

NAPA AND THE WORLD

• Commentary
• Opinion

The people at the
Golden Gate Bridge
asked us to tell you...

Don't even think about trying this



PHOTO BY DAUG REITMEYER

Above: Steve Booth, now a wood carver in Napa, spreads his arms like an eagle perched atop the highest point of the north tower of the Golden Gate Bridge during a daring but illegal climb of the span 27 years ago.

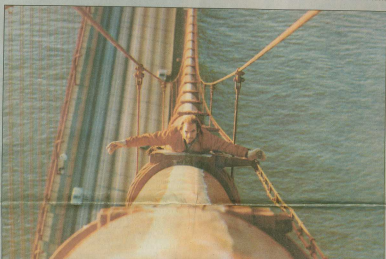


PHOTO BY STEVE BOOTH

Left: Doug Reitmeyer hangs it up for the camera on a Golden Gate Bridge cable shortly after sunrise on a brisk October, 1969 morning. Stiff penalties and tight security including patrols and video surveillance make such a venture virtually impossible today. napa.officials.com

Bottom left: Doug Reitmeyer looks back at a camera after climbing onto the cables of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1969. A few weeks later the 28-year-old, who now lives in Texas, joined pal Steve Booth in a clandestine climb to the top of the bridge.

By PAT STANLEY
Register Staff Writer

NAPA—What began as a casual joke ended with a daring predawn assault up the cables of the Golden Gate Bridge—an incident bridge officials would rather forget.

Nearly 28 years later the two daredevils were reunited in Napa this month.

It was 1969, and Doug Reitmeyer, now 47, bragged he could ride a motorcycle up the bundled cables of the golden span.

He didn't, but Reitmeyer, now a Texas contractor, and his best friend, Steve Booth, now a 48-year-old wood carver in Napa, soon started planning their nighttime caper.

A few weeks later, on a warm October night, they sneaked onto the cables near the north tower.

What was a foolish and dangerous stunt in 1969, is a highly dangerous and illegal act today.

The two climbers are quick to point out that new construction, constant patrols and video surveillance now make such a

Visit...legally

Golden Gate Bridge district officials hope to set world records with the numbers of visitors to their new web site as part of a 100th anniversary.

Special information, games and internet links will be offered through the end of May.

Features on the site (<http://www.ggb60.com>) include:

■ A game allowing net surfers to design a bridge but stay within a budget.

■ Players can control traffic flow (The Golden Gate is the only Bay Area bridge not currently separating opposite direction traffic by concrete barriers).

■ Access photographs during a "virtual walk" across the span.

■ Visitors to the site can send electronic bridge postcards.

A venture nearly impossible, to say nothing of the danger and the penalties if caught.

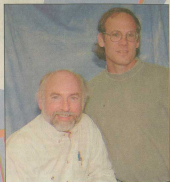
And bridge officials chime in: Not just danger, climbers face possible prison terms.

"We've tried to make it as difficult as you can," said bridge manager Bob Warren. He said se-

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PHOTO BY STEVE BOOTH



PHIL ALDORWORTH/REGISTER

At a Napa reunion earlier this month Doug Reitmeyer, left, and Steve Booth recalled their a 1969 nighttime climb up the cables of the Golden Gate Bridge. They used no safety gear during their stunt, which both admit was dangerous and warned against trying such a venture today.

NAPA

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curity cameras, regular patrols and barriers were instituted to prevent such antics. He also said legislation is pending in Sacramento that would make the penalty for such trespass a \$10,000 fine or one year in jail, or both.

Even 30 years ago, a Golden Gate Bridge stunt was taboo. Reitmeyer and Booth scurried to take their photos and story to California Living magazine. But when editors called the bridge district to verify the stunt, bridge officials doubted the story. When confronted with the photographic evidence, they were aghast.

"The bridge threatened to prosecute us if the story was published," Reitmeyer said.

The boys quickly reclaimed their pictures, and the story was never published.

Until now.

"I guess the statute of limitations is up," he said.

THE DEED

Reitmeyer said as young men he and his buddy purchased bundles of equip-

ment including rope and metal clips from a local hardware store. "Our scheme was hatched."

"Obviously (our climb) needed to be done in a clandestine manner," he said.

When his parents learned of the plan they forbade it, but that didn't stop the young adventurers. "It's just something that has to be done," he recalled telling his horrified mother. "We had no concept of legality. We also had no hesitation."

"You'd think we'd have more sense, but we didn't," added Booth.

They drove to the observation area on the Marin County side of the bridge at about 2:30 a.m. on their appointed day, walked out on the bridge, and when no cars were in sight jumped up on the cables. Steve was first.

"We had no difficulty getting on the cable, but the hooks didn't fit," said Booth. "We figured that out right away. We were fussing around down at the base of the cable, worried (motorists) might see us, so we just decided to take off up the cable."

They began their climb with no rope, no metal clips, no safety devices.

Reitmeyer recalled climbing about 100 feet then freezing in a moment of panic. "I can remember my hands grip-

ping (the cable). I wasn't going to move for anything."

He looked down and saw waves crashing on the rocks 300 feet below. "I had all these visions of how they would get me off of there. Even with a helicopter," he recalled.

Booth urged his buddy on.

"Well, if he can do it, I can do it," Reitmeyer remembered thinking.

Memories rushed back as if the climb was made only days earlier. "Then I just went right on up to the top."

The very top, where a flashing light was installed, was the most difficult challenge. "We had to work our way around it."

Booth took his glasses off earlier. "He was blind without them," said Reitmeyer. "No wonder he wasn't afraid."

They were surprised at the absence of security cameras.

Suddenly the metal scaffolding started to shake. "We thought it was an earthquake," Reitmeyer said.

The shaking subsided, but a few minutes later it started again. They realized large trucks hundreds of feet below were causing the tower to vibrate.

The moonlit view was breathtaking. There was a light fog but no wind.

They were on top of the world. Al-

most. A metal ladder took Booth up another 20 feet to the very top of the north tower, where he briefly stood on a metal beam only a few inches in diameter, arms outstretched. Reitmeyer snapped a picture to prove their stunt.

They then spray-painted their names and the date on the golden metal. The graffiti has long since been removed.

The pair then opened a hatch leading to the elevator shaft, but the lift was locked.

They recalled flipping an electrical switch to illuminate the room where the elevator opened onto the walkway, but were mortified when instead it turned on huge flood lights that lit up the entire top of the tower.

Somehow, nobody saw the light, which remained only a few seconds.

The trip back down was a breeze. "We actually ran all the way down the cable, on the ocean side, north toward Sausalito," said Reitmeyer.

"It had a nonslip surface," Booth explained.

The Golden Gate climb was not the last adventure for the duo. A year later they piloted a 29-foot, Dutch-built sloop from Santa Barbara to Hawaii.

They lived in the San Jose area in 1969, but went their separate ways in

1971. They soon lost track of each other.

REUNION

Reitmeyer said his 20-year-old son, Ryan, recently bragged he could track down Booth on the Internet. Reitmeyer doubted him but was wrong.

A short time later Ryan announced he had just contacted Booth's son, Alan, and had a phone number in Napa.

The fathers quickly arranged a reunion.

Both men warned against attempting such a fete as their climb up the bridge, which they conceded was dangerous and foolhardy.

Napa County's representative to the Golden Gate Transportation District, Ginny Simms, said climbs on the cables are so dangerous, "I'm not sure I would even ask a bridge employee to go up there and rescue them."

There is no catwalk or safety net beneath the cables. A fall would be fatal, she said. "The danger, is extreme."

Simms also said winds toward the top of the bridge often top 40 mph, adding more danger.

Danger aside, the two men agreed their 1969 climb was the greatest adventure of their lives.