

# The first show: art and garden

By Frank Healy

Most agree Art in the Redwoods (AIR) began 50 years ago in 1961, but there are different versions about where it began.

Betty O'Neil and Kathy (Rubel) DiMaio, honorees at this year's Top Hat dinner, were there. Both remember that the 1961 AIR took place in the Gualala Community Center.

O'Neil, an ardent gardener, was inspired to set up a show at the Community Center after attending the Oakland Flower Show. It took weeks for planning and decorating. An artificial redwood tree dominated the center of the Community Center floor. A wood framework was covered in bark donated by Norm Reuter. Fresh cut branches formed the limbs.

Around the central tree, flower arrangements by Jesse Cranston, Bertha Ohlson, Kathy DiMaio and Mae Enos sat on bark covered frames built to resemble tree stumps. Works from local artists hung by O'Neil were displayed along the walls.

Refreshments consisted of homemade cakes and desserts served with coffee.

No prizes were awarded at that first successful event.

Like the symbolic redwood centerpiece in 1961, AIR has grown from a tiny idea in the minds of two women to a major annual August weekend for visitors, vendors and artists. It also is integrally linked to Gualala Arts, an organization with more than 1,600 annual activities,

and it helped spur the effort to create the current Art Center building.

In recent years the four-day event includes the Top Hat dinner, a champagne preview, a vendor fair, and the exhibit of fine art. The origin of all these activities can be found in previous shows. The landscaped Gualala Arts Center grounds echo the garden emphasis of that first show.

The honorees of this year's Top Hat Dinner are most fittingly the two women who started it all — Betty O'Neil, now 85, and Kathy DiMaio, 84. Those who thought the original show was hung in the redwoods on the ridge or at Grandpa Charlie's Park on Gualala Ridge, or in Jessie Cranston's garden might want to come to that dinner and hear the story from this year's honorees.



Redwood bark was attached to wooden tables and display stands. Photo courtesy Betty O'Neil.



Bonsai entries were featured in the second show in Gualala. Photo courtesy Betty O'Neil.



Garden and flower displays were a major part of the first show in 1961. Photo courtesy Betty O'Neil.



Most of the art was by local artists. Photo courtesy Betty O'Neil.



Even from the first, it was a big event for the town of Gualala. Photo courtesy Betty O'Neil.



The second show had a Japanese theme. Photo courtesy Betty O'Neil.



Wood sculpture was included in the first shows, along with watercolors and oils. Photo courtesy Betty O'Neil.



The first shows brought the outdoors in. Photo courtesy Betty O'Neil.



Flowers from local gardens filled the Gualala Arts Center. Photo courtesy Betty O'Neil.

## The early years

By Frank Healy

The many versions of where the original Art in the Redwoods (AIR) was held stem from the fact that before finding a permanent home at its current location at the Gualala Arts Center numerous venues were used.

The successful inaugural event on the last weekend of July in 1961 was repeated the following year in the same building with a Japanese motif for the garden show concept.

Floral displays and plant sales were a major part of the first decade of AIR so outdoor settings in gardens seemed quite natural. Several locals have stated that Jessie Cranston's Anchor Bay garden and redwood grove was the original venue, but further research indicates the show moved there in its third year when art truly was hung in the redwoods.

Another venue besides Cranston's Anchor Bay garden was at the top of Pacific Woods Road in "Grandpa Charlie's Park" named by Dorothy and Charlie Young's grandchildren. Eventually, problems caused by morning dew and tree resin resulted in a return to the community center.

By 1969 the Independent Coast Observer, then a monthly publication in its first year, reported AIR was again being held at the Gualala Community Center. The paper reported that 160 entries were being judged for painting, sculpture, and stitchery. That year the event became a two-day affair.

Local artist Michael Mathay's metal sculpture "Birds" won the Best in Show award and Wayne McQueen's ceramic casserole took second prize. The garden aspect continued with a sale of flowering plants suitable for the local climate. A hot lunch was available and admission for adults was 50 cents.

Even before AIR started, Gualala Arts was formed to promote local artists and to provide a social venue for its members who organized AIR and exhibited both flowers and art pieces there. Through the sale of plants and food, AIR became a means to raise money for Gualala Arts, which became a 501 (c) (3) corporation in 1965.

Although details about the early years remain sketchy, AIR definitely became an annual summer fixture that grew bigger every year. To this day many features remain. Judges from the outside art world judge the entries and cash prizes are awarded. The annual raffle always offered a quilt as the grand prize. The date became the third weekend in August. Local businesses started sponsoring various awards.