

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT

# THE PRITZLAFF HOUSE 1948 & 1951

73493 Joshua Tree Street, Palm Desert, CA



Photo:Linda Holden Clode

The current house, a 3 bedroom plus den, 3 1/2 bath home sits on a .59 acre lot in South Palm Desert. Designed and built by Walter S. White, this house replaced one of the earliest houses built in the Shadow Mountain neighborhood - a large California Ranch-style home, commissioned by the industrialist, Herbert Pritzlaff and designed by Cliff May.

The original home was reportedly a typical May design - combining western ranch house and Hispanic hacienda styles with elements of modernism. It was destroyed in a fire on January 31, 1949. Pritzlaff vowed to rebuild "...a house of charm, with a Mexican hacienda motif..." (Desert Sun, 4 Feb, 1949) By February 24, 1949 new plans were drawn up by architect Walter S. White and construction was completed in 1951.

**DESIGNERS/ARCHITECTS:**

CLIFF MAY (1948)

WALTER S. WHITE (1951)

**ORIGINAL OWNER:**

HERBERT F. PRITZLAFF



Official Modernism Week Event

Born in San Diego, Cliff May (1908-1989) studied business at San Diego State College. After graduation, he began building Monterey style furniture which led to building his first house with help from developer Roy Lichty, his father-in-law. Before May moved to Los Angeles in 1936, he had built 35 houses over a 5 year period in San Diego.

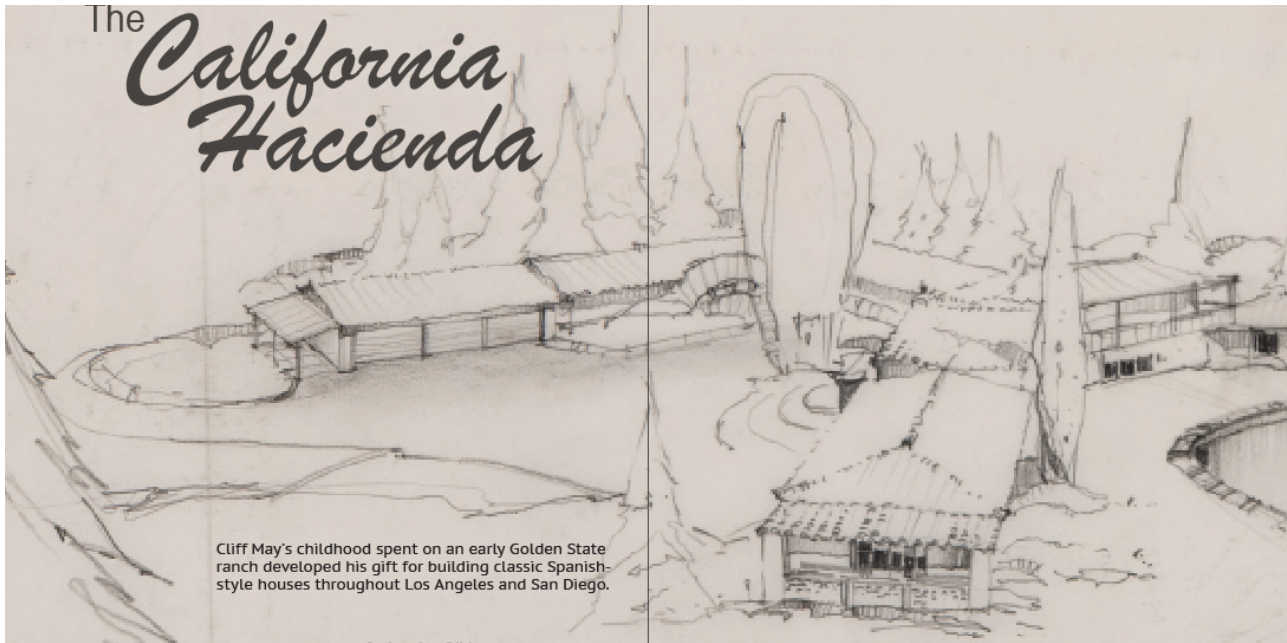
Cliff May relocated to Los Angeles to work with financier John A. Smith. Together they embarked on building and marketing May's urban ranch house designs, including for the development called Riviera Ranch, a subdivision in West Los Angeles marketed to the wealthy. By 1943, he had established a national reputation as a designer of custom California Ranch Houses.

## CLIFF MAY

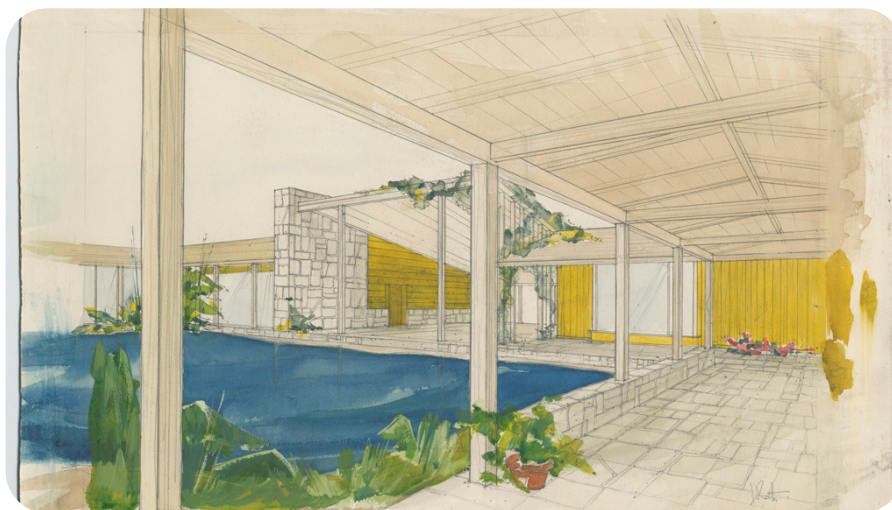
May also designed and built the corporate headquarters for the Lane Publishing Company (Sunset Magazine) in Menlo Park and the Robert Mondavi winery in Rutherford, California.

May maintained an active architectural practice in Los Angeles until his death in 1989. (Source: Architecture and Design Collection, Art, Design & Architecture Museum, UC Santa Barbara)

William Cody, a modern architect known best for his work in Palm Springs, worked in Cliff May's LA office in 1944. In 1945 Cody was commissioned to renovate the Desert Inn and then build the Del Marco. Perhaps he introduced Cliff May to Herbert Pritzlaff?



Throughout his career, Cliff May drew upon the history and mythology of the Spanish and Mexican eras for his designs. He spent his childhood summers at his aunt's Las Flores ranch in North San Diego. This experience instilled in him a vision of the ideal California house: a sprawling structure, low to the ground and open to the landscape. "To me, when we lived on the ranch, with cross-ventilation and rooms spread out and around courtyards, basic old California plans, it seemed to be a much better way to build and live." (Source: Jocelyn Gibbs, *The California Hacienda* [www.architectureforsale.com](http://www.architectureforsale.com))

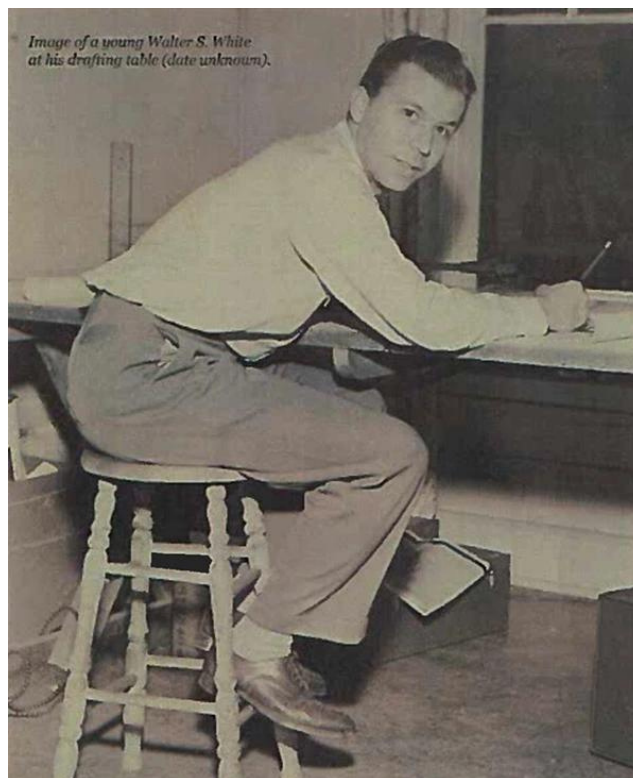


Sketch from: "Carefree California: Cliff May and the Romance of the Ranch House, and exhibition presented by The Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara

Walter S. White was born in 1917. Between 1933 and 1936 he attended San Bernardino High School. White worked for six months in 1937 for Harwell H. Harris followed by an eight-month term in Rudolf Schindler's Los Angeles office during 1937-1938. After working with Schindler, White worked for Allen Rouff for six months between 1938 and 1939. Between 1939 and 1942, White worked for Win E. Wilson for two years and six months, helping to plan and design prefabricated war housing with a skin-stressed plywood panel system. In his papers White recounts that over 8,000 of these units were constructed in the United States.

For the remainder of the war, White was employed by the Douglas Aircraft Co. in El Segundo, California, working on machine tool design for four years and six months, 1942 to 1946.

## WALTER S. WHITE



In 1947 White moved from Los Angeles to Palm Springs where he worked for Clark & Frey Architects between 1947 and 1948, one year and six months. Starting in 1948, White began to work on his own as a self-employed designer and contractor in Colorado Springs, Colorado where he continued to practice as a contractor until 1965. White obtained his architecture license in Colorado Springs in 1967.

He returned to California and worked there during the 1970s and 1980s. Reflecting on his career, White described the variety of buildings he designed: "300 residences, 40 recreation homes, ski lodges, commercial buildings, churches, luxurious club houses and guest rooms, and condominiums. Of the 300 residences designed I have built approximately 15% of them myself."

In addition to designing houses, White devoted much of his career to the research and development of the Solar Heat Exchanger Window Wall and the "Hyperbolic Paraboloid Roof Structure and Method of Constructing Thereof" – both of which he patented, in 1975 and 1996 respectively.

White is perhaps best known as a California modernist practicing industrial design and architecture in Southern California during the 1950s, Colorado during the 1960s, and back in California through the 1980s.

Walter S. White died in 2002, at the age of 85.

(Walter White overview, courtesy of UCSB archives)



Herbert Frederick Pritzlaff was born March 29, 1891 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He was the son of Bernard C. Pritzlaff and grandson of John C. Pritzlaff, founder of the John Pritzlaff Hardware Company, the largest wholesale hardware store in the Midwestern United States until its closure in 1958.



**HERBERT F.  
PRITZLAFF**

While visiting Shadow Mountain Club in 1946, Pritzlaff purchased property nearby. The Desert Sun reported that: “*Carl Henderson tells me that Herbert Pritzlaff of Miami Beach, Fla., took one look at Palm Desert last December 17 and in a few minutes bought a lot; sold out in Miami Beach and flew back here to settle permanently.*” (Desert Sun, 16 May 1947).

Pritzlaff commissioned architect Cliff May to design a large home in a hacienda style, suitable for entertaining. Just over one year after purchasing his lot, Pritzlaff hosted more than 300 guests at his housewarming/birthday party. (Desert Sun April 2, 1948)



**CELEBRATES—Herb Pritzlaff** cutting his birthday cake while the crowd sings “Happy Birthday” during his housewarming party on Sunday. (Gayle Studio photo.)

# The Fire

On the night of January 31, 1949, a dramatic fire destroyed the house - just ten months after it was finished. Pritzlaff and his manservant escaped the fire but were hospitalized and the house was destroyed. The Desert Sun (February 1, 1949) reported:

*Wakening at about 5 o'clock Sunday morning to find his bedclothing aflame, Herbert F. Pritzlaff barely escaped with his life from his beautiful home at Palm Desert as fire which investigators say had been smouldering for some time in the walls and attic space suddenly burst through the roof and ceiling, turning the house into a raging inferno.. Leaping from his bed, Pritzlaff attempted to roll up the burning bedcovers in an effort to smother the flames, he carried them into the bathroom in an effort to douse them with water, slightly burning his hands and singeing his hair. Hearing a crescendo of crackling behind him, Pritzlaff turned to see flames consuming drapes and rugs, sparks dropping from the ceiling. Dressed only in shorts, Pritzlaff found himself facing a cloud of rolling black smoke, ran through it into another room, dialed the telephone and choking from the acrid fumes, told the telephone operator his house was afire, then was forced to run into the frigid morning air to save his life. Pritzlaff's screams wakened his Filipino house boy, Francisco Francisco, sleeping in another part of the house, who managed to escape with a few clothes.*

*Pritzlaff lost not only his house, with its elaborate furnishings, but all of his clothing and personal belongings, including his wallet, silverware, a dinner set of 24-karat gold with platinum centers, all of his valuable papers, and his car...*

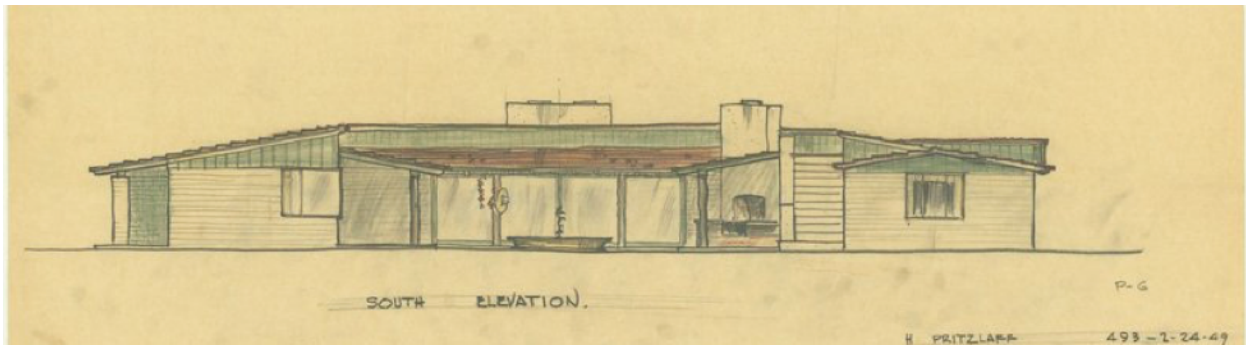
*Much of the east wing still stands, though charred by flames. The exact cause of the fire probably will never be determined. but investigators admit that the fire had gained such headway under the roof and had spread so rapidly before breaking through the roof and ceiling that no amount of fire equipment could have saved the residence with its beautiful appointments.*

# Rebuilding

Subsequent newspaper coverage (Desert Sun, February 4, 1949) reveals Pritzlaff's desire to rebuild:

*"Out of the ashes shall rise a new home, more beautiful than the one I lost to the flames a few days ago... Building it shall get under way at once." So said Herbert F. Pritzlaff, honorary mayor of Palm Desert last night from his bed at Community Hospital, where he is recovering from burns and shock received when he barely escaped with his life from flames which destroyed his desert mansion at Palm Desert last Sunday morning. "My new home shall reflect the mood of the desert. It will have more room and more conveniences. There will be outdoor patios where my friends and I can loaf in the sun and relax under the star lit desert sky and enjoy the romantic charm which was traditional in the days of the California Dons," Pritzlaff declared.*

Twenty four days later, Walter White had sketched a new home for Pritzlaff. The elevation drawing for the Pritzlaff House, dated February 24, 1949 shows a modern ranch-style home.. It was completed in 1951.



AD&A Museum, UC Santa Barbara

Historical Society of Palm Desert  
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