

# Meet – Chalfant of Inyo

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*Desert Magazine* – April 1943

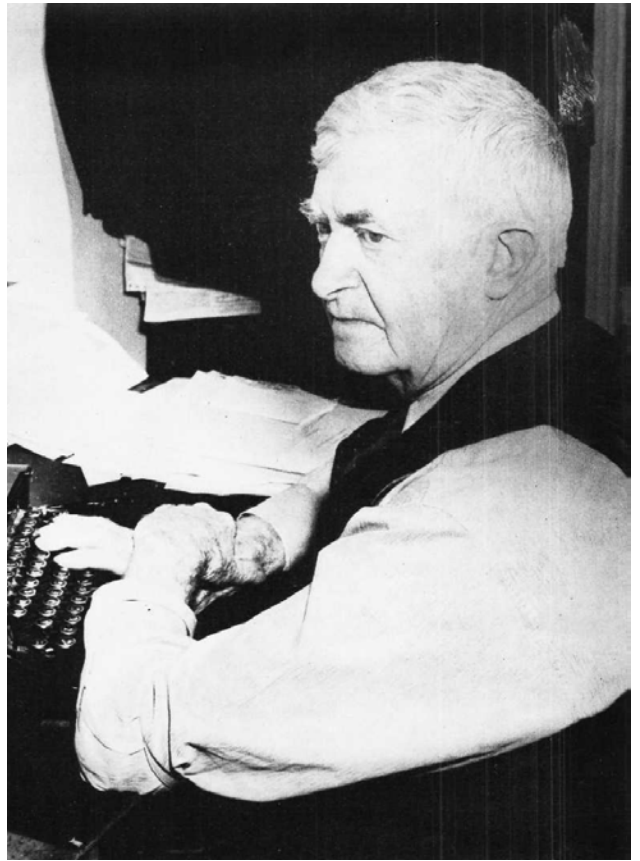
Meet Bill Chalfant dean of newspapermen, first citizen of Inyo. For half a century he has recorded the life of his desert community in the pages of "The Inyo Register" at Bishop, California. His career started before he was six, when he composed and printed his first card. At eight, he ventured into his first publication, "The Juvenile Weekly." Since those days he has become known as the First Country Editor of the desert country. Here is a part of his story. Much more of it is recorded in the 50-year file of his newspaper and in the books he has written about the land which proudly claims him.

In the northwest corner of Inyo county in east central California is the town of Bishop. East of it stretch, the bare peaks of the White Mountains. Against its western sky is spread the saw-toothed grandeur of the High Sierras. Nearby flows the Owens river.

Highway 395 is one with the main street, and, as you travel north, a little past the center of the town, you will see a small building labeled "The Inyo Register." In the big window you will notice a haphazard collection of mineral specimens, and inside, against the north wall, a desk, in the clutter of which the paper's editor maintains that he can lay his hand on anything he wants. If you are lucky you may even discover that white-haired gentleman with blue eyes which strive to bide their twinkle. He is W. A. Chalfant, country editor, dean of newspapermen, and first citizen of Inyo. I want you to meet him.

If you are a newspaperman, you know him. If you are not, you doubtless know his record. The California papers told the story back in 1939. One evening of that year the Bishop Rotarians motored down to Lone Pine for dinner with the Lone Pine Lions. The occasion was a golden anniversary. The speaker was the widely loved "Padre of the Desert," Father John J. Crowley. The man whose record he recounted was his close friend. The gift presented was a desk set of Death Valley onyx and gold on which was inscribed:

"To W. A. Chalfant, after fifty  
years of living, writing, and  
publishing Inyo's story.  
Bishop Rotarians  
Lone Pine Lions."



W. A. Chalfant still works at his desk, where he has edited the story of Inyo for half a century.

Shortly after, and by special invitation, Chalfant was initiated at the University of Southern California into Sigma Delta Chi, national journalistic fraternity. This was in recognition of his more than 50 years at the same editorial desk. This was part of the story in the newspapers which recognized him officially as dean of newspapermen in California.

Now, time has called the desert priest from his desert circuit to the Unseen Heights; War has called the young fraternity brothers to every section of the earth; but, at his friendly desk, Chalfant still lives, writes, and publishes Inyo's story.

Bill Chalfant's tale does not begin with Toyo. It does not even begin with Chalfant's birth. It begins, rather, on a September day in Utah in 1849 when the personnel of several wagon trains gathered west of Salt Lake City to confer about the route. More than 100 wagons were there, and there were three main groups. Jefferson Hunt met with them as their guide. Without frills he told them of the gaunt and dangerous days ahead. He could promise safety only if they followed him southward into California by way of Cajon pass.

But one group, young adventurers from Illinois who called themselves the Jay-hawkers, had heard of a more northern route through the Sierras via Walker's pass. One group, "The San Francisco Party" preferred to go straight west. As a result the party split three ways. The first followed Jefferson safely into Southern California. The second encountered tragedy in Death Valley. The third, "The San Francisco Party," traveled slightly southwest across Nevada and entered California northwest of Reno over Beckwourth pass. In that group was a young man named Pleasant Arthur Chalfant. The story began with him.

He came primarily for gold, and did his first digging at Bidwell Bar near Oroville. Somewhat later on Indian Creek in Idaho he ran a sawmill among hostile Indians. In Idaho, too, he found his wife and came with her to live in Virginia City, Nevada, where Mark Twain was reporter on the "Territorial Enterprise." And here in 1868 was born the first of eight children, a son whom they named Willie Arthur Chalfant.

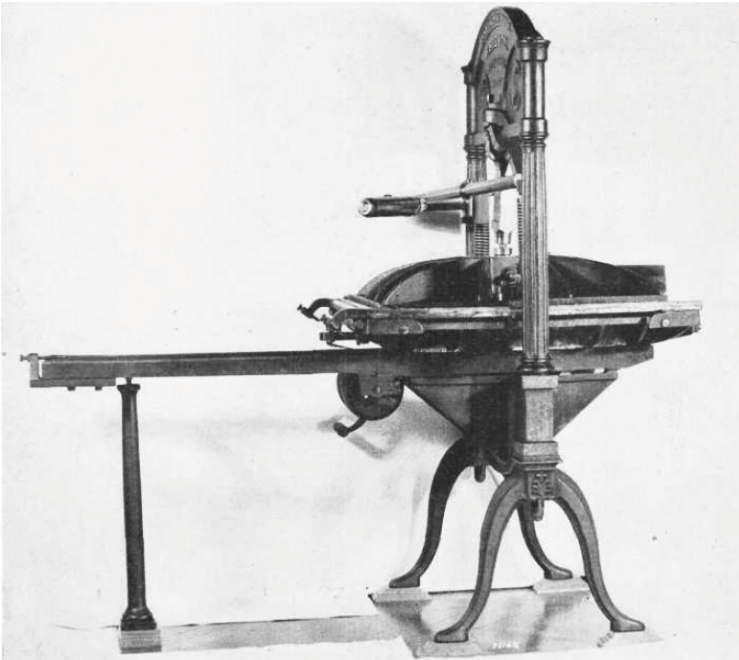
Two years later the little family moved to Independence in Owens Valley, California, and there in 1872, with his half brother J. E. Parker, Pleasant Arthur Chalfant began publication of the "Inyo Independent."

They bought their press from the Esmeralda Union in Aurora, Nevada. It was the first press in Owens Valley, and the third in California. And before it reached Independence it had made a record of its own. It was a Washington press made by R. Hoe and Co. of New York, and some time before 1848 it was sent to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. There Judge J. Judson Ames used it to print "The Dime Catcher," a Whig paper supporting Zachary Taylor for President. In 1849, stricken with gold-itch, Ames headed with his press for California by way of the Isthmus of Panama. Ames made it across the isthmus all right, but his press was accidentally dumped into the Chagras River. Fished out and cleaned, it paused in Panama to print for Ames "The Panama Herald."

But gold was calling, so the two sailed for San Francisco where they got out the issues of the "Placer Times and Conscript." Next the inseparable pair went to San Diego and printed the early writings of humorist John Phoenix in the "San Diego Herald." The little machine's next home was the Mormon outpost San Bernardino where Ames put out "The San Bernardino Herald." Ames died here, and Major E. A. Sherman took over the press to publish "The Patriot" which -- being a Union paper in a Confederacy-minded community -- failed. So, overland to Aurora, Nevada, went Sherman and press to

join with a man named Freaner in publishing the Esmeralda "Star." In 1864 the ownership changed hands and the "Esmeralda Union" came to life. The old press did its last work on "The Inyo Independent."

On it young Willie Chalfant began to learn his trade. The pressroom occupied the upper story of the Chalfant house which, though severely shaken, survived the great earthquake of 1872. Before Willie Chalfant saw a First Reader he had learned to read type. Before he was six he had composed and printed his first card. At eight, on a small press which his father gave him, he ventured into his first publication.



The old Washington press, now in the Edison museum in Dearborn, Michigan.

This was the first press in Owens Valley,  
the third in California –  
And with it the Chalfant Press began

"It was a sheet six inches square," Mr. Chalfant told me, "and I called it 'The Juvenile Weekly.' But," he added with the twinkle showing, "it didn't last long."

In those days getting out a newspaper was not the lightning clatter of machinery that it is today. It was a matter of setting and inking type by hand, of printing papers one at a time on one side of the sheet, then resetting type and repeating the process on the other side. Folding, too, was done by hand. So there was plenty of work for an interested son.

Hence, it was no cub who at 13 began to print his own weekly, "The Owens Valley Newsletter," which lived for several months. In

1881 Pleasant Arthur Chalfant sold his share of the "Independent" and moved to Bishop. Bill Chalfant remained in Independence as compositor on the paper. When shortly the owner failed, he lost the \$180 due him in wages, and went to Bishop, too.

Inyo county was still young. It was but two years older than the younger Chalfant, and it was feeling its oats in mining discoveries, the most important of which was the Cerro Gordo in the mountains southeast of Lone Pine. These discoveries brought in gold seekers, but with them came men in search of homes. To them, farming, not mining, spelled the future of Owens Valley. So they took up homesteads, fought the native Pahutes, and prepared their land for farming. "All that is needed," said one paper of the day, "is capital and population to make this the richest valley in California, if not in the world."

That was optimistic, but it was not fantastic. Owens Valley stretched long and wide and gently sloping in the shelter of great mountains, and all down its length was the water fed by High Sierra snows. Game abounded in the heights. Fish were plentiful. Wealth lay just beneath the covers of the hills. The water needed only a minimum of harnessing to conserve the flow and make this a farming paradise. But even then, Pleasant Chalfant was fighting individual efforts to monopolize the area.

In 1885 the Chalfants again went into newspaper work, initiating "The Inyo Register." Willie Chalfant was full partner. The younger members of the family were typesetters and helpers. Then in

1886 the father was elected assessor of Inyo County, and the editorship of the paper fell to the son. Three years later he began his long career when he became sole owner and editor.

It has been said of Pleasant Arthur Chalfant that his heart was so full it kept his pocket empty. He spent much of his salary for the taxes of unfortunate friends. It is said, also, that he was honest, independent and fearless. Inyo citizens use these words in speaking of the son. Add to that heritage a wide sweep of valley, granite mountains holding lakes and forests in their pockets, and a pioneering spirit, and you have the Chalfant background. It makes you think about the story of The Great Stone Face.

"Chalfant leaned over backward to be honest with himself," is the way his brother-in-law put it. "Nobody with shady schemes got their advertising in his paper, no matter what they tried to pay. He never budged from that rule."



Mr. and Mrs. Chalfant on their golden wedding anniversary in September, 1942

But he was not stern. As a young man he joined in all the activities of the young people. He played the cornet, led the town band, and especially liked to dance. After his marriage in 1892 to Miss Flora Mallory -- a school teacher from Nevada -- he became an active force in community life as club man, lodge man, and business man.

Late in the nineties, neither the Chalfants nor anyone else thought much about it when a young woman, whose husband had failed to support her, came with her abnormal child to teach English at Inyo academy. She taught the younger Chalfant children and wrote stories for "The Youth's Companion." Then she wrote a book called "The land of Little Rain." After that the world knew Mary Austin.

By this time Owens Valley had progressed considerably. There were no longer Indian wars. Mining was satisfactory. Farming was coming to the front, and all eyes were turned upon a farming future.

Before ever there was a reclamation act, enterprising homesteaders had located eight reservoir sites and had sought government permission to build dams for storage and irrigation. Hence, it was no surprise to them to learn that government engineers, sent out to study western lands for irrigation, placed Owens Valley near the top because of the ease and comparatively small cost with which it could be irrigated. Willingly they relinquished the rights to their dam sites to the government, confident that if anything interfered with the completion of the project their rights would be restored to them.

But already an individual, who had coveted the water of Owens river since 1892, was making plans to use that water to irrigate private land of which he was part owner. No one in Owens Valley knew this, nor did they suspect that an important government engineer, interested also in this private land, was soon to play his part in this plan. In 1904 the engineer reported to Washington that the city of Los Angeles desired to divert Owens Valley water to itself.

True, the city did want the diversion, but by constructing storage dams to prevent waste, there was enough water for both Owens Valley farmers and Los Angeles. However, north of the city lay the rich but very dry plain of San Fernando Valley. Here was the privately owned land for which the water was wanted. The full story of how that objective was achieved is told in Chalfant's revised "The Story of Inyo." In this book, with all its evidence carefully documented, you realize that even in recording the betrayal of his people, Chalfant has bent over backward to be honest.

Throughout this period Chalfant fought for Inyo, both by his editorials and by active participation. He fought bitterly and fearlessly for Inyo; yet, he fought his own people as fearlessly when they would have resorted to destruction.

Besides the Story of Inyo, he has written three other books. "Death Valley: The Fact" is an authority on its subject. "Outposts of Civilization" is a historical record of people and events beyond the bounds of Inyo county. His latest book "Tales of the Pioneers" is just off the press. It is what its title proclaims -- little-known factual stories of early Nevada and California days.

Writing is of necessity a lonely business, but Chalfant is gregarious. So, he joined the Knights of Pythias, of which he is still a member. He became a Mason, and for more than 40 years he has been secretary of Winneduma Lodge F. & A. M. In 1929 he became a charter member of the Bishop Rotary club, and from then to now he has not missed a meeting. So proud are his fellow Rotarians of this record that once when he was ill they held their meeting at his bedside. Thus was the record kept intact. In addition he is chairman of the advisory board of the Bank of America in Bishop, and, although he has never owned a car himself, he is on the advisory board of the Automobile Club of Southern California.

In January, 1942, he sold "The Inyo Register" to George W. Savage and Roy L. French, publishers of the "Lone Pine Progress-Citizen" and "The Inyo Independent." To honor the name of Chalfant, they designated the combined enterprises "The Chalfant Press." They retained W. A. Chalfant as editor of "The Inyo Register with complete freedom of opinion. It is an interesting fact that in a recent primary election "The Inyo Register" supported a candidate opposed by the other two papers of the Chalfant Press.

Last September the Bishop Rotarians had another of several special dinners given in Chalfant's honor. This time, however, the two Chalfants were summoned to a "Ladies' Night, only to discover that while all the Rotary Anns were present, they were there to celebrate another golden anniversary -- this time of their wedding. At this meeting the speaker was John B. Long, manager of the California Newspaper Publishers' Association, and he said in closing:

"Angel's Camp had its Mark Twain, the Valley of the Moon its Jack London, San Francisco its Bret Harte, and Owens Valley has its Bill Chalfant.

He does belong to Owens Valley -- to all of Inyo. He is its pride. And it belongs to him -- it is his only child -- and he has given his lifetime to living, writing, and publishing its story.

And his work goes on. Savage and French have been called from the valley by the war. Heavy responsibility again has been laid across the Chalfant shoulders. But, veins still flowing full of printer's ink, he continues as he has for the past half century.

"It's what I'll always be doing," he said simply, "and always for Inyo."