



Keeper of the **HOLLYWOOD** sign

BY STEVEN K. WAGNER



*I*t is, clearly, a coveted piece of land—a stretch of hillside with a view to die for. Like a sentry, the chunk of terrain a football field long stands watch over the glittery dreamland known as Tinseltown, fortified by 50-foot corrugated steel letters that symbolically reach for the stars.

An unofficial caretaker of the Hollywood Sign, one of the world’s most recognizable symbols, is Chris Baumgart, longtime chairman of the Hollywood Sign Trust. Ask him his *sign* in boomer patois and he’ll likely reply, “Hollywood.”

Indeed, the Hollywood Sign, which paradoxically sets atop land that is owned by the city of Los Angeles, is Baumgart’s baby as much as anyone’s. Since 1993, Baumgart, 55, has chaired the nine-member trust whose charge it is to manage the towering icon that is visible for miles. Scratch below the surface, however, and you’ll find more than a man and his trustees. You’ll find a mission.

For Baumgart, that mission often takes him to ground zero, where through the years his “duties” have included checking the superstructure for signs of buckling, evaluating the paint for wear, examining fences that help protect the sign, and inspecting the cameras that he helped install to keep both the curious and the scurrilous away. It has been, clearly, a labor of love.

“It’s a priceless piece of nature,” he said of the hillside that hosts *The Sign*, which he said, “has come to be a signature of a way of life as well as a very important element of the Southern California economy.”

Baumgart’s association with the sign began inadvertently in 1988 when he joined the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce board of directors. Wanting a focused involvement, Baumgart, who has an

undergraduate degree in film from UCLA, approached the chairman, who produced a list of committees he could join. Toward the bottom was one he learned had been inactive: the Hollywood Sign Committee.

“Here, it’s yours,” he was told.

Eager to hit the ground running, Baumgart wasted little time reinvigorating efforts to illuminate the sign. “This is the city of lights, camera, action, right?” he reasoned. Perhaps so, but the effort was rebuffed by then-Los Angeles City Councilman Mike Woo, whose constituency of local homeowners wanted no part of any effort that encouraged an influx of nighttime gawkers who would block their narrow streets. It remains dark.

After that, Baumgart proceeded more deliberately—and successfully. Since the Hollywood Sign Committee evolved into the Hollywood Sign Trust in 1993, with the expressed purpose of protecting and preserving the sign while promoting it as the global icon of the entertainment industry, the trust’s successes have been myriad. They have

included installation of a sophisticated internet-based security system that has made the sign nearly untouchable—and unviewable, at least close up—while all but eliminating graffiti and other forms of vandalism; creation of a web site



(www.hollywoodsign.org)

that enables people around the world to view the sign and surrounding terrain in real time and from different angles; and a major refurbishment in 2005.

“All nine of us contribute in our own way,” Baumgart said of the trust, disavowing any notion that he alone is the official caretaker. “I press a lot of the web and security issues, but there are others (on the trust) who deal with other issues relating to the sign.”

The sign, originally reading “Hollywoodland,” was erected in 1923 by the Hollywoodland Real Estate Group to promote a prime piece of property in the hills above downtown Los Angeles. The cost of the sign, which is situated on the side of Mt. Cahuenga, was about \$21,000.

In 1949, with box office receipts lagging due to the advent of television, the Chamber of Commerce removed the word “land” from the sign, creating the lettering that exists today: *Hollywood*. In subsequent years the sign fell into disrepair, with letters collapsing and vandals having their way. Until Baumgart, who first visited the sign in 1988 and continues to do so about every six weeks, came along.

“Except for an extensive amount of graffiti—it was almost black on the back side—it was structurally fine,” he reflected on that initial visit to the sign, which had been rebuilt “for the long haul” a decade earlier. At that time, graffiti proliferated despite the appointment of barbed wire behind each letter.

“There was graffiti on the front, but it wasn’t bad because the city was constantly painting it out,” he said.

Today, the barbed wire is gone. To prevent access, fences surround both the sign and nearby security cameras, which are monitored continuously to keep trespassers away. If there is a breach, security personnel situated in downtown Los Angeles can respond immediately.

One breach that could not have been prevented occurred in 1999 when lightning struck the sign, destroying the security system. Other occurrences have served to make Baumgart’s tenure memorable as well:

- Through the years he has accompanied three Los Angeles mayors (Richard Riordan, James Hahn and Antonio Villaraigosa) up to the sign.
- On New Year’s Eve 1999, Baumgart helped Los Angeles usher in the new millennium by illuminating the sign for one of the few times since it ceased to be a real estate billboard.
- While out of town, Baumgart has frequently tuned to the web site, occasionally spotting intruders detected by one of several web cameras. In 2005, while sitting at his computer, Baumgart spotted a man trying to light the steel sign on fire. He alerted authorities, who arrested him.
- In March 2007, fire apparently started by arsonists roared through nearby brush, threatening to scorch and blacken the pallid logo. Yet, it survived.

“That’s my biggest fear, because you have a whole neighborhood up there,” Baumgart said. “Fire can be a real problem.”

So can weather.

“It’s like a big catcher’s mitt,” Baumgart said of the massive letters. “All of the elements—especially the wind and rain—slam against it, really beating it up.”

Still, the sign is like an aging actress. Every now and then it needs a facelift to stay young looking. And while it may appear fresher, it still carries the history, hopes and dreams of bygone generations. Perhaps it always will.

“To me, the sign is about dreams,” Baumgart said. “Dreams of success and making it in the business, and dreams that are put on screen.”

Occasionally, Baumgart catches a glimpse of the sign on one of those screens. It is then that he’s reminded of its place in the scheme of things. He appreciates it anew.

“Seeing a brief clip of the Hollywood Sign as a symbol of Los Angeles or the film business reinforces my belief that it’s something special,” he said.

STEVEN K. WAGNER is a freelance writer in Claremont, CA