

An award winning journalist reveals how she discovered major stories and relentlessly pursued them on the northern California coast. From working on boats with commercial fishermen, to going to war with the US Navy she vividly describes what lay behind the exciting stories she covered.

Backstories from the West Edge: 40 years of Adventures and Journalism on Northern California's Coast [aka QuirkUtopia]

by Andrea Granahan

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AndreaGranahan@yahoo.com
MeanderingWithAndrea.com
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Chapter 4

Painting Humbert's Shed

When my husband David and I first moved to Bodega we rented a farmhouse from John and Josephine, a brother and sister. They and their spouses lived on neighboring ranches on either side of us.

It was a rambling old farmhouse on Coast Highway 1 with rolling pastures, clusters of trees and picturesque rock outcroppings. There was a concrete milk shed from when the ranches produced butter for a co-op, and a huge, old barn that owls loved for nesting. The ranch was the home to large flocks of sheep, and some cattle. Our children thought it was paradise.

Josephine's husband was Humbert Franceschi. Humbert, or more properly Umberto, had been born in this country but his Italian parents didn't speak English so he grew up with an accent and a delightful way of butchering the language that reminded us of Yogi Berra.

In those days before big box stores were invented, the shopping bargain spot in Sebastopol, the closest town of any size, was Joe's Bargain Store. Joe would get whatever he could pick up cheaply. There were barrels of Army surplus hardware, towels, pot holders and unexpected bizarre items mixed with the groceries. Everyone loved the store. We often ran into the nuns from Starcross Monastery, a co-ed collection of rebellious Catholics who cared for children in need. They were led by a charismatic monk named Brother Toby. Their monastery was a long drive up the coast, a good two hours away. Joe and his wife treated them with great respect. The nuns shopped for food for their brood. We did, too, but we had learned to carefully check expiration dates before buying anything.

“Don’t buy cake mixes there,” cautioned Humbert. “They are full of weasels.”

I could never shop there after that without thinking of little red furred pointy heads poking out of the Betty Crocker devil’s food cake mix.

“Me and my buddies are going to Modoc County for duck hunting. I like it there but I get hungry from the high attitudes in the mountains,” Humbert told us. He had a wonderful attitude we thought.

We took up bee keeping for a while. One day Humbert came to visit, “I see you got a bee hide,” he said.

After he left David and I looked at each other, “Darned hard to tan the bee hides,” I said and we burst out laughing.

We really loved Humbert because he was such a kind man. He and Josephine were both gentle, caring people, so when we found out about the shed painting we were distressed for them even though the incident was comical. Just down the road from us was an old shed on Humbert’s property across Coast Highway 1.

An artist and avant-garde film maker, let’s call her Patty, was married to a local school teacher then. Patty was into “happenings”, the art form of the day, where the doing, not the product was the goal. Patty was a born exhibitionist so happenings were perfect for her. Humbert’s shed overlooked a view of the gently rolling hills behind Bodega. Patty went to Humbert and Josephine’s house to ask if she could paint his shed. It was an odd request, but if the shed got a new coat of paint, why not?

Patty decided to paint the shed on Labor Day weekend during a heat wave when many thousands of people, sweating in Sacramento’s three-digit heat in the Central Valley made a beeline for the coast and its cooling fog. She painted a nude painting the

shed of a nude painting the shed – sort of like the unending image of the Morton Salt girl on the box spilling her salt. Patty was nude as she painted.

Needless to say, since the shed was right next to the two-lane Coast Highway she attracted onlookers. Somebody finally made it to Bodega where they called the California Highway Patrol about the massive traffic jam. The CHP had a hard time making it to the scene through the traffic on the narrow road, so a neighboring rancher hiked to Humbert's house and told him what was happening.

"The traffic is backed up all the way to Petaluma, Humbert. You gotta make that woman put on some clothes," he said.

Humbert was totally flabbergasted. Josephine refused to have anything to do with it, not wanting to see Patty naked. So, Humbert did his duty. Trying to look at anything but Patty, he came up to her and told her she had to get dressed or leave.

Patty had just finished her painting and was packing up anyway. "Sure, Humbert," she cheerfully told him. Greatly relieved, Humbert immediately turned to go home. Traffic began to flow.

Patty turned to other happenings such as riding her white horse nude through the town cemetery, or airing a film of herself masturbating to an elementary school parents' group that had gathered at her and her husband's home. That last happening led to her marriage breaking up that same evening. She moved to Berkeley where her happenings went largely unnoticed although she got a reputation as a film maker.

The Bodega nude became somewhat of a tourist attraction until a couple of El Nino winters washed the nude away leaving just some vivid memories behind.

Chapter 5

When the Porn Industry Invaded a Cow Town

Valley Ford is a small village tucked into the rolling hills near the Estero Americano River with a population of about 150 people. It is a dairy farm area so the cow population is much higher. There's a post office, a defunct bank, a café, a grocery store, a small bed and breakfast, a great oyster bar and a few other small businesses. In the early 1990s there also used to be a mechanic's garage that housed a gas pump in the days before the LUST (Leaking Underground Storage Tanks) program took over California making all small gas operations shut down, as they were unable to afford new leak proof tanks.

The owner of the garage, once he had locked his tools away, often left the garage doors open. Some film makers from southern California came to town and took advantage of the owner's absence. Without his permission, they used his property to shoot a gay porn film called "Full Service."

The Hollywood porn people probably thought the owner would never find out, figuring Valley Ford was just some hick town. Little did they know that at that time the grocery store was owned by an older gay couple. They had a video rental shop in back and part of it was sectioned off for adult videos. One of the locals rented a film and discovered it had been shot on his neighbor's premises. He promptly brought it to the attention of the Williamson family that owned the garage.

Most Valley Ford residents are from old Italian families and are Catholic (yes, some Catholics watch porn – surprise!). The

Williamsons were extremely upset. They were especially concerned that their two sons aged six and eight would face ridicule in school when they got older. They took the film company to court.

The film company was small and didn't have much money so the Williamsons didn't get rich, but they did get what little money the company had. They also got the film taken out of circulation which was more important to them – lucky for them it was the pre-digital age. They made their point and one hopes Hollywood learned just because a place is a cow town you can't just use it for a quick penny without asking permission - unless you want to film the cows. They don't mind.

Chapter 24

In Hazard

Steve Carpenter was our next door neighbor. Before the salmon season was about to begin, Steve, his father Earl, and brother Stan had their boats hauled out at a dry dock in San Francisco for maintenance. The work was done and it was time to bring the boats back home for the season opening.

“We’re just going to do a picnic run to bring the boats back up to Bodega Bay. Cathy our babysitter wants to go on a boat ride, and I know you have been wanting to see the boats in action. Why don’t you come along?” Steve said.

We drove up to the docks in the city early, carrying a bag of sandwiches and some water bottles. We left the vehicle behind to be fetched the next day. The Bonnie, Steve’s boat, was a little over 30 feet long. It had a tiny wheelhouse, but a roomy back deck for handling fish and crabs, and a comfortable looking area in front of the wheelhouse with a sturdy anchor chained to the bow. I figured once we were underway that’s where we’d eat our lunch.

Teenaged Cathy and I boarded the Bonnie with Steve. His dad, Earl, was on the Annabelle, and Stan on the Clara H. We all set out in the sunshine from San Francisco Bay. Cathy and I waved to Earl and Stan from the deck of the Bonnie as we headed out to the open sea.

It was a pleasant ride until we left the Golden Gate Bridge behind, then we ran into some choppy water. Cathy and I left the back deck, taking refuge in the wheelhouse from the splashes.

“This is the Potato Patch. It’ll smooth out soon,” Steve reassured us. I knew the Potato Patch got its name in the days when Bodega Bay used to ship Bodega Red potatoes to the San Francisco market because the wreck of a potato boat decorated the shores of Bodega Bay. The rough spot would knock potatoes off the barges so some were always floating there. The water grew even choppiest, but Steve kept telling us it would improve before long.

Tall and lanky, Steve took up most of the room in small wheelhouse as he gripped the spokes of the wheel, his eyes watching the sea conditions closely. Cathy was also tall, and we were crowded. I was the smallest one and crouched tightly in a corner to give the others room.

His father and brother were also reassuring on the radio as they chatted with each other. We plowed our way through the swells. The conditions got worse. The swells became waves.

“Looks like we aren’t going to picnic on deck,” Steve said as the waves began washing up on the deck and over the bow. He grinned at us. He had a firm grip on the wheel and didn’t seem at all concerned, just sorry he was disappointing us.

The men talked about the worsening conditions but still seemed to take it in their stride.

“Point Reyes is up ahead. After that everything is different,” Steve said. He was right. Everything was much more turbulent.

The Bonnie began rolling and pitching. A radio call came from Captain Squash Pepetti (his first name another nickname in the fleet with obscure origins). He was asking for help because waves had knocked his crab pots off his boat on his way to San Francisco.

Steve’s father responded to the call, “We’ve run into some heavy weather and we can’t help you. Sorry, Squash.”

We could hear the squawking radio clearly despite the racket the waves were making as they slammed into the Bonnie. We took comfort in the sound even when there was static.

Just as we rounded the point a gray whale surfaced right next to us. It took one look at the waves and promptly dove into peaceful depths.

I began to realize I had always been wrong about water. I thought it was liquid. The waves hit the wheelhouse with such violence it felt like someone was throwing bricks and boulders at us. A violent noise came from the forecastle below us. I offered to take a peek. I opened the hatch and I saw the round stove had become unmoored and was rolling around on the floor. The latched cabinet doors had broken so food, dishes, and paint cans were rolling around with the stove.

"It's really a mess down there, Steve," I reported as I slammed the door to the forecastle closed. I described the damage I had seen.

"Shit," said Steve. "I just got the boat cleaned up and painted. Oops. Sorry for the language."

"Don't apologize," I replied, "Just steer."

Cathy was pale and was biting her lips so hard I was afraid she'd injure herself.

Earl came on the radio. He was chuckling, "A wave looked so mean, I ducked my head down because I wasn't sure the wheelhouse window would hold." Cathy and I had been doing the same thing.

Steve told him about the stove and cabinets.

"Me, too," replied Earl, "and paint cans have opened up so I've got a real mess to clean up."

A series of exceptionally violent waves slammed into us, blocking out all view of the seas. Steve fought to hold the wheel.

"I can call the Coast Guard and request a helicopter get you girls lifted off," he offered. He had tensed up and began looking nervous.

Cathy and I looked at each other in pure fear. Go on deck in those terrifying waters? Cathy vigorously shook her head no.

"No way. We trust you, Steve," I replied and Cathy clasped my hand tightly and gave me a grateful look. All three of us were crammed into the tiny wheelhouse meant for just one. She and I clung to each other grasping anything we could to keep our balance and stay out of Steve's way.

Stan's voice broke over the radio. "Dad, I'm having trouble. My engine is making noise." He sounded worried. If a boat lost its power in this turbulence it would be completely helpless and likely smash into the rocky shore or be swamped by the waves.

"Okay, son," Earl's voice came over the radio calm and steady. He suggested a few things Stan could do. When they failed, Earl continued to maintain his composure. "Son, your brother and I are right here. Everything is going to be fine. Just keep her moving."

A short while later a relieved Stan came on the radio, "The engine is working again. Whatever the problem was it seems to have fixed itself."

"Good, son," Earl said. I could see Steve who had tensed up during the exchange visibly relax even as he wrestled the Bonnie through the mean waters.

"We're in some real hazard here, boys," Earl said. "But it's nothing we can't handle if we all stay calm, work together and just keep going."

Cathy and I were still being flung against Steve and the bulkheads but despite that, took comfort in Earl's words.

The three-hour "picnic run" had turned into a grueling six-hour endurance ordeal. Finally, we reached Bodega Bay. The sea was serene as we entered the harbor. The designation "Harbor of Refuge" took on new meaning to me. I felt a surge of gratitude for Bodega Bay's natural harbor. Steve looked around at the battered Bonnie. The anchor which had been securely chained to the bow of the vessel was nowhere in sight. He looked on the back deck and found it loose on the stern. No one had even noticed when it had washed over the wheelhouse. Luckily, it hadn't smashed into the window when it did.

The radio was suddenly alive with voices. The entire fleet had been monitoring our voyage but didn't want to say anything to break the Carpenter clan's concentration. We were all welcomed back as we sailed up the channel to the dock.

"Glad you made it safe and sound."

"That was something, you guys."

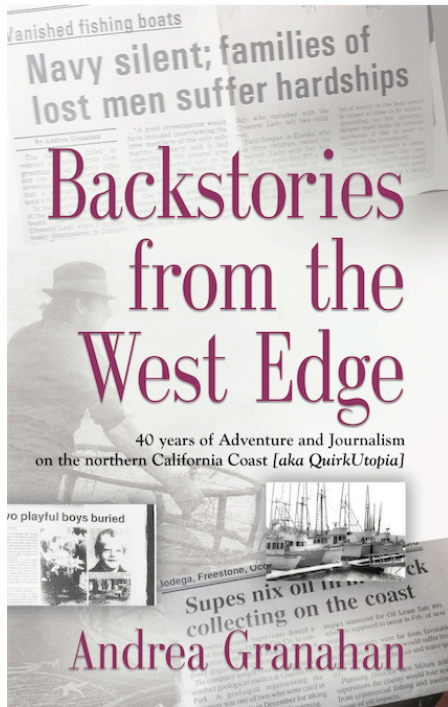
"Welcome back to port."

The Carpenters joked as they shared their damage report with their colleagues. Steve's anchor story won some wows. As we tied up Cathy and I leaped off the boat and made a run for the ladies room.

At home, I rushed in to my husband. "Were you worried?" I asked.

"Worried? Why? I thought you were having a picnic at sea," David replied.

He had no marine radio, so had no idea what was happening at sea. On land, it had been calm and sunny.



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