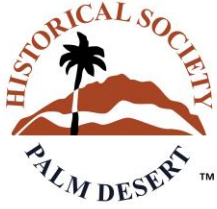


HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT



The Hourglass



Fall 2021

Palm Desert: A Sellable Dream on Forsaken Land – Part I

by Luke Leuschner

A couple years ago I made my way down to Palm Desert’s City Hall for one of their town hall nights. The issue was contentious: new voting districts were to be drawn. Since 1973, the city had at-large elections for the 5-seat City Council, a practice which technically violated the 2001 California Voting Rights Act. Palm Springs, Santa Monica and Palmdale, and dozens of others, had made the switch to voting districts, and now the Malibu-based law firm that prosecuted those cases was after Palm Desert.

That night the city presented their case for a two-district system: a one-seat district would represent the predominantly Latino neighborhood, and a four-seat district would represent everywhere else. Roundtable discussions and an open mic followed, and the citizen arguments were pretty much unanimous: Yes, Palm Desert should adopt voting districts, but No to the current proposal. Most people there, including myself, were supportive of five voting districts. The city ultimately adopted the unpopular two-district proposal. It was partially successful – the “donut hole” district is now represented by a Latina councilwoman – but the power of the 4-seat district looms.

The story of how these two districts came to represent two distinct groups, however, is not one of bureaucratic process, town halls or lawsuits. It is a story of a few visionaries, bullish investors, “desert rats” and the warm climate-seeking people who followed them. A group of people who imprinted a social and political fabric onto a few hundred acres of arid desert land.

In 1945 Clifford “Cliff” Henderson was looking for his next venture. He had returned to Southern California from Dakar in West Africa, where he had served as military governor for part of WWII. He couldn’t return to his Brentwood estate, Chateau Avion, because the renters at his Wurdeman and Becket designed home, Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth, had wrecked the Moderne interior. Henderson was furious, not only because he would need to replace \$4,000 worth of furnishings, but because the mansion was the culmination of a lifetime of achievement.



If you could walk the trophy rooms and libraries of the estate, you might get an idea of who Cliff was. He had spent the bulk of his career as the founder and managing director of the National Air Races. From 1928 to 1939, this event drew the famous pilots of their time: Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, Roscoe Turner and other aviation pioneers. Prior to the Air Races, he was a USC graduate, a Nash automobile dealer, and the first director of the airfield that would become Los Angeles International.

In 1935, he and his brother Phil broke ground on the Pan-Pacific Auditorium complex in what is now the Fairfax District in Los Angeles. With seating for 6,000 and room for large venues, it was an instant success, and was an LA landmark. Extending Cliff's experience with large-scale programming, Pan-Pacific was also the scene of LA's housing, industry and entertainment events due to its size, but also to its symbolism of Southern California's innovation and expansion. It was included in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, then destroyed by fire in 1989. Cliff and Phil developed another complex, the Pasadena Winter Garden, in 1940, to similar success. The arena was used for hockey, including professional teams, competitive figure skating and recreational skating. It closed in 1966 and was converted into a United States Postal Service facility.



In 1945, however, 50-year-old Cliff was at a crossroads. While he continued to work on new projects and expansions of existing buildings, he became interested in something he had never done before: a residential or community-type development. He purchased land for optioning in a handful of Southern California locations, but soon, a different site would attract his undivided attention.

In the small town of El Centro, Cliff's brother Randall was also making preparations for the next part of his life. He, too, had returned from service in WWII, and was looking to expand his small publication, Desert Magazine. Randall had long anticipated the expansion, detailing his plans to an interested Cliff when the two were stationed in Ghana. Randall's 1965 chronology of Desert Magazine mentions this interest: "He asked me to keep him advised, after we returned to civilian life, as to the progress of my plans".

Randall, it should be noted, was Cliff's foil. His story was defined by environmentalist writing, an endearing love of the desert, and a very modest lifestyle. He was also undeniably progressive. In a 1942 letter to Cliff, he states: "Our big problem after the war is to break down these racial hatreds – the extreme nationalism to which we have fallen victim – and it cannot be done by exclusion." The response from Cliff, a confirmed conservative and hard-nosed businessman, was likely not sympathetic.

Late in 1944, the two of them landed on the spot where both of their visions might come true. In October of that year, Randall took his 1927 Chevrolet, "Ol' Breezy", to Palm Springs – not to create another article for his magazine, but to look for land. The Palm Springs broker Raymond Cree offered him 40 acres on what is now Thunderbird Country Club, but Randall was more intrigued by a barren slope up the road at the intersection of HWY 74 and 111. The land, owned by Palm Springs builder Raymond Wilson, had a small homestead on it.

Across HWY 111 to the north was the town of Palm Village, a somewhat failed development by the Mollin Investment Company, that had purchased the land from safety razor blade inventor King Gillette. There was the Palm Village Inn, frequented by Aldous Huxley, a sprinkling of small desert houses, a community pool and a market.

Randall, seeing the southern slope as the future for Desert Magazine, contacted Cliff, as instructed two years before. Cliff was intrigued and met Randall at the tract two weeks later with brother Phil and was quickly sold on the idea of a development.

In dozens of vehement letters, public appearances and chronologies, Cliff told a different story. As he tells it, in November, 1944 he stayed with friend (and famed entertainer) Edgar Bergen at his ranch just north of Palm Village. The purpose of the stay – similar to many others who came to the desert – was to recover from illness. The “Desert Fever” he had contracted in Africa, however, turned into a different type of desert fever, as he became enthusiastic about developing the land Randall found.

Cliff spent the following months gathering investors and buying land – people like tire magnate Leonard Firestone, movie director Henry King, and Lockheed executive Carl B. Squier. They invested in the Palm Desert Corporation, an entity that would build an entire town on that slope – nearly 1600 acres in total. The first Board of Directors meeting took place on January 28th, 1946, in a room at the Pan-Pacific Auditorium.

Standing at the junction of HWY 74 in 1946, one could expect to see a vast stretch of raw desert, tank tracks where General Patton had his tank and Jeep repair facility for the troops training in the desert in preparation for duty in West Africa, a dilapidated homestead and the occasional passing car. It was really no surprise Cliff paid about \$26 an acre. Just before the junction, seemingly out of place, was a bright yellow billboard that read “Palm Desert – The Desert Community of Your Dreams”.



It was the task of Tommy Tomson, the Los Angeles-based landscape architect, to transform the barren landscape into the sellable “dream”. More than being Cliff’s brother-in-law, he had the experience to take on the task. Tomson had landscaped the Pan-Pacific, Park La Brea, Union Station and the Santa Anita racetrack, and worked with architects Welton Becket, Paul Williams, Cliff May and Wallace Neff.

Cliff’s vision was of an elite resort town with respectable homes set into the natural landscape. Visits were made to Smoke Tree Ranch for information and inspiration, as it was a Palm Springs development famed for its integration with the desert, high-class residents (like Walt Disney) and impressive architecture.



Cliff and a dump truck on site

Cliff’s centerpiece would be the Shadow Mountain Club with its modern clubhouse, figure-eight pool, boating lake and tennis courts. The architecture firm Kaufmann, Lippincott and Eggers was responsible for its curved design, as well as anything built by the Palm Desert Corporation in those first years. Their designs complemented Tomson’s final urban layout in 1946 – an array of curved streets that stretched gracefully across the slope, emphasizing the desert landscape with large lots and unobstructed views.

From mid- to late 1946, construction materials dotted the landscape, bulldozers plowed through sand, wells were drilled,



palm trees planted, and the Club's Olympic pool was carved out of the ground. Though he wasn't involved in developing the town, Randall had been given 40 acres as part of an agreement and was beginning preparations for his new Desert Magazine publishing plant. In October, small articles about the "Palm Desert tract" appeared in Southern California newspapers, the features growing larger as the months passed and work progressed.

Sources: Desert Sun; Henderson letters in the HSPD archive. *Ed. Note: Part II, A Dream Realized, will be in the Winter 2022 Hourglass*

President's Letter

It's finally here! The Firehouse is back open. Our "soft" re-opening was October 8th – but our Grand re-opening is this Saturday, October 16th from 11 - 1, so if you are in town and would like to see how things have shaped up while we were locked down, please join us. Our volunteers have really been doing some great things behind the scenes. In particular, Board member David Toltzmann has done an incredible job with re-designing the exhibit spaces and interfacing with the City of Palm Desert regarding new roofing, new flooring, new paint and a new gate to the back parking lot. Our Archivist, Rochelle McCune, has also spent long hours helping to put photographic displays together with Luke Leuschner, during his time away from his studies at school. The result is something we hope you will be impressed with.

In addition to the great displays, Board Member Nerl Porras has been getting the fire truck ready for the season. New seat upholstery and the new headliner look great! Vice President Mark Zimmer has been working with Dansk Film Digitization in New York, getting Cliff Henderson's home movies digitized. We hope to have them available for viewing in the near future. This is only a small sampling of what has been going on at the Firehouse; more has been happening with our other volunteers behind the scenes.

I am excited to announce that our "Friday Night Lecture Series" starts back up again this month on October 15th. We will be kicking off basically where we left off (prior to Covid) with Cahuilla Bird Singer, Mike Mirelez. If you are unable to make that one, our follow up lecture on November 19th will be Dr. Christopher Tracy with the Boyd Research Center in Deep Canyon. Our Friday Night Lectures are held at the Portola Community Center, 45-480 Portola in Palm Desert starting at 6:00 pm. Hope to see you all soon. Stay safe!

Rob Pitchford

Save the Date!

The Annual Fall Luncheon and Member Meeting will be on **November 10th**, 2021, at Mitch's on El Paseo. Watch for your invitation coming soon. The times are, 11:30 sign-in, an informational program at noon and lunch at 12:30. There will be a special opportunity drawing, too! We hope to see you there.

Archivist's Report

To all members and readers of this newsletter: we are asking for your help. Our new **Photo Identification Project** is an ongoing effort to recruit from the community to help solve the mysteries surrounding many of the photos in our collection.

Our photo collection's significance lies in the years covered and the variety of subjects captured from the very beginning of the founding of Palm Desert. Many of the images in the collection have little to no information attached to them - who is in the photo, where the photo was taken, when the photo was taken, why the photo was taken. So we are inviting any and all of our members to help us.

- **Photo ID Friday** - one Friday each month, we will host a photo ID session from 9-11 am in our Founder's Room. "Old-Timers" are especially welcome to drop in and look at a selection of photos to see if they can identify people, places, things and other context about the photos.
- **By Appointment Sessions** – Call 760-346-6588 and we'll go through photos with you at your convenience.

Our first drop in Photo ID Session will be on Friday, October 22 from 9am-11am. This **Photo ID Project** is only one part of an archival process that involves making the images accessible, recruiting the help of the community to describe the images, and ultimately, sharing the images with the larger public.

Also in the News: Luke Leuschner and Rochelle McCune were interviewed for the new Desert X documentary for their role in helping Kim Stringfellow with her Jackrabbit art installation for the previous Desert X. There are several screening events in the valley, and it will be available online in November. <https://desertx.org/learn/programs/dx21-the-film>

As always, we need volunteers to docent during opening hours. If you have some time to spare please call 760-346-6588 and leave a message.

Rochelle McCune

The Historical Society is on YouTube

Many of our Friday Night Lectures and other events are on You Tube for your viewing pleasure – go to <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCECrQkFgpb9eOIVFP0X1SfA> and sample the offerings; we put up new content every month. Enjoy!

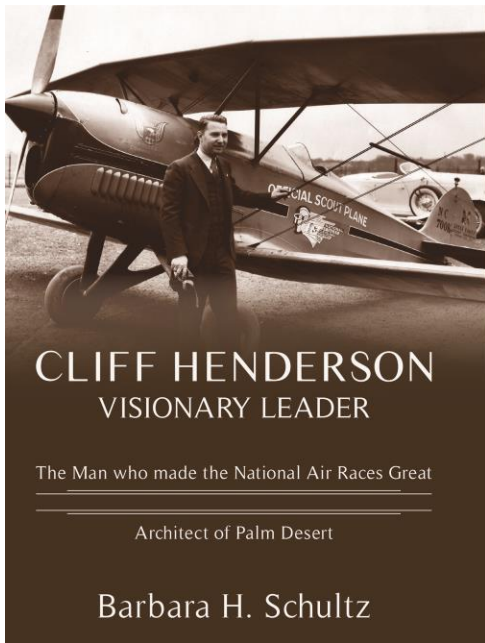
In Memoriam

John Marmon, longtime Historical Society member and Board member, passed away recently. John is preceded in death by his wife Madonna, who was also on the Board and served as Treasurer of the Historical Society for several years. John and Madonna coordinated the Mini-Muster Program for 12 years, ensuring the success of the program which teaches fire safety to third graders in local elementary schools. An extensive obituary can be found in the Desert Sun.

Free Notary Public Services

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Jim West and Karen Prinzmetal’s families visited the Firehouse Museum for the first time to view the exhibits in the West-Prinzmetal Exhibit Room, dedicated to the preservationist couple on October 19, 2019. The response was positive!

L-R: Kris West, wife of Jim’s brother, Don; Kathy, Jim’s sister; Don West (rear); Bob, Kathy’s husband; Karen is in front

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