



The Last  
**PIONEER**

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE  
LIFE OF "BILLIE" MURPHY  
TOLD THROUGH THE  
EYES AND HEART OF  
JEFF BOWMAN

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# PERCHANCE TO DREAM

LIGHT THE LAMP, TELL ME A  
STORY.  
FROM A LONG, LONG TIME  
AGO.  
BEHOLD THE WORLD IN ALL  
ITS GLORY.  
LISTEN TO AN OLD RADIO  
SHOW.

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE,  
THERE'S SURE TO BE FIRE.  
WATCH MY BACK WE GOT A  
JOB TO DO.  
ON THE CATWALK, THE  
WIND SHE DANCES  
DUSTY ROADS, THE SKY IS  
BLUE.

HELLO WORLD, I KNOW  
YOU'RE OUT THERE.  
I CAN SEE YOU IN THE  
STARS.  
HOLDING ON TO LOVE'S  
EMBRACE.  
SPREAD MY WINGS AND  
WATCH ME SOAR.

GOD I MISS THOSE CRAZY  
EVENINGS,  
MAKING FACES, LAUGH  
LIKE FOOLS.  
HERE TODAY, GONE  
TOMORROW.  
WHAT'S A POOR BOY LEFT  
TO DO.

THUNDER  
ROLLS, LIGHTNING  
CRACKLES,  
THERE ARE HARD THINGS  
YET TO KNOW.  
KEEP THE LIGHT THAT  
CARRIED THE FIRE,  
WARMED BY YOUR LOVING  
GLOW.



Reporter and Poetry-Jeffrey Bowman  
Photography-Barbara "Babs" Carlson, Miscellaneous  
Bowman and Murphy Family Members  
Edit Design Layout-Jeff Hopkins

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# THE DREAM

I'm standing next to her on the catwalk of the fire lookout at Keller Peak. We're laughing into the wind and she's teaching me to see. If I had made a secret wish for a Grandmother using my wildest imagination it would have been the one that God gave me...Billie. Our adventures in her red and white '57 Mercury, riding all night through the Indian country they call Tehachapi, heading down the road to Big Bear past the desert cactus, the filling stations and the Burma Shave signs that appeared in the middle of nowhere telling us that somebody out there had a mighty big sense of humor. She was magic, conjuring miraculous events out of the thin air high above Keller Peak. So many years ago...



**NOLADYLIKES**

**TO SNUGGLE**

**OR DINE**

**ACCOMPANIED BY**

**A PORCUPINE**

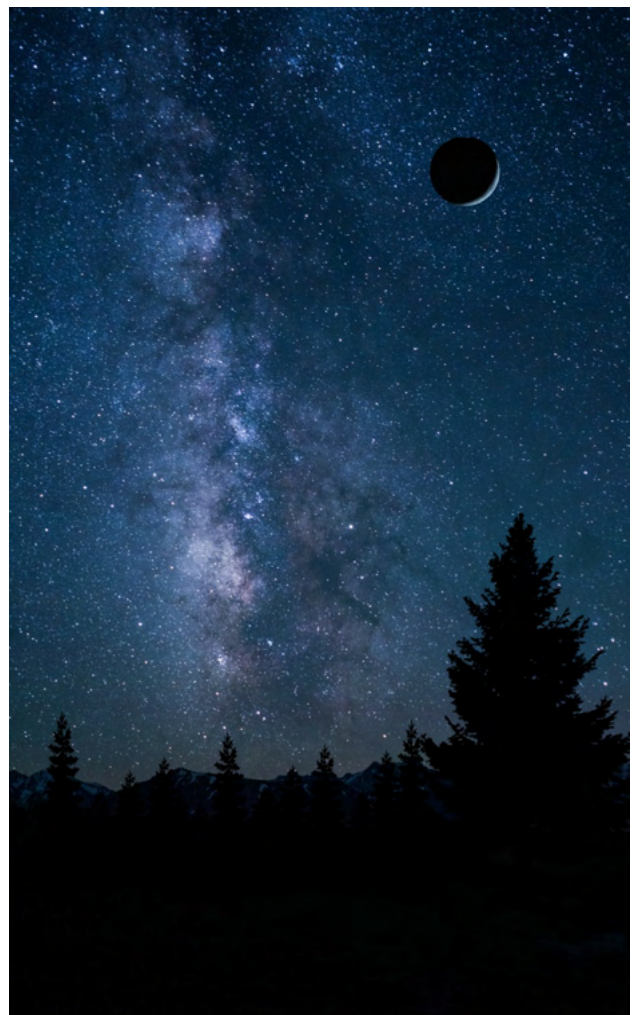
**Burma Shave**

I'm trying to dial in a signal on Grandma's old shortwave radio, a combination of electronic tubes, batteries and naugahyde that make up her government issued receiver. The smell of electricity fills the air and I'm excited. The kind of excitement only a seven year old can feel.



Way up past Running Springs at the lookout on top of old Keller Peak in the San Bernardino Mountains. The sun is setting as I dial away. My Grandmother Billie Murphy ignites our only source of light...her kerosene lamp.

The lamp flickers, throwing a soft warm blanket around an ocean of stars that is our room in the sky. Through the windows I can see a summer crescent moon. The tubes in the shortwave glow. Up against our glass portal they seem to dance in the dark, reflecting off the giant sky as we look through our translucent window to the universe. We are in a spaceship traveling inside the Milky Way. Everything in the evening night sky shimmers from thirty feet above Keller Peak. The flame from the lamp dances in between the stars like Wild Bill Hickock riding the range in search of evildoers.



At first there is more static than signal. I'm trying to dial it in, tweaking the dial, listening like a safe cracker on "The Shadow Knows." Then it happens, after much fine tuning the signal becomes stronger and I hear that dry high desert rasp of hers. "You've got it Jeffrey!"

Mrs. Wilma Murphy  
c/o Thomas Neff  
Arrowhead Ranger Station  
Skyforest, California

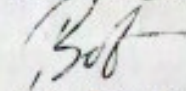
Dear Mrs. Murphy:

Here are some tear sheets on Earl Buie's column and the picture page about the lookout, together with prints of the photographs we took the other day.

Earl, photographer Curt Armstrong and I certainly enjoyed meeting you and hope that we may be able to pay another visit before the summer is finished.

We'll be envying you as the days grow warmer and the pace of newspapering keeps us in a state of jangled nerves.

Best regards,



Bob Geggie  
Editorial Department





**LOOKOUT**—High atop Keller peak is situated one of the most strategic lookouts on the San Bernardino National forest. From its vantage point more than 7,000 feet above the floor of the valley the valuable Santa Ana watershed may be observed. At right is pictured Mrs. Wilma Murphy, who for seven successive summers has manned the tower, accompanied only by her cocker spaniel, "Lady."





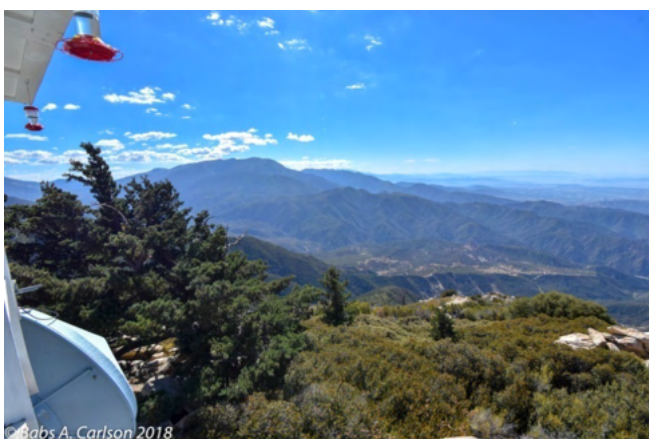
## THE FIRE LOOKOUT AT KELLER PEAK

From 1927 to 1981 the tower was manned by Forest Service personnel. From 1946 to 1969 that person was Wilma 'Billie' Murphy, my maternal Grandmother. In 1985, volunteers from the Rim of the World Interpretive Association manned the site. The lookout had received massive renovation at that point. In 1994 a Fire Lookout Host program was created to manage all the lookouts in that mountain range.

On SR-18 travel east of the Running Springs Village and immediately after Deerlick Fire Station turn right on Keller Peak Road (1N96). This 5 mile paved road is paved all the way to the lookout. At a fork in the road, turn right and drive to the lookout.

The lookout feels and appears about the same as it did in my childhood. It was built by members of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The site represents one of very few fire towers in California that were built before the Great Depression. If you were to visit today you would be rewarded with much the same view I had in the summer of 1957, which is spectacular.

According to information from the U.S. Forest Service, the peak was named for Ally Carlin Keller who was born in San Bernardino in 1868. He was, at one time, an employee of the Forest Service. The story goes that his father, Carlin Keller, was a native of Illinois who settled, farmed and logged the area somewhere around 1854. A Serrano Indian name for this peak was "Kaviktaviat," meaning "so very deep that it could not be climbed."





# BILLIE AND HER KIDS

When my Grandmother, Billie Murphy, was in her forty-sixth year she went to work for the United States Forestry Service. She became the first woman to operate a fire lookout tower in the San Bernardino Mountains. She was hired because she was a widow of an Army veteran, my grandfather Frank Murphy had fought in WWI. The United States Forestry Department had started a new program hiring widows of veterans from World War I and World War II to run their fire lookouts. My grandfather had had a heart attack while working a lookout in the San Bernardino Mountains called Strawberry Peak. So Frank Murphy had died on the job leaving my grandmother a widow with three children. The oldest was my mother Kathryn, everybody called her Peach, she was away at nursing school in Massachusetts. My Uncle Kenny was in the Navy and the youngest, my Uncle Richard, had yet to enter high school.



The Murphy clan lived in a small Mountain community in the San Bernardino Mountains called, Big Bear. All the bears had been killed off long ago, but the name stuck. My grandmother was glad to have the job and would keep it for the next 23 years.

In the summer of 1957 my mother was hospitalized and my Grandma was asked to take care of me.



# THE TRIP TO KELLER PEAK



Grandma Murphy picked me up at our house in Fresno. She had just bought a brand new 1957 red and white Mercury. My Dad greeted her at the door. He had taken the day off from work to wait with me for Grandma.

“Looks like your Grandma will be taking you down 99 in style son!”,



“Grandma, your car is amazing!” I yelled out as I ran past her to look at the car. I could hear laughing behind me as I ran towards

what had to be one of the wonders of the world. That car was so beautiful! I could hear them talking to each other from the front porch. My mom, dad and I lived at 3368 E. Ashlan Ave. in Fresno, California. Dad said we were exactly in the middle of the

state and the San Joaquin Valley was the “Bread Basket Of The World!” He was proud of that. He could make people laugh and he always had a smile on his face. He could really make my mom laugh. Their names were Bud and Peach. Dad liked to talk and mom liked to listen so I guess they were perfect for each other, at least that’s what Grandma said. She said that Dad was the best son-in-law a mother could ever want and they broke the mold after they made your dad. That always cracked me up. I told her I thought they broke the mold after they made my fourth grade teacher Mrs. Kinzle, except not in a good way. That made Grandma laugh.

They were talking but I couldn’t make out what was being said. They hugged and dad brought out my suitcase and pellet rifle. Grandma opened the trunk and Dad put it in.

“All right buddy, you’re going on a summer adventure!”

“Like Davy Crockett?”

“Yes sir! And pay attention to your Grandmother, she’s the last pioneer!” Armed with that bit of knowledge, the sound of my Mom’s voice in my head saying “pioneers have dirty ears”, a hug, and we were on our way.

“The whole summer?”

“What? Oh...yes, looks like.”

“Is mom gonna die?”

“No, your mother is not going to die. Your mom is strong she just needs time to...”

“Regurgitate?”

“Recuperate, my young Dr. Kildare.”

Highway 99 is long, flat and straight, at least between Fresno and Bakersfield it is. On the highway between cities and towns there are long stretches of oleanders that are in between the oncoming traffic. Heading south from Fresno we went through Goshen, the Visalia turnoff, and then Tulare. While we were traveling Grandma told me about her adventure coming to pick me up.

Grandma: “I never drive at night but the dispatch got a hold of me out of Running Springs and relayed the message that your mother was in the hospital and I needed to come and get you. I asked for time off so I could come pick you up. I don’t like driving at night but I went back to the cabin in Big Bear and picked up some clothes and headed to where the headlights from the oncoming traffic seemed to be heading straight at me, so I thought to myself I better pullover before I kill myself or somebody else. I found a

motel by the side of the road and parked my fanny there for the rest of the night. I called and picked you up this morning. There was a little hiccup on the way down the mountain.”

“No, I mean a little problem.”

“Do you understand what being patient means?”

“Sure! That’s how Dad says Mom is with me! Patient.”

“Ha! Well, when driving two lane roads up in mountains you need a whole lot of patience. Does that make sense?”

“You mean you got to be careful?”

“Yes sir! Real careful. And honestly, Jeffrey, most folks aren’t that careful. They drive like they’re in a hurry and got some real important things to do. But if they don’t make it, it wasn’t that important, was it?”

“So you had a hiccup.”

“Ha hey! Yes, sir. I suppose it was a bigger hiccup for the fellow that was tailgating me coming down the mountain. I told you I don’t like to drive at night, but there I was with the sun going down, visibility not too great and this man driving right on my bumper. I’d pulled over for him but we hadn’t hit a turnoff. Sure enough it happened. When I finally did see a turnoff so I could let this yokel around, wouldn’t you know it on my side of the road was a big old boulder.

Just like I always tell you, “you got to be ready for anything driving up in the mountains.”

“So what happened, Grandma?”

“Well, I pulled over and this dang fool gunned his engine and ran right up on that boulder. He was stuck there

like an upside down turtle. My eyes became big.”

“Holy mackerel, Grandma was he hurt?”

“No, just stuck. And I just kept on going, I had to pick you up. Now is that not a heck of a dang deal?”

“You thirsty, Grandma?”

“Well, I guess I am. You didn’t see that Giant Orange stand sign that we just passed, did you?”

“Can a sign make you thirsty?”

”That’s why they make them!”

“Can we turn off at the next one?”

It’s not too far. And, do they have hamburgers and fries?”

“My, you are thirsty!”

Grandma pulled into the giant orange stand just off the highway. She was right, of course. I was hungry and a cheeseburger with fries plus an orange drink... That’s really going to hit the spot. In 1957 giant orange stands were everywhere up and down the 99. Dad had also put in the trunk of the car my new pellet rifle, which I’d only taken out to the country with

Dad once. We shot at tin cans and a target that Dad bought at the five and dime. Dad wasn't too big on guns, although he had one from World War II he kept in a box with some ribbons and medals. He showed me one time when I was asking him about what he had done in the war. I could tell he didn't like talking about it. And the fact that the box was put away made me think it wasn't a very big deal to him. My favorite thing to do was play cowboy, I liked all the cowboy shows on television like Gun Smoke and Wanted Dead or Alive. I always had some kind of toy sixgun and a cowboy hat, so going to live with Grandma in the actual mountains was about the coolest thing ever. Except for the fact that mom was sick, that wasn't so good.



*Photo courtesy of Brian Johns Photography, 2007*

From the tape of Billie telling family stories in San Juan Capistrano, Ca., 1978: *The time you spent the most time was when your mother was operated on. Anyway, I took off in the evening and you know I never ever used to drive at night but I asked for the time off and (I went home got some clothes and) started to Fresno, at night, (and I drove as far as Tulare.) It got to where every car that came toward me looked like they were coming right at me so I thought well to avoid (I may be killing) myself or somebody I better quit. So I stopped*



*in Tulare at a big motel at the side of the road (and got a room for the rest of the night.) And I called Bud and he told me then what was wrong. So I went into your place it was where you set the house on fire. And he'd been in the house for several days and he'd been taking you for hamburgers. So I said the only thing I know to do is take him back to the lookout because I have to go back...*



## Rattlesnakes and Crop Dusters

My grandmother Billie Murphy killed, dispatched, or otherwise did away with a number of diamondback rattlesnakes while on the job as a fire lookout at Keller Peak. She kept a board with the rattles from the unfortunate snakes that had crossed



her path over the years, mostly on her trips to the outhouse. The rattles hung on the board on a wall next to the shortwave radio, a tangible testimony to the fierceness of my grandmother's will. This was the stuff of legend in the Murphy and Bowman families. I wanted to kill a rattlesnake with my daisy pellet gun and bag a Western diamondback just like Grandma. I had gotten the pellet rifle for Christmas after much heated debate between my mom and dad. My TV heroes: Davy Crockett; The Rifleman; Zorro; Wild Bill Hickok; and my favorite, Gun Smoke's Marshall Matt Dillon. Of course there were many more, the Wild West ruled television in the 1950s.

So it was with great anticipation we made the journey to Keller Peak. Highway 99 between Fresno and Bakersfield was flat with endless fields of cotton or the occasional grape vineyard. What you could always count on was the air show of crop dusters that dotted the air space on the daytime journey riding shotgun, rumbling through the fertile San Joaquin Valley. We would continue on our journey through Tehachapi heading towards the Mojave Desert.

## And So It Goes

Heading south on Highway 99, one of the biggest forms of entertainment was the crop dusters. A crop duster was mainly used to apply sulfur, a fungicide that helped control powdery mildew and pests on table grapes, known as the Thompson seedless variety. They also dusted tomatoes, potatoes, corn and sugar beets – all common crops in the 1950s in the San Joaquin Valley.

As the plane flew over the fields, the sulfur was air driven through the distributor on the bottom of the plane directly onto the fields. A glass window in the front of the cockpit allowed the pilot to monitor the amount of material left in the hopper. A Crop duster was an aircraft used for dusting or spraying large acreages with pesticides. It was an aerial ballet of major proportions.

We arrived at the Peak just before sunset and that evening I had my first

encounter with Grandma's shortwave radio and the radio shows that would change my life.

That night we listened to The Shadow Knows, a mystery show that had the scariest sounds I had ever heard in my life.

That night, and every night thereafter while I lived with my Grandmother, we would perform the same ritual. Grandma would light her kerosene lamp, I would go sit on my bed, she would turn on the shortwave radio and dial in a radio show. Over the summer we would listen to The Shadow Knows, Wild Bill Hitchcock, Gun Smoke, The Lone Ranger, The Cisco Kid, Jack Benny and so many, many more.

Thus began my magical summer with my Grandmother, Billie Murphy. We would survive lightning storms, have shootouts with rattlers in the outhouse, listen to old radio shows as we watched the stars in the night sky, and meet the wild assortment of characters, human and animal, that inhabited Billie's mountain world.

In subsequent issues I will explore, reminisce, and tell you true stories as best as I can remember in The Last Pioneer. To be continued...

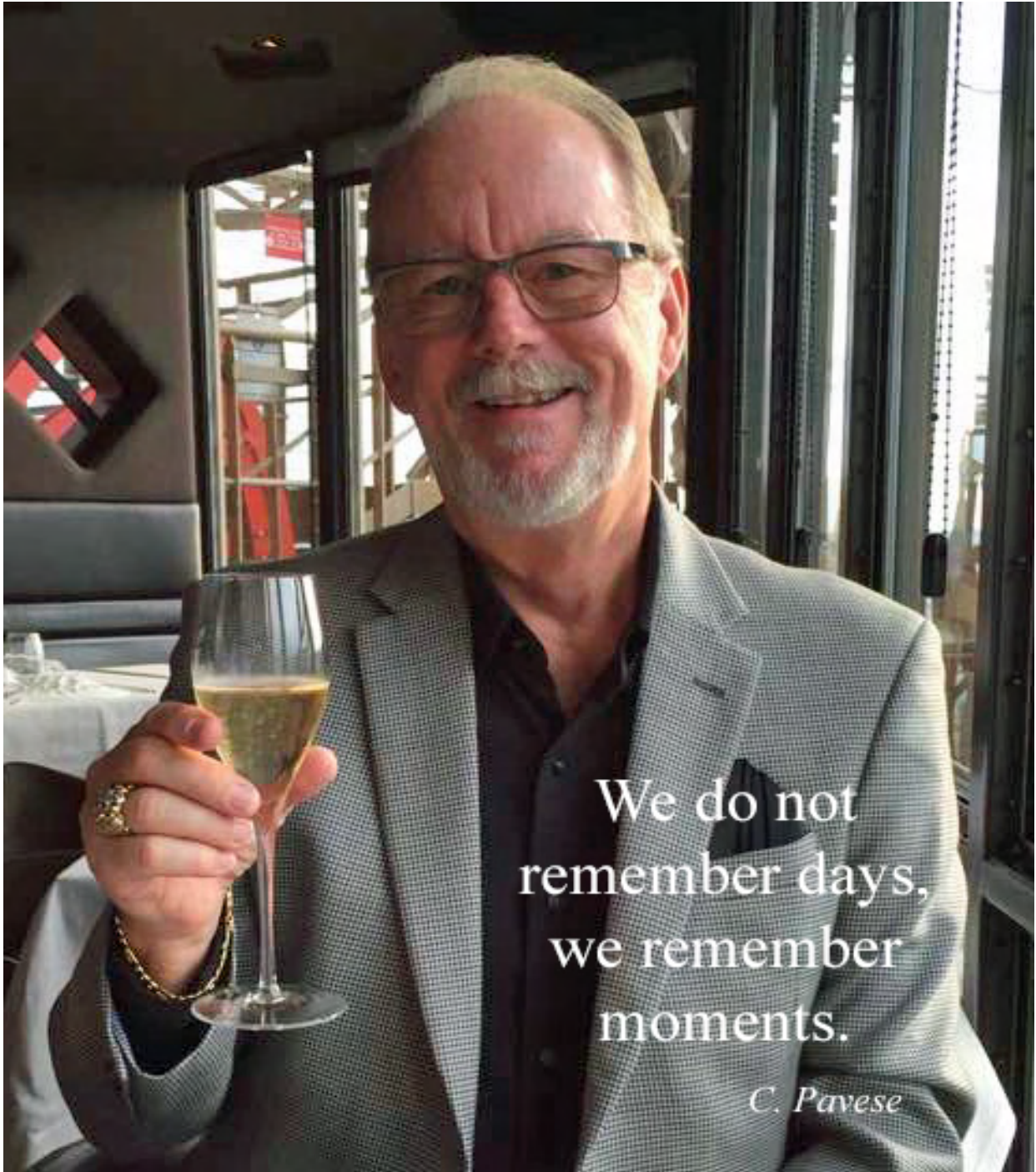
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Listen to "Bud, Peach & Billie."

By: Jeff Bowmen.

Link: [http://y2u.be/zU\\_hrRDJCNM](http://y2u.be/zU_hrRDJCNM)





In Loving Memory

Mike Murphy



Never shoot a  
rattler  
in the outhouse!



## **The Author**



**Jeff Bowman lives in Fresno, California with his cat Blade. He writes stories, makes films, plays and records music, and tells an occasional tall tale to anyone who will listen.**