

The Hourglass



Winter 2022

Palm Desert: A Sellable Dream on Forsaken Land – Part II

by Luke Leuschner

On the morning of November 7th, 1946 a sizable crowd gathered in front of Palm Desert’s first “commercial center” – four surplus WWII shacks that contained a date and fruit shop, a malt stand, and a sales office. Behind them were 16 miles of paved road, two partially-built houses, a one-room office, an artificial lake, some palm trees and a lot of desert land. Cliff Henderson stood on a picnic table surrounded by architectural renderings, and described his vision to the crowd. He must

have said something right, because the Palm Desert Corporation sold \$200,000 worth of land over the next two weeks.

Gradually over the next year or so, Palm Desert became a town. In July 1947, the Palm Desert Post Office opened (cheered on by the few residents who could bear the summer heat). Work progressed on the Shadow Mountain Club, Desert Magazine, a small scattering of houses, and Cliff and Leonard Firestone’s Firecliff Lodge. A larger, Henry Eggers-designed tract office opened on the main boulevard, El Paseo, and a minimal landscape of yellow flowers and palm trees filled the medians.



1947 was also the first year Palm Desert saw private, residential construction. As Cliff had hoped, many who purchased the first lots were heads of industry, businessmen or names from the social register. Their money mixed well with the large scenic lots, spurring the construction of dozens of architecturally-significant homes. Works by famed architects Albert Frey, Walter S. White, Herbert Burns, William Pereira and Cliff May soon dotted the curving streets. Looking through the Palm Desert Corporation’s “Declaration of Protective Restrictions” – the agreement property owners signed when they purchased a lot – it’s easy to see how this was by design. Homes could only be single-story, a minimum size of 1,200 square feet, a recommended “modern ranch” style, and subject to review by an architectural review committee.

Architecture wasn’t the only thing the Palm Desert Corporation was concerned about, however. In a 1946 newspaper feature, Cliff, “speaking on behalf of his group” is quoted as saying “we are starting from scratch.” The raw desert had provided them the opportunity to craft their ideal town in terms of environment, architecture, economy, infrastructure,

and finally, race. Article IV, Section 1 of that same “Protective Restrictions” document is explicit: “No part of said property shall be used or occupied in whole or in part by any person not wholly of the white or Caucasian race, except for servants employed by the occupants thereof.” As the hundreds of original community applications in the collections of the Historical Society make clear, this was enforced. Prospective residents provided three references and a brief racial history of their family, as well as that of their spouse. In every application, the latter is marked by the ubiquitous “W”, “white”, or an occasional “American”.

More effective in enforcing this policy, however, was the sheer exclusivity of the “Palm Desert dream.” The desert was far away, provided little recreation outside of clubhouses, and was excruciatingly hot for a large part of the year. For the most part, those who came to the new subdivision were seasonal residents, building interesting and experimental homes for retreat from their main residences. They were the first to arrive for the Shadow Mountain Club’s opening party in October, and the first to leave when the heat neutralized the figure-8 pool’s refreshing appeal.



Cliff touting the advantages of club membership

For this group of residents, the Palm Desert Corporation had devised a thoughtful incentive: the most exclusive lots would include a membership to the Club. These lots – referred to as either “Palm Desert Ranchos” or “Palm Desert Estates” – consumed much of the slope, were as large as an acre, and could run over \$6,000. These units constituted most of “Palm Desert,” but more affordable lots were available on the periphery of the town.

After all, the Corporation had to justify the line on their brochure that read “Palm Desert is not for the very wealthy alone.” (It is true that it was for the white alone: the same racial restrictions applied everywhere.) Across HWY 74 – which bisected the landscape – was Unit 6, and across Portola was the more family-oriented Unit 4. Lots in these units were small, didn’t include club membership, had fewer “improvements” and were zoned slightly higher density (R-2). They were also marketed to the few working, year-round residents.

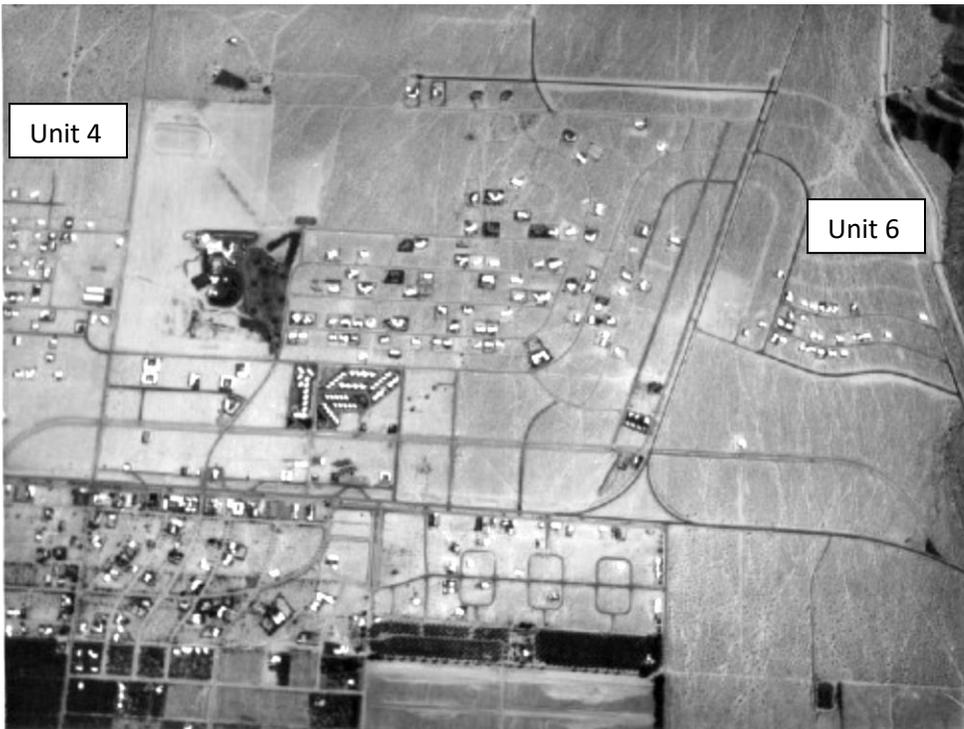
The dichotomy of these two groups – people who made Palm Desert their main residence and those who did not – was first noted by Randall Henderson, who never served a role in the Palm Desert Corporation. In a 1946 letter to Cliff, he criticizes the lack of “community-building beyond the Shadow Mountain Club project” before providing examples of 32 residents “who will have only a remote interest in your club idea.” “The above people” Randall writes, “are just as important as the part-time parasites.”

The same year, Randall wrote that he “would miss no opportunity to speak out against the bigotry of those who foster racial prejudice.” Whether or not he took an opportunity to do so with Cliff and his corporation is unknown: that letter has yet to be found.

Perhaps it was due to this letter, sent early in the planning with Tommy Tomson still drafting an urban plan, that Unit 4 and 6 came into existence. The precise specifications laid out by Randall to solve the problem mirror the resulting Units 4

and 6. His final point to Cliff might have sold it – “You are either going to be the big shot in a ritzy little club, or the daddy of a damned fine town. I am trying to sell you the idea of going for the TOWN.”

For the most part, Cliff chose to be that “big shot.” In the Palm Desert Corporation’s tenure, Unit 6 was largely untouched. When they sold the remaining land to a bank in 1956, it only had three paved streets and about two dozen homes. The rest of Tommy’s scheme for Unit 6 had been scratched into the desert but never paved or subdivided. And when a developer proposed constructing a small tract of less expensive, Walter White-designed homes in the 1950’s, Cliff turned them down.



On the opposite side, however, Unit 4 had been reasonably successful: smaller homes lined the streets, families moved in, and a school was built in 1951, following a church in 1950. Its success in attracting families, however, does not negate the fact that it was a mere 40 acres, of which the school consumed one-fourth. This footprint was less than 3% of the corporation’s land.

The effect was as Randall predicted in 1946: “Either you are going to take care of them ... or someone else in that area is going to offer them what they want.” To the year-round workers and families of Palm Desert, surrounding subdivisions did just

that. Palm Village proved particularly attractive for year-round residents, as successive bankruptcies and liquidations left lots extremely cheap and free from restriction. Panorama Ranch, Silver Spur Ranch and Palm Dell were other scattered subdivisions that followed a similar fate.

From the 1960’s onward, country clubs, golf courses, condominiums and other “snowbird”-oriented development engulfed the remaining land. There was a synchronized expansion of the golf/resort/leisure/retirement narrative, and by the 1970’s developers had exhausted infill and sprawled outwards, past the confines of the original 1600 acres. Ironwood went in, then the Vintage, Bighorn, Stone Eagle, Mission Hills and The Reserve. El Paseo was thick with high-end boutiques. The Shadow Mountain Club covered its lake with condos. The seasonality of Palm Desert became fixed in its identity.

It was a simultaneous expansion of the Palm Desert Corporation’s white, elite and wealthy vision, and the consolidation of working families into a few neighborhoods – the impact of which is most obvious in the voter maps used by the City of Palm Desert to draw new voting districts. The maps, which represent the number of eligible Latino voters, show Palm Desert Corporation land as containing the least share. Only a portion of Unit 4 registers in the next highest category, as well as a sliver of Unit 6 (now built with dense, affordable condos).

The land north of HWY 111, in what was once called Palm Village, tells a different story. The share of Latino voters is as high as 75-100% in some areas of old Palm Village and between 25-50% in others. When the City of Palm Desert drew their two districts from this map, they captured a picture of a town centered around seasonality with the working-class community at the heart of it.

In 1945, Randall's lifelong friend J. Wilson McKenney writes about the then-unnamed Palm Desert, "I assume that you and your brother enjoy a close paralleling of ideals in this matter; otherwise you would be loathe to surrender your long-established conception of desert appreciation by desert people." 75 years ago, the Palm Desert Corporation set out on a mission to birth a town from some forsaken land 14 miles from Palm Springs. The result was a landscape built around the economy of elitism – a vision represented by the built environment and now, the political landscape. The desert still has its "desert people," but like the brittlebush that cling to the few untouched stretches of land, they become more rare with each year.

Sources: Desert Sun 12 Dec 2019; Daily Limelight News 15 Nov 1946; Declaration of Protective Restrictions Palm Desert Unit 7 Nov 1946; Leuschner, Luke "Smartest Address on the American Desert" 26 May 2020; Welter, Volker "Walter S. White" 2015; the Historical Society of Palm Desert archives: letters, Henderson, Cliff, Henderson Randall, McKenney, J. Wilson 1942, 1945, 1946, 1965.

Ed. Note: The City of Palm Desert is conducting public meetings to plan new councilmember district configurations taking into account the 2020 census, during the first quarter of this year. To learn more and to participate, go to <https://www.engagepalmdesert.com/2022-redistricting>

President's Letter

I was going through some of my father's drawings the other day. He was a local designer and architect who moved to the desert with my mom in the late 1950's to start a family. He passed in 2017, and I have all (or what he kept) of his work.

The first thing that threw me was finding the drawing of a roof remodel for Henny Penny Chicken-To-Go. If you lived or visited Palm Desert in the 1960's and 1970's, Henny Penny was the place to go for great chicken. Back then, there weren't many choices for fine cuisine. Henny Penny was located east of Portola Avenue on the south side of Highway 111 – currently the parking lot for the Heather James Fine Art Gallery. I had no idea my Dad designed the mansard roof that topped that cool little building that held fond memories for so many of us. I will copy the sheet and find a place for it down at the Firehouse for anybody who is interested.

Other surprises that I found were houses that my Dad designed for his family. Two houses in Palm Desert and two at Salton Sea. Neither my Mom nor my brother or sister knew of these ambitions. My favorite design is a house that is triangular in plan, three bedrooms with a triangular masonry fireplace at the center. The kitchen is small but kitchens were small back then. The square garage is connected to the house by a wooden trellis. The date on the sheets is April 14, 1965. The best page is a pencil perspective of the house. On the driveway my dad is driving away in our car at the time, a 1948 MG TC. My mom is outside the front door of the house waving to him. When I showed the plans to my siblings, my sister said "Let's build one of these." Wouldn't that be a kick?

Never Stop Dreaming...

Rob Pitchford

Call for Nominations!

It's that time again, elections for your HSPD Board will be held in late January – early February, 2022, for members of your Board of Directors. The new Board will be announced at the Spring Picnic and in this newsletter, and will take office on July 1, 2022. There are 15 Board members with terms of four years. Every other even-numbered year there are either seven or eight Board seats to fill. The officers, who serve two-year terms, are elected by the Board at the June Board meeting after the general election. Officers must be Board members.

Come join the Board for a fun and exciting experience. We welcome all member applications for nomination. You can contact Board Treasurer and Nominations Committee Chair Susan Marie Weber and throw your hat in the ring! To self-nominate, send an email to hspd.firehouse@gmail.com, text Susan Marie at 760-831-5416 or call the Firehouse Museum and leave a message at 760-346-6588, by 5 PM January 21. And look for your ballot in the mail after January 25.

Board Nominations Committee

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The Historical Society is on YouTube

Many of our Friday Night Lectures and other events are on You Tube for your viewing pleasure – go to <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCECrQkFgpb9eOIVFP0X1SfA> and sample the offerings; we put up new content often. Enjoy!

Important Notices

The January 21st Friday Night Lecture at the Portola Community Center has been postponed until Friday, February 18th. Our lecturer in February is Paul Clark, noted local historian, and his topic is “The Rise of the Gasoline Cowboys.” The March 18th Friday Night Lecture will be on Tommy Tomson, Landscape Architect and brother-in-law to Cliff Henderson, with speaker Steven Keyton, a Tomson expert who is about to publish a new book on Tomson.

Also note that the Firehouse Museum is temporarily closed; in the middle of this latest Covid surge we decided for the safety of our docents and visitors to close the museum to the public and re-evaluate the situation in a week or two. We are all hoping the surge will be on the downswing soon.



**HSPD MISSION STATEMENT
TO COLLECT, PRESERVE AND RECORD THE
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The Mystique of Shadow Mountain

I am pleased to announce that the Historical Society of Palm Desert is partnering with Modernism Week 2022 to bring the HSPD's inaugural walking tour to South Palm Desert, featuring the Shadow Mountain Resort, Golf Club and surrounding homes, on February 24th and 25th 2022.

Beginning at Lindi Biggi's newly restored Shadow Mountain Golf Course, the tour will wend its way through the eastern half of this iconic section of South Palm Desert, with the tour guides stopping to share the architectural features and fascinating stories of the homes and the people who lived and played at Shadow Mountain. The tour culminates at the Shadow Mountain Resort, where the participants will enjoy a reception catered by Delish, the Resort's bistro, and an exhibit of the historic Shadow Mountain Club and surrounding area curated by Cim Castellon.

Shadow Mountain Club water ballet exhibition, late 1940's



Along Ironwood, Grapevine, Fiddleneck, Pinyon streets and more, the tour will relive the vision of the "Founder of Palm Desert" Cliff Henderson and his fellow investors, who encouraged business leaders and entrepreneurs from across the country to vacation here and have "More Fun in the Sun" (brochures at the time featured the fact that Palm Desert afternoons were much longer than Palm Springs' by as much as four hours).

Architects such as William Pereira, William Krisel, Albert Frey, Herbert Burns, Harold Bissner, John Outcault and others obliged, and designed magnificent homes for those who answered Henderson's call.

The HSPD Board approved the venture last spring. A committee began meeting every three weeks starting on June 21st, 2021 to map out and research the project. When the tickets, at \$55 each for the 90 spots (45 participants each day), went on sale on the Modernism Week website on November 1st, 2021, the event sold out in four days.

A feature of the tour is the online brochures the committee created to accompany each of the houses, complete with information about the architects, first owners and special features and history of the houses. The brochures will be online at the HSPD website via a QR code for the tour participants and later, for the general public.

Several Board members and others have volunteered to assist at the event. We look forward to its success and to other architectural walking tours in the future. Special thanks to the committee who have worked diligently to keep to a tight schedule and budget. They are: Sue Harvey, our tech wizard, Karen Prinzmetal, Kim Castellon, Merilee Colton and Juleen McElgunn.

Special thanks go to all those at Modernism Week who took a chance on us, particularly Lisa Vossler Smith, Executive Director of Modernism Week; Cindy Calquhoun and Michael MacFarlane of the Shadow Mountain Resort; Karine Gornes of Delish; Councilmember (then Mayor) Kathleen Kelly and her helpful team from the City, and Lindi Biggi of the Shadow Mountain Golf Course.

We will have a surprise for our tour participants at three of our homes and we are very grateful to those homeowners (names under wraps for now). And we are so appreciative of the many volunteers who will be helping with all of the myriad tasks for this event. A report about the event will be in the next newsletter, coming out in the spring.

Linda Holden Clode, Chair, Steering Committee, HSPD Modernism Week 2022 Walking Tour



Jim West and Karen Prinzmetal South Palm Desert walking tour, 2017 – many thanks for the inspiration!

In Memoriam

Del Gagnon – 1933-2021

Long-time resident (1955) and perennial HSPD supporter Del (Robert Ernest) Gagnon passed away December 1st, 2021. Del was the owner of Desert Map and Aerial and the previous owner of Del's Lodge on HWY 111, which he opened in 1960. The family plans a celebration of life when it is safe for get-togethers.

Archivist's Report

Now that 2021 has ended, we've been thinking about plans for the new year and beyond. In addition to our standard processing and digitizing work, we're focusing on gathering materials about the people and places that have made Palm Desert the place it is today. This focus is because 2023 is the 50th anniversary of the incorporation of the City of Palm Desert. It's a big project but we're recruiting help. We're partnering with UCSB-Palm Desert to create an internship program plus have created two new volunteer opportunities. If you or someone you know is interested in volunteering at any level, contact us at hspd.firehouse@gmail.com.

Archives: Internship

Internships at the HSPD are built around each applicant's background, education, skill set, and desired field. You will have the opportunity to work directly with the Archivist while processing, describing, and arranging items in the collection.

Archives Intern:

- Archival arrangement and description
- Conservation and preservation of textual, photographic, audio and visual recordings
- Metadata creation and maintenance of the digital database
- Digital preservation, curation, and migration
- Researching and writing

(Qualifications: some knowledge of Library Science, Archival Studies, Museum Studies and/or History preferred)

Archives: Collection Volunteer

Archives Collection Volunteers will assist the Archivist with important cataloging and researching efforts to ensure that archival artifacts (pictures, diaries, letters, books, etc.) are kept and cared for in the collections.

Archives: Oral History Project Volunteer

To re-energize our Oral History Program, the HSPD is actively seeking interviewers, videographers, video editors, and general volunteers

Rochelle McCune, HSPD Archivist



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