

ARTI-FACTS

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Idyllwild Area Historical Society

Preserving the History of Idyllwild and the surrounding communities in the San Jacinto Mountains

Spring 2009

BURNED TO THE GROUND

By Ben Killingsworth

If you've had the pleasure of reading *The San Jacintos*, by John Robinson and Bruce Risher, from cover to cover, you were probably as surprised as I was at the number of local buildings, some quite prominent, that have burned to the ground at one time or another. Of course this goes way back to a time when there wasn't much in the way of fire-fighting resources up here, so when they say "burned to the ground," that's probably an accurate description of what actually happened.

The earliest reference to a troublesome fire occurred way back in 1892 when a structure housing the rock crusher being used to construct the Lake Hemet Dam burned down, causing a five-month delay.

But one of the earliest incidents which took place closer to home occurred in 1901, when the Native Lumber Company's sawmill, owned by George Hannahs, who has often been referred to as "The Father of Idyllwild," went up in flames.

Next was the sawmill owned and operated by Anton Sherman and his sons, which caught fire in 1906, apparently started by sparks from the engine that powered the mill. As the May 17, 1906, edition of the San Jacinto Register put it, "The mill burned to the ground in a miraculously short time."

Another 1906 fire completely destroyed what

had first been the Idyllwild Sanatorium, then later the Strawberry Valley Hotel. Oddly enough, this catastrophe took place during a heavy snowstorm.

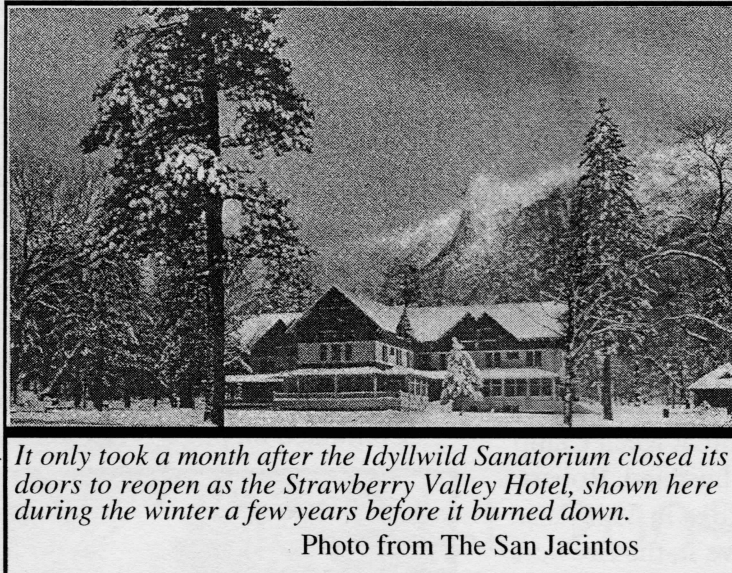
The next one to bite the dust was the Dark Canyon Sawmill, operated by lessee Hiram Roach. This fire, which occurred in 1914, burned down the sawmill, and 500,000 board feet of ready-to-use lumber and over 4,000 acres of forest land along with it. But that wasn't the end of Roach's bad luck. Two years after rebuilding the mill he slipped and fell on the saw, losing one of his legs just above the ankle. But, not to worry – he was back to work in six weeks thanks to his new peg leg.

The next fire-related calamity came about just one year later when the main lodge of Keen Camp, located at that

time just east of Mountain Center, burned down. While it had become a favorite spot for making movies, as attested to by none other than Cecil B. DeMille, the 'camp' hardly missed a beat.

The owner at the time was Anita Walker, whose husband, Percy, had drowned in Lake Hemet just a year after the couple had purchased Keen Camp from John and Mary Keen in 1911. Somehow she

Continued on page 2 See BURNED DOWN



It only took a month after the Idyllwild Sanatorium closed its doors to reopen as the Strawberry Valley Hotel, shown here during the winter a few years before it burned down.

Photo from *The San Jacintos*

IMAGES
of America

**IDYLLWILD AND THE
HIGH SAN JACINTOS**

Robert B. Smith
Idyllwild Area Historical Society

It's almost here!

To reserve your
copy see page 5

BURNED DOWN *Continued from page 1*
 was able to replace the lodge with a much larger and more luxurious hotel in time to reopen for business in about six months.

According to available records, things apparently quieted down for a few years, at least with respect to buildings being 'burned to the ground.' In any case, it wasn't until 1941 that the Idyllwild Store, owned by Elmer Horsley, and the Idyllwild Post Office were destroyed by fire. Today the site is occupied by The Village Market.

Mountain Center was next, when a fire burned down the gas station, store and café. But that wasn't all. Strong winds drove the fire into the surrounding forest, burning over 8,000 acres before soldiers brought up from Camp Haan were able to contain it along a line just below Idyllwild.

Unfortunately the fire also moved far enough to the east to engulf Keen Camp, and that big, luxurious hotel Anita Walker built at Keen Camp in 1916, which she and her new husband, Robert Elliot, had renamed Tahquitz Lodge in 1919, also burned down. As luck would have it, the fire occurred just after the bank had foreclosed on the owner at that time, Alyce Walker Murphy, who was unable to pay the mortgage because of a severe business slump during the early stages of WW II. The blaze also destroyed her home and several cabins.

The timing of both the fire and the foreclosure was quite unfortunate because not long after that large numbers of soldiers and their families from General Patton's desert training center, Camp Young, began visiting Idyllwild. The training center was located just east of Indio and at the time was the largest army post in the world. Soldiers

and their families stationed at Ryan Airfield in Hemet, March Field, and Camp Haan, both located near Riverside, were also frequent Idyllwild weekend visitors.

Then, just three months before the Japanese surrendered, ending WW II in August, 1945, the Idyllwild Inn, which had been the center of Idyllwild social activity throughout most of its 40-year life, caught fire and was destroyed completely.

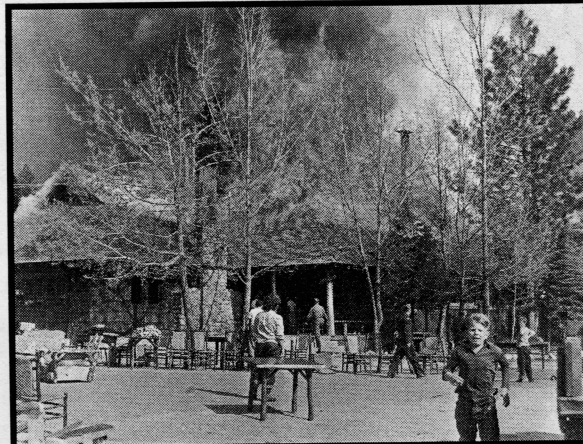
The Inn was rebuilt in that same year, but somehow things were never the same. Partly because the end of the war marked the end of visits by soldiers and their families, eleven different owners struggled to survive during the next 31 years.

Another reason was that times had changed and the public now preferred to stay in a mountain cabin or lodge rather than a big fancy hotel. As a result, the hotel was torn down in 1976 and replaced by the Idyllwild Inn we see today.

The next big fire destroyed an almost brand new business called Sportland, which consisted of a five-

lane bowling alley, snack bar, swimming pool, and amusement center. It was built during 1946-1947 and "burned to the ground" in 1948.

To be sure, there have no doubt been other
Continued on page 7 See BURNED DOWN



The Idyllwild Inn bursts into flames on May 4, 1945. The boy in the right foreground is Jim "Robbie" Pitcher. Barbara Wilson (Hunt) was also there.
 Photo from Museum Archives



The Idyllwild Inn, shown as it burns to the ground while an unidentified volunteer makes a last-ditch effort to save the day.
 Photo from Museum Archives

The Rustic Theatre
Presents



an afternoon of...

VINTAGE IDYLLWILD



- Rare Restored Photos of 1920's Idyllwild!
- Special Preview of "Idyllwild & the High San Jacintos" Photos & Book Signing
- Eric Von Stroheim's 1919 film "Blind Husbands" shot in Idyllwild!

May 1st, 2009
1pm to 4pm
at the Rustic Theatre

\$5

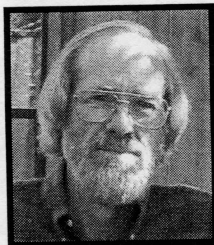
AT THE DOOR



A PRODUCTION OF:

The
IDYLLWILD AREA
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ALL ABOUT WRITING A BOOK



Bob Smith, Author
of *Idyllwild and
the High San
Jacintos*

Since 1925, Bob Smith's family had owned property near Black Mountain at the old Fuller's Mill, now called Pinewood. He'd spent summer vacations there all his life, and, when he retired in 1996 he began to research the history of Fuller's Mill. By 2005, he said he'd learned enough to write a

short history, *From Sawmill to Sanctuary*, for Pinewood property owners.

Meanwhile, Bob and Adele had moved to Idyllwild, and soon Bob began working in the IAHS office documenting and archiving his Pinewood materials. In early 2007, after working in the office on other projects for several years, Bob became acutely aware that our museum would never be able to display all of the huge archive of historical material IAHS has been accumulating over the years. But just as Bob began searching for other ways to share it with the public, an Arcadia editor dropped by to inquire about the possibility of someone writing a book about Idyllwild to add to their "Images of America" series.

Fortunately for the rest of us, Bob saw this as the perfect answer to our dilemma, and made up his mind to take on the task himself.

But Bob realized that the first thing he needed to do was to learn more about Idyllwild's history and then see for himself whether our collection was varied enough to capture that history. So for the next year all of his spare time went into examining all 6,500 of the items then in the archive.

What came into focus by early 2008, Bob said, was a picture of San Jacinto mountain history along six parallel dimensions: natural resource exploitation, outdoor recreation, resorts, back-country retreats, pre-Depression

village, and post-war renaissance, and he began to see the character of today's Idyllwild reflected in these historic developments between the years of 1880 and 1960. And, best of all, it appeared that there was plenty of material in the archive to illustrate them.

And so it was that on March 3, 2008, Bob signed a six-month contract with Arcadia to produce the manuscript. During his year-long research of the archive Bob had identified over 500 photos that he considered the most interesting, and from those he looked for the ones he felt best illustrated every category exclusively with photos that would be new to most of the public.

Shortly after Bob began the process the Town Crier donated an additional 1,000+ negatives from Harry Wendelken's collection.

Although the images he used came chiefly from the IAHS archive, Bob did have to "plug a few holes," as he put it, with pictures gathered from his own collection, along with a few furnished by his Pinewood neighbors and from nearby museums and libraries.

As one might expect from a retired college professor and administrator, Bob established a schedule for himself that would allow completion of a draft manuscript with a month to spare for copy editing and a local expert's review.

First, he decided to devote a chapter to each of the six major themes and to subdivide them into 17 topical categories. The process included performing high-resolution scans of the photos in order to meet Arcadia's strict specifications, then writing an extended caption for each photo. He also wrote introductions to the book and each chapter, all of which contributed to the story he was trying to tell.

Along the way, Bob said, he communicated often with his Arcadia editor for feedback, advice, and interpretation of the publisher's required format and style.

Even though Bob had to contend with a few unanticipated interruptions, it all came

Continued on page 5 See **BOOK**

BOOK *Continued from page 4*

together according to schedule, and by Labor Day the finished manuscript was on its way to San Francisco for final editing and photo processing. All told, Bob spent around 800 hours gathering and processing photos and writing text.

It certainly goes without saying that Bob deserves our thanks, admiration and respect for not only taking on such a daunting task, but also for recognizing the opportunity to share the history of our wonderful community with potentially thousands of readers around the world.

Bob's book, *Idyllwild and the High San Jacintos*, will go on sale on April 20th. The price, tax included, is \$23.75, and it can be purchased at the Museum. The price for orders received and delivered by mail is \$26.95, including S&H. All royalties will go directly to IAHS.

HOW TO ORDER BOOKS

If you can't make it to the special event on May 1st, (see page 3 for details), or you are unable to make your purchase at the Museum, you are invited to cut out this form and use it to order one or more copies of *Idyllwild and the High San Jacintos* by mailing it to the address below.

Each book you order will be signed by the author.

First book: \$26.95, which includes tax and shipping.

Additional books: \$24.75 each.

Please send me _____ books.

Enclosed is my check or money order for \$_____

Name: _____

Mailing address: _____

City/State: _____

Zip _____

E-mail address (optional) _____

Please mail your check, payable to IAHS, along with this form to

IAHS P. O. Box 3320, Idyllwild CA 92549.

To see our ONLINE INDEX for this book, go to the publications page on our website, Idyllwildareahistoricalociety.org, and click on the blue link.

If you have questions, please call (951) 659-8725

APPRECIATING OUR HISTORY

By Ben Killingsworth

Most of us, if our memories are still that good, do not remember history being one of our favorite subjects in school. To the contrary, when the teacher said, "Now we're going to study the history of our country, or the state we live in, or the world," the first thing we thought of was how long it would be before the recess bell rang.

And yet, here we are today, enthusiastic members of the Historical Society, often thrilled to learn more about the way it was long, long ago. Even an old postcard can make our hearts beat faster.

Who would have guessed?

To be sure there are a few readers who just loved history; always did and always will. But the rest of us didn't care that much, or at least weren't very interested, simply because we had no sense of history. At that point in our lives nothing that occurred before we were born seemed real.

But, as we grew older, the past began to take on more meaning, and the older we got the more we had a tendency to look back more than we looked forward. Alas, we began to long for the good old days when, at least in retrospect, we understood life and appreciated what living a good life meant.

Even the things we didn't have began to seem important. How many times have we announced with a tinge of pride, "Of course we didn't have television back then?", actually feeling just a bit sorry for those who never had the pleasure of living without TV. We listened to the radio – great shows like Fibber McGee and Molly, and the Lone Ranger, and Dinah Shore. She used to sing, 'See the USA in a Chevrolet', and every car made was made in the USA. All Japan made was cheap toys. Heck, we didn't even have plastic, and when we finally did everything made with it was apt to break the day after you bought it. And all this talk today about health care, why back then doctors came right to your house, even in the middle of the night.

Perhaps the lesson to be learned, if there is one, is that the older we get the more we begin to feel like we are a part of history – like it's really about us, our parents and grandparents. And then there's that oft repeated saying; "Those who cannot learn from history are bound to repeat it."

Would that be so bad?

IAHS BOARD OF DIRECTORS LAUNCHES FINAL PUSH FOR NEW BUILDING

On October 18, 2003, IAHS opened its new museum. That same day society officers began planning and raising funds for an additional building.

Even then it was obvious that a 468-square-foot remodeled garage would be far too small to house a rapidly growing collection of artifacts, documents, and photographs.

The IAHS Board of Directors has since been quietly and systematically laying the groundwork for a proposed new Archive and Research Center. Having now raised nearly two-thirds of the money needed for the \$130,000 project through grants and private donations, the push is on to attract the final \$49,000 needed to begin construction by New Year's Day 2010.

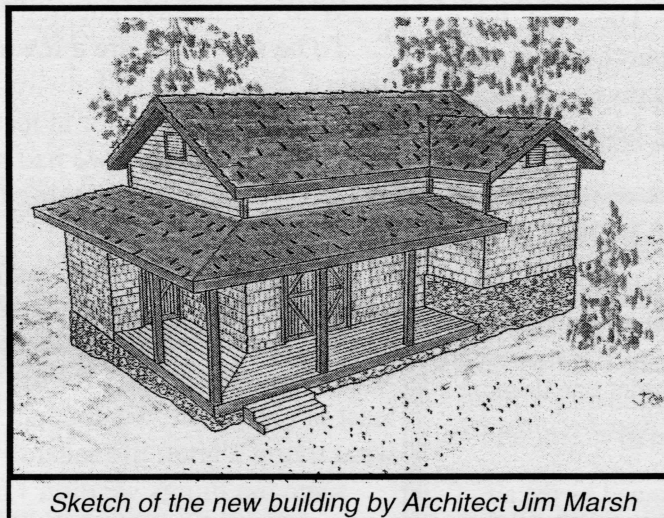
An appeal has gone out to the membership and public alike to join together in the spirit of old-fashioned American barn-raising and make this dream come true.

Since its founding, IAHS has deliberately

avoided soliciting donations beyond annual dues from members. Such an appeal is the first time in its eight-year history that the board has taken such a step.

Clearly, given the national economy, this is a most difficult time to be seeking funds. Yet the board believes that in terms of costs and schedules this is the ideal time to build.

Early donations, ranging from \$50 to \$10,000, have been encouraging. All donors will be listed on a "wall of appreciation" plaque displayed on the porch of the new Center.



Sketch of the new building by Architect Jim Marsh

Architect Jim Marsh, who is donating his services to IAHS, has planned the building to harmonize with the museum's architecture, fitting into the 1920s flavor of the site. It will be located between the museum and office.

The 732-sq.-ft. center will provide secure storage with properly controlled temperature

and humidity, to preserve valuable materials. It will also free up space for research and more frequent preparation of new exhibits for the museum.

Meeting another perennial Idyllwild need, the plan includes a public restroom for museum visitors.

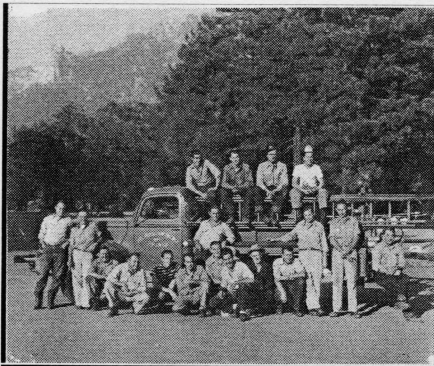


DOCENT LUNCHEON WELL ATTENDED

The annual Docent luncheon was held at the Silver Pines Lodge on Wednesday March 18th. A great time was had by all.

Docent Dan Carpenter is shown explaining an apparently very complicated subject as fellow docents listen with rapt attention. Meanwhile event organizer, Corrinne Brown (upper right), attempts to make her escape.

BURNED DOWN *Continued from page 2*
 structure fires in and around Idyllwild since 1948,
 and probably a few we missed that occurred be-



Some early Idyllwild Fire Protection District volunteers proudly pose beside their fire truck Photo from IFPD files

fore that. Still, it's easy to see why the Idyllwild Fire Protection District was formed in 1946, although as a strictly volunteer organization, except for the first Fire Chief, Bill Price, and

stayed that way until 1958. Bear in mind that in 1914 there were only about 50 cabins in and around Idyllwild – hardly enough to justify an organized fire department, and even in 1945 there were only about 450 full-time residents.

Up until that time forest-fire prevention, and, to a lesser degree, suppression, were primarily the responsibility of the U.S. Forest Service. In those days a large part of their overall effort to prevent forest fires was carried out by lone Forest Rangers sent into the forest on horseback in the hopes of preventing fires from starting and/or spreading by finding and eliminating fire-prone conditions. And while there were fire-prevention regulations applicable in the forest, there were none which applied on private property.

Aside from the most notable structure fires discussed above, there have been several large forest fires that have plagued these beautiful mountains going back to the time that the Cahuilla Indians had it all to themselves. But, when we say 'plagued' we have to remember that our forest and even our wildlife often benefit, over time, from an occasional forest fire. Indeed, even the ashes are beneficial since they enrich the soil, and many plants, including some of our most beautiful wildflowers, can only germinate after being exposed to fire. That's the 'good side' of forest fires – we're all familiar with the other side of the coin, and it's clearly not something we wish for, good for the forest, or not.

WHERE IN THE WORLD DID

ALL THOSE PEOPLE COME FROM?

Most of us who act as museum docents have a general feeling about where our visitors come from, but there's nothing like hard facts to either confirm or dispute our seat-of-the-pants impressions.

The best news is that we are attracting more and more visitors as demonstrated by the fact that the number of people who visited us in 2008 was 24 % higher than in 2005 (4,291 vs. 3,454).

Approximately half of our visitors in both years came from either the Inland Empire, San Diego County or the Los Angeles Basin. The biggest change was in the number coming from the Inland Empire, with 567 visiting in 2005 vs. 955 in 2008, a whopping 68 % increase. Of interest is the fact that 41 % of that increase came from Hemet and Temecula. The number visiting from San Diego County also showed a healthy increase; 677 in 2005 vs. 828 in 2008, a 22% increase.

Another interesting note is that there are almost as many visitors from other states and foreign countries, combined, as there are from the desert, which only accounts for about 10% of our visitors and less than half the number who come from San Diego County..The number of local visitors stayed almost the same; 421 in 2005 and 417 in 2008.

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Our e-mail address is Info@Idyllwildhistory.org

Visit our new website at www.Idyllwildhistory.org

Admission is free

Donations are welcome

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Name(s) _____ Address _____

Telephone _____ Email Address _____

Please select one of the following categories:

Individual \$15 Family \$25 Contributing \$35 Business/Organization \$35

Sponsor \$100 Benefactor \$250 Patron \$500 Corporate \$750

Founder's Circle \$1,000 (one-time or cumulative qualifies for lifetime membership)

If this membership is a gift, please list donor's name and address:

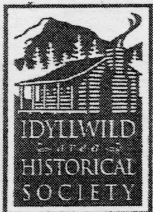
Name _____ Address _____

Please make your check payable to IAHS and mail with this application to

IAHS, PO Box 3320, Idyllwild, CA 92549

All dues and contributions are tax deductible.

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****** DATE TO REMEMBER ******

May 1, 2009, Special program and film at the Rustic Theatre—Don't miss it!