

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

SUMMER 2026

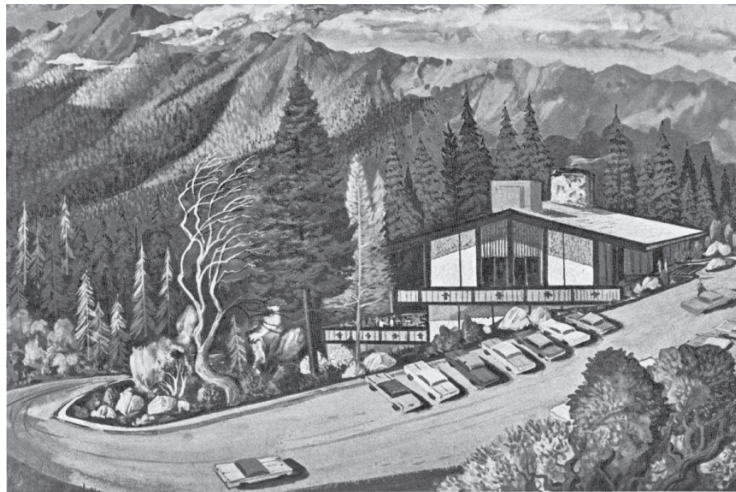
A Used Book Purchase Prompts Exploration Of The 'Golden Age Of Idyllwild'

By: Robert W. Lee

While researching online to become acquainted with my new "second home" in Idyllwild, I came across a book for sale at a used bookstore in Pasadena that was inscribed to "wine expert Robert L. Balzer in 1963, including a strong compliment to his Idyllwild restaurant The Tirol." I was intrigued because I was aware that no restaurant by that name existed in Idyllwild today. More online research revealed that at one time it had been the most upscale restaurant in Riverside County, indeed touted as a "masterpiece"¹ and one of the top restaurants in the United States. The book was *Cooking by Heart: Devotions and Recipes* by Ruth C. Ikerman. I ordered the book, and it soon arrived at my post office box in Idyllwild. This contact led me on a journey to discover a period of time from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s some refer to as the "Golden Age of Idyllwild."

In mid-October 2025, as my first seasonal Idyllwild stay wound down, I visited the Idyllwild Area Historical Society twice, both times speaking with the docent Lynnda Hart. She has been a resident of Idyllwild for more than 50 years, having previously lived in Palm Springs, and having been one of the founders of the Historical Society.

Hart and her husband knew Robert L. Balzer,



BOB BALZER'S TIROL RESTAURANT
Idyllwild, California

Tirol Watercolor, Val Samuelson

the person noted in the book's inscription, who had been the developer and owner of The Tirol Restaurant and his Idyllwild residence, now the Jameson Lodge. Balzer, who was well established financially due to inheriting his father's gourmet grocery and wine business in Los Angeles, had visited Idyllwild in the mid-1950s and fell in love with the area. In his memoir, he describes his vision for an elegant restaurant: "a Tyrolean theme, a crystal and wood chalet, situated spectacularly high among the great old trees with an outdoor deck and a big fireplace and a gorgeous view of the entire Idyllwild basin."² Designed by Balzer and Thornton Ladd, an eminent modernist architect, construction on the restaurant began in 1962, but planning and implementation were difficult due to the rocky mountain terrain.

When completed, the upscale epicurean restaurant attracted the movers and shakers from the film industry and the political world, including numerous actors such as Marlon Brando, Lucille Ball, Gloria Swanson, Tab Hunter, Bing Crosby and Merle Oberon, as well as former President Dwight Eisenhower and future President Ronald Reagan. In his memoir, the colorful Balzer noted that eating at the restaurant was

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<i>Museum Exhibit Design:</i>	Lynnda Hart
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Arti-Facts

<i>Editor:</i>	Edward Warner
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HINDSIGHT: 20/20 VISION IN THE REAR VIEW MIRROR

As we wind our way out of Idyllwild towards Pine Cove on highway 243, a few miles past the ranger station, perched up on a hillside is a landmark with a priceless view of our valley. The majestic panoramic windows suggest a mountain chalet, and one wonders what was behind those massive glass windows. Over the years we learned it was called the Tirol Restaurant, but who built it and what became of it, given its prominent architecture and siting? Some bits and pieces are known in the local “lore” and covered in the “Idyllwild Books” but this was yet another Idyllwild Area story that demanded a deeper dive!

This spring our Lynnda Hart told me that a relatively new Idyllwild resident and IAHS member had researched and written a compelling story about this location and the people woven into it. The author is retired Judge Robert Lee, of Broward County Florida. Naturally I wondered like you, how this guy landed here, and how he came to create such a well-crafted narrative about one of Idyllwild’s uniquely influential residents and the landmark restaurant the man created!

Growing up in his mom’s Mexican restaurant in Jacksonville, Robert knew the very hard work required to be successful. This work ethic followed him throughout school, then as a lawyer, and continued as a judge, becoming the Head Administrative Judge for the counties’ Judicial Circuit. He authored numerous articles in esteemed legal publications, while presiding over hundreds of jury trials, resulting in an impeccable reputation for fairness and the rule of law.

Robert Lee’s path through the legal community and his commitment to education of others however took a plot twist. Just three years after becoming a judge in 2000, he was assigned to chair the Broward County Election Canvassing Board. When the results of the Bush-Gore Election in Florida went off the rails with disputes, Judge Lee found himself in the middle of a weeks-long hand re-count to decide the next president of the United States. This became known as the infamous “hanging chad” incident, and the fallout and notoriety of Judge Lee was memorialized in a Time Magazine article and Lee being spoofed on the David Letterman show!

I hope you enjoy as much as I did his well-researched and detailed article on the Tirol and its founder! Three Cheers for Idyllwild’s Robert Lee! 🍷

Edward Warner

President, Idyllwild Area Historical Society

GOLDEN

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like attending a performance. Starting with the drive off of Highway 243, guests would immediately see the soaring glass windows, have their cars valet parked by red-coated attendants, and then order cocktails with only the finest brands of liquor served. With its focus on an elegant dining experience in a magnificent setting, the restaurant soon received kudos, including being named by *Holiday* magazine as a restaurant of “distinctive dining,” only one of seven Southern California restaurants that year to receive the honor.

In his own right, Balzer was an internationally celebrated wine expert and critic, as well as an award-winning chef. His love for wine began to develop while working at his father’s gourmet and wine emporium. He later inherited the business at a young age and then sold it in 1959 to help finance his Idyllwild dream. He attracted a few other investors, including Marlon Brando and Barbara Hale of *Perry Mason* fame. Balzer opened the restaurant alongside his longtime companion James Willett, who stood by Balzer’s side at the groundbreaking ceremony for The Tirol.

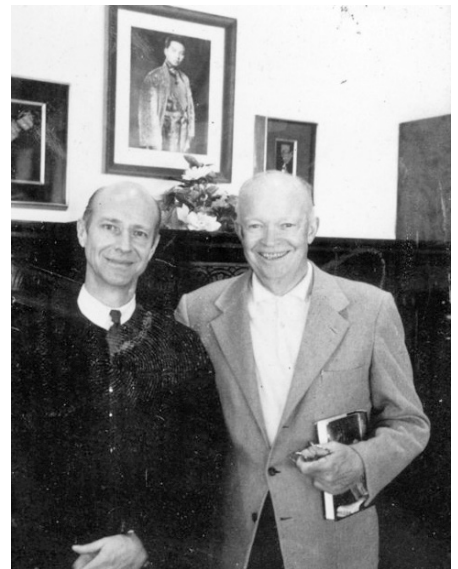
A few years before The Tirol was built, Balzer and Willett had taken a trip together to Austria that inspired the two to open The Tirol in Idyllwild. After the opening of the restaurant, Balzer and Willett worked continuously side by side.

Balzer was also a devoted Buddhist who was inspired to build a Buddhist meditation retreat in Idyllwild, but it never came to fruition. Before creating The Tirol, Balzer had been a war correspondent. While in Cambodia for that purpose, he attended the coronation ceremonies of the King and Queen, and became a decades-long friend of their son Prince Sihanouk, who later stayed in Idyllwild with Balzer for several days.

An article 25 years ago in the *Town Crier* described the restaurant: “It seated 160, and included a private dining room and a bar. The restaurant was decorated with antiques and oriental objects d’art, some from Mr. Balzer’s private collection. A huge fireplace heats the giant interior, and the enormous windows provide 270-degree views, including of Lily Rock.”³ The main dining room consisted of more than 3000 square feet, while the entire supper club was upward of 8000 square feet. Balzer traveled to Europe to buy furnishings and wine for his restaurant.

In 2025 money, the restaurant cost \$4.7 million to build.⁴

Unfortunately, the restaurant, while initially highly popular, did not succeed and closed within a few years. Several reasons suggest the venue’s demise. One problem pointed out by William



Eisenhower visits Tirol

Randolph Hearst, Jr. was the fairly remote location of Idyllwild and the lack of upscale places at that time for the affluent guests to stay overnight when coming to dine.⁵ Another arose from management disputes which ultimately undermined the high level of service expected by the diners. In Balzer’s memoir, however, he attributed the restaurant’s failure to “sewage problems” – due to the rocky terrain, the sewage system continued to fail, triggering thousands of dollars in repairs. He also noted that insurance on the building skyrocketed due to recurring fires in Southern California.⁶ The Tirol went into bankruptcy in 1966.

In sum, although the restaurant did more business than Balzer had anticipated, the problems facing The Tirol were financial. Moreover, for its time, the prices were high. While local advertising continued weekly through mid-1964, it dropped off considerably thereafter. The high prices suggest that the local population considered the restaurant an infrequent special occasion experience rather than a routine dining stop. As a result, The Tirol had to rely almost solely on upscale tourism primarily from Palm Springs, Los Angeles, and San Diego. When all was said and done, it wasn’t enough.

After the restaurant failed, Balzer was humiliated and almost broke. He and Willett left the mountain almost immediately for Orange County, and became promptly involved with another restaurant there. Many of the artworks bought for The Tirol were auctioned off in 1967.

Nevertheless, while Balzer left Idyllwild embarrassed with the failure of his restaurant, it

See Golden, page 3

THE COMPANY WE KEEP

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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.

GOLDEN

(continued from page 3)

was that failure in Idyllwild that opened the door to becoming what he would become – the “Dean of American Wine Writers.”⁷ At the time Balzer moved to Idyllwild, his expertise as a wine merchant was well known. However, almost 20 years had passed since he had published his only book, California’s Best Wines, in 1948. While at Idyllwild, he was able to complete his second book *Beyond Conflict*, his third book *Pleasures of Wine*, and then become a wine columnist for the Los Angeles Times, a position he held for more than three decades thereafter. Balzer also became a wine educator at the University of California – Irvine, a position he took while at Idyllwild to improve his financial position as he launched his restaurant and Buddhist retreat dream. Upon leaving Idyllwild, he continued to teach worldwide and to author books about wine, one after another. Perhaps the highlight of Balzer’s honored career, he was tapped by three presidential inauguration committees to plan the food and wine for the inauguration celebrations in Washington.

After The Tirol’s closing, Balzer did not return to Idyllwild for 20 years. At the invitation of the Idyllwild Area Historical Society, he returned for an Oral History Project interview. By that time, Willett had passed away. For the interview, Balzer met with Lynnda Hart and her husband who had together taken one of Balzer’s earlier wine tours that included a trip to the Napa Valley. He came back to Idyllwild with a desire to visit the building that had housed The Tirol. Hart discouraged him from doing so because extensive interior renovations had been made during the ensuing time period, and she felt Balzer might want to keep the memory of what it had been rather than what it had become.

After the failure of the restaurant, the property became known as the Tirol Mansion or Glass Tirol House and sat empty for several years. According to the editor of the Town Crier at that time, even ten years later, visitors coming to Idyllwild would ask whether the restaurant was still operating.⁸ While there were local efforts to open the restaurant under new ownership, those efforts were unavailing. Later, the property became a residence that often operated as a venue for cultural

and business events. Ultimately, The Tirol was converted into what it is today – a benchmark residence sitting proudly just off Highway 243 in Pine Cove. As noted, Willett died in 1998, credited by the Los Angeles Times for his own role in creating The Tirol, Idyllwild’s esteemed restaurant. Balzer died in 2011, having lived almost a century, and having recalled that among his warmest memories of living in Idyllwild during its “Golden Age” were the times he spent there with Willett.⁹

This journey through Idyllwild history began with a used book find in a Pasadena book shop. So, back to the book. Research on the author, Ruth Ikerman, in the Idyllwild Town Crier database revealed only one reference. Although the inscription in her book indicates



Tirol interior



Future president visits the Tirol

she had been a visitor to Idyllwild in the early 1960s, with a visit to The Tirol, the only reference found was a trip about twenty years later in 1981, when she appeared as featured speaker at a meeting of the Idyllwild Branch of the National League of American Pen Women. She was referred to as the “author of many books, poetry and short stories.”¹ Her works and records are archived in the Online Archive

of California. However, her book, with its 1963 laudatory inscription to Robert Balzer and The Tirol, now sits in the archives of the Idyllwild Area Historical Society. ✍️
Comments to the Author? rwilliams6668@yahoo.com

¹Luther Weare, *Essence of Idyllwild* 10 (Idyllwild CA: Strawberry Valley Press, 1978) (cited as Weare).

²Robert L. Balzer & Christine R. Graham, *Hollywood and Wine: A Star-Studded Life* 10, 267 (Amazon Kindle, 2018) (cited as Balzer & Graham).

³Idyllwild Town Crier (July 6, 2000; Jan. 14, 1966).

⁴Balzer & Graham 278; Idyllwild Town Crier (Sept. 6, 2012).

⁵Balzer & Graham 293.

⁶Balzer & Graham 15, 300; Weare 11; Idyllwild Town Crier (Sept. 12, 2002).

⁷Balzer & Graham 530.

⁸Weare 10.

⁹Balzer & Graham 500.

¹⁰Idyllwild Town Crier (June 11, 1981).

The Idyllwild Area Historical Society 2026 Home Tour

DISCOVER THE LIGHT FIXTURE, THE FRESH CANVAS, THE PORCH, THE STAIRWAY AND THE COLUMNS

Home Tours are about The Homes, right? Or, are they about The Families that created and live in these creative spaces? Or are they after all, on this day, my favorite day in this village each year, simply a treasure hunt for us, the fortunate home tour guest?

Treasures do abound in these five local homes. Special elements, little touches and grand statements can be found throughout. I discovered as I hope you will in each of the homes a fortune, one particular treasure that I cherish. Please join us in your personal discovery of the special elements and hundreds more that move you.

Families gather around the dinner table and many of the meaningful moments happen over food, friends and the events of the day. As you tour the



homes, keep an eye out for one particular Light Fixture suspended carefully above their dining room table. It foretells creative ways to use light and other lighting elements spread throughout the home in ways that most of us would not imagine. This homeowner will inspire you as they did me.

Some homes are the response to the emotional upheavals life can lay at our door step. For one of our homeowners, about

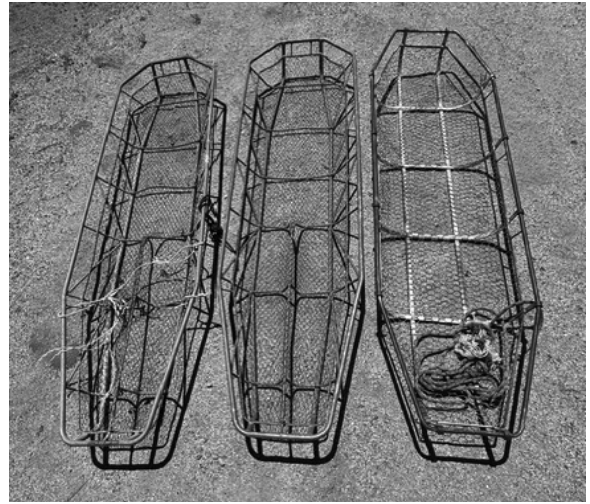
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*ICC
Summer
Camp Kids
Getting
Tour of
IAHS
Garden*



Idyllwild Garden Club Working in IAHS Garden



Tahquitz Rock Historic Stokes Self Rescue Litters, one of which is now in our Collection

HOME TOUR

(continued from previous page)

all that was left of their previous home was the door step. When you see the soft Canvas they have created for the next chapter of their lives, you will know what hope looks like and have a warm sense of how they will finish out that painting.

We live in a rustic place that gets its feel from the mountains, forest and sky around us. Some homes are designed protect the inhabitants from those elements. One of our homes this year goes out of its way to pull the outdoors in. You will know this house when you walk in and know what autumn feels like for the residents. What you will not know but will want to imagine is what the other seasons feel like from the windows and The Porch!

Another home has one element that you need to see, a study in gorgeous efficiency, sort of a lesson

book in utility, and how to beautifully use the space that presents itself. I will give just one clue: The Stairway.

And finally, a study in how rustic and historic can be presented in modern terms that you can see your self in. When you walk this home, you are looking for The Columns that supported utility in its previous life. You will know them when you see them, and then let your imagination go back and envision seeing this valley from horseback!

So my friends, above are a few breadcrumbs to follow, but they are just the thinnest dotted line marking your trail. You will fill in the rich detail of the path through these five homes with things that move you and give you a sense of the homeowner's story, one that they are proud to share with us on this, again, the best day every year in our village! The Idyllwild Area Historical Society 2026 Home Tour. Saturday September 19th. Details at Idyllwildhistory.org. 📖

The Mission of the Idyllwild Area Historic Society

To preserve the history of Idyllwild and neighboring communities in the San Jacinto Mountains; to maintain artifacts thereof in a manner accessible to the public; and to promote public awareness of local history for the enrichment of visitors and residents.

The Frank and Mabel Moote Archive has been busy! The Oral History Transcription Project, to create a written searchable narrative our 55 audio recordings, has completed 38 transcriptions, with 17 more to

go! The Museum accessions committee led by Robert Greenamyre, with Laura Zarecky, Lynnda Hart, Sherry Martinez, Don Wopperer and Candice Mann, agreed to bring over 100 important Items into the

permanent collection. This growth is wonderful but poses another problem that our board must manage: how to increase space for the growing archive collection within an existing building that is stuffed to the gills!

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**

Follow us on Facebook

www.facebook.com/IdyllwildAreaHistoricalSociety

Visit our website

www.idyllwildhistory.org

For special hours and other business, call
(951) 659-2717 or email info@idyllwildhistory.org

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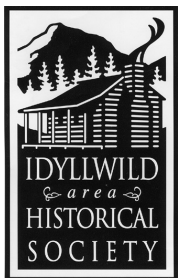
Donations Welcome

Upcoming Events

- September 18th, IAHS Home Tour, Volunteer Docents Private Preview of Homes
 - September 19th, IAHS Home Tour
- October 10th, Art Alliance Art Walk and Wine Tasting: Winery at IAHS Museum Garden

Check our Website for details and times
www.idyllwildhistory.org

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