

ARTI-FACTS

The Newsletter of the Award-Winning Idyllwild Area Historical Society

Our Mission: To Preserve, Promote and Make Accessible the History of Idyllwild and Surrounding Communities in the San Jacinto Mountains

WINTER 2026

Bears, Temperance and Tourism: the Mid-Century Transformation of Idyllwild

By Edward Warner

You need to get to the post office, but every parking place at Fairway is taken, the one-way has visitors circling in both directions, a scrum of strollers, dogs and young families are vying for position in front of the pizza place. You can forget about getting your prescription and just try to ignore the guy proclaiming his manhood with his motorcycle throttle! It's Saturday in Idyllwild, and you wonder how this happened. Follow me dear neighbor back to the mid-20th Century!

Idyllwild was a relatively unknown destination until the post WW2 boom in Southern California. When Ernie Maxwell completed his Air Force illustrator assignment, he and his wife landed here and built a cabin in 1946. They embarked on the Town Crier, a little newsletter that reported activities both mundane and significant, important to those living in this mountain cluster of cabins and homes. His hand drawn cartoon ads evoke a simpler time, while behind the words lurked his tongue in cheek humor evident in the papers tag line "Almost All of the News, Part of the Time."

As you thumb through back issues, their down-home coziness cloaked their passionate desire to preserve the wildness of this place, and you sense that tourism was a novelty to Ernie and his readers. In the very first issue he announces the agenda for the next Idyllwild Chamber of Commerce meeting, and its impending election of a new slate of directors, one of



1940s postcard image of a grizzly bear

which was him. He goes on to proudly describe the group as more of a "town meeting," not a typical chamber focused on promoting business. Idyllwild was a seasonal town with many shops relying on the summer trade closed after Labor Day. Since the 1920's, the center of the village was dry, with no alcohol for sale, and a generation later, the town remained

content being a bit of a secret. Below the surface however was a hunger for more out-of-town visitors, which eventually exposes its claws, as we shall see.

Leigh Dutton grew up in Anaheim, and after a stint in the Merchant Marines in WWII, came to Idyllwild in 1947. He was our school bus driver and also a bit of an impresario, leading The Mountain Players as actor, stage manager, and producer. Those showman skills serve him well as we shall see. Idyllwild continued to grow steadily and by 1948 had about 1,200 permanent residents. Its budding summer trade led Dutton in 1951 to take a long-term lease on the Fern Valley Market, renaming it Dutton's Corner Store.

Dutton saw new visitors as an opportunity to grow revenue, so in 1953 he dives headfirst into the Idyllwild Chamber of Commerce, hoping to find others sharing his desire to promote Idyllwild to the rest of the lucrative Southern California market. In late 1954 the Dutton's take over the Idyllwild Market, but within a year he becomes frustrated with the meager promotional efforts of the chamber. With a few like-minded members he establishes a Businessmen's

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MISCELLANEOUS

RAMBLINGS

→ Whatever you do with this newsletter, before you start the fire with it or wrap the catch of the day, **please read the feature article!** To know our past is to better navigate our future. We hope you benefit from learning about the forces that have influenced growth in our little gem in the forest, as we work to carefully shape and protect its future.

→ As earlier generations of Idyllwild area residents pass away, many of us worry their valuable stories and experiences can pass with them. Another Must Read in this issue, Bob Greenamyer's article, **Oral History Project Leaps into the 21st Century** reports on the great work recording those Oral Histories, and the new labor-saving technology to make them more accessible to you!

→ **As caretakers of our precious 100-year-old museum building**, we upgraded the rain gutters, with a rustic look, providing much greater protection to the shake siding and river-rock foundation. We also re-sealed the shake siding on the Frank & Mabel Moote Archive building and added a much-needed concrete pathway between the archive and museum, increasing accessibility.

→ **For our campus visitors we installed new garden furniture** that will give us many years of service. This combined with the typical year-round upkeep, sealing the driveway, repairs and garden maintenance (with the Idyllwild Garden Club) is only possible with your dues, fundraising and your volunteer work!

→ Please check the **back page** for dates of the 2026 IAHS Events!

We value your Membership, Thank you from the IAHS Board!

Edward Warner

*President, Idyllwild Area Historical Society
Contact me at edward54625@gmail.com*

BEARS

(cont. from page 1)

Committee within the chamber, to bring more out-of-town customers to the shops, restaurants, cabins and inns. They agree to pay higher dues than the residents, to fund their goals.

Dutton as publicity director of the new committee eagerly proposes a year-round program to draw more people to the hill and provide them with a good time when they get here. He suggests they publish and circulate a new Idyllwild brochure to better promote the area, combined with the release of stories of interest to off the hill papers and radio stations. Dutton also wants to expand the summer weekend campfire into an all-week program, and move them indoors when it gets cold. In April of 1956 Dutton arranges to host 35 travel agents from the Los Angeles Area, with the goal of selling Idyllwild's charms to their customers. I believe this whirlwind of new ideas had to be a bit unsettling to the chamber's rank and file.

Meanwhile, his customers are thirsty for a drink, so in August 1956 he applies for a liquor license. His license is quickly shot down by residents, including fellow chamber members affiliated with youth camps and churches. They had long held sway opposing any such activity here, protesting that it could "harm the youth in their spiritual and educational development."

Dutton, confounded by this opposition and feeling the Idyllwild Chamber would never invest in the promotional effort the shopkeepers needed, had to do something. In November 1956 Dutton and a group of prominent businessmen break ranks and create the new Mount San Jacinto Chamber of Commerce, an actual chamber of commerce focused on....commerce! By year end it represented most of the village shopkeepers, restaurants, innkeepers, and service stations, and was an ominous milestone in Idyllwild's trajectory towards becoming a legitimate tourist destination.

In the first Town Crier issue of 1957, Ernie in a terse editorial, points to the unfortunate confusion caused by two chambers of commerce; The 20-year incorporated one he proudly calls a civic group, and the break-away

group that would "advertise the area more actively." He points out that the San Jacinto Mountain Chamber is open only to businessmen, and it's clear which one he supports. That being said, Ernie quickly foreshadows and then participates in the new chamber's promotional effort. For its part, the new chamber had to strike quickly and produce results, putting to rest the whispers swirling around the village caused by its formation. They announce an event to bring visitors up a full two months sooner than the traditional Memorial Day start of the season.

Many comparisons were made between Idyllwild and the more popular all-year Big Bear Resort. I believe the Bear Festival was a simple play on the Big Bear name, and the event's theme was crafted to fit the need. Ernie in the Town Crier now amicably shares the new chambers plans for its Bear Festival, and in the same issue slips in a little sly reporting about recent questionable bear sightings in our area, using the paper to stir the pot a little. The promotional hook is set! Within a week The Hemet News proudly proclaims "The Great San Jacinto Bear Mystery has been solved" and Idyllwild will hold a Bear Festival "In celebration of the return of the bear to the San Jacinto Mountains." Dutton, the ring master behind the PR campaign had to be pleased.

The event would feature Lulu Belle, TV's Wonder Bear performing tricks. There would be booths for the PTA, Girl Scouts and the Lions, with the Bear Festival Queen crowned at Saturday nights dance. The center piece was the Idyllwild Inn's Bear

Meat BBQ. The cynical side of my brain can only hear; "Hey, how 'bout we celebrate the return of the bear to the San Jacinto Mountains by eating one?" The planning committee demonstrating greater sensitivity then my own had bear burgers for the kids, to avoid any confusion with Teddy. The Riverside Daily Press posted a Bob Gray photo of a 650 lb. bear carcass presumably bagged locally, carted around town as it thawed for the weekend's BBQ. The events grand finale would be Hemet Boy Scout Troop 43 performing its authentic Indian bear dances, rounding out a fun time for all, I suppose, except for the bear.

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1959, Inie Wilson drives her chainsaw through a log to become the champion of Pauline Bunyan Contest.
Town Crier

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RENEWING YOUR MEMBERSHIP

Please make your tax-deductible membership check to IAHS and mail to PO box 3320, Idyllwild, Ca, 92549
You can now also can renew membership online!

www.idyllwildhistory.org/membership-application-2/ and pay with a credit/debit card.
Please list your name(s) as you want it to read in our newsletter.

BEARS

(cont. from page 3)

And thus, on final weekend of March 1957, The First Annual Idyllwild Bear Festival went into the history books. The San Jacinto Mountain Chamber described the event as “satisfying,” a lukewarm reaction to the low attendance and the likely BBQ leftovers. The Idyllwild Inn, unable to sell beer, served a modest 150 BBQ bear plates. The Idyll-Hof serving bear burgers had much better results as guests voted with their knives and forks the type of bear meat they were comfortable eating.

During the rest of 1957 both Dutton, and Martin Sousa, owner of the Idyllwild Inn, continued to pursue liquor licenses, running up against a temperance group, the Idyllwild Protective League, intent on protecting us from “degrading influences.” The liquor license issue simmered behind the scenes, as the break-away chamber readied plans for its 2nd annual Bear Festival in March of 1958. The event again would feature the talented Lulu Belle emerging from hibernation, and broader support from the community with 18 booths for local groups. In a nod to the women of the mountain, a Pauline Bunyan contest would feature women wielding chainsaws. And if anyone felt gamey Bear BBQ was too wild, the organizers doubled down throwing both Elk and Buffalo meat in the BBQ pit. Snow storms threatened the event but as the weekend dawned, the sun came out on an Idyllwild winter wonderland! Several thousand visitors showed up!

Within 40 days of the successful 2nd Annual Bear Festival, the Idyllwild Chamber sensing a growing appetite for tourists, voted to modify its bylaws giving business owners more control over the chambers budget and directors. The two chambers were again one, and with no city government to reign it in, could sound its bear calls throughout Southern California, and it did!

For the next 5 years festival attendance was strong and Idyllwild's weekend popularity grew. The 3rd annual 1959 event featured Ruff, a trained bear acquired by festival chairman Bill Neuhoff and buddy Clarence Bischof. Ruff, ended up in a pen at Bill's Snow-White

Laundry for a few years as a year-round draw for visitors. Later that year, I believe to further distance the festivals origins from simple bear resort envy, the chamber successfully lobbied for a State of California proclamation recognizing the Idyllwild Bear Festival for its celebration of the 1846 Bear Flag Rebellion and the grizzly bear as the official state animal.

In 1960, Dutton hosted a popular travel reporter from the LA Examiner before the event. In a full-page article Dutton describes a more noble if less historically accurate “origin story” for the event: “Idyllwild was once heavily populated by the California grizzly bears, and the Montezuma Indians used to hunt them for tribal feasts. Centuries old petroglyphs made on boulders by Indian hunters, tell the story in pictures of their bear hunts. It was this which gave rise to the festival Idea.” Amongst other untruths, today we understand the Cahuilla who inhabit this valley and did so seasonally for thousands of years only allowed Shamans with their great spiritual powers to partake of the feared but respected bear.

By 1961 the festival, seeking a wider swath of visitors, added a comedy and fashion show and a folk-dance exhibit. The more genteel face of Idyllwild was reflected in the Grand Marshall, TV's Chucko the Clown, but alas the Pauline Bunyan ladies continued

to wow the crowd with their chainsaw skills, confirming Idyllwild was still wild! The 1962 event, now a fully watered down version of the untamed events of the 50's, included an arts and crafts show chaired by Jon Gnagy and a parade featuring a masked impersonator of TV star “Zorro.” Bear was no longer on the BBQ menu, but later that summer you could finally get a beer at the Inn and Dutton's stores.

The festival in 1963, now billed as the Bear Flag Festival, was an event lacking both leadership and funding. Local businesses now flush with weekend visitors had little time to volunteer building booths and flipping pancakes. This would be the last of the 7 Original Bear Festivals promoted by the chamber, a group that did not necessarily represent the community as a whole. The group did have enough bear envy to

See Bears, page 8



1961 Grand Marshall Chucko the Clown.
Town Crier

Oral History Project Leaps Into the 21st Century

**By Bob Greenamyer,
IAHS Board Vice President and Lead Archivist**

The Idyllwild History Museum's Oral History Project has been around since the museum's inception in 2001, even before there was a building to house our community's historical records. Thanks to the vision of our earliest leaders, Lynnda Hart, Corinne Brown, Baird Bryant, Sheila Meyer, Carolyn Levitski, Bob Smith, and others, the value of recording the stories and reminiscences of Idyllwild's earliest notable residents was a priority.

The stories of interviewees, Leigh Dutton, Jack Garner, Frank Gorzny, Ted Belden, Margaret Jaenke, Reva Ballreich, Bob Balzer, and many others, weave a historical tapestry of what it was like to live in Idyllwild as far back as the 1920s. Who were the movers and shakers, the artists, the climbers, and creators who called Idyllwild home? What anecdotes of mountain life make these past times come alive? All were captured by our oral history volunteers via video, cassette tape, CD, and more. These stories lay resting in our archives for many years in many formats. Again, it was the vision of Lynnda Hart who realized that no one except the interviewers and videographers were able to access these fascinating stories. Lynnda decided to change that.

Thus began the effort to transcribe these tapes and CDs into written form, making it easier for people to access. This initial effort proved to be both time-consuming and costly and was soon abandoned. The stories continued to rest quietly and unknown in archive boxes and binders... until AI, yes, Artificial Intelligence, gave us the tools to

bring the transcription process back to life. Let's call it the Oral History Project 2.0.

With the help and guidance of John Drake and Rebecca Frazier, the archive team began using a software program that quickly transcribed voice-to-text. How quickly? A tape that was the equivalent of over 100 pages of text was transcribed in less than 1 minute! I, or I should say the program, was able to transcribe 30 oral histories over two rainy days. Coupled with our existing transcriptions, we now have over 40 oral histories that will soon be more readily available to our community.

While AI has been a tremendous time-saver, there is still more to be done to edit the transcriptions. Once the oral history is in document form on the computer, the pages are read and condensed. "Ums," "uhs," and irrelevant interjections are eliminated. A story that started with over 100 pages can be reduced to under 40 pages of rich, historical content. This is the most tedious process, but it allows the editor to learn more about the interviewee and their story in the process.

Completing Oral History Project 2.0 will be one of the museum's goals for 2026. We will have the oral histories in booklet form with additional photos, news articles, and information gathered by the Oral Historians and our archivists. And just as we have added all the copies of our newsletter Arti-Facts to our website, we plan to add a section dedicated to the oral history of our community, shared by its many fascinating residents. I like to say that everyone in Idyllwild has a story, and thanks to Lynnda Hart and others, those stories will be more available, soon. 

BEARS

(cont. from page 5)

launch the transformation of a sleepy Idyllwild village into a real tourist destination! Over the next



1961 Program, showing Ruff IAHS Archives

50 years a variety of events were staged to further promote Idyllwild to the population below, but they all stood on the shoulders of ring master Dutton, who used bears to bring visitors to a valley where there were none! During prime weekends Big Bear is now gridlocked with traffic and Idyllwild might not be that far behind. Can we slow this down and put OUR bears back into hibernation? It's meat to chew on, for sure. ↗

Comments? edward54625@gmail.com

Sources: *Town Crier, Hemet News, Riverside Daily Press, Los Angeles Examiner, The San Jacintos by Robinson and Risher, Idyllwild's Own Thirty-Years War, by Robert Smith, Mukats People, Lowell John Bean, IAHS Archives.*



New outdoor furniture at the IAHS Museum Garden.

Museum Hours

11 am to 4 pm

**Saturday and Sunday
and Monday Holidays**

Also daily between Christmas and New Years

History Gardens Open Tuesday Thru

Sunday 9 am to 4 pm

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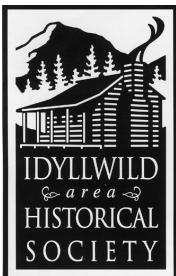
Donations Welcome

Upcoming Events

- Dec. 26th, 27th and 28th 2025, Museum Open, Bring your family by!
- Jan. 2nd, 3rd and 4th, 2026, Museum Open, Bring your family by!
- June 2nd, Bob Greenamyer's presentation on Idyllwild's Movies, Idyllwild Library
- June 17th, Untold Tales of our Town, Open House, Frank & Mabel Moote Archives
- August 1st, IAHS 2026 Annual Public Meeting, Idyllwild Library
- Sept 18th, IAHS Home Tour, Volunteer Docents Private Preview of Homes
- Sept 19th, IAHS Home Tour

Check our Website for details and times

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