

The Tribe's Mountain Man Program

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The office of Mountain Man is the newest of the five Tribe offices, created in 1974. Hiking and camping were certainly not new concepts to the Tribe in 1974. The organization had been founded in 1925 on the basis of its members being Honor Campers. During the 33 years that Camp Tahquitz was in Idyllwild the Tribe had a close relationship with the San Jacinto backcountry. Prior to the 1950s the Indian lore program was a sideline of the Tribe's program. Hiking and camping were the primary interests.

When Camp Tahquitz moved to Barton Flats in 1959 the Tribe continued to emphasize backcountry hiking and camping—now in the San Gorgonio Wilderness—as an important part of the summer camp experience. However, two important differences existed between “old camp” and “new camp” in terms of the camp's relationship to the nearby wilderness. In Idyllwild the primary point of entry was some distance away and troops had to “hike” through town to get to it. Most of the camping supplies, certainly the heavier items such as canned goods, pots and pans, were packed into the backcountry ahead of the troops on mule teams headed by Tribe staff members. Scouts carried only their personal items and bedrolls. Since the point of going to camp was to go into the backcountry, people didn't give much thought to how much effort it took to get to the trail head.

In Barton Flats there was no town to hike through to get to the trail head, but it was physically farther away from the camp. The primary entry point was Poopout Hill, which was accessed via a dirt road above Jenks Lake. Securing transportation from camp to Poopout was almost a necessity. Some troops hiked all the way from camp, but it was enough to wear out most young Scouts before they ever reached the trailhead, and the scenery was less than thrilling.

The Forest Service closed the road to Poopout Hill in the late 1980s to cut down on traffic and established a new trailhead and parking lot just east of Jenks Lake. This meant that everybody now had to hike an extra couple of miles just to get to Poopout Hill, reinforcing the validity of that geographic place name.

The mules that were used in Idyllwild up until the last year did not make the trip to Barton Flats in 1959. At the new camp the Scouts had to carry everything that went with them into the backcountry on their backs. This was the beginning of the era of widespread use of dehydrated foods and lightweight equipment. Troops were expected to pack smarter and lighter when they went backpacking.

The second major difference between the two camps had to do with the size of the camp in Barton Flats and the number of activities available “in-camp.” At Idyllwild the camp served

primarily as a base camp for trips into the backcountry, a place to acclimate the Scouts for a few days before venturing into the higher elevations. At Barton Flats many more activities such as moskeet (the rifle range in later years), archery, and craft lodge were available, as well as a much more developed advancement program. Increasingly troops decided that they really didn't need to go backcountry to enjoy the camping experience.

It took several years for this mindset to evolve and other factors also played a part, including shifting demographics in Long Beach, a shrinking Scout population, and stricter rules governing minimum levels of adult supervision required for troops on camping trips (two-deep leadership).

In Idyllwild nearly every troop that went to summer camp went backcountry. In Barton Flats it became not at all unusual for troops to spend the entire week in camp. Prior to 1964 when the pool opened, all aquatics activities took place at Jenks Lake, which required a mile and a half hike—in both directions—along the “green arrow trail.” Boating and canoeing continued at Jenks Lake until 1972 when Tahquitz Lake was developed on the camp property. From that point forward it was no longer necessary to leave camp at all, except to go into the backcountry. More and more troops were deciding to stay in camp all week to take advantage of the program and advancement offerings and foregoing any backcountry trips.

Perhaps not coincidentally, 1972 was also the year in which the first climbing tower in the meadow made its debut. It was a huge and immediate success and provided yet one more reason to stay in camp.

In the 1960s there was still a lot of interest in backcountry hiking and camping. In fact, interest in the outdoors increased in the general population in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The San Gorgonio Wilderness offers a prime example of this. Twice in the early 1960s commercial interests tried unsuccessfully to push bills through Congress to allow construction of a ski lift and resort on the slopes of San Gorgonio above Dry Lake. One of the arguments was that the area was enjoyed by a very small number of hikers and campers and opening it to skiers would make it available to a much larger segment of the population. By 1969 however, popular interest in camping and backpacking had skyrocketed, resulting in a fivefold increase in the public's use of the San Gorgonio Wilderness. In the South Fork Meadows region alone, San Bernardino National Forest records reveal that visitation jumped from just 12,000 people in 1960 to 62,000 people in 1970. Many factors affected this increase and Long Beach Boy Scouts reflected the trend.

An Old Idea for a New Program

Although some troops were no longer going backcountry during their summer camp stays, there continued to be an interest among many Scouts in doing just that. In 1968 an idea was borrowed from old Camp Tahquitz in Idyllwild and a program of extended backcountry treks was offered to older Scouts. The program was dubbed the Mountain Man program. Burros were used to carry equipment and supplies into the backcountry for the groups. Rock climbing skills were taught in camp on a limited basis. Scouts learned how to rappel down the side of the water tank near Staff Area.

The Mountain Man groups were frequently made up of individual older Scouts who signed up for the program outside of their troops. They spent Monday through Friday in the backcountry, returning to camp by noon on Friday in order for the Tribesmen staffing the groups to attend the new member selections on the rock that afternoon. Many of the Scouts participating in the Mountain Man program were eligible for Tribe membership.

A special patch was developed for those who participated in the program. One goal of the program was to lure older Scouts back to camp for a second week, after spending a first week in camp with their regular troop. The Long Beach Area Council also marketed the Mountain Man program to other councils, particularly to older Scouts. Given the camp's proximity to the backcountry, it was a natural. The patch became something of a desired item, since you could only get it by going through the Mountain Man program. Scouts from other councils liked that!

Competing Interests

Beginning in the mid-1950s and continuing into the early 1960s, the Tribe's Indian lore program underwent a steady improvement in authenticity and took on a much more central role in the overall program. The development and growth of Spring Ceremonial after 1954 had a lot to do with this trend. By the mid to late 1960s the Tribe was as much an honored Indian lore group as it was an honor camper group, perhaps more so in some respects.

In the late 1960s an increasing conflict arose between those in the Tribe who wanted to stress the traditional Scouting activities of camping and hiking and those who were interested primarily in Indian lore.

By the early 1970s, Tribe members who were not particularly interested in Indian lore had few opportunities to pursue their hiking and camping interests within the group. One member in particular—ironically perhaps, one with strong interests in the Indian lore program as well—wanted to develop a program that would serve the interests of those other members. Allen Thomas began to promote his ideas through the Chief's Council in 1972.

The idea took hold and beginning in late 1973, during John Payne's year as Chief, a major project for the year was to develop a program to support and promote hiking, camping

and backpacking both within the Tribe and within the Long Beach Area Council.

In his first article as Chief, in the September 1973 *Runner*, John outlined the goal as follows: "One thing we are trying to do this year is to provide a different program or opportunity to suit everyone's interest. We are expanding our backpacking program and hopefully we will soon be making Tribesmen available to troops for help in setting up a troop backpacking program."

In his December 1973 *Runner* article, John expanded on the concept. "If you were at the last Tribe meeting you heard Keith Mollé talk about the new backpacking program we are trying to start in the Tribe. We would like to provide training to troops and posts in the Long Beach area in any of the backpacking related skills." Keith was the Chairman of the Chief's Council that year and John had assigned him the task of establishing the new program.

In the same issue, Keith Mollé wrote:

"This year the Tribe has organized a new PROGRAM OF BACKPACKING & INSTRUCTION. It is still in the planning stages, with very good response so far. It will consist of the Tribe offering instruction in any phase of backpacking to a troop. Also, if the troop wishes, the Tribe can help in planning a trip and going on it for practical instruction. What I want to start this year is a good foundation for next year's program. Also, I would like to promote the proper use of our wilderness areas and the enjoyment that can be received from backpacking. To accomplish as much as I can this year, I will need the support of the Tribe members. In the near future I will be contacting people for help, but right now I am asking you to talk about the program to your scoutmaster and to anyone else that might be interested in such a program."

By January 1974 development was progressing nicely and a feature that would later become a mainstay of the Tribe's Mountain Man program was set in place—the District Representative. In the January 1974 *Runner*, Chief John Payne announced:

The next thing that will really be keeping us busy is Camp Promotions. Four members of Chief's Council have been assigned as heads of each district, and they will need a lot of help. THIS MEANS YOU...

The following people are in charge of the districts. They will be calling you for help, but even if they don't, you should call them and volunteer.

Mike Emling – Alamitos District
 Mark McMillan – Polaris
 Keith Mollé – Lakewood District
 Rich Harris – Dan Beard

If you are interested in helping, (as I'm sure you are), give one of these people a call, particularly if you intend to be on Camp Staff.

In the June 1974 *Runner*, the following announcement appeared:

IMPORTANT*CONSTITUTION***IMPORTANT**

This year, the Tribe has undertaken a very important project: the organization of a fifth elected officer for the next Tribe year. The new officer will basically have the same duties the Chairman of Chief's Council has right now. He and the Medicine Man will be equal in the succession of officers. Some of the duties will include: Being in charge of the Tribe Backpacking Program, overseeing the staffs for all the Camp Promotion talks, in charge of Camporee staffs, and the current duties of the Chairman of Chief's Council. Overall he will be the Tribe officer in charge of all Camping and Scouting.

We will be voting on the adoption of this change in the constitution at the Annual Meeting and then, hopefully, electing the new officer at that time. We also need a name for the new officer—be creative and send any ideas or questions to Keith Mollé.

The constitutional and by-law amendments were ratified at the 49th Annual Meeting of the Tribe of Tahquitz on September 1, 1974. The name of the new officer was the one first proposed by Allen Thomas in 1972. Outgoing Chief John Payne thereupon opened the election of officers by nominating Keith Mollé to the office of Mountain Man for the preceding year in recognition of his efforts to organize the new program. Keith officially became the first Mountain Man, although he held that office for just a few minutes. Keith was subsequently elected Chief for the 1974-75 Tribe year. Charlie LeCain was elected as Mountain Man for the 1974-75 Tribe year, the first person to serve in that office for a full year.

Backpack Training

An important part of the new Mountain Man program was the planning and execution of a Backpack Training course. This course quickly took on the scope and importance of Spring Ceremonial.

The course was held in conjunction with the Council's High Adventure Team. Wiseman Larry Strom was a member of that team, and was High Adventure Chairman a couple of years before he became Tribe Advisor in 1980. The Mountain Man was also an ex-officio member of the High Adventure Team and the annual preparations for Backpack Training were always subject to review and approval by that group.

The course consisted of two Saturdays of instruction at Will J. Reid Scout Park, followed by a training hike. Both adults and Scouts of a minimum age, usually 13, could attend. It was mandatory for troops that wanted to go backpacking to have adults in their troop attend the course. Specifically, to

qualify for the various BSA Western Region hiking awards, like Broken Arrow and 50-Miler, the Troop had to have an adult leader on the hike that had completed the backpack training course put on by their local council.

Generally, a Scoutmaster and/or assistant would attend and bring along some of the older boys in the troop. Even though the course was mandatory in some ways for adults, there were always more Scouts. For example, if 10 troops participated in the course, there would probably be 15-20 adults and 40-50 Scouts.

It was as big an event for the Mountain Man as Spring Ceremonial was for the Medicine Man, and, like the ceremonial, required the participation of many Tribesmen and Honoraries for it to be successful. The Mountain Man would assign two or three Tribesmen to teach each training station on topics such as equipment, clothing, cooking, and map & compass. Participants attended the stations round-robin style.

As the program evolved, the manual each participant received became more sophisticated, including not just copies of second-hand literature but "write-ups" by the various station heads on each subject.

For example, Mountain Man Jim Evans decided to add a "weather" topic to his course in 1980, and asked John Hochhausler and Jeff Tylicki, who had worked on the Nature Staff at camp, to prepare the curriculum. They researched what was appropriate to teach in the context of backpacking and hiking, got some handout materials from sources like the National Weather Service, and wrote three to four pages of text for the manual. Looking back at those Backpack Training manuals today, it was quite an accomplishment for a bunch of 15- to 18-year-old boys.

The Tribe would borrow a lot of equipment from REI for the courses. The equipment station was a room filled with various types of sleeping bags, tents, and packs to demonstrate the differences between goose down and synthetic fibers, water proof materials, etc. The cooking station would have all the latest types of white gas and propane stoves, cook kits and samples of backcountry food. One of the later additions was a winter mountaineering station that displayed ice axes, special boots, and other related equipment.

The glory years of the course were roughly between 1979 and 1983. Jim Evans put together one of the best overall courses, with strong station personnel, a great training manual, and a good hike. Attendance peaked in 1982 when Bob Stradley was Mountain Man, with over 80 participants.

The training hikes were held in various locations over the years—San Gorgonio Wilderness if the course was later in the spring (after the snow started to melt) or closer, like the San Gabriel Mountains if it was earlier. In 1981, when Randy Miller was Mountain Man, the hike was held in Joshua Tree. (It was COLD.)

Following the high water mark of 1982, Backpack Training began a slow demise. The last one was put on by Brian Verbeck in 1987. As with most trends, the reasons were complex and factors in the broader Council played a role.

There was always an "adults only" session at each Backpack Training course taught by members of the High

Adventure Team. They discussed topics such as filing a tour permit, parent release forms, and driving regulations. However, in 1982 the council High Adventure Team decided it wanted to begin teaching an adult backpack training course separate from that for the youth.

The first year of the new format—1983—both programs were successful. Mountain Man John Hochhausler put on a good program that was fairly well attended, and the High Adventure Team had about 10-15 adults attend their training. After that however, both programs began sliding downhill rapidly.

By the middle 1980s there was a declining level of interest and experience among Long Beach Scout troops in backpacking. There were fewer and fewer Tribesmen who were qualified to teach the course. The decreasing interest among troops in backcountry programs, coupled with the lack of scoutmasters promoting the Tribe's course (some did continue to do so) accelerated the decline in Backpack Training attendance. The pool of adults the High Adventure Team had to teach their course was shrinking as well.

By 1987 the attendance had dwindled to fewer than 15. Tribe membership had also been declining during this period. It was not an isolated trend. The "baby bust" that followed the "baby boom" was partly to blame. The number of Tribe-age teenagers during the 1980s was at an all-time low. Scouting membership in Long Beach and across the country was in steep decline.

The Tribe Advisory Committee finally took the position that the Tribe was not serving the Council well with the Backpack Training course, so it was quietly discontinued. Not coincidentally, the last stage format of the Spring Ceremonial was presented in 1988, a year after the last Backpack Training.

The High Adventure Team continued with their adult course—it was still required for adults to take troops backcountry and qualify for hiking awards—but it was only a few more years before their attendance dried up as well, due to the fact that almost no troops were going backcountry anymore.

Mountain Men in the 90s and Beyond

As the number of Long Beach Scouts declined beginning in the 1970s, the number of districts was pared back. At one time in the 1960s there were six districts within the Council. By 1995 there were only two districts left in the Long Beach Area Council. In 1998 those two remaining districts—Montana and Alamitos—were combined into the single Los Fieros District. Declining Council registrations and finances necessitated the cut.

As districts were eliminated and combined over the years, the number of District Representatives working under the Mountain Man was likewise reduced. With only a single district there wasn't much point in having any District Representatives since the Mountain Man would presumably be able to cover the single district calendar himself.

And so, another facet of the Mountain Man program disappeared. Besides extending the reach of the Mountain Man throughout the Council, the District Representatives provided a fertile ground for aspiring Mountain Man candidates. Many of the Mountain Men over the years began as District Representatives under their predecessors. When the council returned to a two-district configuration in the early 2000s the old district representative system under the Mountain Man was not resurrected. A key link to the district committees was lost, as well as a sustained presence within the council.

As the Mountain Man program within the Council has dwindled, so has the program within the Tribe. Occasional trips to Joshua Tree and the rock gym in Long Beach for rock climbing, day hikes, bicycle trips, kayaking, skiing and other outdoor activities have marked recent years. These activities are largely just that—something for Tribe members to do during the year outside of the Indian lore program. The focus on providing training within the council has almost completely disappeared. Even participation on camporee staffs is no longer assured and it's not unusual for the Tribe to play no part at all at some camporees. Camp promotion presentations to local troops are also largely a thing of the past.