

ARTI-FACTS

The Newsletter of the Award-Winning Idyllwild Area Historical Society

Preserving the History of Idyllwild and Surrounding Communities
in the San Jacinto Mountains

WINTER 2016

MA KETTLE AT HOME IN FERN VALLEY

By John Blodgett

It was a scene fit for a comedy film. An installment of "Ma and Pa Kettle," perhaps.

Marjorie Main, who famously portrayed Ma Kettle in nine movies from 1949 to 1957, had built a part-time residence in Fern Valley in the late 1950s. In the fall of 1968, she periodically had been calling Pargas to complain that her gas stove would not shut off.

The propane company finally dispatched appliance repairman Pat Boss to her home on Dickinson Road to see what the problem was.

After some chitchat, Boss got down on his hands and knees in front of Main's kitchen stove and peered underneath. He found the pilot light standing by for duty, its flickering flame reflecting into the oven.

"Miss Main, Marjorie if I may, do me a favor," Boss said he said. "Turn on your oven."

"It's on."

"No, turn the knob."

Main turned the knob, causing blue flames to jump up with a whoosh.

"Now turn it off."

Main turned the knob again, extinguishing the flames.

"Now come look."



Reluctantly Main got down on her hands and knees and watched as Boss explained what a pilot light is and demonstrated how it works.

"That's all it is?" Main said. "Well, OK. I guess I'm wrong."

"She called the company and apologized about being such a pain," said Boss, now of the Mountain Communities Fire Safe Council. "And we laughed about it."

Main was synonymous with humor. In her article "Good for a Lot of Laughs," Sylvia C. Henricks suggested that Main is best remembered "for her raspy-voiced Ma Kettle, with her tumbledown hairdo, flock of children and indolent husband" (played by Percy Kilbride).

Yet there was more to Main's career. Over the course of 85 films she became a movie star whose work "critics almost always praised" and "saved many a bad picture and made the good ones better," wrote Henricks.

Still, the "Ma and Pa Kettle" series exposed Main to her broadest audience, beginning in 1947. In a movie based on a novel by Betty MacDonald, two newlyweds buy a chicken farm in the Pacific Northwest. Their neighbors are the Kettles, a poor farming family with thirteen children watched over by the crazy Ma Kettle and the lazy Pa Kettle.

See Ma Kettle, page 3

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Board meetings are open to the membership and are held in the archive building on the 2nd Friday of each month at 4 p.m..

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Co-Editors: Adele & Bob Smith
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President's Corner

The month of January 2016 started out with a bang. Two earthquakes, several power outages of various lengths, a major snowstorm, and a rock slide which closed Highway 243 at "Deadman's Curve" in Pine Cove for four days. Residents demonstrated how strong and resilient they are and especially showed their sense of community by their willingness to help neighbors and friends.

If you have not visited the museum recently, come by to see our newest acquisition on our front porch. A wooden six-foot bench dedicated to Daniel Rubin, who passed away January 2015, and donated by Stephanie & Bruce Denney of Idyllwild. Created by artist David Roy (who also carved Idyllwild's "Harmony" Monument), it includes beautifully carved birds and animals, all highlighted in a color wash.

Our docents, friends and members help us achieve our mission of preserving & sharing the history of the Idyllwild Area. Thank you all for your continuing support. **Best wishes for a prosperous 2016!** ♪

Marlene Pierce



HELP WANTED

Are you curious to know more about the Idyllwild area's history? Want to help others find answers to their questions about our past?

Preserving Idyllwild's past is major part of IAHS's mission, and that requires a lot of work. We're now on the lookout for new volunteers. Any training you need will gladly be provided. Experience using computers will be very useful, though not mandatory.

By working regularly in the archive you'll have access to all of our more than 12,000 documents, photographs, and artifacts. There's no better way to learn, while helping to make it possible for others to appreciate the rich heritage of our village and mountains.

Give Bob Smith a call at 659-8725. He'll show you around and discuss how you can become involved. ♪

MA KETTLE ... (continued from page 1)

The movie's success — it grossed \$5.5 million and resulted in Main's only Academy Award nomination — convinced Universal to make a series out of it, releasing one movie a year starting in 1949. Kilbride left after seven movies, Main stayed on for two more, and after all was said and done the series had grossed approximately \$35 million.

The movies made Main a fixture in Idyllwild even before she built a house in Fern Valley. Various Town Criers from 1949 through the early 1950s advertised her movies — including the original “Ma and Pa Kettle” and “Ma and Pa Kettle at Waikiki” — whenever they screened at the Rustic Theatre.

“Ma Kettle's coming round the mountain,” reported the Town Crier of June 29, 1956. “Yes sir, Bob O'Donnell sold Marjorie Main a lot on Dickinson Rd. in Fern Valley. If you hear a war whoop, don't be frightened!” The newspaper reported the following June that Main had taken out an \$8,000 permit to build a home on the property.

Main also owned homes in Los Angeles and Palm Springs.

One of Main's co-stars paid Idyllwild a visit on March 29-30, 1958. Her name was Susan, and she was a black bear that appeared in “The Kettles on Old McDonald's Farm” of 1957, the final movie in the series. Susan was part of Clark's Bears, a troupe that would entertain during Idyllwild's Bear Festival, according to the Town Crier of March 14, 1958.

Given the name Mary Tomlinson at birth in 1890, Main adopted her widely known stage name when she started touring the Chautauqua circuit in 1913. Henricks wrote that Tomlinson chose Marjorie Main because it was “a name easy to remember,” yet that didn't always prove true for Idyllwild postal employees.



Just ask Marge Muir.

“She'd get my mail, I'd get hers, because Main and Muir looked alike,” Muir said. The mix-up happened about four or five times, she said.

Muir remembers seeing Main drive around town in her blue Ford Thunderbird, an occurrence reported in

the “Notes of Interest” section of the Town Crier of June 27, 1958. Muir said Main always wore a bandana tied around her hair and spoke with a twang, just like in her movies.

“It wasn't a put on at all,” Muir said.

When Muir waited tables at the Alpine Pantry in the early 1970s, she'd often see Main come in for

breakfast and for a chat with owner Kitty Thomas.

“(Main) would walk in, sit down at the deuce in front and order eggs,” Muir said. “She was kind of loud.”

Muir said after Main finished eating she'd toss leftover butter and sugar packets into her purse.

“Sometimes she'd pay, sometimes she'd forget,” Muir said. “Kitty didn't care.” ♪



THE COMPANY WE KEEP

New and Renewing Members - October through December 2015

NEW MEMBERS

Family

Ron & Carol Rohe San Diego

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Kay Keiser Palm Desert

RENEWING MEMBERS

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One notable acquisition this past quarter was a large collection of drawings, manuscripts, and memorabilia of former *Town Crier* cartoonist John Marshall, donated by Becky and Jack Clark of Idyllwild. We also received from Steve Price of Cathedral City an assortment of items from an old Idyllwild cabin in the 1913 Wildwood subdivision of George Hannahs; these included vintage sleds, maps, maintenance checklists and drawings, tools and utensils, and especially a chest of drawers made and signed by Selden Belden in the mid-1930s, before he developed his Pinecraft line of furniture.

CELEBRATING 15 YEARS

On October 24 an enthusiastic crowd of members and friends gathered at the Idyllwild Library to mark the 15th Anniversary of IAHS's founding.. It was organized as a slimmed-down reprise of the event that inspired our society's creation: the day-long forum in January 2000 at which a panel of old-timers shared their memories of early postwar Idyllwild.

This time around, four long-time Hill residents spun tales about earlier times.. Pat Boss, Marge Muir, and Becky Atilano talked about people and events around town going back to the 1950s, while Bob Smith described vacations at his primitive family retreat out in the forest.. The enthusiastic response of the audience inspired us to devote the lead story in this edition of Arti-Facts to Marjorie Main, one of the more memorable characters recalled by panelists,.

Following the panel discussion, celebrants adjourned to the museum to enjoy the current exhibits and get a rare peek inside the Frank & Mabel Mootte Archive and Research Center.. There the progress we've made since the new building was dedicated at our 10th Anniversary Party was on display. The accompanying photos show what five years in excellent quarters have permitted for organizing, documenting, and preserving our collection of more than 12,000 historic photos, documents, and other artifacts of the Idyllwild area's history. 🐿



10th anniversary partygoers gathered amid bare walls and empty storage racks when the building opened in 2010.
IAHS archive



Above right: The scene of the party five years later.
Bob Smith photo

Right: IAHS president Marlene Pierce examines some of the art work collected in the Archive & Resarch Center.
Bob Smith photo

THE REST OF THE STORY: AN UGLY DUCKLING VINDICATED

In the Summer 2013 edition of Arti-Facts we featured the tribulations of IAHS member and museum docent Joyce Miller's lengthy quest to have her 1923 Idyllwild cabin placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Some of you may remember the cabin from our 2013 home tour.

Although she'd considered the cabin "one of the homeliest I've ever seen," she was encouraged by a complimentary review in the county's feasibility survey for the Idyllwild Historic District.

So how did her six-year ordeal turn out? With a happy ending, we're pleased to report.

This past August she finally received a letter notifying her that the so-called Hoxie-Vance Cabin has indeed been placed on the California Register of Historical Resources. (It might well have become Idyllwild's



The historic Hoxie-Vance cabin in the 1920s.
Courtesy of Joyce Miller



Patio view of the Miller cabin today
Courtesy of Joyce Miller

first entry on the national register, but for newer siding that had replaced its original shingles.)

The state's Historical Resources Commission agreed to recognize Joyce's cabin as a significant example of single-wall Prairie Style architecture expressed in a California resort community. It's actually one of the best-preserved structures built during Idyllwild's great prewar building boom of the 1920s, the same era that saw construction of the IAHS museum building.

We heartily congratulate Joyce on her achievements, both of preservation and recognition. She'd be pleased to offer

advice and experience to any Idyllwild resident interested in pursuing a nomination. You may contact her at woodbwrkn@gmail.com. 🐾

MUSEUM DOCENTS: OUR PUBLIC FACE

One of the keys to IAHS's success is the corps of volunteers who staff the museum week after week throughout the year. Some are regulars, some fill in occasionally, but all contribute to our visitors' experience, and we wish to thank all of those who participated in 2015:

Nancy Borchers, Maureen Boren, Suzy Bowman, Corrinne Brown, Dan & Sharla Carpenter, Diann Coate, Morry Copeland, Susan Cowper, Barbara Cutter, Dick Dorisse, Charlotte & George Groty, Lynnda Hart, Barbara Jones, Carolyn Levitski, Renée Lodge, Doris

Lombard, Virginia Lumb, Art Mason, Lynette Matthews, Sheri McClain, Joyce Miller, Ron Perry, Marlene Pierce, Jan Priestley, Shanna Robb, Bob Smith, Linda & Larry Turner, Adele Voell, Elaine Weiler, and Betty Wilcox.

According to docent coordinator Barbara Jones, we have a nucleus of reliable volunteers, but **we always need more**. It's a great way to learn more about the Idyllwild area's rich history and meet some of the interesting people who visit our mountain paradise. If you'd like to share in this opportunity, call Barbara at (760) 835-8387. 🐾

ANOTHER MILESTONE IN VIEW: The Town Crier Archive

Four years ago, catalyzed by a seed-money grant from the Idyllwild Community Fund, we launched a long-term project to collect, scan, and post back issues of the Idyllwild Town Crier on the Web. We're pleased now to report that what seemed at first to be a distant goal, with a price tag possibly as high as \$60,000, is now within reach.

Drawing on the archives of IAHS, the Idyllwild Branch Library, and the Town Crier, we've already posted the early years from the Crier's founding in 1946 through 1960 at a cost of \$4,000.

Library Director Shannon Ng, an IAHS archive volunteer, has now negotiated an agreement with NewsBank, Inc. to scan and put the remaining issues (1961-2015) on-line for less than \$15,000. Best of all, the full series of digital Town Criers will be available through the library at no cost to the public.

What's more the money to do the complete job is now in hand. The IAHS board will contribute \$5,000 in surplus operating funds, while the Friends of the Library have made a wonderful pledge to contribute \$10,000, a portion of which will be covered by private donations.

IAHS is grateful for gifts and grants already received from life members Betty Parks, Dick & Jan Goldberg, and Bob & Adele Smith, as well as from the Idyllwild Rotary Anns, Town Crier, and Pine Cove Property Owners.

With just the first 15 years of newspapers now on-line, the usefulness of this resource is already becoming obvious. Two-thirds of the research



inquiries we receive relate to the postwar era that's covered by the Town Crier. Our overall success rate in finding useful answers to questions is now near 90%. Since the papers began appearing on the GenealogyBank.com website, 70% of the "Before Our Time" columns in the Town Crier have relied on that NewsBank archive for research. And it will only become more useful as additional years of the old newspapers are scanned and posted. ♪

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

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Telephone _____ E-mail _____

_____ Individual (\$15) _____ Contributor (\$35) _____ Benefactor (\$250) _____ Business (\$35)

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(Please make your tax-deductible dues check to IAHS & mail to PO Box 3320, Idyllwild, CA 92549)

If a gift membership, please enter donor's name and address:

Name _____ Address _____

Museum Hours

11 am - 4 pm

Follow us on Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/IdyllwildAreaHistoricalSociety>

Winter Schedule (September-June)

Saturdays, Sundays, & Monday holidays

Visit our website

www.idyllwildhistory.org

Summer Schedule (June 17-Labor Day)

Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays,
4th of July, & Labor Day

For special tours and other business,
call (951) 659-2717 or
e-mail to info@idyllwildhistory.org

Admission Free

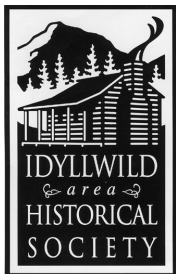
Donations Welcome

**Who Knew?
Ma Kettle was a Hillbilly!*(See Page 1)**

(“Hillbilly”: the nickname proudly borne by postwar Hill residents)



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