



# The Hourglass



Editor Bob Tyler

Winter 2019

## Helli Harrison and the Water Company

***An interview with longtime HSPD member and Palm Desert resident Helli Harrison, who once managed the Panorama Mutual Water Company in Palm Desert, by Bob Tyler***

I was born in Vienna, Austria in 1930. My name was Helena Kudernatsch, which is a Czech name that was Germanized, and I'm told that it means "curly hair". When I was 18 years old I came to the United States as a war bride on a ship named "General George W. Goethals".

After a few days at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, my husband and I headed for Detroit Michigan. I had married a soldier named Raymond Wilson who is the father of my oldest son Kent. Unfortunately, my marriage to Raymond didn't last very long, and ended in divorce. Later on I met E. Millard Smith, who at that time was working for Ford Motor Company as a contract administrator for their tank division. Millard and I got married and he is the father of three of my children; Rex, Nancy and Andrew, although Andrew passed away eighteen years ago.

A year after we were married, we decided to move California. Neither of us liked Detroit, and Millard had family in Santa Monica. Millard's mother wanted to move to California too, and so he drove her out to California, and I joined them about a month later, and I never went back to Detroit again.

My husband's cousins, who lived near us, moved to Palm Desert in 1955 or '56, and they had a house on Paintbrush, which is now Fairway Drive, and so we'd come to visit them on the weekends and we both really liked Palm Desert. We were living in Santa Monica, but it was too busy there, and so Palm Desert seemed like a nice place to raise our children. So, in April of 1957, with three kids and a baby on the way, we bought a small house in Palm Desert for \$15,000; vacant lots were going for about \$3,000. Washington Elementary School was just around the corner, the Shadow Mountain Club was nearby, and for a small fee there was a community pool located near the corner of Candlewood and Abronia Trail. Our house was located at 74-278 Fairway Drive, and the address was an even number on the odd side of the street, and so people often had a hard time finding our house, and it's still that way.

At that time the El Dorado Polo Club grounds were located on the end of Cook Street, and since there were lots of vacant lots and quite a bit of open land, my daughter Nancy could just walk



Partial map of the Panorama Mutual Water Company

Paintbrush to the south and the Hwy 111 frontage road to the north.

Joan Wyman was the secretary of the water company and also a member of the Palm Desert Chamber of Commerce. I can still remember Joan riding in the Golf Cart Parade. When my husband passed away in August of 1973, Joan told me that I had to take over the water company because there wasn't anyone to run anything. I told her that I didn't know how to run a water company, and I remember very clearly that she told me; *"Well Honey, you don't have a choice!"* So I had to run the water company, do all the billing, and read the commercial meters every month.

down to the Polo Club. Nancy knew everybody at the stables there, and she enjoyed exercising the polo ponies. My husband didn't like her hanging around over there, but she did anyway, and she never got over the horses and horseback riding, and she still loves horses.

Our water came from two wells owned by the Panorama Mutual Water Company. Our neighbor Murry Kessler was the president of the water company, and since my husband was a semi-retired engineer, Murry asked him to be the manager of the water company. I don't remember exactly when my husband took over, but I'd guess it was in 1964, and he was paid \$50.00 a month to run it. Murry brought my husband the paperwork, which was addresses on index cards in an old shoe box. The fee for residents was \$6.00 per month, billed twice a year to whomever had a house or owned a lot, so that was \$36.00 every six months.

All the residents owned a share of stock in the water company worth \$300.00, so if you bought a lot or a house in the Panorama Mutual Water Company area, you had to purchase a \$300.00 share of stock. The houses didn't have meters, but there were a few water meters along the Hwy 111 frontage road for commercial properties. The boundaries for the water company were from Abronia Trail to the west side of Deep Canyon, with

As I recall, there were five commercial water meters and when they built the International Lodge they put up a chain-link fence, and the meter was right behind that fence so I had to lay flat on the ground to read that meter. One time we had a middle-of-the-road water line break down on Abronia Trail near the frontage road, so I had to call someone to have the line repaired, and I'll never forget that they made a temporary repair with a loaf of bread, and then they had to tear up the street to replace the broken pipe.

I always had to watch the water flow, because the wells were getting old, and they'd just stop functioning. My husband, who was an engineer, had installed a flowmeter near our front door, and he hooked up a bell that rang when the water pressure went down. So when the bell rang, we had to head down to the underground well on Fairway and then my kids and I would literally sit down there all night turning the pump on manually to get the pressure back up. If we didn't do that, there would be no water. Then I'd call for service, but that would take a while, if I was lucky, maybe they'd come next day, and in the meantime I'd have to sit down there to keep the water going.



*Underground well and pump house on Fairway Drive*

The well on Fairway is still there and Coachella Valley Water District still uses it. C. V. Water



*Aboveground pump house on Abronia Trail*

District took over the water company in 1974, we didn't actually sell it to them, they just took it over. I had to get together with the water company's attorney, his name was Mr. Paulson, and his office was in the Harboe building on El Paseo, because I had to distribute the company stock to the shareholders. I had to do a yearly tax return, even though it was a nonprofit company, I still had to do tax returns for it. At first I didn't know how to do them, so I just looked at the returns that my husband had done, and did the

same thing, and I sent them off and never heard anything, so I guess they were ok.

After the Coachella Valley Water District took over, they put meters on everything, so then every house had a meter. After that the city put in sewer lines, before that we all had septic tanks, and they charged me \$1,200 to hookup to the new sewer. I remember that the city had just repaved Fairway Drive, and it was just a few months that they tore up the whole damn street to put in the new sewer lines when they built Ironwood Country Club. It looked like a canyon going down the street, and that's when we all had to hook up to the sewer.



*Fairway Drive well viewed from the street*

An interesting part of the map is that it has many of the names of the people who owned the lots: The Botsfords, Ralph Hale, Fred Penney, the McClellan's who owned McClellan Electric, and Joan Wyman who was the one who told me that I had no choice but to take over the running of the Water Company.

*(To view the entire map, visit the Firehouse Museum)*

## **President's Letter**

It's Christmas Day, 2018, as I am writing this. By the time it is in front of you, Christmas and possibly New Year's Day, will be history – recent history, but history just the same. As I grow older, time seems to click by faster and faster. Is it the same for you? What can we do to slow it down? When time is screaming by, things can fall to the wayside in seemingly no time at all.

When Johnny Carson's announcer, Ed McMahon, passed away in 2009, a gathering of friends and family was hastily put together at NBC. After a few people had already arrived, a young page announced the arrival of Ed McMahon's doctor. The gathered crowd looked around at each other unsure about whom the page was talking about. The doctor who soon entered was the Tonight Show bandleader, Doc Severinsen – the page had no idea who he was.

Two years ago my wife and I attended a lecture by Mike Mirelez, a Bird and Wake Singer who has tried to keep up the traditions of the local indigenous Cahuilla tribe. These Bird Songs and Wake Songs have been passed down from generation to generation. We learned that a gap in that chain had caused hundreds of songs to be lost forever – no written record or audio recordings exist.

An example of how quickly knowledge that you take for granted – that you think everybody shares - is lost in a very short time. And another example of important knowledge that is hundreds of years old, lost due to a breakdown in record-keeping.

I want to thank you for your support of the Historical Society of Palm Desert and I hope you had a great and relaxing holiday. May your new year go by at a pace you are agreeable with – and – may all you hold important (and even unimportant) be written down or recorded for those who come after us.

**Rob Pitchford**

### HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Date	Event
1/15/2019	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 6:30 PM - members welcome
1/11-1/14/2019	Desert Arc Art Show and Sale, reception Friday the 11 <sup>th</sup> at 11:30
1/14/2019	FDM/HSPD lecture at the Palm Desert Library 6-7 PM
1/25-1/28/2019	Deserts of the World Photography Show and Sale
2/25/2019	FDM/HSPD lecture at the Palm Desert Library 6-7 PM
2/19/2019	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 6:30 PM - members welcome
3/18/2019	FDM/HSPD lecture at the Palm Desert Library 6-7 PM
3/19/2019	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 6:30 PM - members welcome
3/31/2019	Picnic in the Park 11:30-2 at Civic Center Park - all welcome
4/15/2019	FDM/HSPD lecture at the Palm Desert Library 6-7 PM
4/16/2019	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 6:30 PM - members welcome
5/21/2019	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 6:30 PM - members welcome
5/28/2019	Closed for the Summer

Watch for Meet the Muralist, a weekend with Warner Graves and his art, and our ever-popular Appraisal Day later this year. Go to the website for an updated calendar at [www.hspd.org/News and Events](http://www.hspd.org/News and Events).

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## Desert Arc Art Show and Sale

Come to the Desert Arc Art Show and Sale, a yearly event at the Firehouse Museum. The show is from Friday, January 11 through Monday, January 14, with a special reception on Friday catered by Desert Arc from 11:30-1 PM.

## “Deserts of the World”

A new event for the Historical Society, we host photographer Grant McMillen from January 25<sup>th</sup> through January 28<sup>th</sup>. Grant is an amateur photographer with a focus on Europe, the Middle East and North and South America.

This photographic project is dedicated to the deserts of the world and to the people who live there. The images on display come from dry spots near and far – Arizona, California, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Turkey, and Utah. The images have been selected to stimulate interest in desert cultures around the world – and to encourage the viewer to seek out more information about these parallel, sometimes contrasting cultures.

Grant’s photographs have been on display at the Palm Desert Civic Gallery in 2013 and 2017 and at the University of California Riverside in 2014. He has also exhibited at the Borrego Springs Art Institute (2015, 2016 and 2017) and the Joshua Tree Art Gallery (2016).

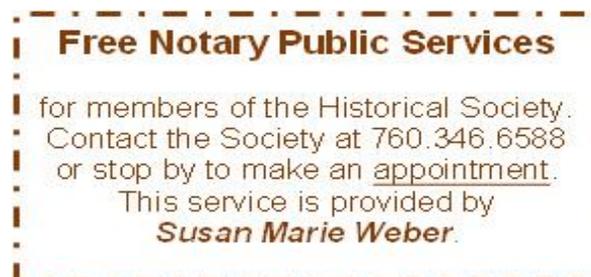
## Lecture Series with Friends of the Desert Mountains

This season our former Friday Night Lectures are changing to a new day and location. We are partnering with the Friends of the Desert Mountains (FDM), which we did two years ago with great success. The new series will be on the third Monday of the month (except for some holidays) from 6:00-7:00 PM at the Palm Desert Public Library at 73300 Fred Waring Drive and is entitled “**Caring for Our Trails – Past, Present and Future**”.

Monday, January 14, 2019 – “**Riding with the Desert Riders: Early Stewards of the Trail**” with Doug Evans, President of the Desert Riders. Doug will describe the history, mission and impact of the Desert Riders organization on the Coachella Valley trail system.

Monday, February 25, 2019 – Famous Trail Namesakes: Mayors, Scientists, Cahuilla and Pioneers

Monday, March 18, 2019 – Pathfinding: Increasing Access to Outdoor Recreation



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