

Golden Gate Mysteriously Attracts Its Painters

EDITOR'S NOTE — Like to work 75 stories up, painting the Golden Gate Bridge? Sorry, but this is "not just any bridge." The painters rarely fall, none has ever been killed, and there are far more applicants than jobs.

is an almost mystical attraction to the Golden Gate Bridge, at least for the painters who climb to fearsome heights daily to renew its world-famed orange glow.

"The bridge grows on you; it becomes part of you," says Hale Sharrett, a husky ex-Navy man

who supervises a 40-man painting crew.

The painting boss replaces his calm, steady gaze with a look of surprise when asked why a person would work at heights up to 746 feet above swirling riptides. "Why this is the Golden Gate Bridge you're talking about, not

just any bridge!" he exclaims.

This magnetism has also drawn millions of tourists — and 286 known suicides — in the bridge's 28-year history. It also thrills drivers and passengers who cross the 4,200-foot suspension bridge, says James Adam, general manager of the bridge. Some 345 million vehicles have crossed the bridge since it opened in 1937.

Another 1.5 million pedestrians have strolled the bridge's walkways, usually in couples, or families, almost always with cameras. Only rarely will they see the painters, who usually are specs high up on the towers, or hidden from view under the deck.

The painters continuously paint its 10 million square feet of deck, towers, supports and cables.

The bridge, second in length by only 50 feet to New York's new Verrazano Narrows Bridge, is on its fifth complete painting.

Each paint job is done completely by hand brushing, using successive coats of red lead primer, intermediate brown and its public face, international orange.

The outer color is a reddish-orange hue that sometimes deters tourists who expect a golden color. Orange was selected from the start because of superior visibility, durability and harmony with surrounding hills of green and brown. The bridge's name was taken from the harbor entrance, the Golden Gate.

The bridge's appeal draws far more applicants than can be used in the painting crew.

"Our men have been on the job an average of 15 years," Sharrett says, "so you see we don't have many vacancies. But we get about two new applicants a day."

The supervisor, a 19-year veteran who worked up from rookie painter, says he can tell in a day whether a new man is scared.

"I think it's fair to say one must have iron nerves" for this job," he declares. "We have had would-be painters freeze on the railing."

Besides iron nerves, the painter must also have two years' experience as a journeyman painter and one year of painting structural steel or bridges at considerable heights.

The jobs, which pay \$800 a

month, are demanding mostly because of "terrible weather — foggy in summer and windy in winter," Sharrett says.

Despite painting eight hours, five days a week — covering 1,200 square feet of flat surface or 400 square feet of cables on an average day — the men don't feel bored.

"It's a long way from being a dull job," Sharrett asserts. "There's something different every day. We've had wrecks, fires, jumpers — anything can happen on the bridge."

"There have been several instances where painters have rescued would-be suicides," says Sharrett's boss, the maintenance superintendent, R. D. Mullins.

"If the painters see the suicide on the railing," Mullins said, "maybe we can get there in time, since the jumper usually goes over the railing and stands on the beams underneath, then jumps."

Sharrett again assumed a look of surprise when asked what thoughts run through his mind at the top of a tower, 75 stories above water, even though he is protected by a safety belt, an emergency net and good sense from a plunge to certain death.

"Nothing — you think of nothing up there," he said.

If painters do think, he said, it's in terms of safety, not danger.

"We have an excellent safety record. Not one painter has fallen to his death."

A worker is automatically fired if he isn't wearing his safety belt on the job, Sharrett said. Large rope nets follow the men as they work.

The nets are similar to the type that caught and saved the lives of 19 workmen when the bridge was being built. Ten workers were killed near the end of construction, however, when a scaffold gave way and ripped a safety net apart. Two other workers, not painters, died under

similar circumstances a decade ago.

The bridge itself was built to withstand earthquakes, a matter of vital importance in a city that still measures all earth tremors by its great earthquake of 1906.

The bridge also is designed to withstand a side sway totaling 27.7 feet and an up-and-down sway of 11.8 feet. It rode out its most severe test, a 69-mile-per-hour windstorm in 1951, with an up-and-down buckling of about 10 feet.

The bridge was closed nearly three hours then, the only time it has not been in full operation.

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