



# The Hourglass



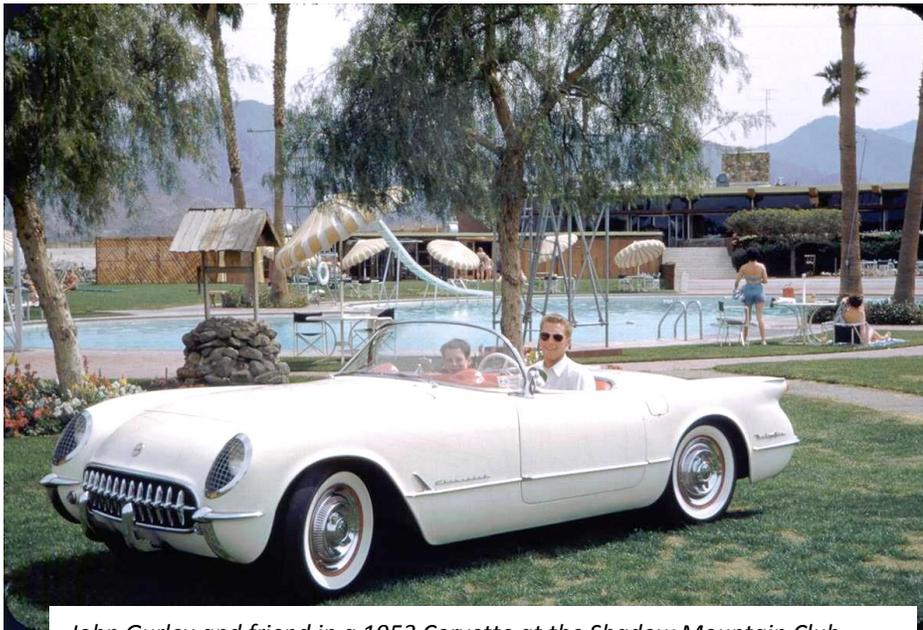
Editor Bob Tyler

Summer 2019

## Interview with John Gurley by Bob Tyler, Part One

My name's John Gurley and I was born at the California Hospital in downtown Los Angeles. My family came to the Coachella Valley in 1940 and I grew up in the Rancho Mirage area. I left in 1982, and went into the cattle business in Nevada, and here I am old man!

My family first came to the Coachella Valley in 1940, at first, we just came down here on the weekends. My dad had opened a Chevrolet dealership in Bell, California and he had just sold a car to a fellow, an' they got to talkin' and he told my dad "You ought to go down to the Coachella Valley, and visit my sister, she owns a place down in Rancho Mirage, and you can park your trailer in her yard." My dad owned a travel trailer and so we drove down there for the weekend. I remember that her name was Claire Lady, and her ranch was at the corner of Rio Del Sol and Highway 111, right across the street from Yoxsimer's Richfield gas station. She had lived down here for many years, was the heir to the Rexall-Sontag drug company. For some reason we called her "The Widow Murphy," I don't know why she was called that, but that's what everybody called her, and she was a very nice lady and quite a character. She and my mother hit it off right away and they had 25, 30-year friendship.



*John Gurley and friend in a 1953 Corvette at the Shadow Mountain Club, part of GM's advertising program for the new sports car.*

We had gotten acquainted with a realtor named Don Cameron, and a guy named Ronald Button who was an early realtor down here, Don had given Mr. Button quite a bit of property to sell and said, "Let's develop this area." My dad bought a place on Clancy Lane that adjoined John Westman's property on the east side. He bought two 40-acre parcels and a twenty-acre piece, so then he had 100 acres. The land to the east of our property belonged to Alan Ladd, who had the hardware store in Palm Springs. Alan Ladd didn't do anything with his property, and he let all the date palms die. Across the street from us was "Rancho Mañana," which I believe is still

there. The tamarisk trees that are there must be 100 years old, because even when we were living there in the 1940's they were mature trees.

People called my dad "Doc" 'cause most of his family were doctors, but he never wanted to be a doctor, however, they called him Doc anyway. My dad decided that he'd plant grapes on his ranch, and it turned out to be very successful. So, he planted the first grapes on Rio Del Sol, and that was during the war, maybe 1942. Then my grandparents bought a house on Clancy Lane, it was made of rock and I think it's still there. I can remember Hank Gogerty had the Desert Air Hotel and at that time there were a bunch of guys who'd fly down here and land their planes on The Veld and they'd park their planes there too. Rio Del Sol only went to Country Club Drive, there was the Kersten Ranch on one corner and Hank Gogerty's house was on the other corner, it did go north a little bit, but it was just a dirt road. Hoagy Carmichael and Leonard Firestone had a couple of houses there, they were all what I would call "gentleman farmers." They all had businesses in Los Angeles, Hank Gogerty had a big architectural firm, Paul Kersten had a company called Ornamental Iron Works, where they made iron gates and stuff, and they'd come down on the weekends and play with farming. Paul Kersten is the guy who talked my dad into planting grapes.

When we first came down here everyone had problems with conjunctivitis, which they called "Pink Eye" and was caused by gnats. The gnats would breed under the tamarisk trees. There was a fellow named Nean, who was a cranky old guy, and he'd walk down Clancy Lane with a switch, waving it back and forth, people used to call that the "Clancy Lane Wave," so we'd walk around waving a switch to keep the gnats out of our eyes.

I remember that my dad was having a group of Shriners down in December of 1941, when Pearl Harbor happened, and down to the east on Clancy Lane came a woman riding a horse, and "Yelling the Japanese have bombed us! The Japanese have bombed us!" My dad told me "Oh don't pay any attention to her she's just a drunk, she's always drunk." At that time, we couldn't get any radio reception down here until after dark, then when it got dark you could get KSL in Salt Lake City, or KFI in Los Angeles. So, that night when we turned on the radio, there was Gabriel Heatter telling us that we were in a war, so then my family immediately packed up and went back to Los Angeles. We didn't know quite what to do, nobody seemed to know what to do, but we had been bombed and then we were at war.

Not long after that, the military started their training down here in the desert, and as I recall, General Mark Clark was the guy who was in charge of the motor pool. The motor pool went along Highway 111, south along Highway 74 and all the way over to Cook Street.



*Commanding Officer's quarters, U.S. Army  
Motor Pool on Portola Avenue, 1943*

At that time, I had a little pony, and I'd sneak away and ride over to watch the soldiers, and sometimes I'd even fall asleep on that little horse. The rule was that I couldn't take off by myself until I learned to saddle the pony by myself and put a bridle on him. Well, I learned that real quick, 'cause I wanted to get out and about. So I'd stop over at White Sun Guest Ranch and they'd let me get water for my horse, and then I'd go over to see Amos O'Dell, he was such a nice guy, his ranch was where College of the Desert is now. So, he'd let me water my horse there and my dad usually packed me an apple and some graham crackers and a military canteen. He had the canteen wrapped up in a gunny sack so they wouldn't know it was stolen from the military.

My father bought the Palm Village Inn from a fellow named Rocky Hume, whose wife Grace had "Grace's" dress shop here in Palm Desert, but in the summer time down here, everything closed up, they didn't just lock the place up, they put boards over the windows, and they were gone! Rocky and Grace would go up to the North Shore Club up at Lake Tahoe, so they were into the gambling thing along with the people at the 139 Club in Cathedral City. Nobody seem to say much about the Palm Village Inn, but before Hume owned it, but it had been set up for gambling, I can remember that in the back room there were two craps tables and a bunch of slot machines, and they were still there when my dad bought it in 1947. The back room was built by Bud Swindler, who was a contractor in Indio.



My dad and Walter Melrose were in the same Masonic Temple in Los Angeles, Al Malaikah Shrine, and Walter Melrose told my dad "We set it all up for gambling, but when the military came in and there were all those GI's here, it wouldn't have been right to take their money, and so we forgot about the gambling." However, in 1947 when my dad bought it, they started gambling again in the back room, and there were gals there too, going north on Portola there were three rooms, and the doors were different colors, one was purple, one was green and one was blue, and that's where the girls were. There were girls there no doubt about it, 'cause if you have soldiers, then there were going to be women!

My dad bought the Palm Village Inn in 1947, but he didn't keep it very long, he had to pay off the sheriff to keep the gambling going, and then he came in one morning and all the slot machines were gone, and then he decided to sell it. When my dad decided to sell it, and a fellow named Angelo had said that he wanted to buy it, and so he called Angelo and he bought it, his named was Angelo Potenza, who was quite a character. Angelo was very bald and had an eagle tattooed on the top of his head. Angelo passed away a few years later and then his wife Ruth ran it, there was another partner in the restaurant and his name was Posella and I think he was a local bartender, and so he and Ruth ran the place, and I know they paid my dad off. I remember the first market in Palm Desert, and I think the building is still there. On the corner was a Texaco gas station owned by a guy named Art Fields, and I can remember GI's with their towels lined up to get into the community pool. It was a reservoir to start with, but when the government came, they made a swimming pool out of it.

*To be continued .....*

## President's Letter

I often find myself wondering, as I look around at all the outstanding efforts our current HSPD members take to preserve our rich history in Palm Desert, who will look after this tomorrow? Are we doing anything to make history today and if so, will there be anyone committed to making sure it is still preserved in the future? Fortunately, as they say, "I've seen the future and it is bright."

This past February 1, 2019, the Boy Scouts of America made its own history in allowing the formation of female-only scouting troops. They re-branded their name to "Scouts BSA" and have now opened the program to girls to form their own troops and experience the same outdoor, adventure-based, and character-building program that many have watched their brothers enjoy in the past.

I am pleased to report the Historical Society of Palm Desert has made some history, too, by becoming the first organization to charter an all-female troop in the City of Palm Desert. The troop is known as Troop 1973 and draws its number from the year the City of Palm Desert was incorporated. Perhaps you got to see their cheerful and happy faces at the HSPD Annual Picnic this past March. We are very excited at the opportunity to showcase Palm Desert's history to our new troop in the hopes of helping to inspire these civic-minded young adults, who in turn, will support their own historical societies wherever their futures take them. On May 9<sup>th</sup> a Proclamation recognizing this event, the first female Scouts BSA Troop in Palm Desert, is being presented at the Palm Desert City Council Meeting at 4pm. I hope you will find the time to come join us in support of history being made.

But that's not all. I am also excited to share an incredible website: [www.becomingpalmdesert.com](http://www.becomingpalmdesert.com) which is the brainchild of a Palm Desert High School youth named Luke, who along with a neighbor, Suzie O'Hair, happen to be residents of Silver Spur. Recognizing the history Luke was literally living in the middle of, he decided to take it upon himself to create a contemporary website with historical (and at times humorous) views of the neighborhoods around him. I invite you to take a moment, if you haven't already, to peruse this fantastic resource. Check back often, as this website will be updated as more neighborhoods are added. Luke and Suzie also played an integral role in the formation and execution of the HSPD's Walter S. White architectural exhibit at the Jocelyn Center in 2018, during Modernism Week. I'm sure this will not be the last time you will hear us talk about Luke.

I don't have to look far for "History Ambassadors", as I like to think of them, and hopefully this is just the beginning. I am sure you share with me the encouragement I feel that coming up behind us are youth not only making history, but also wanting to be a part of preserving it. The future truly is bright.

**Rob Pitchford**

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## Notice of Donation

Recently the HSPD received a generous donation in honor of Bev James, former Board member, who spearheaded the implementation of the “exhibits project” at the Firehouse Museum last spring and summer. As those of you who have visited us recently know, we have changed our focus to feature the development of Palm Desert. In addition, a beautiful mural adorns the south wall of the main exhibit space, painted last summer by noted muralist Warner Graves. Bev was the overall manager of this project, and we couldn’t have done it without her.

If you wish to make a special donation to the Historical Society, you can go to the website at [www.hspd.org](http://www.hspd.org), and click on Donate Now. There is a memo area where you can describe the purpose of your donation. Thank you in advance!

## Newsletter News

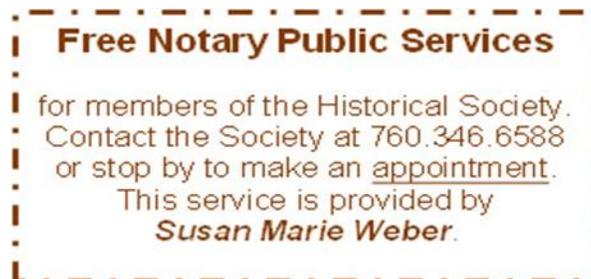
The Fall 2018 Hourglass featured an article by Board member Linda Holden Clode about noted interior designer and aviatrix Vee Nisley (see the website at [www.hspd.org](http://www.hspd.org) for previous Hourglass editions). Linda’s article prompted renewed interest in Vee, who had almost been forgotten. Recently the UC Santa Barbara Art Design and Architecture Museum began an interior design collection, as an addition to their extensive mid-century modern architectural collection, and we are proud to announce that items from Linda’s personal Vee Nisley collection have been accepted into the museum’s new collection for curation and display.

Linda continues her research on Vee and would like to speak with anyone who knew Vee or has any information about her. You can contact Linda at [www.hspd.firehouse@gmail.com](mailto:www.hspd.firehouse@gmail.com).

## Facebook – You Know You Are from Palm Desert .....

Hello, my name is Nerl Porras, a HSPD Board member and a true Desert Rat. I was born at Desert Hospital almost 60 years ago and have lived in Palm Desert my entire life. I started a Facebook group called, “you Know You Are from Palm Desert When ....” about ten years ago so folks could share their experiences of growing up here, connect with other locals they may have lost track of and reminisce about places and events, good or bad, of the good ‘ol days and what life was like in this tiny town way back when. The group now has about 1.8K members and I try to keep membership to those who have a history or some connection here, from shopping at the Market Basket, to riding Andy the Donkey Man’s donkey or telling tales about the massive flood back in the 70’s. There’s always something to learn, something to tell and something to share!

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/759697277379215/>



## Vintage Adventures

By Carol Patterson, originally published in **Empty Nest (Star Metroland Media) Magazine Spring 2018**

*Carol is a four-time winner of Travel Media Association of Canada's Best Sustainable/Responsible Tourism Feature and a Fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society*

A real estate boom created by the United States 1938 Small Tract Act – when people homesteaded five-acre parcels of California desert for as little as \$10 an acre – was one of the strangest land rushes in history. Known as jackrabbit homesteading because of the speed with which a cabin could be erected, many cottages are dusty memories but others provide a fresh spin on a Palm Springs vacation.

The *Los Angeles Times* has called the redevelopment of homestead cabins into vacation rentals a cottage industry. The phenomena might also be called a way for curious travellers to live like vintage movie stars on the budget of a film star extra. Most of the cabins are small making them affordable to rent than most hotel rooms and offering outdoor space for star-gazing (movie and celestial) or wildlife watching.

When I saw a VRBO (vacation rental by owner) ad for a homestead cabin called the Bird Cage in Palm Desert, my bird-loving heart fluttered. When I saw the price compared to a Palm Springs resort my wallet sighed in relief. It offered a million-dollar view of the Coachella Valley. A barbeque and chimera cinched the deal.

Upon arrival, my new landlord Ann explained, “My aunt and uncle built this cabin in 1948.” Pointing to another dainty structure further down the hill, she added, “A Hollywood agent owned that cabin. I used to see stars like Rock Hudson and James Dean come over to party.” Back in the day Hollywood stars under contract were not allowed to wander more than two hours driving time from their studio, hence the popularity of the Palm Springs area as a Hollywood getaway.



*Ann Cady Cooper's homesteader cabin*

I opened the door to the Bird Cage and entered a world of memories. Dozens of western-themed pictures covered every inch of wall above a goldfish-colored sofa. A wooden rooster perched on a canary-yellow bureau. A postcard of Roy Rogers balanced on a light switch, a tiny birdcage swung below the light fixture. Windows ringed the room and out each of them was a Coachella Valley view a developer would drool over.

While I was enjoying a well-loved cabin, developers tore down many homestead shacks to build bigger abodes. While I sipped a glass of Pinot Grigio on the worn patio stones, I overlooked fountains of million-dollar homes owned by people rumored to include Goldie Hawn, all while I traveled on a writer's budget.

Finding a homesteader cabin to rent is relatively easy. A google search of homestead cabin Palm Springs area will reveal cabins like the Joshua Tree Homesteader Cabin (located next to a Bureau of Land Management wildlife corridor), Chickasaw Homestead, or Encanto Cabin with the vintage trailer that was once Lucille Ball's dressing room. The Tile House in Twentynine Palms is listed as one of the 70 Airbnbs that will blow your mind.

Most homestead cabins were built in the Mojave Desert Morongo Basin near Joshua Tree National Park or in the area around Palm Desert and Palm Springs after World War Two and electricity to remote areas was available.

War veterans with lung damage looking for dry air were the first homesteaders but the government also encouraged city dwellers from Los Angeles and San Bernardino to get out into nature with the Act. Those following the dream camped among cactus as they mixed cement and erected brick walls on weekend forays from the city. The cabin had to be a minimum of 12 by 16 feet (3.6 by 4.9 meters) and completed in three years but other than that, they could be pretty much what you wanted.

Watching hummingbirds flitting among the ocotillo stems shading my homestead cabin or admiring the eclectic collectibles in the handcrafted bookcases I felt I was staying at a friend's house. Or in the type of cabin I might have created. Most people who built homestead cabins didn't have construction skills but what they once saw as empty desert now provides a chance to experience real desert landscapes – not landscaped desert.

One evening as I watched the sunset a pair of dusty-brown coyotes trotted by a few meters from where I sat. They seemed to regard the land around the cabin as an unofficial wildlife easement. A lonely roadrunner appeared on my patio the other day, his plaintive mating calls unanswered although I like to think he eventually found love.

While I was appreciating the history of my desert shack, it seemed few people I spoke to were aware of the homestead era. Kim Stringfellow, artist and Associate Professor at San Diego State University's School of Art + Design, became aware of homestead cabins during twenty years of visiting Joshua Tree. "Once I looked into it (jackrabbit homesteads) I knew they were undocumented. It seemed some people felt these homesteaders in the 1950s were not authentic. And that made me even more interested. Why were people drawn to doing that (proving five acres) so late in the twentieth century?"

Her investigation led to a book, photo exhibition and audio tour on jackrabbit homesteads. She found several of the cabins were owned by artists, some turned into studios, others refurbished as rentals. "Because they are creative places, people like to stay in them," Stringfellow observed.

In addition to their history and acreage-type settings, it seemed to me a stay in a homestead cabin offered a window into a California community and its history. After several days I came to recognize regular dog walkers and their canines strolling at sunrise and the rumble of a neighbor's restored circa 1930s Roadster.

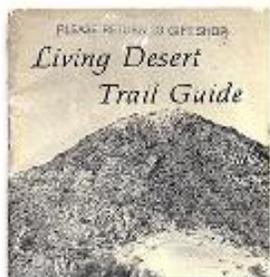
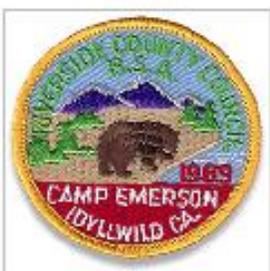
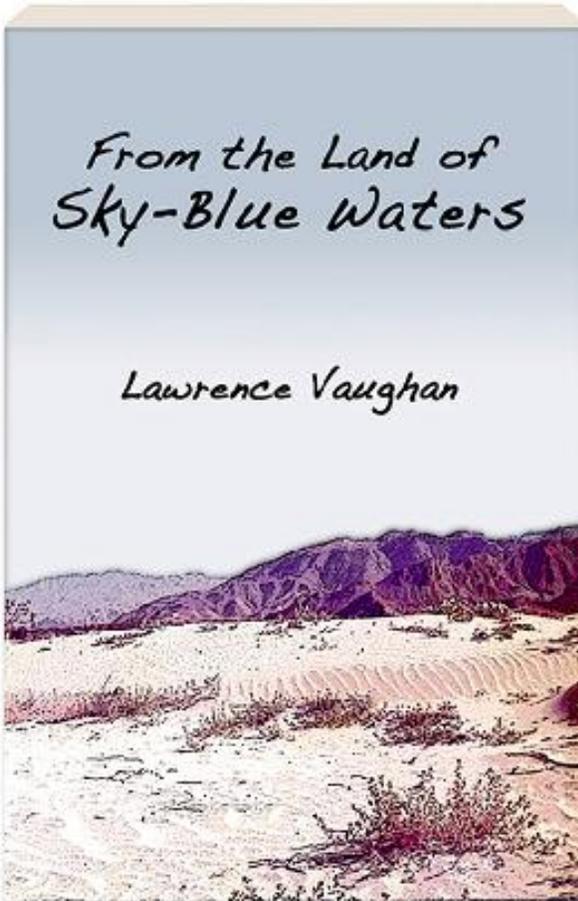
My landlady was always ready with tips on sights and tasty bites or local history. "When Bing Crosby was in town, he'd fly a huge American Flag you could see from here," Ann said, pointing to a neighborhood visible from my cabin. As I gazed across the canopy of palm fronds where Crosby used to relax, my vintage dwelling gave me a whole new view of Greater Palm Springs and people coming here for a new start.

*Travel writer Carol Patterson stayed at the homestead cabin of Ann Cady Cooper, a Historical Society member.*

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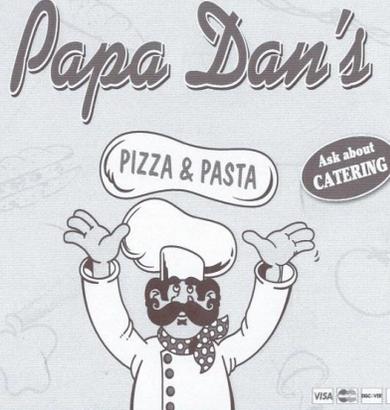
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