiction but affects adjacent land which *is* legally part of the district, have in turn made it necessary to become politically savvy.

In an attempt to form more functional policies between agencies, so that emergency responses can be made through stalled winter traffic, Board members have at times called upon local legislators to assist the co-ordination of interagency meetings of those whose jurisdiction involves the I-5 corridor.

Yet while the Board arranges and plans for such meetings, the responsibility for any perceived shortcomings in the Fire District's operations during a medical, fire or rescue response lands upon Steve.

Most of the correspondence from the CORP Railroad this past season was directed to Steve, who was forced to flag the train down several times because of its fire hazards.

When local area newspapers picked up the story of the railroad fires in July, it fell to Steve to defend the actions of the fire district, and to correct the railroad's report regarding the causes of the fires, and the way in which the fires were contained.

In a separate issue involving the railroad, as part of a local resident's legal suit, Steve was subpoenaed to testify in court this past summer.

Steve has also been forced to carry out the role of law enforcement in other instances, closer to home: Last year, besides issuing citations during fire season, Steve turned down a local request to provide fire protection for a planned music festival in the lower end of the valley.

Although the sponsors had already received a conditional use permit for the event from the County, the Fire District was unable to support the use permit, because of potential safety and emergency access problems posed by allowing uncontrollable, high-volume traffic on Colestin Road, and the potential fire

hazard introduced by several thousand visitors to the valley attending the event, which the Fire District was not, and is not, equipped to handle.

On a similar note, Steve was contacted by a local news reporter to explain the fire district's reluctance to condone an event held in the middle of the valley, which drew an unexpectedly high number of visitors, crowding Colestin Road and violating a conditional use permit for the parcel in question.

In another case, the fire district received a request for a sweat lodge permit, which Steve turned down. The applicants then informed the fire district that they had the right to go ahead without a permit, since they are legally considered to be a sovereign nation and are not bound by the same restrictions as others.

Because of the legal ramifications, the ODF took over the issuance of the permit. Despite the fire hazard implications, ODF was forced to grant the permit, and to agree to be responsible for any problems arising from the situation. In this instance, ODF and Colestin were bound by a federal law that has the power to override fire safety concerns.

More recently, the Fire District was requested by Jackson County to perform a code compliance inspection on a private residence, where industrial chemicals were reportedly being used. Steve has been forced to take up the issue, despite the hostile relations engendered by asserting the District's authority to conduct such an inspection.

Despite his occasional lack of popularity with those whose vested interests are at odds with the stringent fire prevention measures and rescue response requirements necessary for our rugged, remote area, Steve has held his ground over the years, prioritizing the consistency and integrity of the District, rather than pandering to those who nay-say or complain.

Long under the scrutiny of other fire agencies, Steve has slowly earned the respect of many other fire agency authorities, while the mantle of his apparently renegade, anomalous behavior has given way to a resilient, yet flexible core.

Through a continuous process of informational exchange, dialogue and conciliation between Colestin and other districts, the image of a small-time fire chief of a remote, rural district with few people, resources, or civilized instincts, has evolved into the reality of a respectable fire agency authority in his own right.

Steve's persistence and dedication over the past 17 years have produced lasting results. Colestin's firefighting operations are still going strong, in spite of an ever-changing population and ever-increasing challenges and responsibilities. The Fire District is now recognized as a capable, stable fire agency that can hold its own, despite its small size.

Although he says he would like to eventually pass the job on to another, younger individual who can face the heat with a dedication similar to his own, his present main concern is finding enough regular participants to fill out the ranks of firefighters and support volunteers, to make it through the next fire season.



CRFD's Chief STEVE AVGERIS grimly observes every detail as he supervises an interagency equipment inspection of the northbound CORP train in Hilt on July 13th, 1999.

As the local fire agency present, the Colestin Rural Fire District was responsible for halting the train, preventing a further fire incident from occurring, and approving the inspection before the train was allowed to proceed northward.

The result was the removal of a railcar with a failing break system, which can throw sparks.

Yet the most important thing people can do, Steve says, is to participate in whatever way they can. Even modest involvement distributes the load more equally.

Steve also acknowledges that, above all else, it is the staunch, dedicated support throughout the District that we have had since the beginning, that makes it both special, and at the same time, even possible. Because of this, the Fire District has remained intact, while growing in its service capabilities and resources.

As the head of such a district, Steve Avgeris is often between a rock and a hard place. There is always the elusive, magical balance to maintain between monitoring potential fire hazards, and accommodating the interests that sometimes present those hazards.

There are jurisdictional and legal slopes to negotiate, and political hot-spots to walk through. There are

administrators, state auditors, and other fire agency authorities to report to, trucks to maintain, trainings to teach, and new things to learn.

And there are fires to fight.

Somewhere in the midst of the flames, there is a person who works non-stop diligently, without looking up or away.

He believes that, with the charitable help of other neighbors, through the sustained efforts of a committed group of people, good deeds and civic duties can be accomplished, to make the community of the Colestin valley a safer place to live.

The work comes with the territory, where the parts of his job are less than the sum of the whole: as Colestin's Fire Chief, Steve Avgeris "does it all." ■