



# The Hourglass

Editor Bob Tyler

Fall 2018



## VEE NISLEY: A MID-CENTURY MODERN WOMAN FOR THE AGES

By Linda Holden Clode

The room settled into a hushed anticipation as the guest speaker was about to begin her presentation.

With almost 40 years' experience as one of the foremost interior designers of her generation, Vee Nisley was the perfect choice to address the American Association of University Women on a February evening in 1974. The Desert Sun, February 8, 1974:

"Vee Nisley, recognized as an innovative experienced interior designer in the area will be the speaker when members of the American Association of University Women meet Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. in the community room of the Santa Fe Federal [bank], 300 Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs. Her talk will highlight 'trends in home decoration and design'."

Not only was Vee on the cutting edge of her topic but her address, delivered at the Santa Fe Federal Bank, foreshadowed the transformation of this iconic E. Stewart Williams building, which became the Architecture and Design Center of the Palm Springs Art Museum in 2014, exactly 40 years after her speech to the university women.

Born May 18, 1913 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, when women wore hobble skirts and did not have the right to vote, Vee (Violet Marie Hart) Nisley van Delden became one of the most important interior designers of her generation. A successful businesswoman, she owned Vee Nisley Interiors in Rancho Mirage, operated her extensive orchards in Indio and Thermal (where her custom workshops were located) and served as president of the Interior Designers of California. Vee was a Palm Desert resident at The Sandpiper for many years and was chosen by The Sandpiper's developers and architect William Krisel to design the interiors of the Sandpiper model homes in 1958.

### Flying High

Vee graduated in the mid-1930's from the Milwaukee Art Institute's Layton School of Art. She opened her own successful design studio there in 1939, and in her early twenties learned to fly at the Milwaukee County airfields. It was there that she met and soon married Jerry Nisley, who became her partner in her many businesses. She continued to fly throughout the 1930's while she was building her design business. Then, war intervened.

Vee's love of flying and her patriotism led her to volunteer for the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) in 1942, when she was 29. There were over 25,000 applicants to the WASPs, of whom only 1,100 were chosen. The WASPs were an all-female branch of the Air Force that flew cargo planes for the nation during WWII, freeing male pilots to fly combat missions.



Vee was an excellent pilot and became an aviation instructor and test pilot, stationed on the east coast. Local aviatrix Jackie Cochran was also a WASP, based in California. The service of the WASPs was recognized by Congress in 1977 when the women were given veteran status. On June 16, 2009 Congress passed a bill, introduced by Congresswoman Susan Davis from San Diego, awarding the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor, to the WASPs. President Obama presented the Gold Medal award to the surviving WASPs; Vee's was presented posthumously.

Vee remained close to her WASP classmates from her squad, 44-9, all her life. On February 28, 1973 the Desert Sun noted that Vee and her second husband Dr. E. van Delden (Jerry passed in 1966) hosted a dinner party for classmate Lt. Colonel Jean Olmstead upon her return from Vietnam:



WWII WASP Poster

“Dr. and Mrs. E.H. van Delden (she is Vee Nisley, the interior designer of Rancho Mirage) celebrated the return from Vietnam of Lt. Col. Joan Olmstead with a small dinner party at the Thunderbird Country Club. Col. Olmstead was in charge of Air Force Intelligence throughout her second tour of duty in Vietnam and has just been re-assigned to a new post in the Pentagon. She and Vee Nisley were classmates during the WASP training days during W.W. II ...”

Vee joined the Coachella Valley chapter of the “Ninety-Nines”, an international organization of licensed women pilots founded by Amelia Earhart in 1929 with ninety-nine charter members. From the Desert Sun, February 1956:

“Jacqueline Cochran Odlum will be honored at a luncheon meeting of the Coachella Valley Chapter of the Ninety-Nines to be held Monday noon, February 20, in the Chi Chi Starlite Room...From 1941 through 1943 Miss Cochran served as International President of the Ninety-Nines...The present Coachella Valley Chapter, though small in number makes up for its lack of numbers in its outstanding group of active aviation enthusiasts... [among them] former WASP and flight instructor Vee Nisley of Thermal...”

This Renaissance woman also found time amidst all her other achievements to become a nationally recognized champion bowler!

## Moving to the Desert

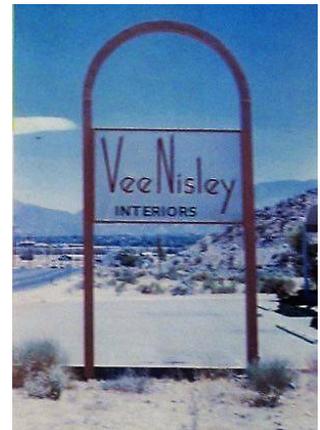
It is possible that Vee's friendship with fellow WASP Jackie Cochran drew her to the desert. Regardless, following the war in 1945 she and Jerry moved to the Coachella Valley permanently, bought orchards in Indio and Thermal, and established an interior design business. Vee opened a studio in Rancho Mirage in 1956, soon followed by her own building with its distinctive signage at 72-111 Highway 111 at the junction of Rancho Mirage and Palm Desert. The trade papers noted the \$100,000 studio of Vee Nisley, ASID, in Rancho Mirage and remarked:

"Former aviatrix, Vee Nisley, has been active in the desert area decorating circles since 1945. Over \$50,000 worth of Western, Eastern and imported furnishing and decorator items will be available in the new studio. Vee Nisley has created a score of interiors for some of the desert's most famous homes and personalities.

Specializing in interiors that express the personality of the owners, her work is noted for its color coordination, outstanding individuality and dramatic detail. Associated with her in the new Rancho Mirage studio is Jerry Nisley, her husband and business manager ..."



Vee and Van at her design business



Vee's distinctive sign on HWY 111

*Photo Courtesy of the City of Rancho Mirage*

Vee Nisley Interiors was immediately successful with Vee responsible for the designs of many prominent residents. The Desert Sun, February 12, 1957:

"Vee Nisley, who opened her decorating studio in Rancho Mirage this fall, reports that among the homes she has recently completed are the A. Ronald Buttons in Rancho Mirage [Button was called "the attorney to the stars" and became California State Treasurer in 1956], the Robert Rowlin in Indio and playwright John Van Druden's in Thermal..."

Vee designed the decor for the 1959 'Holiday House in Palm Desert' fundraiser and quickly became the preeminent designer in the valley. She continued to be known for her "breezy desert style evoking carefree living and a stylish, casual way of life." (Desert Sun, February 1974.)

In 1967 Vee became a founding member of the Palm Springs chapter of the National Society of Interior Decorators (later, Designers ASID) and served as its president in 1979.

### The Sandpiper



By 1958 it was apparent that Vee was the perfect choice to furnish the model homes for the new Sandpiper Condominium project of architect and landscape architect William Krisel, AIA, being developed (1958-1969) on El Paseo in Palm Desert. George Holstein was the builder and Jack Enders, the sales manager. Her design sense perfectly matched the vision of William Krisel, whose Desert Modern aesthetic of indoor-outdoor living was realized in The Sandpiper. Krisel won many awards for this project.

*L. Holden Clode photo*

Vee designed the interiors of the homes featured in the Sandpiper brochures (photos by Julius Schulman including some rare black and white photos):

“The beam and window trim carry out the black accent in this large bedroom. The interior walls are off-white. The king-size beds feature the gold quilted silk spread in oriental manner created by Vee Nisley in her studio” (Don Bush)



“The long decorative masonry wall has been highlighted in the models by captivating mosaic decorations, or breathtakingly brightened by imported prints or paintings. In every case, the soft hues of the stone work has served as an interesting background for Mrs. Nisley’s décor”



“Hand-rubbed Danish walnut combines with pink, blue, and purple plaids in this Sandpiper apartment. Chair in convertible den area (at right) is of white naugahyde and swivels for TV viewing. Formica coffee table and bar top in kitchen are egg shell white as are draperies, linen lamp shades and carpet.”



Her efforts were written up in the Desert Sun and in Palm Springs Life. Don Bush summed it up:

“The Sandpiper concept is an ideal plan to serve the growing need for informal desert living and Vee Nisley is doing a great deal to prove that America’s third way of life - desert living - can be truly gracious and carefree.” (February 15, 1960)

So successful was Vee in her designs that many owners of the earlier, smaller (1000 sq. ft.) weekend homes hired her to decorate and furnish their larger units purchased as the project developed.

In 1964 Vee did the interior design for the Sandcliff apartments in Palm Springs. From the Sandcliff brochure:

“Sandcliff, newest Palm Springs apartment home, features stunning interiors, decorated by Vee Nisley, NSID. Colors

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On May 12, 2015 the city of Palm Springs' Historic Site Preservation Board approved the Sandcliff Garden Apartment Homes to be a historic district. It is one of four Palm Springs condo communities which hold the historical designation.

In 1968 Vee married Dr. Egbert H. van Delden (Van), a noted economist. By the early 1970's Vee, who loved The Sandpiper, and Van had purchased a home in Circle 8, where they lived for many years. Vee's long association with The Sandpiper ended in the early 1990's when she retired.

Vee Nisley van Delden died in November 2003 at the age of 90. This innovative designer, visionary leader, businesswoman, aviatrix, accomplished sportswoman and true American heroine was in every sense an extraordinary mid-century modern woman whose design influence continues today.

*(Watch for the next Vee Nisley article showcasing her original interior design in a Sandpiper unit.)*

## **President's Letter**

A termite walks into a bar. He asks, "Is the bar tender here?" I always like to start off with a joke to break the ice. As you can see they don't have to be particularly funny jokes.

This is my first president's letter since becoming the new HSPD Board President. For those of you who don't know me I thought I'd give you a little of my background.

I am a Desert Rat – born and raised. My family moved to Palm Desert from Rancho Mirage in the mid Sixties in the middle of Second grade. I attended Washington School. My second-grade teacher was Barbara Jane Callahan. Her husband Danny was a past President here at HSPD. I remember my parents, Bob & Vera, my brother Trev (and later little Sis, Ginny), and I piling into our Pontiac Station Wagon and going to the movies at Sun-Air Drive-In. On special occasions – somebody's birthday maybe – we would get to go ride donkeys at Andy the Donkey Man's.

A school chum, Mike Johnson and I were the first customers at the Circle K store on Portola near Highway 111. I drop this tidbit at finer restaurants when going for a table upgrade. It hasn't worked yet, but someday. Someday.

One of my Little League coaches named Robin Barrett convinced a bunch of my team members and myself to join his Boy Scout Troop 76. He was the Scoutmaster at that time. I stuck with it and earned the Eagle rank. If you have a copy of the Arcadia Publishing book on Palm Desert, you can see a picture of my buddy, Larry Krikorian, and I smiling away at our Eagle Court of Honor at Camp Emerson in Idyllwild. Copies of this great book are available for a suggested donation at an HSPD Firehouse near you.

My wife Judi & I live in Bermuda Dunes now with our son, Robert. When my son became Scout age, my wife & I became Scout leaders. Robert earned his Eagle rank a few years ago from Troop 76. At the end of last year I retired

as Scoutmaster of the troop but my wife and I are still involved with the adult leader side and I am the Sunrise District Eagle Coordinator. Which finally gets us to the HSPD.

Our troop would help out with the HSPD yard sale and the HSPD picnic each year. The Board President at the time, Don Graybill (my fourth-grade teacher) asked if I would like to join the Board. And here we are today. I've had a great time serving on the Board and I look forward to serving as Board President. I wish to thank the Board and the members for welcoming me in this regard. I would to thank past President Harry Quinn who has left some pretty big shoes to fill. I'd also like to thank Brett Romer (who still takes my calls), Hal Rover (a family friend and another former little league coach of mine) and Merilee Colton for her great help and encouragement.

I hope to see you at the HSPD opening reception on October 6<sup>th</sup>. We have some great things planned for the months to come. Please come by and say hello.

Rob Pitchford

### Grand Re-Opening at the Firehouse

Come to the open house reception to celebrate the re-opening of the Firehouse Museum for the season on Saturday, October 6 from 11 AM to 1 PM. Light refreshments will be served, and we have a wonderful surprise as well.

In addition, your Exhibits Committee has been busy redoing the exhibit space to further illustrate the development of Palm Desert as part of a complete redesign of the interior of the Firehouse. **All Welcome** and see you there!



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Advertising space is available in The Hourglass 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.



## HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Date	Event
9/18/2018	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 6:30 PM - members welcome
9/27/2018	Fire Prevention Month, Mini Muster Award, Palm Desert City Hall 4 PM
10/2/2018	Mini Muster at Abraham Lincoln school
10/4/2018	Mini Muster at George Washington school
10/5/2018	Opening Day at the Firehouse 10 AM - 3 PM
10/6/2018	Opening Day Reception at the Firehouse 11AM - 1 PM
10/9/2018	Mini Muster at Gerald Ford school
10/11/2016	Mini Muster at Ronald Reagan school
10/16/2018	Mini Muster at James Carter school
10/16/2018	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 6:30 PM - members welcome
10/28/2018	Golf Cart Parade on El Paseo 12 Noon - Fire Truck and Mini Muster Kids
11/17/2018	CVAS/HSPD Symposium 8:30-Noon Portola Community Center
11/19/2018	FDM/HSPD lecture at the Palm Desert Library 6-7:30 PM
11/20/2018	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 6:30 PM - members welcome
12/4/2018	Fall Luncheon and Member Meeting at Mitch's on El Paseo 11:30-1:30
12/17/2018	FDM/HSPD lecture at the Palm Desert Library 6-7:30 PM
12/18/2018	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 6:30 PM - members welcome
1/15/2019	Board Meeting at the Firehouse 6:30 PM - members welcome
1/21/2019	FDM/HSPD lecture at the Palm Desert Library 6-7:30 PM
2/11/2019	FDM/HSPD lecture at the Palm Desert Library 6-7:30 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 6-7:30 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 6-7:30 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



## ***In Other News .....***

### **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 from 6-7:30 PM at the Palm Desert Public Library at 73300 Fred Waring Drive and is entitled **“Caring for Our Trails – Past, Present and Future”**. Here are the first three lectures:

Monday, November 19, 2018 – **“Following in the Cahuilla Footsteps”** with Harry Quinn. Harry will discuss the origins of the hiking trails in the Coachella Valley and the forging of the Spanish Route by Juan de Anza.

Monday, December 17, 2018 – **“Start to Finish: The Building of Highway 74”** with Steve Lech.

Monday, January 21, 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.

### **Coachella Valley Archaeological Society and Historical Society of Palm Desert Joint Symposium**

The Coachella Valley Archaeological Society (CVAS) and the HSPD will hold a joint symposium at the Portola Community Center on Saturday November 17 from 9 to noon, with a reception beginning at 8:30 AM. There will be a silent auction and door prizes. Speakers include Sean Milanovich, Joan Schneider speaking on the story of Elizabeth Campbell and Harry Quinn speaking on the prehistory and history of the Coachella Valley.

### **Shadow Mountain Golf Club Open House**

The Shadow Mountain Golf Club is having an Open House to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Club on Saturday, November 3, from 5-7 PM. There will be refreshments, games and tours of the Club. HSPD members are especially invited to attend; please RSVP to [smgcmgr@gmail.com](mailto:smgcmgr@gmail.com). Come see this legendary Club and join in the fun!

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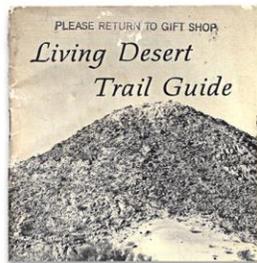
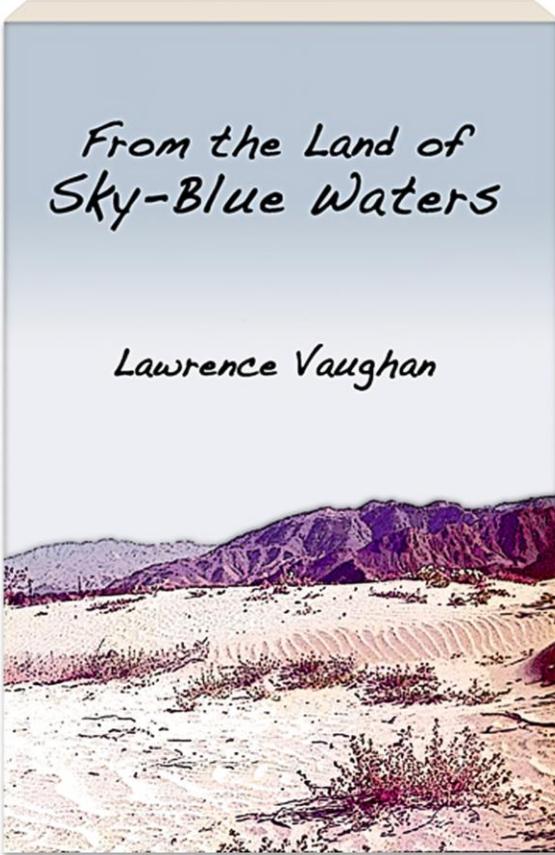


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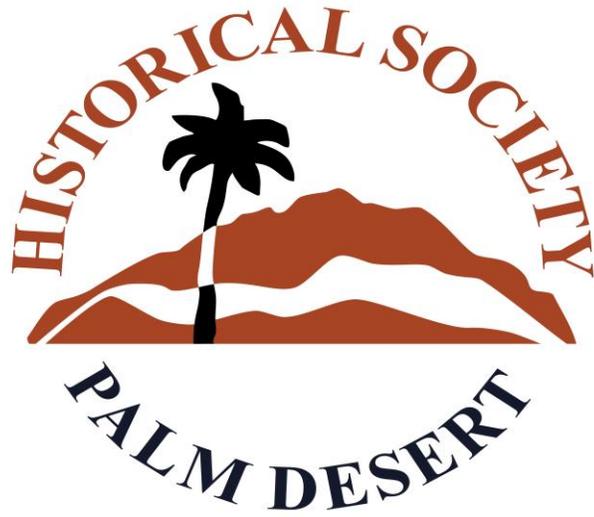
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