

Palavering with Edmund

Clang the Cowbell and Pass the Avawatzica

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THE PALM SPRINGS AREA HAS SPAWNED PLENTY OF UNIQUE RITUALS: The White Party, golf cart parades, the now defunct Desert Circus. There's one desert tradition, however, that's been around longer than any of the others—since 1954.

It's the Jaeger Palaver.

In last month's column we met Edmund C. Jaeger, a Palm Springs school teacher who inspired generations of naturalists to study desert tumblebugs and shovel-nosed snakes.

Jaeger is as important to the California deserts as John Muir is to the mountains. Yet his impact is mostly forgotten, except in a biannual event called the Palaver.

According to Webster's, to palaver is to talk. By Edmund Jaeger's definition it means to gab profusely. Outdoors.

The palavers got started through Jaeger's longtime habit of putting in hundreds of hours of "dirt time." He disdained new-fangled naturalists who spend all their time in labs and classrooms.

None of that for Jaeger. You could find him out camping with his students many weekends of his life. By one account, he went on 1,430 camping trips in 55 years.

In the fall of 1954, Jaeger put out a call to his former students and fellow naturalists to gather in the Mojave Desert's Lucerne Valley. Forty-eight people showed up for Palaver #1.

Entertainment consisted of observing the species *Edmundus desertus* in his natural habitat. "During the daylight hours he prowls the canyons and mesas and his interests extend from the tiniest insects to the largest of the desert mammals," wrote former Palm Springs Desert Museum director Lloyd Mason Smith.

In the evenings palaverites amused themselves by watching Jaeger cook dinner over two iron rods placed on rocks. "The various cooking utensils that form Jaeger's camping equipment all have individual names that only he can remember," wrote Smith. "The wash basin, for instance, is a cast-off iron differential plate, shaped like a soldier's helmet, and is called 'Corvus' because there were ravens near where he found it. The whittled wooden handle for the skillet is the Whoopy-Doop."

With the help of Whoopy-Doop, Jaeger concocted signature camp dishes such as kidney beans cooked in browned flour with tomato sauce. This delicacy Jaeger called "Avawatzica," after a desert snail discovered by biologist Stillman Berry of Redlands.

One palaver-goer says the most intriguing thing about the gatherings is that not a lot seems to be going on—on the surface, at least. "It's very simple. There's almost nothing to it. It's all about just understanding where you are," says James Bryant, curator of natural history for the Riverside Municipal Museum.

The gatherings begin with a ceremonial ringing of the cow bell Jaeger found years ago in Baja. There are Palaver Patches awarded for faithful attendees, along with the occasional rocket launching demo, pet show (one year someone brought an ocelot) and display of freeze-dried reptiles.

And of course there's a lot of discussion of desert botany, biology, geology and whatever else a bunch of guys palaver about since it is all guys.

All guys?

Jaeger believed women would subvert the attention of the budding naturalists. "He thought if we had the girls along we'd pay more attention to the girls than to the desert," says Jack Harris, a retired vegetable farmer from Riverside who rings Jaeger's cowbell at the palavers these days.

In 1983, at age 96, Jaeger attended his last palaver. After his death that same year, the palavers have continued each fall and spring with as many as 150 campers showing up. They leave no trace (Jaeger was big on this point), but there are ghosts of palavers past all over the local desert-in the Orocopia Mountains, Box Canyon, Corn Springs and at the fish traps near Valerie Jean, to name a few.

What's remarkable about the palaver is the way it's endured with little organization or publicity, no splashy headlines or slick brochures.

The grand tradition may be threatened, however, by tighter regulation of gatherings on public lands. At last year's palaver in the Chuckwalla mountains a ranger instructed the palaverites to disperse. Without a permit, he told them, they couldn't assemble more than 50 people on public lands.

It's ironic that the man who did so much to preserve and exalt the desert is now-symbolically-being tossed off the very land he loved. But for now, Palaver #99 is still on for the spring. (For more information on palavers visit www.jaeger.ws.)

So clang the cowbell and pass the Avawatzica.