

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT

The Hourglass



Editor Bob Tyler

Spring 2020

Memories of Long-Time Palm Desert Resident Rick Clark, as told to Bob Tyler

My family first came to the Coachella Valley from Arkansas in in 1954 when I was four years old because my father had a job working for a date garden in Coachella, and then we moved to Palm Desert in 1958. I was born in Marshall, Arkansas, my parents are Clay and Marcel Clark, and we lived on Avenue 44, just a little east of San Pablo, across the street from the "G Bar G Ranch". The G Bar G grew cotton, alfalfa and a variety of different crops. There were several small individual houses there, one of my friends I can remember was Robert Pryor, who lived near us. The Pryors were the only black family in Palm Desert, and Robert's father worked for the G Bar G Ranch. From the time I was about twelve or thirteen years old I worked with my dad, I usually rode in the truck with him when he went on jobs for Morrison's Sewage Disposal, which was a septic tank company, and was the only disposal company in Palm Desert. At that time, all the houses in Palm Desert were on septic tanks. A few years later, my father bought Morrison's Plumbing as well as the Roto-Rooter franchise here in Palm Desert. We later lived near a date garden off of Deep Canyon, and it happened that my future wife Wendy lived in one of the houses near us, and that was just before my parents were getting ready to move back to Arkansas. I had met Wendy here and we had gone to school together, Wendy and I were married December of 1968, and so we've been married almost 51 years now. We have a daughter and a son who pretty much run our pool company now, and they have kept things going quite well!

In 1958 I was in third grade and attended Washington School here in Palm Desert. I was in Mrs. Dozier's class, with Jerry Frost, Mike Witten, Robert Pryor, Ronnie Garcia, Jim Snedeker, Georgette Arthur, Mary Marshall, Mary King and a few others. As I recall there was only one third grade class, but when I entered the fourth grade there were two classes, Mrs. Dozier's and Mrs. Cabel's. Ewing Robertson was the principal, and when I was in the fifth grade my teacher was Mr. Edder. In sixth grade I had Mr. Edder again, but since there wasn't a classroom for us, our class was held in the corner of the cafeteria. For seventh and eighth grade I went to Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Indio. After I graduated from high school, I attended a General Motors Training School and then worked as a mechanic. The auto shop teacher at Indio High School was Claude Ison and he helped get me into the GM training school, and then after that I went to work for McCandless Motors, Pontiac GMC Buick and Oldsmobile in Indio.

I was thirteen when I got my first motorcycle, you need to understand that Palm Desert was a very different place back then. The agreement I had with my parents was that I wouldn't ride on the streets, but since there was so much desert to ride on back then, I could ride my motorcycle all the way to Indio in the Whitewater Wash, and that was back when the Whitewater Wash had its original straight sides. When I was fifteen, I got a job at a gas station in Rancho Mirage, and I could ride back and forth to work in the wash. When I got my motorcycle license I was fifteen and a half, so then I could ride on the street, but I rode all over out here in the sand. My buddy Jerry Frost had a Vespa, which was a scooter, Jerry's dad was the janitor at Washington School. Jerry's parents wouldn't let him have a full-size motorcycle, but he got around

that by getting the scooter, and then he bought a small tractor tire from Suski & Sakemi in Indio and put it on the back, so he could ride with us in the desert. We used to ride out into the sand dunes, and at that time there was nothing but dunes on the north side of the wash, so we'd ride all over out there. The desert was wide open, and it was a real pleasure to be able to ride wherever we wanted to go. One of my pet peeves is that people have to have a bottle of water with them wherever they go, we never even thought about water, if we wanted a drink of water we'd stop at somebody's house and get water out of a hose.

The Shadow Mountain Club was always a high-end club, my family lived over on the north side of the highway which was the working class area, we had two ways that we could go there, there was a hole in the fence over by the condos that we could slide through, everybody knew about it, or we could pay 55 cents, non-members were charged 55 cents to get in for the day. We had a great time at the pool, they had a three-foot diving board, and a ten foot, and of course the slides. I never had a problem climbing up those 40-foot slides, the slides had metal bottoms with wooden sides. I actually ended up remodeling that pool years later. I seem to remember that it's 14 feet deep at the north end, it's 80 feet long and 40 feet wide at the deep end and 60 feet wide at the shallow end, if I remember it right. It's a huge pool, we had it empty twice. In 1977 there was a flood in the hills that went through the Shadow Mountain Club, filling their pool up with mud. It was a mess! They had us come out and pump the water out. We completely drained it, washed it all down, and got it all cleaned up. But then we made a terrible mistake, we forgot about those 12 to 14 inch pipes that go over to a surge tank, and that they were also filled with mud. So when we turned everything on, it filled the pool up with mud again. It had taken us over a week to just refill the pool, the club was supposed to open on the first of September, so we only had a week, and there wasn't enough time to drain and refill it again, so they wanted to know if they should cancel their opening. But I told them no, and so we got the filtering system all cleaned up and I brought in five more portable filtering systems, and so we were able to vacuum and filter out all the mud. We were all taking shifts, because someone had to be there 24 hours a day, going from filter to filter, cleaning out all the mud. But we did it, and so with the help of some chemicals, we got it all clean and pretty for their opening.



That same year most of the houses up on Haystack were filled with mud, they got hit really hard up there. I took my Bobcat tractor up to those houses and we cleaned many of them out, some of those houses had three or four feet of mud in them. My company was Canyon



Beverly and Homestead today

Pools, we had been doing a lot of work at *The Springs*, and one of the guys we knew had a house up on Haystack, so we originally went up there just to help him out, but after we got started it became a community project. I had left my tractor up there overnight, and when I went back the next morning, it had

all these little pieces of paper stuck to it saying; "Please help! Please come here!" So we helped clean out their houses and garages and everything. I had to have a guy to keep the homeowners from trying to talk to me while I was using the Bobcat tractor, it was dangerous to have people up close to me while I was working because the tractor doesn't just stop. I used my Bobcat to get into the tighter places in the houses and garages, but the outside areas could be cleaned by larger tractors. There were also some houses in Silver Spur that were flooded, but they didn't get hit nearly as hard. We worked up there for two weeks straight, and I never charged anybody anything. Mr. Johnson at *The Springs* held our schedule off for two weeks so we could help those people clean up. Dennis Chuck went up there with a scraper and cleaned off streets, I started taking off the sliding glass doors so we could get into the houses to clean out mud and rocks, some of the rocks that broke through the walls were so big that I had to roll them out of there. These were houses along Homestead, Bel Air, Skyward Way, all those streets up there. After that, the city built a channel up in the canyon that stopped much of the serious flooding.

The Shadow Mountain Stables were run by my friend Mike Witten's dad, and Mike's sister Marie rode horses all over the desert, but I don't think I ever saw Mike on a horse. The Shadow Mountain Stables were right at the end of Avenue 44, which is now Fred Waring Drive, about where it runs into Hwy 111, where the Flying J gas station is now. There was just a dirt road there, and on the other side was where Andy the Donkey Man had his donkeys, and Mike Witten's dad ran the stables there. Painters Path up near the mountains is what's left of the old original Hwy 111, which was the only paved road there. So when they straightened out Hwy 111 across there, it went right through where the stables used to be. That was when Mike's father moved his stables up to Silver Spur.



Somebody knew that I liked the movie "It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World," and they gave me a DVD of it, it's such a neat movie! What happened was that in 1963 I was thirteen, and my father had been working in La Quinta, and a big gust of wind picked up a sheet of plywood and hit him right across his shoulder, breaking his collar bone. At that time, he had placed chemical toilets out at the different movie locations for the various scenes in *Mad Mad Mad Mad World* that were being filmed down here in the desert, so he couldn't work for a while and I wasn't old enough to drive yet, but I did know how to clean the portable toilets and rinse them down. My uncle came down to drive the truck, and I told him where to go, because luckily I had been to the locations before. One of the locations was right on Hwy 74 where they had the fight at the gas station and Jonathan Winters knocked it all

down. I was fortunate enough to be there both before and after he knocked it down, although I didn't get to see them film it. But I was there to see them build the set, and got to see it afterwards, because I had to clean the chemical toilets.

There was another site just off Hwy 62 on the left near Desert Hot Springs, where Phil Silvers picked up a man who had medicine for his wife, and then another where they built a shack that a little boy stayed in, and who was supposed to tell

Phil Silvers how to get back to the highway. That site was located in Whitewater Canyon, you turned north on Hwy 62 and drove about a mile to Dillon Road, and then took Dillon up the hill to the west. The site was way up the hill, and it was a real challenge to get up there, because it was way uphill, and it was about all I could do to get there and get that one cleaned out. That spot was on top of the hill, and they did their filming just down below that. The airplane scenes were filmed at Desert Air Park where Mickey Rooney and Buddy Hackett picked up Jim Backus. My friend Mary King's father ran Desert Air Park.

They also filmed up in Yucca Valley at Joshua Tree, and we had toilets up there, too. So we had to have our chemical toilets in place before they started filming, and then we had to service the toilets while they were filming, and then when they were all done, we had to go pick them all up afterwards. Another thing I remember was that the scene where Jimmy Durante went off of the hill, up on Hwy 74, we were on our way to Camp Emerson in Idyllwild, my dad had a '59 Chevy pickup that we were in and we saw the ramp and they had us all stopped, and we were right below it when they shot that car off the hill. We could just barely see what was going on, and then when they let us all through, we could see what they were doing. When you watch the movie you can pick out all the places where it was filmed, it's just a great movie!

Rick Clark

President's Letter

The last time we talked we were all living in "Regularland." Since that time, life has changed. We have postponed all of our upcoming events, cancelled our remaining Friday night lectures for the season, and shut down the Firehouse Museum until further notice. All done to help slow the spread of an aggressive and possibly deadly flu strain.

Many of us who live in the Valley have seen work slow down or completely disappear. The loss of tourism very quickly is felt by just about everyone here. Frustration and worry increase each day as this continues to draw out and we practice social distancing. So this is what History is like to live through. Like it or not, someday you will be reminiscing with someone, "Hey, remember when we had that pandemic? That really stunk." I hope that day comes soon. We'll get through this – we always do. I hope to see you sooner rather than later, back in "Regularland." On behalf of the entire board of the HSPD please stay safe and healthy, practice "social distancing," and we look forward to this becoming "history" very soon.

Rob Pitchford

Board of Directors

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Nominating Committee Report

The ballots for the 2020-2024 Board of Directors are in, and the votes counted. The Nominating Committee announces that, as of July 1, 2020, the Board will include Linda Holden Clode, Bob Tyler and Beverly James (incumbents) and a new member, Juleen McElgunn. Juleen was successful in getting her condo development, Kings Point, designed by Hugh Kaptur, designated as a City of Palm Desert historical site recently, and is an active member of the HSPD's Architecture Committee. Congratulations to all!

Susan Marie Weber, Brett Romer, Erika Sharp

The Archivist's Corner

We have closed for the season, but there are plenty of ways for the Archives to move forward. Thankfully, many archiving tasks can be done remotely — transcribing hand-written incoming donations documents; drafting finding aids; gathering timeline facts and trivia; streamlining procedures; drafting archiving instructions so that anyone can help; prioritizing materials to be scanned or digitized; creating a “5 Year Plan” so that progress is transparent and measurable. While the current situation requires us to work remotely as much as possible, I'm hoping to do a few strategic work sessions in the physical archives soon. (Alone!)

Since October is National Archives Month, we're brainstorming what special activities you might enjoy most - an online exhibit; a facility tour; maybe a Scan-a-thon; or whatever other fun ideas we can come up with between now and October. Contact me through the Firehouse at 760-346-6588 by leaving a message. I will be training volunteers for various archiving tasks as soon as we can come together again. Thank you in advance!

Rochelle McCune, HSPD Archivist

Grants Committee Report

Last Summer Past President Brett Romer and I attended an informational seminar at the La Quinta Historical Society thanks to an invitation from Linda Williams, President of the LQHS, and learned about the California State Library's newest venture, “California Revealed”. This is a project to digitize the collections of libraries and historical societies throughout the state, and the California Revealed staff were doing outreach to the smaller historical societies. We became interested in participating and took a look at our various collections to see which would be appropriate to nominate as part of this effort. The Historical Society of Palm Desert has numerous collections of old magazines and newspapers, and also has old interviews, dating from 1979, in audio and text, of people who lived here at the time, similar to the lead story by Rick Clark in this edition of The Hourglass.

We decided to nominate four collections for digitization and were fortunate to win three grants! The grants are “service grants”, meaning that the state will digitize these collections for free once we curate them, prepare them for scanning and ship them, which we did in February. The three are, old editions of The Hourglass newsletter prior to 2011 (you can read the editions from 2011 on, on the website), and both the audio and text of over 50 interviews done between 1979 and 1981, of the “pioneers” here in Palm Desert and surrounding communities. These will eventually be on the State Library website with a link to the HSPD website, and you can read the text documents or actually listen to the voices of the “old timers” on the audio interviews, once they are digitized. Currently the State Library is closed, but the California Revealed staff are working remotely and will let us know when the digitization process will begin. Later this year we will be proposing more items for digitization for the 2021 grant year from our collections, such as editions of the Palm Desert Post under its first owner and local magazines and newsletters no longer in print.

Merilee Colton, Chair, Grants Committee

Rediscovering Charles Du Bois and Purple Hills Estates

After purchasing our home a little over five years ago, small bits of information kept coming to the surface in reference to our home, little historical bits of information. I have always been intrigued by mid-mod homes, their windows, roof lines, and the flow from inside to outside. Well, it turns out that we did purchase one.

I was appointed to the Cultural Resources Preservation Committee a year ago, and then joined the Historical Society of Palm Desert, and boy, did I ever start to learn about this area. It all started with Luke Leuschner's "Becoming Palm Desert" website. Suddenly we found out we owned a Purple Hills Estate home (PHE), designed by the architect Charles E. Du Bois and developed by J. C. Dunas, both of whom were involved with the Alexander Company in Palm Springs and designed and built many famous homes in Vista Las Palmas. I then met Merilee Colton, and she said that we lived next to the sales office of the Purple Hills Estates and that there was a possibility that our house was a model home. This house does have a very cool water fountain in the backyard, which most homes in PHE do not.



Turns out that we do have a model home for PHE.

So then the digging started, I found that there were 2100 references to PHE at the California Digital Newspaper Collection (www.cdnc.ucr.edu) website, I went through all of them and was able to see that in 1965 our house was used for an open house and is the "Normandy" style home for the PHE subdivision. PHE consisted of four styles, Parthenon, Normandy, Florentine, and Classic. These homes were sold starting in 1963; the last two sold in 1968. The homes featured custom-built pools, lavish marble walls and hearths, atriums, private patios flanking bedrooms, and roman tubs. Sounds like the Normandy got the full treatment; the interior was designed by Bob Hurd, who said, "the home will be featured in powder blue, French lilac and touches of gold and black with furnishings in empire design."

One of the original features of this home, which we are lucky to still have, is the double entry doors with casket pulls on the front doors. Also, the house has not been modified: it still has all the original windows, baths, and fireplace, which of course is marble-clad and prominent in the Normandy and Parthenon homes. These two styles of homes had identical floor plans as well. From what I can tell, there are only three Normandy's left in PHE.

I know that I said the homes were sold in 1963, however there was a swimming pool contract signed in 1962 for the first 20 pools. This contract was awarded to Sunset Pools. The second contract was issued later for 18 pools. From what I can tell, there were about 40 homes in PHE. PHE was marketed as upscale living at a discounted price; for instance, the Parthenon was “The House With the \$80,000 look - But priced at Only \$52,000.”

Recently Merilee Colton, Luke Leuschner, and Susie Ohair were able to put together a tour of a few of the PHE homes here in South Palm Desert. The granddaughter of Charles Du Bois and the grandson of J. C. Dunas joined the tour and really appreciated seeing their grandparents’ work all these years later. I learned a couple of interesting facts on the tour. Dunas always liked to put a shuffleboard court in the backyard along the pool, and I do have an area along the back of the pool where that court most likely was. Also, it was noted on the tour that the Norman roof in France equates to the mansard roof in the PHE Normandy House. This investigation has been very rewarding, and I am continuing to find new information about Purple Hills Estates and our Normandy model home.



David Toltzmann

Ed. Note: You can read about the Purple Hills Estates development in three back issues of The Hourglass: Winter, Summer and Fall, 2017. Go to www.hspd.org and click on News/Events.

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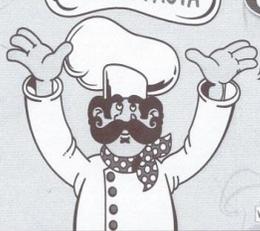
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