HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT • <u>WWW.HSPD.ORG</u>



# An interview with Palm Desert founder Cliff Henderson recorded on Wednesday December 19<sup>th</sup> 1979 by Patricia Young

It's my understanding that this interview concerns the post war community of Palm Desert, which I had the pleasure of founding. My background is actually in aviation, rather than land development, but the opportunity seemed to be just too wonderful. The dry climate, surrounded by the beautiful mountains, it's about twelve miles from Palm Springs, it has the convenience of city life, and yet the rural aspects of desert living, it's a wonderful place to live and retire. There are so many fine substantial and successful individuals, both men and women, who have chosen Palm Desert for their retirement. It may be of interest to you, to know how I happened to come to the area in the first place; I've been a long-time personal friend of Edgar Bergen, and he has a ranch close by, and so it was at Edgar's invitation that I came down here for a weekend. The area offered an opportunity that anyone with an imagination couldn't fail to appreciate.

People have occasionally asked me about "Palm Village," which was a development on the north side of highway 111, but it was just a bankrupt subdivision, one or two houses built and a gas station, and that was about it. There was no clubhouse or anything, it was just vacant lots. It had all pretty much been abandoned, somebody still had title to it, but it was a total failure. We never tried to draw a demarcation line, and so as Palm Desert began to grow and succeed, there was growth over there on the Palm Village side too. There were some liquidation lots available, so if someone wanted to buy property cheaply they could buy a lot at Palm Village was never thought to be second class area. But since there wasn't any planning or control, some of the houses that were built there were little more than shacks. Palm Desert had strict architectural control, architects had to submit their plans to our committee, and we'd look them over, and it's like that today; you can't just build a little shanty, or a little shack of some kind in Palm Desert.

After I had made up my mind to build a community here, the next step was to purchase about sixteen or seventeen parcels of land, and it all had to be contiguous 'cause it was going to be a complete community along Highway 111 with convenient shops and stores, service stations, doctors, etc. During the three or four months that the land was being quietly acquired from various individuals, and since I had no personal background in community planning, I acquired the services of Tommy Thompson, a nationally known land planning engineer. All of the rules had to be adhered to, all the streets and sidewalks and everything had to be legitimate, because I knew that eventually the community would be incorporated as a city. The initial plan included fine roads and boulevards, two or three parks and playgrounds for a full life for the members of a family.

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This has all come to pass, with a golf course, tennis courts, and the land given for a grammar school that has been in operation for several years now. There's also a prospect for a high school midway between Palm Springs and Indio, and we are providing land for the projected high school. It's just a matter of time as to when the population growth will dictate when the construction of the high school will begin. I wasn't able to buy all the parcels I wanted because Raymond Wilson wouldn't sell to us, although Palm Desert made him a lot of money. Raymond never contributed any money, but he got a big price for his lots. His lots were in demand, 'cause they were located along El Paseo. I was able to pick up a total of eighteen small parcels, someone had sold two or three acres of land, but nothing had ever happened, so the owners got tired of making the payments and sold to me, but it took some doing to get them all together in one total property.

One thing that was different from other communities was that Palm Desert was centered around the elegant *Shadow Mountain Club* which was constructed immediately with a huge figure eight swimming pool, a beautiful club house, a golf course, six tennis courts, as well as stables for horses. The stables were off to themselves, my older brother had a business in Santa Monica, and he sold a few lots to a very enthusiastic horseman and he brought some of his horses down here. At one time they had six or eight horses and they'd have a ride around the desert about once a month. This was all described in our brochures, and those brochures included photographs of the facilities, so these were not just dreams and promises for the future but had already been built to be enjoyed by the first families to buy homes and live in the new Palm Desert community.

There was also entertainment at the club restaurant, we had Art and Dotty Todd who were a trio with their bass player, Dotty played the piano, Art played the banjo and guitar, and they always brought a bass player with them and they would all harmonize, they made tremendous music for just a little trio, and people came from miles around to have an evening with them. Art and Dotty often played until two o'clock in the morning, they were a lovely couple with tremendous talent with their instruments as well as their vocals, I think they're in Honolulu now, but we brought them back here several times. "Chanson d'amour" was their theme song, and they sold lots of records with that song, it was the song that made them famous. They were at the Shadow Mountain Club for several years. The Club proved to be very successful providing a wonderful social life for families, and even though it was a high-class club, it was not so expensive as to be priced beyond the reach of families. Shadow Mountain Club was conceived and built as a family club, and it was built many months before the population came to the area.

Some of my friends thought that I had gone mad to invest all that money, but fortunately I was able to finance the club from the sales of real estate in other areas. I also relied on several successful

Board of Directors Harry Quinn, President, Rob Pitchford, Vice President, Susan Marie Weber, Treasurer, Merilee Colton, Secretary, Don Graybill, Immediate Past President Directors Christy Lane, Gale Broeker, Buford Crites, Richard Folkers, Michael Lewis, Linda Holden Clode, Nerl Porras, Bev James, Tom Mortensen, Mark Zimmer, Robert Tyler

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individuals who could afford to invest with me, and I'm happy to say that the project has been successful, and all the original investors have enjoyed a good return on what was initially a reckless gamble. One of my original investors was Leonard Firestone of the Firestone Tire and Rubber family, Leonard and I built the first Lodge in the community, it was called *"Firecliff Lodge"* which was a combination of the names Leonard Firestone and Cliff Henderson and has been reasonably successful and is still in the community to this day. I always made a point of the fact that Palm Springs is located at the foot of the San Jacinto Mountains, we're located about twelve miles south, and so we get about an hour and a half more sun before the sun goes over the mountain. So, we made a big point of it: *"Hours More Sun and Loads More Fun."* 

I've been in love with Palm Desert ever since I first saw this land and was able to acquire the seventeen parcels to become a new town site, and which has been so successful. Originally, the Shadow Mountain Club was only open for ten months during the year, there was a time when during July and



August the valley was almost deserted, there were only a few caretakers left down here. But now there are people who need this hot dry climate for their health, and more and more people are staying down here all summer, and of course air-conditioning has become a big factor too. So if you want to stay indoors you can get any temperature you want, but as soon as the sun goes down it becomes so delightful at night, and we have such beautiful evenings. I've lived through a lot of Julys and Augusts down here and my plans don't include a trip to the mountains or the beach. In the past people who had lung problems were told by their doctors to seek out a healthful climate, and so many people who had the means would have a second home down here. A man might have a business in Los Angeles, and his wife would stay down here, and he would drive back and forth. Since it's only about 118 miles, about a two-hour drive to and from Los Angeles, so we had many families who lived here, but the husband would be in town for most of the week. The name "El Paseo" was picked up during my travels in Europe, I named all the streets in Palm Desert. I was traveling in Eastern Europe, and

there's a number of El Paseo's in that part of the world, so it's nothing new, but El Paseo is a quality street wherever the name is used, and it seems to attract a better class of merchant development. So I tabbed it El Paseo and of course it parallels the highway and it's a wider street with an island down the middle and it has developed in conformity with our original plan. I'd like to see it solid with successful shops, but they can't all be successful and make money as you know, but most of the shops there are doing very well. We haven't let any junky stores go in there, and it will always be *the avenue*, and as time goes on it will become more *the avenue*, and it really is.

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## My Mass with JFK by Don McNeilly

In March of 1962 President John Kennedy came to the Coachella Valley for a vacation, staying at Bing Crosby's house here in Palm Desert. On Sunday morning March 25, about 200 residents attending Mass at Sacred Heart Catholic Church were taken by surprise when President Kennedy arrived to join them. This is a personal account by Don McNeilly who grew up in Palm Desert, and who attended church that day. Don is a history professor, has a PhD in History from University of Maryland and is also an award-winning author. (BT)

It was 1949, the year of my birth, when my grandfather and namesake—Donald McNeilly Sr.--moved to a desolate desert outpost, recently named Palm Desert. He had emphysema from huffing two packs of Lucky Strikes a day and his doctor advised him to take in some healthful desert air. So, he left the San Francisco Bay Area, moved south, and bought a nine-unit motel—the Green Palm Lodge—located on the corner of Deep



Canyon and Hwy 111, and settled in as an innkeeper. This minor event would set in motion a series of fortunate events that would in time provide me with a remarkable childhood and a lifetime of spectacular memories.

A decade later, in 1959, the emphysema claimed his life, and so, my dad, Don McNeilly Jr., packed up the family and moved us from Northern California into that lodge. My life was about to experience an amazing series of close encounters with some remarkable personages. The most remarkable of personages

that I would encounter would of course be a president on R&R at Bing Crosby's house in Palm Desert.



So just a couple years after our move, in 1962, when word arrived that President John Kennedy was to visit Palm Desert and, of course being our first Catholic president, attend mass at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church at the bottom of Deep Canyon Drive—well, I was all set to go. As a good little Catholic boy, myself (I had just recently been "confirmed" and was in a state of grace), needless to say I was thrilled. But then again perhaps not as thrilled as I should have been. You see, in the previous year, I had met President Eisenhower (while he was still president which

is an important detail) and had met and attended mass with one Konrad Adenauer, Chancellor and savior of West Germany. So, by the time I was age 12, I was a seasoned associate of world leaders. So, what the heck, I'd meet another. Meeting world leaders was becoming a pleasant routine.

On the appointed Sunday in March of 1962, I dressed carefully in my white sport jacket, plaid vest, and bow tie, and bicycled down to church for the 11:00 a.m. mass (for some reason which I don't recall, my dad decided not

to attend mass that day). I took my seat in the loft and waited for the moment. When the president entered the church and walked up the aisle to take his seat, the congregation broke into applause. (Presidents are customarily applauded when making such appearances.)

Father Edwards observed the mass that morning. The President took communion and the service was concluded in about an hour. Right before the end of the service, I sped down stairs and into the lobby, where ropes had been set up to contain the crowd, maybe thirty people. I was only 12 years old, and this was 56 years ago, but I have a crystal-clear memory of the ensuing moments. For before my very eyes, this icon for the ages walked into the lobby. I remember his distinctive gait, I remember his smile, and above all his hand. I burst out *"Welcome to Palm Desert"* and he turned said *"Why thank you son"*, and gently gripped my hand.

To this day more than a half century later, I can still feel the warmth and above all the softness of his hand. I had never felt such a soft hand. It was that softness sensation that endures in my memory. This moment was to present a serious dilemma for me: dad was a Nixon man; it was going to be hard to tell him that I was now, henceforth, a "Kennedy man." But I digress.

Two, maybe three days later, Father Edwards called my parents it was late at night and past my bedtime—to bring exciting news. An AP photograph had gone national (today we'd say had "gone viral") and was published in many newspapers nationwide—the Miami Herald and the Chicago Tribune to name a couple. The photo captured me waving at the president sitting in his convertible Lincoln Continental. One caption read "Young admirer waves at president on California vacation."

Now here is the strange thing. For as clear a memory as I have of the mass that Sunday morning, of his gait, smile, and handshake, I have utterly no memory of that farewell wave. Apparently, in my transported condition, I rushed out the front doors of the church, pushed my way through the crowd, and proceeded to wave—a moment captured forever by an AP photographer. My fifteen seconds of fame frozen for posterity, well at least for a few family members. It feels good to be at least a footnote in Palm Desert history.

<image>

Don McNeilly

## Saving the Bates House

It's official: on March 30, 2018 Mayor Sabby Jonathan received a letter from the State Office of Historic Preservation announcing that on March 26 the Bates house, designed by Walter S. White, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The house has also been included in the California Register of Historic Places. Earlier this year the city's Cultural Preservation Committee succeeded in listing the Bates house locally, with a city-level historic designation approved by the Palm Desert City Council. Many of you donated to the Historical Society's fundraising effort to pay a consultant to prepare the national nomination. Since time was of the essence (the Bates house had to be sold by June 30, 2018),

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last May the Board determined that it was not feasible to try to complete the application ourselves in less than a year. The consultant we hired, Barbara Lamprecht of Pasadena, had previously succeeded in listing another Walter S. White-designed house, the Franz Alexander house in Palm Springs, on the National Register in 2015. On February 24, during Modernism Week, the city auctioned the Bates house and an architectural firm from Los Angeles purchased it. The firm, Stayner Architects, has committed to restoring the house. We will be monitoring their work and will keep you informed of the progress. Going forward, we remain interested in the many architecturally significant structures in Palm Desert and also in continuing to explore the work of White, who built primarily in Palm Desert but also throughout the Coachella Valley.



## PRESIDENT'S LETTER NUMBER 6

This is my sixth and final President's Letter since taking office. I now have completed nearly two years as HSPD president and I must say it has been quite an experience. I need to express my appreciation to Brett Romer for all his help. Brett's help has come through his useful suggestions, useful ideas, and especially his computer expertise. His help was very appreciated in developing some Power Point presentations for several lectures I gave during the past year. One of these lectures was done for HSPD and the other I gave HSPD credit for the Power Point development. I couldn't have done them without Brett's help. I also need to express my gratitude to Merilee Colton for all the assistance she has given me during my term as president.

Right after writing my last President's Letter in January we had a special event and a tragedy. On January 12<sup>th</sup> through the 15<sup>th</sup> we had the Desert ARC Show, and then on the 14<sup>th</sup> Madonna Marman passed away. Madonna and her husband John have been long time active members of HSPD, as well as personal friends. We give our heartfelt condolences to John and the Marman family as well as their friends. They've had health problems for the past few years and they are, and will be missed by all of us.

Thanks to the efforts of Christy Lane, February was a milestone month for HSPD as it was the premier of our "Blast from the Past" party. While the party was originally scheduled to be held at the Shadow Mountain Golf Club, it ended up at the Venus de Fido Palm Desert Spa and Fitness Center. The facility was a great venue for our event and we owe them a special thanks, and my thanks to Papa Dan's Pizza and Pasta for suppling the food. What a great group, Christy Lane supplied the entertainment, Venus de Fido Palm Desert Spa and Pasta the food.

February also saw "Modernism Week" between February 15<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. The events included the Walter S. White Exhibition at the Joslyn Center, a Double-Decker Bus Tour of Palm Desert's significant architecture, a walking tour of South Palm Desert architecture, and also included in the week's activities was a lecture on the Miles Bates House by Architectural Historian Professor Volker M. Welter at the UCR-Palm Desert Theater.

March was an equally active month for us, as we had an Art Show, Heritage Festival, and our Picnic in the Park. The Coachella Valley Watercolor Society Art Show and Sale ran for three weeks starting on the March 2nd and ending on the 19<sup>th</sup>. The event was attended by a good number of people and the sale of paintings went well. HSPD has always received a percentage of the sale and this money has helped to keep us operating in the past.

I represented HSPD at the 2018 Heritage Festival at the Coachella Valley History Museum in Indio on the 17<sup>th</sup>. The annual event saw lots of visitors stopping by the table and several membership applications handed out. We can only hope that some of these applications are returned by new members.

Our Annual Picnic in the Park and Spring Membership Meeting was held on Sunday March 25<sup>th</sup> at Palm Desert Civic Center Park. HSPD supplied enough food for a small Army and the membership added beans and deserts to that which was supplied by HSPD. I want to thank Rob Pitchford and his Boy Scout Troop for all their help. They did a great job setting up the tables, helping with other chores, and they did a fantastic job of presenting our flag. I would like to personally thank them all, but alas I can't remember all their names. I also need to thank Rob and his group for doing the cooking. I need to present a special thanks to Suzanne Breshears and Adele Sandman for putting together a very successful "Annual Picnic in the Park." I need to thank Richard Wood for getting the tables and supplies from the Museum to the park and back to the Museum. In addition, Adele made sure that we had gifts for the picnic raffle and Dick Folkers and Tom Mortensen made sure we sold enough tickets to make it worthwhile. Merilee Colton announced the results of our recent election, which is as follows:

President: Rob Pitchford Vice-President: Christy Lane Secretary: Merilee Colton Treasure: Susan Marie Weber Immediate Past President: Harry M. Quinn

April was another interesting month as I gave a lecture to "The Coachella Valley P.E.O. Sisterhood" at the Desert Falls Country Club Ballroom. We also had the Desert Artists Art Show featuring paintings by Kathi and John Hilton as well as Carl Bray, but unfortunately none of the paintings were sold. The Carl

Bray paintings were all from the HSPD collection and the Hilton paintings from both Kathi Hilton and her father John. Cathy still needs to write about her father's connection to the Torres-Martinez Reservation in Thermal, as he was the only non-Indian that I know of, who could participate in some of their ceremonies. John Hilton could also sing some of the Cahuilla Bird Songs, and he did so very nicely.

April 21<sup>st</sup> saw the "HSPD Appraisal Day Fundraiser." We need to give a special thanks to Sharon Klotz of Fine Arts Advisory for donating her time and appraisal skills.

We were all very sorry to hear of the passing of Edith Morrey, her obituary is included in this issue of the newsletter. If I have missed any personal thanks to anyone I am sorry. I will try to keep things running until my term ends and I look forward to all your help in doing so. Since my term ends June 30th, I send my best to our new in-coming president, Rob Pitchford, and hope that all continues to go well.

Harry Quinn

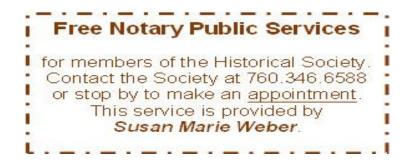
# Edith Morrey's Obituary from the Desert Sun

Long time HSPD member and friend Edith Katherine Morrey of Rancho Mirage passed away peacefully in her home on April 15, 2018 at the remarkable age of 105 (almost 106!). Edith was married to Dr. Robert Morrey, the second physician in Palm Desert, and one of the prominent founders of Eisenhower Medical Center. She was preceded in death by her beloved husband, Dr. Robert Morrey, her mother Katherine Fortier and her sister Dorothy Morrissey. Edith was born in Bremerton, Washington on May 5, 1912 and spent her early years in the Northwest. As a young, aspiring artist, Edith was trained in woodcarving, metal crafting and weaving in the 1930's and early 40's in Portland, Oregon. In the mid '40s her path led her to the California desert where she was known to say: "I felt I had my share of rain and wanted to spend the rest of my life in sunshine."

A lifelong visionary with creative talents that stayed with her all of her life, Edith was known as the *"the Grand Dame of Fashion*" in Palm Desert. In 1957, Edith and her husband took a large leap of faith and opened an elegant, chic dress shop on El Paseo *"Edith Morré Fashions"* where she created all of her fashions by hand. This store, only the second on the street, would become the harbinger of the upscale establishments that define El Paseo. Always a pioneer, Edith expanded the business in 1960 into a tea room, hair salon and a gift shop, and Dr. Morrey also opened his private practice in the shop, caring for former President Dwight D. Eisenhower and thousands of Palm Desert residents. Edith's accomplishments are many. She was very proud to be a part of the outstanding desert organizations: Historical Society of Palm Desert, Pathfinders, Muses, Thunderbird Country Club, College of the Desert Foundation and the Palette Club.

A lifelong health advocate, Edith set the standard of eating right and exercising as she worked in her retirement to inspire older people to take care of themselves and live a wholesome life. Her love of animals also defined her life, caring for her little dogs Gigi, Tammy, Twiggy and Angel, always

pampering and accessorizing them in beautiful pink bows. Edith enjoyed her life with characteristic "gusto" and loved a good challenge, most often winning with her incredible talent and determination. Her life was interwoven with beloved friends, family and the desert community, creating the most beautiful fabric of all.



**BIRTH OF A TOWN** 

Painting by Ron Backer



The Historical Society purchased the original of the adjacent painting. We had 25 original copies (20" x 24") of the painting made for resale as a fund raising activity. There will only be 25 copies and they will all be signed with a certificate of authenticity. The purchasers of the first 10 copies will have their names on a plaque associated with original which will hang in the museum. The purchase/donation price is only \$250. We will have the picture on display at the Firehouse Museum until the 25 copies are sold.

# PALM DESERT'S ORIGINAL PLOT PLAN

Copies of the original Palm Desert plot plan with updated overlays are available at the museum for \$40. These reproductions are 23" by 28". This is the plan as originally drawn by Tommy Tomson and then updated with additions showing, for example, the fire station added in 1951, as well as the names of the original property owners.



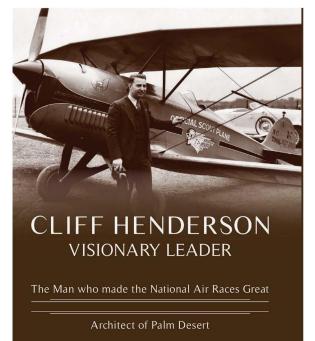
# Advertising in The Hourglass

Advertising space is available in The Hourglass to current HSPD Business Members only, at the following rates: ¼ page \$25, ½ page \$50, full page \$75. Rates subject to change. The Editor reserves the right to accept or reject an ad based on its suitability for publication in The Hourglass. Revenue from the ads will be used to offset the cost of newsletter publication and to further the mission of the HSPD.

Date	Event
Мау	Second Grade Tours begin
5/15/2018	Board meeting 9:30 – members welcome
5/19/2018	Book Signing - Barbara Schultz
5/29/2018	Closed for the summer (last day open is May 28, Memorial Day)
6/19/2018	Board meeting 9:30 – members welcome
7/17/2018	Board meeting 9:30 – members welcome
8/21/2018	Board meeting 9:30 – members welcome
9/18/2018	Board meeting 9:30 – members welcome
10/5/2018	Opening Day
October	Mini Muster
10/16/2018	Board meeting 9:30 – members welcome
11/20/2018	Board meeting 9:30 – members welcome
12/4/2018	Fall Luncheon – Member Meeting

# **Book Signing by Barbara Shultz**

Saturday, May 19, 2018 At the Historical Society of Palm Desert 72861 El Paseo Drive 11:30 am to 2 pm Presentation and talk with the author about the book from 11:30 to 12:00 Refreshments at 12:00 pm.



Barbara H. Schultz

A dedicated aviation historian, Barbara Schultz has written four excellent books:

Pancho: The Biography of Florence Lowe Barnes Wedell-Williams Air Service Flying Carpets, Flying Wings: The Biography of Moye W. Stephens Endorsed by Earhart: How Amelia Financed her

Flying

Cliff Henderson's biography covers over eighty years of one man's fascinating life. His contributions to aviation were phenomenal. Building a prosperous city in the middle of the desert – exemplary. Cliff seized opportunities when he saw them and transformed them into reality.

As Managing Director for the National Air Races, Cliff created a 'laboratory of the industry' which provided an international platform for faster airplanes, more reliable motors, and safer transportation. Under his guidance, new world records were set and the public was entertained. Thousands returned each year to witness the daring, the spectacular, and the thrills provided by the National Air Races.

In 1945, Cliff envisioned a city that would have the 'smartest address in the American desert.' Less than 20 years later, the city of Palm Desert had arrived. Palm trees lined picturesque neighborhoods, filled with homes belonging to the 'elite of society'. El Paseo, the main thoroughfare through town and occupied by exclusive shops, rivaled Beverly Hill's Rodeo Drive. Cliff's 'town of promise and expectancy' was a reality.

This book is certain to be a collector's volume. It contains never-before-published images, from a variety of public and private collections. Cliff's biography is an excellent gift for anyone interested in aviation, how the National Air Races were created, or the history of Palm Desert.

Illustrated with 233 black & white images 32 pages of color images featuring memorabilia *First printing is a limited edition* 

Historical Society of Palm Desert

# Help Shape Palm Desert

Palm Desert's committees and commissions provide opportunities for residents to meaningfully engage with their local government.

Palm Desert is a diverse community and it benefits when people from a variety of backgrounds, traditions, and experiences participate.

Serving allows your voice to be heard on important issues such as development, parks and recreation, public art, housing, and much more.

Applications are accepted anytime.

Information: 760-776-6301





www.cityofpalmdesert.org

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## **BUSINESS MEMBERS**

The following local businesses have supported the Society by taking out a membership. We encourage you to patronize them throughout the year. Be sure to mention that you know they are Historical Society members/supporters.

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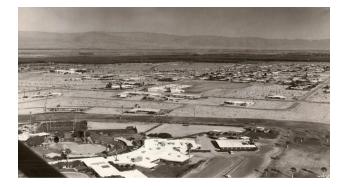
## ROCKY'S PAWN SHOP

44900 San Pablo Ave. 760.340.2567

ROVER AND ARMSTRONG, ATTORNEYS 75100 Mediterranean 760.346.4741

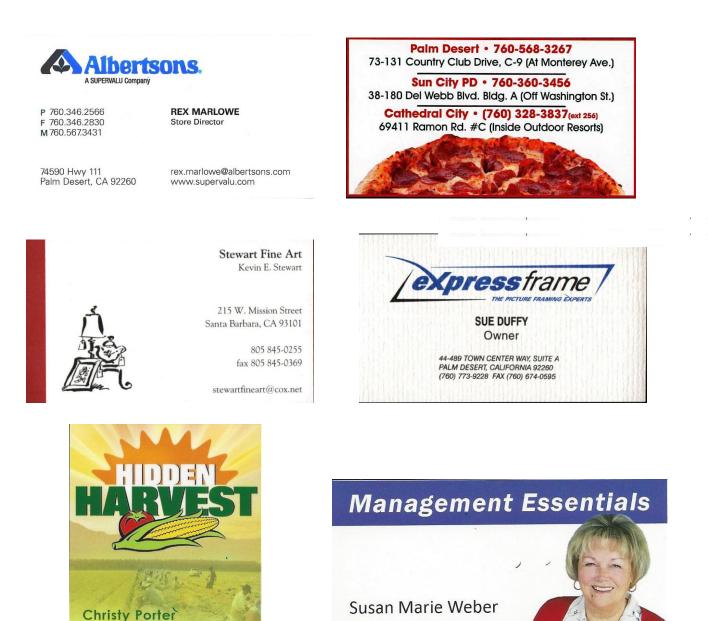
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