



The Hourglass



Editor Bob Tyler

Winter 2020

Memories of My Aunt and Uncle, the Founders of Silver Spur Ranch

By G. Vickers Marovich, October 2019

In the ups and downs of his business, my uncle by marriage, Adrian Schwilck, had to make some tough choices that I know made him some enemies. It had been more than 15 years since he lost his two large real estate developments, Silver Spur Ranch and Shadow Mountain Fairway Cottages, to the “bank”, resulting in his and my aunt’s absence from the Balboa Bay Club in Newport Beach, several desert country clubs, as well as the newspaper’s business and society pages. So I was surprised to see Saint Margaret’s Church completely full for his funeral in 1984. They talked about Adrian Schwilck’s service to Saint Margaret’s. They talked about him being one of the pioneers of Palm Desert and a real estate visionary. I had to admit, I was impressed by what I

heard. But I wondered how many people were really there for my Aunt Mercedes (Deeze) who was a wonderful, kind, loving, glamorous person who was liked or loved by all who knew her. She was one of my most favorite people in the world. She was also well known in the desert, with her picture often appearing in the paper with friends such as George and Caroline Berkey, Dr. and Edith Morre and celebrities such as Mamie Eisenhower, Sonny Burke, Zeppo Marx and his wife Barbara Blakeley Marx (and eventually, Sinatra).

To help put some things in perspective, prior to 1948 the area where Palm Desert is located was inhabited by the Cahuilla Indians of the now extinct San Cayetano tribe. In 1948 the Palm Desert Corporation, whose president was Cliff Henderson, began to develop real estate, and in 1951 the area was given its present name, Palm Desert. It did not incorporate as a city until 1973; its incorporated area included Silver Spur Ranch.



Adrian and Mercedes

The following is based on records, pictures, and news articles I obtained upon my aunt’s death in 1997, discussions with Mercedes and Uncle Ade, my mother Jane and cousin Patricia Neuhaus Gift, as well as my own memory and some research on the internet (Google!). To put my memory in perspective, I was born in May 1947, so I was only about 8 years old when

Silver Spur Ranch property acquisitions and development began in 1955. My mother Jane and her older sister Mercedes had the same mother but different fathers. They were very close and we (my mother, brother Jim, sister Mercedes [Mermie] and I) spent a lot of time each year on vacations from San Marino and later South Pasadena in the desert or at the beach with Mercedes and Ade, as we called him. I, my brother Jim and cousin Ronny, Ade's son from an earlier marriage, worked as gardeners for Ade in the summers of 1963 and 1964 on both Silver Spur Ranch and Shadow Mountain Fairway Cottages.

Mercedes Libby and Adrian Schwilck were married in 1951. Mercedes was somewhat of an heiress in that her grandfather, William H. Libby, who sold his oil company to Standard Oil and was on its Board of Directors, left trusts for each of his two granddaughters, Mercedes and her older sister Madge, when he died in 1917. Adrian and Mercedes moved from Corona Del Mar to Palm Springs about 1952. In Corona Del Mar, and prior to that in San Bernardino, Ade designed and built single family homes on spec, one at a time. He was not an architect but rather a draftsman who had a good eye for design and would do the schematics and some of the design development and then work with a licensed architect to prepare the construction documents. In about 1953 or 1954 they moved to Palm Desert and Ade continued designing and building homes.

In about 1955 or 1956 Adrian and Mercedes started acquiring real estate parcels from private parties that ultimately made up the 600 acre +/- Silver Spur Ranch. My memory was that they bought it from an older woman and later he drilled for water, found it, and the woman sued him and lost. But that is my memory, which appears incorrect, as included in my Aunt Mercedes' belongings were records indicating that they bought the property from at least 8 different people. But these records are incomplete and only account for 427 acres. The average price per acre was \$1,468. I would estimate that 1/4 acre lot today would cost \$125,000 or an acre would cost \$500,000? Maybe the original 175 acres or so not shown in the records were with the aforementioned older woman. At any rate, the original seed money for the Ranch came from my Aunt Mercedes. Finding water that would support the whole Ranch significantly increased the value of the land. I should note that one of the property sellers of 7 1/2 acres was "Della Robia," which was also the name of the road by Bing Crosby's house.

In doing my research I came across some information that stated "on March 2, 1956, Panorama Builders received approval from the Riverside County Board of Supervisors for the first tract of a 700-acre development. That tract is named Silver Spur Ranch No. 1." Panorama Builders was a predecessor company 100% owned by my uncle and aunt. After doing some excavation, roads, installation of underground utilities and other infrastructure, the Ranch was open for limited sales in 1956. The most famous sale was to Bing Crosby in February 1957, joining his friends Randolph Scott, Phil Harris and Alice Faye. This was a sale of 16 acres. I am reasonably certain that this was a land sale only and Crosby used his own architect and builder. A number of "Hollywood" people followed suit. I think it is well known that President John F. Kennedy stayed in Crosby's house in the Ranch twice. It has been reported in newspapers that one of these times Marilyn Monroe stayed with him.

Early buyers in the Ranch had a choice of using their own architect and builder or having Silver Spur Ranch build their homes using one of its model designs, or any combination thereof. Anyone who bought property had to join Silver Spur Ranch Association which had an architectural committee and building requirements. All building plans had to be approved by the architectural committee.

A multi-page article in the spring 1958 issue of *Pictorial California & the Pacific* magazine says, "Along the sunny foothills of the Santa Rosa Mountains lies a stretch of unique and truly beautiful country that is at present the scene of the most extensive development yet to take place on the desert — Silver Spur Ranch — 600 acres, high above desert floor and to the south of Palm Desert. From its high terrain the panoramic views are dynamic and breath taking." A picture of Adrian Schwilck and opera singer and actress Lily Pons is included in the article.

As reported September 27, 1959 by the *Los Angeles Times* and *Desert Sun* newspapers, the "Acquisition of a major interest in the \$75 million Silver Spur Ranch by a group of prominent LA business and community leaders was announced by Adrian Schwilck, original developer and president. The group includes Sol Lesser, pioneer motion picture producer, Joseph Shane,

investment banker, Hernando Courtright, president of Century City development, Al Hart, president, City National Bank. Immediate plans include swimming pools, tennis courts, putting greens, stables, bridle paths, and a restaurant. Cost of initial phase will be in excess of \$1.2 million." I don't know the reason for this sale. I know historically a lot of "Hollywood people" put their money into real estate, some for the good, some not so good. I assume, but do not know, that my uncle sold a large stake in Silver Spur Ranch because either the price was too good, there were extraneous pressures on him, or he needed or wanted the money for other things, most likely the purchase of the property surrounding the Shadow Mountain Country Club, or some combination of things.

In June 25, 1960 it was reported in the *Desert Sun* that "*Adrian Schwilck announced his resignation as president of Silver Spur Properties. Sol Lesser, chairman of Silver Spur Board, accepted Schwilck's resignation with reluctance.*" There are a number of things that probably led to the resignation. Adrian had definite opinions on design and landscape. He wanted the architecture and landscape to intermingle with the desert. He did not want curbs, gutters, and sidewalks that made his desert development mirror Los Angeles suburban developments. He liked rock roofs that blended in with desert. Knowing my uncle, who was pretty much his own man, I am speculating there was not enough room for him in the new organization and his interests were on the Shadow Mountain Fairway Cottages. In an April 1961 issue of the *Desert Sun*, Adrian Schwilck, owner developer, "*has announced the beginning of the Shadow Mountain Fairway Cottages, a \$3.5 Million development of 115 cottages, adjacent to the Shadow Mountain Country Club golf course.*"

In early July 1962 Adrian Schwilck bought back the controlling interest from those he sold it to: Sol Lesser, et. al. I think the Sol Lesser group made their investment at the wrong time. It was just when a major recession had started in the country that lasted for 10 months and ended around March 1961 for most of the country. However, for real estate markets and retail in resort areas and other high-end real estate areas, recessions tend to last longer. At the first sign of recessionary problems, the wealthy generally tighten their purses for second homes, jewelry, and vacations. After the recession is over for most of the country, it takes a little longer in the construction of new homes to crank up the design, permit, financing, and building process. Immediately after the acquisition, ground was broken for new houses in Silver Spur as well as a 3-par, nine-hole golf course and a clubhouse. It was at the clubhouse that the first services in 1964 were held for St. Margret's Episcopal Church until the church's first building was completed in 1965. As my Uncle Ade was a churchwarden, or member of the vestry or other church volunteer position, he had my aunt Mercedes and our family seated just behind the Eisenhowers for at least 3 years. Once was when I was 21 and brought my girlfriend, Donna, out from University of New Mexico over spring break, we sat directly behind the Eisenhowers. That may have done the trick with impressing her, because we later married and are married to this day 51 years later!

Starting in about 1966, real estate sales slowed in Silver Spur Ranch, Shadow Mountain Fairway Cottages, and the desert and other resort areas. My Uncle Ade was stuck paying large interest payments on his acquisition and development loans with little revenue coming in. People were concerned about the impacts of Vietnam, race riots, inflation and taxes. The huge expenditures of the Vietnam War had a major impact on the balance of payments and inflation. The country was becoming unsettled which increased financial unpredictability. In August 1967, President Johnson called for a major tax hike. With the significant increase in government spending there was a large excess of U.S. dollars held by foreign governments. The U.S. was still on the gold standard and foreign governments could and did cash in their dollars for gold. In March 1968, this led to what *Time* magazine called "the largest gold rush in history." The economic slump which began in 1968 had become serious and by the end of 1969 the U. S. economy was in a full recession that did not end until November 1970.

I don't know when my uncle and aunt lost Silver Spur Ranch and the Shadow Mountain Fairway Cottages to the lenders. Adrian was a proud person and not one to tell us how tough things were. I think developers like my uncle are a special breed. Where there is nothing, they can see something. Their tolerance for risk is probably only exceeded by their

optimism. I suppose there is some arrogance mixed into the formula? You would never want your banker or broker to have a developer's mentality.

I have wonderful memories of going down to Palm Desert as a kid, which included Andy the Donkey Man; the many horse rides from the stables that were north of the bend in Highway 111 just as you came into Palm Desert from Rancho Mirage; the Easter Egg hunts at Shadow Mountain Resort and its huge pool slides, diving towers, and train house; shooting up the desert with my cousin Ronny's guns; hiking Round Top Mountain; dancing at Shadow Mountain with my cousins Terri and Chris, and my mom, aunt and sister, to Les Brown and His Band of Renown or to Sonny Burke.

After all the people left Ade's funeral reception at his house on Little Bend Trail in Silver Spur, his wife Mercedes and family, along with the minister, walked up the street to some empty lots and spread his ashes on his dream project . . . his monument. About a year later Mercedes Schwilck married Harlan C. Kittle, a rancher who founded the first lawn bowling club in Palm Desert. They brought much happiness to each other.

President's Letter

This year we spent the Christmas Holiday at my sister's house in La Canada-Flintridge. Great fun and good cheer was had by all. Coming home the day after Christmas, and sitting through some pretty bad traffic, we were greeted by snow around the perimeter of the valley. It's a beautiful sight when snow gets low enough to frost the mountains to the north of us.

Many of us take the mountains around our valley for granted. The addition of snow, a lot of snow, adds dimension and draws your focus and your appreciation for the beauty that surrounds us.

And talk about appreciation (sorry, awkward segue), on December 12, 2019, our Mayor, Susan Marie Weber and the Palm Desert City Council proclaimed it Historical Society of Palm Desert Day. The Proclamation notes the beginning of HSPD in November of 1978 and its efforts to preserve local history and architecture – especially Walter S. White's Miles Bates House. And especially the efforts of our own Merilee Colton to get the Bates House on the National Register of Historic Places in 2018. The City also had a Proclamation for owners of the Bates House, The Stayner firm, for their great work in the restoration.

HSPD will continue its endeavors in preserving local history and architecture. We don't always succeed. Recently, the Walter S. White Bungalows that were on the northeast corner of San Pablo Avenue and San Gorgonio Way were razed to make way for new development in the new San Pablo corridor. We may not always succeed, but we are going to stay determined.

One other newsworthy mention – our Scout Troop 1973's Scoutmaster, Sandy Bock, will be receiving The Silver Beaver Award in February – the only one this year from the Sunrise District. The Sunrise District, just to give you an idea of size, contains Fontana to Blythe and Julian to 29 Palms. The Silver Beaver is an award given to those who implement the Scouting program and perform community service through hard work, self-sacrifice, dedication, and many years of service. It is given to those who do not seek it. Way to go Sandy!

Hope to see you at our continuing Friday night lecture series. Great stuff coming up. And I hope to see you at the Firehouse. Hey, let's do this again in the Spring!

Rob Pitchford

In Memoriam

We lost several long-time and devoted members in 2019. They will be missed!

**Jean Benson Jean Ann Hirschi Louise Neeley Kermit Martin
Caroline Berkey Lorraine Follette Margaret Ritzel Frances Lesser**

Please let us know if we missed someone; often we do not know of a loss. If you would like to make an In Memoriam donation to the Historical Society, you can go to the website at www.hspd.org, and click on Donate Now. Thank you!

Meet the Archivist

Hello, members, let me introduce myself. I am a semi-retired Archivist & Historian and received my Masters degree in Library & Information Science, with a concentration in Archives, from San Jose State University. I then passed the exam to become a Certified Archivist. I managed the Archives and Records programs at Gap Inc. in San Francisco until deciding to opt for self-employment. I owned a bar and restaurant for six years before relocating to the desert.

In addition to doing a facility and collection review at the Firehouse, I've begun visiting other local archives and research centers to learn about their collections, processes and procedures so we can work cooperatively. I'm looking forward to getting all the donation records into a spreadsheet so that information is easily searchable. I'm also working on making some easy-to-use finding aids so the physical items in our collection are more accessible. I will have a column, the Archivist's Corner, in this newsletter beginning with the next edition.

Rochelle McCune

New Committee Announced

This past year has seen two notable events in Palm Desert's architectural history. The Miles Bates house, AKA "The Wave House", has undergone a beautiful restoration by The Stayner firm, and is nearly complete. The results are stunning and a tribute to the unique work of Palm Desert designer, Walter S. White. But sadly, another of White's designs, The Bungalows on San Pablo fell to the wrecking ball as part of the city's recent street improvements. While not as obvious or as bold a design as the Wave House, these units were elegant in their simplicity and together were an example of the vacation cottages grouped around a central space so popular in the desert during the 1950s.

There are many hidden architectural gems here in our city and there has been an upsurge in enthusiasm to recognize them. In response to this, the Historical Society of Palm Desert formed an Architectural Committee. The purpose is to advocate for, educate the public about and protect significant architecture and historical buildings in Palm Desert. This includes the disciplines of landscape architecture and interior design as well. The Committee will work with the city's Cultural Resources Preservation Committee to encourage historic listing and designation where appropriate.

We invite any HSPD member passionate about architecture and design to join us at our second meeting on January 6th. For more information contact the HSPD at 760-346-6588. It will be a good time to meet and get to know others who have mutual interests in Palm Desert's fascinating architectural history.

Mark Zimmer, HSPD Vice President and Architectural Committee Chair

HSPD FY 2020 CALENDAR

Date	Event
1/17/2020	Friday Night Lecture at Portola Community Center, 6-8 PM, Luke Leuschner on the history of Silver Spur Ranch
1/17/-1/20/2020	Desert Arc Art Show and Sale at the Firehouse 10 AM – 3 PM, 4 days
1/21/2020	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 5:30 PM - members welcome
2/13-2/23/2020	Modernism Week
2/18/2020	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 5:30 PM - members welcome
2/20/2020	Delta Gamma Firehouse Museum Tour 11-12 noon
2/21/2020	Docent for Bates House during Modernism Week 9 AM - 1 PM
2/21/2020	Friday Night Lecture at Portola Community Center, 6-8 PM, Ellen Trover on the Creation of the Salton Sea
2/22/2020	Joint Symposium, CVAS and HSPD, Portola Community Center 7AM-1PM
2/22/2020	Docent for Bates House during Modernism Week 9 AM - 1 PM
2/23/2020	Docent for Bates House during Modernism Week 9 AM - 1 PM
3/17/2020	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 5:30 PM - members welcome
3/20/2020	Friday Night Lecture at Portola Community Center, 6-8 PM, Mike Morales on Cahuilla Bird Songs
3/29/2020	Picnic in the Park and Member Meeting at Civic Center Park 11-1
4/4/2020	Art Appraisal Day at the Firehouse 11-2
4/17/2020	Friday Night Lecture at Portola Community Center, 6-8 PM, Dr. Chris Tracy from the Philip L. Boyd Deep Canyon Research Center
4/21/2020	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 5:30 PM - members welcome
5/19/2020	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 5:30 PM - members welcome
5/25/2020	Last day open
5/26/2020	Closed for the summer


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