



The Hourglass



Editor: Bob Tyler

Summer 2017

Purple Hills Estates - South Palm Desert Housing Development in the early 1960's

by Merilee Colton

This article is the second in a three-part series about the Purple Hills Estates homes that were constructed in South Palm Desert in the early 1960's. The series features short biographies about the developer, the builder and the architect. The Winter edition of The Hourglass featured the developer, J.C. Dunas. This article features the builder, Torrey Spannagel and his wife Clara, long-time Palm Desert residents. This research is a work in progress, and anyone with additional information is urged to contact the author through the Historical Society.

Unlike most of the homes built in Palm Desert in the 1950's and 1960's, the Purple Hills Estates homes were "tract" homes, albeit designed with a custom look. They came in several façades, and are similar to homes seen in North Vista Las Palmas in Palm Springs. The model home was at 72792 Bursera, which still has its original doors.



A Purple Hills Estates Home located on Shadow Mountain Drive

The Builder

Roscoe Torrey (R.T.) Spannagel was born in South Dakota in 1901 (d 1985). He attended the University of Michigan Engineering School. He was interested in building construction, set design and building, and interior design, and in the 1920's went to Hollywood. There he made films with Cecil B. De

Mille, also appearing in front of the camera in many of the pot boilers of the time. He was good-looking and athletic and often played the hero's buddy, doing the stunts himself. He was in the cast of the 1926 classic, "What Price Glory", and palled around with Clark Gable.

Torrey met his wife Clara Frazee in Hollywood where she was a dancer, actress, costumer and interior decorator. She designed clothes for famous actresses of the day, including Theda Bara and Carole Lombard. Clara was also an aviatrix with the Dominguez Hills Flyers, wrote books, and later, a column for the Palm Desert News.

Torrey and Clara had an interior decorating business on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, "Frazee and Torrey", from 1926 to 1947. Both were devotees of Dr. Ernest Holmes' "Science of Mind", an early self-help and positive thinking philosophy later called Religious Science. Holmes himself was a student of Mary Baker Eddy and Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as eastern religious philosophy.

In the late 1940's Clara had a commission to decorate Joe and Beatrice Dunas' Los Angeles home in preparation for their daughter's wedding, and they became friends in no small part because the Dunas' also followed Dr. Holmes' philosophy. They maintained this friendship for many years, and after the Spannagels moved to Palm Desert Torrey built houses for Joe Dunas in the Purple Hills Estates. (See the Winter edition of The Hourglass for more about J.C., or Joe Dunas.)

Torrey Spannagel built houses and public buildings in Palm Springs, Palm Desert and the El Dorado Country Club development, among others. He and Clara had no children, and devoted their extra time and effort to supporting Angel View. In the 1960's Torrey gave his service as a builder and construction manager free, for two years, to build a 36-bed dormitory wing at the Angel View facility in Desert Hot Springs. He arranged for the donation of most of the building materials and prevailed upon the construction worker unions he dealt with in his housing projects, to give their time for free as well. In the 1970's Torrey spearheaded the construction of the Angel View thrift shop in Cathedral City.

Torrey Spannagel was a rock collector, and during World War II he established a rock and mineral club at Camp Irwin, near Barstow. He had an extensive collection and rock-hunted throughout the Coachella Valley whenever he could. Near the end of his life he donated his collection to the College of the Desert Geology Department.

Torrey and Clara were often the subjects of articles in the Desert Sun for their many accomplishments and their extensive social life. Clara served as a vice president of Angel View for many years, and was president and a longtime member of the National League of American Penwomen. Clara survived Torrey by several years and is remembered fondly by many of Palm Desert's older residents.

Information for this article is from The Desert Sun newspaper, years 1958-1974, thanks to the California Digital Newspaper Collection, and from the Science of Mind magazine article "Building with Faith, the Spannagel Story" by Helen Munger, 1968.

A correction to the previous article in this series in The Hourglass, Winter 2017: "Swidler" is the correct spelling of the name of Joe Dunas' son-in-law, Stuart.

Pete Petitto's Crooked Palm Trees from the Desert Sun, July 26, 1968

Those Crazy Palms? A Funny Thing Happened on the Way...

By Doug Brown

Ah, palm trees, what would the desert be without them? Somewhat naked, we think. There are palm trees and palm trees. They come in all sizes, but usually one shape—straight, or perhaps sometimes they lean over. But there never were any palm trees like the group of eight that now adorn part of the frontage outside the Italian restaurant being built by Pete Petitto in Rancho Mirage. No sir, these palm trees are a botanist's delight. You see, they're crooked. They lean out from the ground and then curve upwards towards the sun; in fact, they branch out like a flower. Petitto, a restaurateur and character in his own right, has another "crooked" palm tree which he's planted by itself against the wall of his place, which was scheduled for opening August first.



These are some of the crooked palms currently located in Petitto's back yard at Ironwood Country Club

It all started when fearless Pete went searching for palm trees a year ago. He went to see his old pal Millard Wright, who's been in the desert for 35 years and who's one of the original growers of large palm trees. Millard Wright is a palm tree expert. It was he who moved palm trees from the desert and planted them in Las Vegas, which wouldn't have palm trees if it weren't for him. Now Petitto has been buying palm trees from Wright since 1946. One of the first occasions was when he bought them to plant at the Ranch Club when it was owned by desert pioneer Trav Rogers. "That was one of the first places that used palm trees for a driveway and used them in their natural state as you see them over there now," said Petitto. And when the Blue Skies Trailer Park was built, Petitto went down to Wright's and picked out 500 trees for that project. About his unique palm tree arrangement for his new restaurant, Petitto said years ago he visited his pal's place and saw some trees that had fallen over and had started to make a turn. He asked Wright how long it would take them to make the turn and grow ten or twelve feet. "Millard said it would take ten or twelve years. I told him someday I would want those trees, and when I first got the idea of my new place, a year ago next month, I went back for the trees. They had grown ten or twelve feet." Wright, of course, did the tree planting honors. He brought a crew of eight men to plant them on the corner where they stand like an open flower or a lamp. "Yes, sir, they're a real palm tree octopus," smiled Petitto proudly. But Petitto is not going to sit back. He's going to

varnish his “octopus!” “August 15 we’re going to trim them, peel the barks of them and varnish them. You see, when they’re peeled they are a bronze, reddish color, and this fade. We’re going to varnish them so they will maintain a beautiful color. My main problem is, are the people going to like the trees better than they like the restaurant?” he quipped. Petitto refers to his “octopus” as the “eight wonders of the desert.” However, they’re an attraction at his new \$300,000 restaurant, in which Lindsay Crosby is a partner. Petitto is sure that nobody has ever seen palm trees like his “crooked” ones. “Why, even Millard said he’s never seen any like them, nor has Cactus Slim Moorten, and these men know their palm trees like nobody,” he said. When they first transplanted the trees, said Petitto, they had to water them for 30 days. “Lots of people think that I tried fertilizer; that’s not true. Some of the most beautiful palm trees in the world are growing in the canyons in Palm Springs. All they need is water,” said Petitto. And water is what Petitto is giving his trees, which are indeed different. But Petitto wouldn’t have it any other way. “Besides,” he said, “anyone can see a straight palm tree.” Very true, and now at Pete Petitto’s new restaurant you can see crooked ones.

Letter from the Editor

An excerpt from Desert Magazine, January 1959, by Randall Henderson;

Just Between You and Me

“I cannot generate any enthusiasm over this race between the United States and Russia to see which can plant its flag on the moon. According to all scientific reports the moon is more arid than the Sahara Desert. I am in favor of giving the moon to Russia, while we here in the United States devote our energies to perfecting a method of desalinizing sea water at a cost of less than 50¢ a thousand gallons. At the rate population is increasing and our water supply diminishing, an added supply of good water is going to be more important in the years ahead than any claim we could establish to a lifeless satellite 238,857 miles away.”

This coming July will mark the 48th anniversary of Apollo 11’s landing on the moon. I had pretty much forgotten about the moon landing until I read Randall Henderson’s comments. When the astronauts were landing on the moon, July 20th, 1969, I was sitting with friends at Charles Shelton’s house here in Palm Desert, watching the whole thing unfold on his TV. In 1959, when this article was written, Charles Shelton was the owner and publisher of Desert Magazine. Although we owe much of our modern technology and knowledge of our universe to the NASA space program, and of course our old rival the Soviet Union no longer exists, but in my opinion Randall Henderson’s words still ring true. A cheap and efficient method of desalinating water is a far more worthy cause than landing a few people on the moon.

Out of necessity, the Israelis have been developing successful desalinization plants using filtration and reverse osmosis. In the past, this process was expensive and had serious environmental issues, but with the kind of advanced technologies being employed at the modern Sorek plant, located south of Tele Aviv, desalination has become a reality. Water produced by desalination costs just a third of what it did in the 1990s. The Sorek plant can produce a thousand liters of drinking water for 58 cents. Israeli households pay about \$30 a month for their water — similar to households here in the U.S., and far less than Las Vegas, Nevada at \$47, or Los Angeles, California at \$58.

My mother once told me that in the 1920's she and her parents were driving through the Owens Valley on a camping and fishing trip to Mammoth Lakes. When they stopped for gas she used the restroom and noticed a big sign that read **"Be sure to flush the toilet, Los Angeles needs the water."** The sign was a local satirical reaction to the L. A. Department of Water & Power buying up land and diverting water to Los Angeles. I can just begin to imagine what Southern California and the west would be like with a stable and abundant supply of drinking water. There would be less need to import and store vast amounts of fresh water, and no need to suck the Sierras and the Colorado River dry. With desalination plants, we could actually allow some of our lakes to fill and our streams to flow again, and after 58 years, Randall Henderson's dream could actually come true.

Bob Tyler



Desalination plant in Sorek Israel

House Bequeathed to HSPD

At our September 2016 HSPD Board of Directors meeting Susan Marie Weber informed us that she had been contacted by a Los Angeles attorney, Philip R. Homsey II, who was in charge of the Donna M. Matson Trust, and that the Historical Society of Palm Desert was to receive her house located at 73-341 San Benito Circle in Palm Desert. This unexpected gift is a valuable and very much appreciated contribution to our Museum. The Board of Directors would like to thank Ms. Matson and her Trust for this wonderful and thoughtful donation. From Ms. Matson's biography; Donna Matson took advantage of the World War II era transformation that afforded greater numbers of self-assured women the opportunity to experience a new freedom of travel, and particularly of surfing. This bold, self-confident woman explored the changing moral codes and pushed the envelope of acceptable behavior, while demanding new improved surf boards that revolutionized her favorite sport of surfing.

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A new rising swell was sweeping into the country's landscape. In the coming decade, it would transform the culture of surfing - and of America itself. And trailblazing women wave riders like Donna Matson paved the way.



Donna Matson

A native Californian, Donna Matson didn't consider herself to be much of a surfer, she "just liked it." Donna surfed all over the world, including in Hawaii when it was still a U. S. Territory. In the mid-1950s, when she was in South Africa, she saw the waves at Jeffrey's Bay and asked some locals if there was a place she could rent a surfboard. They pointed to the nets way out in the ocean and told her there were sharks out there, and no one would rent her a surfboard. However, a couple of the guys took Donna out tandem because they wouldn't let her surf alone.

A graduate of U. C. Santa Barbara, Donna taught elementary school worldwide, and traveled extensively in Africa, South America, Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. She hiked and snow-skied on five continents, and she worked as a research diver in most of the world's oceans. She was the first American woman to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, and spent eight months lugging heavy camera gear around to do a story on Machu Picchu in Peru. Her experience as a writer, lecturer, teacher, filmmaker and photographer came into full fruition forty years ago when she founded the educational division of Western Instructional Television Company, which became her full-time career. In later life she was content to see the sights of America and spent each summer on her sailboat at Catalina Island, enjoying dolphins, whales, and pelicans. Donna inherited the house from her mother and bequeathed it to HSPD.

Donna Matson House Yard Sale

by Susanne Breshears

The sale of the household goods at Donna Matson's San Benito Circle home was a lot of fun! Although we didn't have big crowds, many customers were thrilled to find just the treasure they were looking for. I need to give a big **Thank You** to our chairman Adele Sandman, and our sales – display people Gale Broeker, Jackie Damron, Kathy Shayler, Buford Crites, and Maureen Boren.

Some of the neighbors shared their memories of our generous donor and a few folks left their names and phone numbers as interested buyers, perhaps they will be helpful to our listing agent.

As you do your spring cleaning and redecorating, remember the Historical Society of Palm Desert has a November yard sale. If you bring it, we will sell it!



Donna Matson's House on San Benito Circle in Palm Desert

President's Letter

Number 3

This is my third Presidents Letter since taking office, and it has been an interesting adventure over the past eight and a half months to say the least. I can only hope that things have been working smoothly for everyone, especially members of the board.

Since my last letter, we have lost two of our local historians, Anne Tuttle and Janice "Jan" Holmlund. Anne had been our only paid employee since I've been here, serving as our long-time secretary and "Anne of all Trades." Jan was a long-time museum member, someone who helped me and brought us the Mini Muster. A Memorial Service was held for Anne at Sacred Heart Church on March 4th, and a Memorial Service was held for Jan at the Firehouse Museum on April second. These two tireless women will be missed.

2017 has started out on a sad note as we've not only lost the two friends mentioned above, but I've also lost a longtime friend here on the mountain, Dawn Wellman. Dawn and her husband Stan once ran the Sugarloaf Cafe and Store in Pinyon. Her dad, Bud Wellman, has been a personal friend for many

years, and is probably the last living person who worked at Art Nightingale's Saw Mill up on Santa Rosa Mountain after WWII. Dawn's aunt is Margaret Wellman Jenke, the founder of the Hamilton Museum in Anza and her grandfather was Jim Wellman, the man who ran the 101 Ranch here at Pinyon before and during WWII. It was basically through Jim that I met many of the local cowboys who helped him run cattle up here, and was also through him that I met the local Native Americans here on the mountain, as many of them were Jim's cowboys. Life up here on the mountain was a lot of fun for a kid growing up.

My time as President of HSPD has been interesting to me, and I think you can all see that I make a rather poor politician. I served my time in the U. S. Army Reserve from 1957 to 1962 as a member of a Special Forces Reserve Unit (Airborne) at Fort MacArthur, partly because I did not do well with regular military discipline. Our group worked as an "A Team" and I hope that our board can also work as a team. This is one reason I've pushed for more committee chairs, in hopes that each committee chair will become part of the team.

The Donna Matson House gift has been a challenge for the board. One controversy has been "*should we keep it or should we sell it?*" The decision has been made even more challenging by the City of Palm Desert who wants to purchase a strip of land off the back of the property, and then thought that perhaps they might want to purchase the whole property, but then changed their mind. We now have the house up for sale through our realtor, and I can only hope all goes well. The outcome of this problem may change before this letter goes to press.

We now have a member, Christy Lane, who is trying to get us more publicity and increase our membership. Her first big project has been to get businesses to help develop a Palm Desert Historical Map. This is to be a "Cartoon Style" map of Palm Desert highlighting our many historical sites and businesses. Hopefully this will highlight the Historical Society and help make our Firehouse a "Hot Spot" for desert tourists. We thank for her for all her efforts.

At this time, I wish to send our condolences to the families of Anne Tuttle, Janice "Jan" Holmlund, and Dawn Wellman for their recent losses.

(s)HARRY QUINN

Historical Society of Palm Desert, Annual Spring Picnic

by Sandra "Sandy" Craig

In recent weeks, our Coachella Valley weather has been up and down and sometimes downright nasty. Thanks to the rain we now have an abundance of beautiful wildflowers, however, the wind has yanked out trees by the roots and toppled them in streets. Roofs and fences have been damaged and people were forced indoors for their safety.

On Sunday, March 26, the sun came up and the wind went down. It was a perfect day for a picnic. Harry and I arrived at our picnic area prepared to help with the clean-up, set up and found that the Boy Scouts had everything sparkling clean with everything set up. We can't thank these young men enough for all of their help, and this includes their scout leader Rob Pitchford.

Thank you - - - Thank you - - -Thank you!

A general board meeting was held by Harry M. Quinn, President, who acknowledged the Palm Desert City Council members in attendance and the H.S.P.D. board members. A moment of silence was requested for the passing of our Secretary, Anne Tuttle, and Jan Holmland, the person who brought us the Mini-Muster. Also, Dawn Wellman, a longtime resident and historian. They will all be missed.

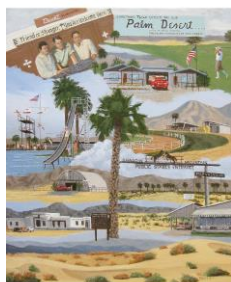
Some special thanks for those who helped manage the check in table, those who helped with the preparation and serving of food and those who brought the food we all enjoyed. Thanks to Rob and anyone who helped grill hot dogs and burgers. The hot dogs hung over both ends of the buns. It just doesn't get much better than that.

The drawing proceeded with great fun watching the winners. I sat with the lucky table bunch, all winning something and I was the happy recipient of my favorite olive oil. It's always a special time for visiting with old and new friends. We really enjoyed a beautiful day.

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for members of the Historical Society.
Contact the Society at 760.346.6588
or stop by to make an appointment.
This service is provided by
Susan Marie Weber.

BIRTH OF A TOWN

Painting by Ron Backer



The Historical Society recently 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 Backer show in the city's gallery, the Friday night lectures, the museum and all other activities 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.



CALENDAR OF EVENTS FOR 2017

May 13th Coachella Valley Archaeological Society (CVAS) and HSPD – Archaeological and History Symposium – 8 AM to Noon at the Portola Community Center

May Second Grade Tours Begin

May 30th HSPD Museum is closed for the summer (last day open is May 29th Memorial Day)

July 14, 4 pm to 8 pm; Midsummer Madness Potluck

October 6, **REOPEN** for the Fall

Advertising in the Hour Glass

Advertising space is available in the Hour Glass 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.

Midsummer Madness Potluck

SAVE THE DATE!

The Midsummer Madness Potluck will be held on Friday, July 14 at the Palm Desert Country Club, same location as last year, from 4-8 PM. Our theme is “Greetings!” Bring your favorite dish and enjoy meeting old friends and new, and a fun and educational program. Please RSVP to the Firehouse at 760-346-6588.



Symposium 2017

Presented by:

Coachella Valley Archaeological Society

in association with the
Historical Society of Palm Desert



Portola Community Center
45480 Portola Ave.
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Saturday, May 13, 2017
8:45 till Noon....

Doors open at 8:15 a.m.
Coffee and light refreshments provided

8:45 a.m. – Ernest Siva:
Native American Blessing

9:00 a.m. – Steve Freers:
Fascinating Colorado Desert
Petroglyphs & Historic
Inscriptions

10 a.m. – Tiffany Arend & Dr.
Barbara Roth:
Archaeology of the Mojave
Sink

11 a.m. – Sid Burks:
The Military History of the
Salton Sea

Admission is free; donations gladly
accepted: For further information, call
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**Historic
PALM
DESERT**



Cover page for the Historic Palm Desert Map

The map is the dream child of and was designed and put together by Christy Lane. Copies of the map will be available at various businesses in Palm Desert. We have copies to distribute at the Firehouse. The project was funded by the listed individuals and the listed businesses. Also, Christy, in addition to her time contributed significantly to the project. The second edition of this map will be out early May. If you would like to contribute and get your name listed, go to PalmDesertMap.com. Businesses, it is not too late to get listed on the next edition. Go to PalmDesertMap.com and you will be contacted.

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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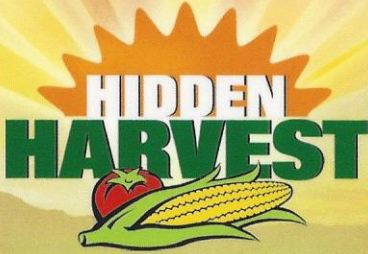


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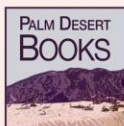
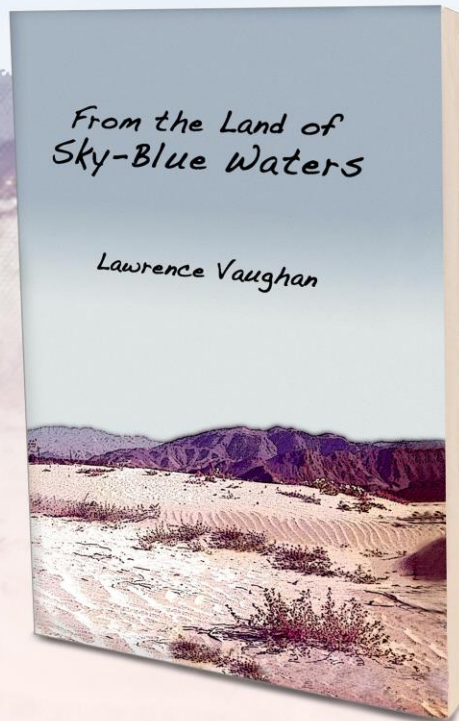
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