

# 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 2021

## FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

By Robert B. Smith

Every locale bears its particular existential threats. San Jacinto Mountains residents live in the shadows of two: earthquake and fire.

We can't control quakes, which stem from the two dangerously active faults that have formed these mountains. Fire we can do something about, especially if we recognize its causes and patterns. But first, let's separate structure fires from wildfires.

Burning buildings have been a frequent phenomenon throughout Idyllwild's history. Mountain architecture favors highly flammable building materials, made more so by a relatively dry climate.

Early sawmills were especially susceptible. Casualties included George Hannah's Native Lumber Company sawmill on Dutch Flat in 1901; the Scherman family's last mill, down on Hurkey Creek in 1904; and Hiram Roach's so-called Dark Canyon mill in 1914 (more about that one later).

Idyllwild was only three years old when its first major tourist facility, Strawberry Valley Lodge (born in 1901 as the Idyllwild Sanatorium), caught fire in a storage room full of paint and cleaning fluids. The midnight blaze sent the lodge's sole occupant, manager Ralph Lowe, scurrying for his life into an April blizzard.

A spate of 1940s fires destroyed Idyllwild Incorporated's historic general store, post office, and garage one winter night in 1941; its on-site successor, the postwar Sportland recreation center and Cedars Café on Strawberry Creek in Fern Valley (both 1948); and, most notoriously, the 40-year-old Idyllwild Inn one calm spring afternoon in 1945.

But this latter disaster catalyzed a movement



*People salvaging furniture from the Idyllwild Inn after it caught fire.*

*Photo: IAHS Archives*

to organize a fire district. Within two years a Fire Marshal was hired, volunteer firefighters were organized, and a fire station was built. Commercial building fires were soon a thing of the past, and nowadays the several residential fires each year are quickly squelched by professional crews.

Forest wildfires, so common now, were relatively rare before the 1960s, and among 36 major fires on our mountain only one has ignited in the tall timber. The Dark Canyon mill, known as the "highest sawmill in the San Jacintos," was actually located at Sawmill Flat near Stone Creek. It burned down in August 1914, taking all the stacked lumber with it, but resident loggers kept it from spreading into the surrounding cottages and forest. A surviving sawdust pile, however, continued to smolder unnoticed until November, when a Santa Ana wind ignited it. The result three days later was some 4,200 acres

*See Fires, page 3*

## IDYLLWILD AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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*Board meetings are open to the membership and  
are held in the archive building on the  
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### Arti-Facts

*Editor:* Carolyn Levitski  
*Feature Writer:* Robert B. Smith  
*Layout:* Halie Wilson

### President's Message

Hello to all our members. We are excited about this coming New Year. We sincerely hope you are all well.

With perseverance we look forward to the end of this

terrible pandemic. At the present time our wonderful museum remains closed and silent. However, we continue to work on the preservation of Idyllwild's history.

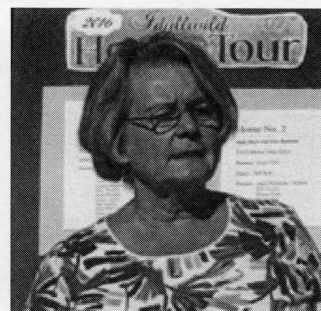
A very big thank you to our members for your support of the Idyllwild Area Historical Society. Without this support we would have been unable to weather this last year. We look forward to your continued support in this coming year and to reopening the museum. Through all of this our board continues to maintain the everyday operations of the museum.

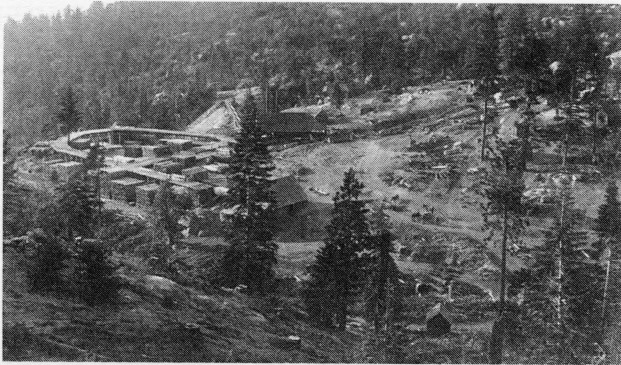
I would like to welcome and introduce our newest board member, Dana Albano. He has been a docent at the museum, worked on the home tour, and even shared his beautiful home on a previous tour. He has a lot of energy and ideas, and I know he will be a wonderful addition to the board.

In the coming year we look forward to reopening the museum, planning for the 2021 home tour and resuming all of our activities. We also invite you to volunteer a little of your time by becoming docents at the museum and meeting with visitors who are eager to learn about Idyllwild's history.

Put this date on your calendar: IAHS 20th Annual Home Tour, Saturday, September 18. We look forward to seeing you again at the museum and at our various functions in the coming year.

Sincerely,  
Charlotte Groty  
IAHS President





*Roach's Dark Canyon sawmill before the fire  
Photo: IAHS Archives*

**FIRES ...** (continued from page 1)

of blackened timber between the San Jacinto River's North Fork and Pine Cove.

But that fire was an anomaly. Most wildfires are started more directly by people: a review of 1,252 fires of all magnitudes in our local ranger district between 1970 and 2004 found that 38% were ignited naturally (by lightning) and 62% by humans, most commonly through arson (14%) or abandoned campfires (12%). Southern California's postwar suburban sprawl has situated the people around the base of the mountain, so that's where the fires typically begin.

Furthermore, with their home at stake, mountain residents have generally attended to prevention measures, while the Forest Service has been aggressive—perhaps overly so—in responding to every newly sparked wildfire, especially between 1956 and 1972 when Howard Evans was the district fire control officer. Indeed, no major timber fires occurred here between 1943 and 1972, and by the 1960s the San Jacinto District actually had a tongue-in-cheek reputation in the Forest Service as the “Asbestos Forest.”

The unintended consequence of a century of such effort, combined with a warming climate, has increased the density of plant life on our mountain slopes, increasing fire intensity and reducing its predictability, making it a more fearsome spectacle.

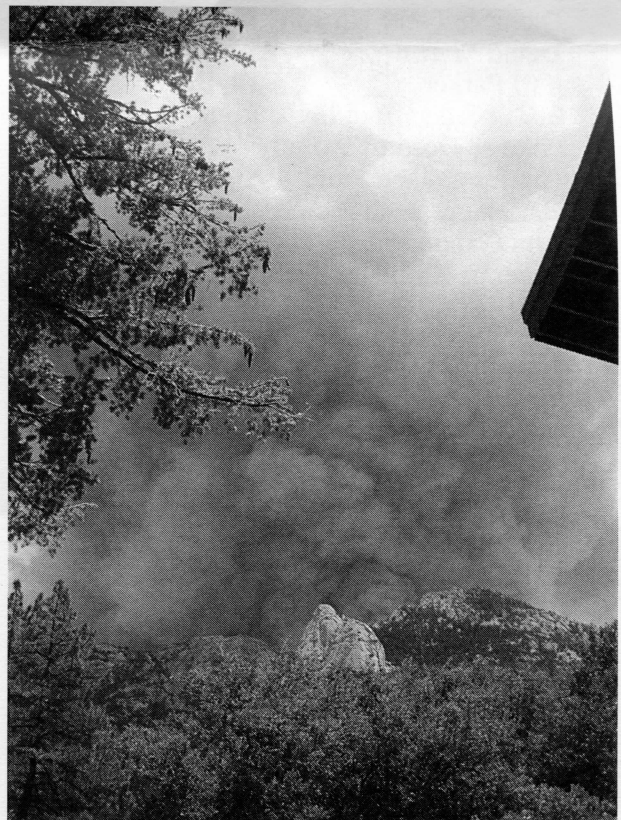
Consider what happened in November 1943, when another Santa Ana wind ignited some discarded hot ashes in May Valley. The resulting brush fire charged straight for Keen Camp, the site of today's Living Free animal sanctuary near Mountain Center. There stood Tahquitz Lodge, an elegant resort built in 1919 to replace a prior lodge that had itself burned

down. Somehow the fire front burned by on both sides without touching the resort and headed on down the mountain toward Hemet.

But soon the renegade wind died down. Then the fire naturally spread back up Strawberry and Dry creeks, and Idyllwild was abruptly evacuated in the dead of night. The bare slope below Double View Drive is a reminder of how closely it approached the village. At Keen Camp, however, every structure but the general store was incinerated, leaving only the resort's swimming pool and remnants of its tennis courts.

These two fires dramatize the role of prevailing winds. Heat naturally rises, creating a daily breeze up the canyons and valleys from the west throughout the warm season. Santa Ana conditions interrupt this pattern in the fall and winter, bringing strong winds from the east.

That changing weather conditions have consequences for fire behavior was nicely illustrated by the 2013 Mountain Fire. Ignited by an electrical equipment failure at Mountain Center, it was steered eastward by a rising west wind, burning across May Valley, up the face of  
*See Fires, page 5*



*Mountain Fire smoke plume as we evacuated  
Fern Valley, Day 3.  
Photo: Robert Smith*

# THE COMPANY WE KEEP

*New and Renewing Members July 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020*

*We welcome new members and appreciate renewing members for their continuing support.*

*Membership coupon below*

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## FIRES ... (continued from page 3)

Spitler Peak on the Desert Divide, then down the desert side to threaten the outskirts of Palm Springs, where it began to run out of fuel.

As the west wind died down in the face of an approaching monsoon from Mexico, the sputtering fire front spread both north and south and naturally started climbing back up the steep desert slopes. When it reached the far edge of Tahquitz Valley two days later and began to burn back toward the Pacific Crest above Idyllwild, it pulled a prearranged trigger for evacuating Strawberry Valley. Luckily, the monsoon then brought two days of calm overcast instead of lightning storms, allowing firefighters to slow its progress until a heavy downpour extinguished the fire after consuming over 27,500 acres of brush and forest.

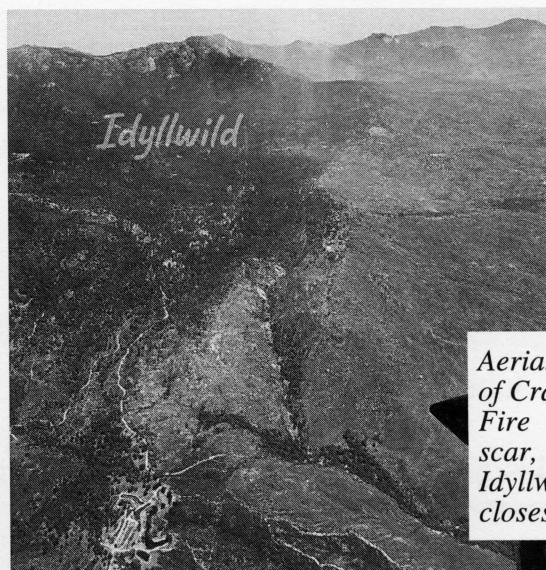
Much of the Mountain Fire's territory on the desert side had previously been burned in 1980, when boys playing with matches above Palm Springs on a windy day started the Dry Falls Fire. The wind steered that one south past Spitler Peak and up to the Desert Divide, where a fortuitous wind shift kept it out of Garner Valley.

Even low-elevation brush fires can be destructive. In 1967 the 21,000-acre Bailiff Fire started at Cabazon, caught a late-October Santa Ana wind, and burned all the way to the hot springs lining the San Jacinto Valley, destroying a forest-fire research laboratory operated by the Forest Service along the way.

In 2006 the infamous Esperanza Fire burned the same territory, killing five firefighters on its way to the Soboba Reservation and Highway 79 in Lamb's Canyon. Its 40,200 acres of brush and chaparral made it the San Jacintos' most expansive fire ever. Also the subject of a book, it gained added notoriety when its serial arsonist was tried, convicted on five murder counts, and sentenced to death.

Another of the few fires that have directly threatened Idyllwild was the 9,600-acre Bee Canyon Fire in 1996. Ignited by target shooters at the foot of the mountain, it was propelled by a normal summer breeze up the North Fork past Indian Mountain, when yet again a wind shift changed the outcome. Hill residents were evacuated as the fire front turned toward Idyllwild before being halted the edge of Pine Cove. The usual uproar over target shooting ensued, but the 1970-2004 study would find that it accounts for less than 9/10 of 1% of our local wildfires.

Arson is far more common, most recently in the 2018 Cranston Fire, the most damaging to



Idyllwild of all fires in the past 120 years. Again, the perpetrator was quickly apprehended after a witness at the Strawberry Creek bridge on Highway 74 quickly reported the incident to authorities. Amid a hasty evacuation and few burned homes, a combination of retardant drops and—once more—a timely wind shift took the fire past Idyllwild and over South Ridge.

Another serial arson fire worth mentioning is the 1999 Mixing Fire, set near the asphalt mixing station on Highway 74, and spread from there to Lake Hemet. A year later the Forest Service granted to a Canadian company filming a TV ad permission for a controlled burn on some of the remnant vegetation in the fire scar near Mountain Center.

More significantly, it happened that there was a trainee shadowing the Incident Commander on the Mixing Fire. Jeanne Pincha-Tulley would become legendary in the Forest Service in that role, and it would be Idyllwild's good fortune that she was available and assigned to the 2013 Mountain Fire. She masterfully designed and guided that campaign in the face of a wandering fire front and changing weather conditions.

Idyllwild residents are extremely fortunate that thanks to a combination of advance planning, quick and effective response, and dumb luck, the magnificent panorama of forested ridges and peaks surrounding the village remains intact. With large fires in the San Jacinto Mountains occurring every three years on average, it's only a matter of time before Idyllwild will undergo the next evacuation, and residents will hold their breath and trust that firefighters can continue to work seeming miracles. ♫

## Museum Hours

10am to 5pm

Friday, Saturday, Sunday  
and Monday Holidays

Also daily between  
Christmas and New Year

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## Visit our website

[www.idyllwildhistory.org](http://www.idyllwildhistory.org)

For special tours and other business,  
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Admission Free

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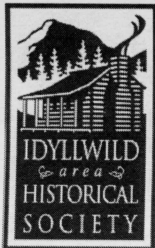
Donations Welcome

*The museum is closed to visitors at this time.  
No events are being held.*

## Join us in 2021 for the next fabulous Home Tour

*Tentative Date: September 18, 2021*

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