



# The Hourglass

## Palm Desert Serendipity

*A personal story about Landscape Architect Tommy Tomson.*



*Palm Desert Landplanner Tommy Tomson at his Hacienda Dos Gallos.*

**S**erendipity, called synchronization in some circles, had considerable influence with the beginnings of Palm Desert.

The gent, who aesthetically designed Palm Desert, was truly a genius in his field, but rarely mentioned in connection with this little city. His name was Tommy Tomson. He was a prominent West Coast/Southern California land planning consultant/landscape architect—and he was my beloved Dad! He laid out and named all Palm Desert streets—many curvy—even meandering as “straight streets have no imagination,” landscaped from A to Z, sited all the early buildings and infused a good deal of artistry in doing so.

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### Event Calendar

#### **3<sup>rd</sup> Annual “Midsummer Madness”**

#### **Potluck Dinner**

On July 15<sup>th</sup>  
at Portola Community Center  
from 6 PM to 8 PM.

Please bring your favorite dish  
—including serving utensils—  
to serve 6.

Please RSVP by  
Tuesday, July 12<sup>th</sup> at  
760-346-6588

#### **Firehouse Yard Sale**

We are now collecting your  
“treasures” for our annual sale.  
Items can be dropped off at  
the Historical Society, or call  
the office (760-346-6588) to  
arrange for pickup. The sale  
will be held in Nov. 2011.

#### **Museum Hours**

10 AM to 3 PM  
Monday, Wednesday,  
Friday, Saturday  
through June 4

After the summer closing, the  
Museum will reopen on  
Saturday, October 1, 2011

**PRESIDENT'S LETTER**

We have some sad news: Pat Marzicola passed on. Her obituary will follow later. And we have a whole lot of good news, but that comes later too.

I am sorry to announce that we have had two resignations from the Board—Eric Vogt as Vice President and Marcy Gregory. We'll miss them both as they have been a significant part of the Board. Both felt that they could better serve the Society in other ways and indicated that they will continue to support the organization with their special skills. Please let us know if you would be interested in filling the VP spot. We'd like it filled ASAP.

The good news is WE HAVE BEEN BUSY! In January we had an Art Show featuring clients of DesertARC, the first of the Firehouse Lectures Series, the drawing for the dinner hosted by Kay McCune at her Randall Henderson House, and the dedication of the Portola Community Center.

February included the second of the Firehouse Lectures and the Coachella Valley Art Show. These were followed by the Randall Henderson House dinner (more on that later), the third Firehouse Lecture, the Wildflower Festival at the Santa Rosa Information Center, and our annual picnic. Lastly, we had our annual Spring meeting . Notice

how each month is getting busier??!!

April turns out to be THE month ! The fourth Fire House Lecture, a month long showing of Norton Allen's maps and drawings, a closing reception for the art show, an Art Appraisal Day, a bus tour to Gubler's Orchid Farm, and a full hour on "Traveling with Françoise."

May will be easy; we are keeping the museum open every Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. Founders Day is being put off until the Fall.

If it were not for the board and other volunteers, we could not do all of this. I should also mention that Anne Tuttle has been key to all of this happening ! ( I think she is ready for a summer break.) We shall cover many of these events in separate articles so I will not detail who and what was involved in this letter.

We shall be doing our summer work parties again this year. Come on down and join us in the tasks that we save for the summer.

We'd LOVE to see you !

I also might mention that Stephen Aryan has been assigned as our working liaison with the city. Jean Benson is our council liaison, and Bill Kroonen is our alternate council liaison.

Thanks so much for your support.

—Brett Romer

**The Mission and Purpose of the Historical Society of Palm Desert (HSPD)**

To preserve, record and provide access to its historical collections.

To relate an on-going history of the City through exhibits, publications, media, programs and events.

To support, with volunteer efforts, activities sponsored through the Society and co-sponsorship with other private and public agencies.

HSPD is organized as a non-profit corporation that supports its mission and purposes in a responsible manner. The Society cares for the materials and pieces in its possession as unique and irreplaceable objects of local history and strives to protect and preserve its collections for posterity.

**Executive Board**

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**Newsletter**  
Duchess Emerson, editor  
Ty Davison, layout

# Obituaries

## *Notable Palm Desert lives remembered*

PATRICIA MARZICOLA, PH.D. 1936-2011

On February 16, 2011, the Historical Society of Palm Desert lost a valued member, Patricia Marzicola. Patricia and husband, John, joined our Historical Society in 2004 and have been staunch supporters of all our events.

Patricia was a native Californian, born in Los Angeles. She received two Masters of Arts degrees—one for USC, LA and the second from USC, Redlands. She received her Ph.D. from the Professional School of Psychological Studies in San Diego and received her California State License of

Clinical Psychology in 1988. She was involved in many local programs, practicing at Family Services of the Desert, prior to opening her private practice in Rancho Mirage where she did consultant work for Barbara Sinatra Children's Center and the Betty Ford Center.

Patricia loved painting and gardening and was an accomplished violinist who, at one time, performed with the Palm Springs Symphony Orchestra. Her lovely smile and sweet disposition will be missed by all of us!

# Newsbits

## **Desert ARC Art Show**

This was probably one of the most satisfying events in which I have participated. We had an outstanding turnout. All of the artists were there at least once. What an experience to see their enthusiasm and to have them show you their works and to bring family and friends in to see the show.

Credit to artist Paul Maloney. He had painted a picture for Anne Tuttle and in talking about his painting the idea of a show came about. He did not let me forget that we had discussed this and with the able leadership of Hal Rover on our end, we were able to put on an outstanding show. Liz Nabie coordinated from Desert ARC's side.

One of the paintings was of President Barack Obama. Several of us pooled our resources and sent the picture to the President. We have not heard anything from the White House yet.

## **Randall Henderson House Dinner**

Kay McCune proposed that we have a drawing for a hosted dinner at her house, once the residence of Randall Henderson. The winner would get to invite five additional people to a three course dinner prepared and hosted by Kay, assisted by Fred Montano and Kelly Flanagan. The winner would work with Kay in selecting the menu.

Over 100 tickets were sold with Harry Quinn (and friends) the lucky winner. He asked for his favorite, Mexican food. As the official photographer, self appointed, I was there for the

first part and sampled some of the appetizers. Harry, in recounting the evening, said that the meal and the evening were outstanding.

Harry and his party, Theresa Pawley, Sandy Craig, Ann Japenga, Christy Porter, and Corine Morley, were first treated to a tour of the house, which maintains its original feeling. Drinks in the back yard followed with entertainment provided by some young bunnies playing in the yard. Then dinner. From what I understand, the meal, presentation and service outpaced anything one might find commercially.

Many thanks to Kay, Fred and Kelly for hosting this evening in support of the society!

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## **Ed Mullin's Memorial Picnic in the Park**

The Keedy Kids, Barbara and Doug were there with the help of all their able assistants. I am going to step into dangerous grounds and mention only two: Warren (Barbara's husband) and Gary Olsen. They are in the kitchen for us every year.

At the picnic, I started to write down everyone who was helping out, and it was not long before the page was full and I was not through. Thanks to everyone who helped out. Also, thanks to everyone who came out and supported the society. We had about 70 people there this year.

As usual, the hamburgers were outstanding. More importantly, the company could not be surpassed. That is what it is all about, good food and good friends.

PALM DESERT SERENDIPITY  
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**H**is story starts here. By chance, Tommy met and married a lovely young lady named Dorris Henderson. And by chance, she had four older brothers, the Henderson Boys—Cliff, Phil, Carl and Randall—who were an imaginative and energetic bunch. Randall published the original Desert Magazine, Cliff and Phil built and ran the Pan Pacific Auditorium in Los Angeles, and Carl sold Packards out of his new building on Wilshire Blvd.

After WWII, when Randall and Cliff were out of the service, they talked about looking at some property east of Palm Springs where General Patton kept his repair equipment for his tank division. Randall realized he could move his Desert Magazine publishing plant up from Calexico, and Cliff and Phil could fulfill a dream of creating a town in the beautiful “cove” across Hwy. III from Palm Village. And they had just the guy with all the credentials to design and pull it together, their brother-in-law, Tommy. What a coup!

**T**ommy was an interesting multi-faceted fellow. He was a dreamer—oh, what a dreamer—with a colossal imagination! And in his case, he could make those dreams come to life.

He was born in Zanesville, Ohio in 1900 and given the prophetic name of Golden Sands! His father was a minister and his mother an “angel.”

He spent much of his after school time in the early years playing Tarzan and Huck Finn in the woods and on a nearby river where he found an abandoned boat. Later, in high school, he yearned to head west, leaving the snow and cold way behind. He even considered traveling as far as the sands of the Pacific Ocean. He quit school after his junior year, reasoning it was time to make that move out into the world and start realizing some of his dreams.

He said goodbye to the family, and what followed for him was an “only in America” story. He found work at the newly developing Grosse Point Farms in Michigan where he learned to be a surveyor.

From there he went south, working for a time in Albuquerque where he slept in an old barn with a tin roof. He loved the sounds, the rhythm, the magic of those raindrops on the roof as he lay on the hay. My Dad never missed the essence of the moment! He ventured on south to Socorro in southwest Texas, where at age 18, he led a survey party laying out new train routes.

Then the bug to REALLY go west bit him, and at 21, it was off to Hollywood where he rented an apartment on Morningside Court and went to work for the Southern California Dept. of Subdivisions.

He took lessons in etiquette, dancing and dressing while also teaching himself the tools of the career he wanted—advanced math and drafting. And somehow along the way—quoth the L.A. newspaper, “(Charles G. Tomson) was chosen for a screen test by director Robert McIntyre of Goldwyn Studios because of his distinctive type. And the test is now being shown at the California theatre here.”

He was a tall, strong, handsome guy with a quiet voice, and a somewhat shy demeanor ala Gary Cooper, *The Zanesville Local Bee* wrote, “LOCAL BOY MAKES GOOD! G.S. Tomson has been a resident of Hollywood for the past year. And

according to Tomson, he is in the movie business to stay.” He stayed for about a minute, and never looked back. Through business, he joined a professional fraternity, met new friends, and for the

first time in his life began to have a social life.

One evening he was included in a USC sorority/fraternity party. He asked to be introduced to the young lady in the pink gown. There were two young ladies in pink gowns, and the one he wanted to meet was NOT the one to whom he was introduced.

*“Tomson has been a resident of Hollywood for the past year. And according to Tomson, he is in the movie business to stay.”*

—*Zanesville Local Bee*

The girl he met was Dorris Henderson, and soon he forgot about the other pink gowned girl. Dorris captured his heart in short order, and soon he asked her drop her other beaus. She nixed that as she was having too good a time playing the field—so Tommy, who by then had changed his unwieldy birth name to Charles, left town, discouraged with his plans, and headed back to Texas.

But serendipity came into play: The train ahead of his derailed, and he read that as an omen. So back to LA he went, called Dorris and said, “We are getting married. I'll be by to pick you up tomorrow!”

Of course, she was overwhelmed, and said YES to his proposal, but “no” to leaving the next day. She couldn't as she had an important date the next night with the USC student body president who was being honored at a formal dinner. So my Dad said he'd be by at FIVE AM the next morning to pick her up and head south. Their destination was Calexico to my uncle Randall's home where they'd quickly made arrangements for a justice of the peace to marry them. Some added excitement was that the hoof and mouth disease was rampant at that time in Southern California. Every time they drove across a county line, they had to drive the car through sheep dip and then get out and walk through the stuff. Talk about a romantic elopement, this was it.

They married in Calexico with Dorris' mother and brother as witnesses, and had their wedding dinner in Mexicali. Henceforth, their song was “Mexicali Rose.” The date was April 26, 1924. So, with that, my Dad joined the Henderson clan.

Tommy went back to working for the city, but also started branching out into his new area of endeavor—as a landscape architect and land planning consultant. At that time attracting clients was a challenge. So he began planting trees for a small fee in parkways all over Los Angeles.

It provided a living for my parents who by 1926 were expecting their first child. In November of that year my sister, Kay, was born—just a few years before the Great Depression hit the country. At this time Tommy was offered an opportunity to work in the Portland, OR area with the Lake Oswego development where he spent a couple of interesting years working with a renown architect.

However, down in L.A. in 1930, Tommy's connections with the city helped open BIG doors for him.

My sister recalls as a little girl hearing Dad come in the door from work one day hollering, “I GOT THE JOB!” It was truly incredible! The opportunity presented to him changed his world forever: THE JOB was laying out the hundreds of acres of land which was to become Santa Anita Racetrack Park! And all those acres were his with which to work—siting the track, the infield, the grandstand and Turf Club area, the paddock, walkways, multitudes of parking places, the endless landscaping—green belts, the multitudes of flowers and on and on. He was overwhelmed and thrilled beyond belief. (Before Santa Anita, there had been a simple track with stables and a few bleachers built by Lucky Baldwin, previous owner of the property.)

When you see those tall thin palms at either end of the infield in the movie *Seabiscuit*, there is Tomson written all over them.

*When you see those tall thin palms at either end of the infield in the movie Seabiscuit, there is Tomson written all over them.*

One of the most creative jobs was designing flower patterns at each end of the infield. The all time favorite was the year the flowers were planted in the colors and shape of peacock

heads with their combs the crowning glory. My Dad was kept on retainer at Santa Anita until 1975, giving our family years of glorious days at the races—with complimentary Turf Club tickets. This was especially thrilling for horse-loving me.

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**T**his job opened up the world for my Dad. Clients hired him from far and wide though most were Southern Californians  
—Henry Fonda, David O. Selznick, Charles Boyer, Basel Rathbone, Frank Sinatra, Donald Douglas to mention a few. His favorites were Ronald Coleman and Red Skelton—great gentlemen, he said. And then there was Paulette Goddard who insisted that she interview perspective “employees” such as my father in her BLACK bedroom !

Late in the 1930s, a couple of years after I was born, my parents decided to move out of the city and found two and a half acres in Pacific Palisades on a canyon just up from the ocean. It was a beautiful site with our property going down into the canyon where, near the bottom, there was a small mesa—so Dad, favoring things Spanish, named our new home Rancho Mesa Potrero.

We had a pony, dogs, cats, horses, sheep, goats, pigeons, chickens, peacocks, rabbits—not all at once, but staggered over the years. It was heaven for me, especially when one day my Mother received a notice in the mail that there was something for her to pick up at the post office. What she found was unreal and hysterical. My Uncle Cliff (Henderson), who was stationed in North Africa during WWII, had sent us FIVE MONKEYS—in cages! Good thing we had a station wagon. Those monkeys were sensations. Mostly, they were in their cages, but when let out, they leaped around screeching through our trees. When our doorbell rang, they soon learned it was showoff time and flipped, looped-d-looped and flew through a pepper tree just out the big back window—all to our company’s delight. They lasted through most of two winters, but sadly met their demise after a big winter storm. My Mother and Dad saw to it that her brother never again sent such a surprise!

About this time the Hendersons Boys decided to get serious about buying and developing the desert property. And my Dad, just the man my uncles wanted and needed for this monumental project, began what was to be a labor of love for the next few years. Interesting that their little sister was married to that man ! Serendipity!

**O**n a June day in 1946 I well recall standing in the middle of nothing but sand with my family, when Cliff said in a loud clear voice that this would one day be called “the smartest address on the American desert!” I thought he was crazy, but at age nine little did I know of my uncle’s enthusiasm and energy for anything to which he set his mind.

Because in 1946 there was no place to stay in the area—named Palm Desert by my Uncle Phil—my Dad realized that he’d/we’d be needing somewhere to hang our hats, often. He’d heard about some homesteading acreage not far away in the Cahuilla Hills area west of Hwy 74.

So on a very hot June day, he put on some boots, shorts and a straw hat and started walking east from Hwy 74 up into the hills hoping to find the perfect five acre plot which he could claim. The U.S.government wanted only \$5 per acre, and those claiming a stake, had to make a \$500 improvement on the property within 5 years. He found an area by a large pile of rocks hot enough to fry eggs on, and decided this was it. And he named it on the spot—the “Hot Rocks.”

He completed the government paper work quickly and began planning what to build. He mustered all the help he could find—my sister’s old boyfriends, his able bodied pals and anyone else he could talk into helping, and up went the little house made of railroad ties. Before we knew it, we had a roof over our heads and some old Navy bunks, painted the color of the local lichen—chartreuse—a couple of built in divans, a huge rock fireplace, and down two steps to a tiny kitchen with a bar where we could sit to eat. Behind the bar was a counter for the Coleman stove, dishes and etc. and next was the icebox—an honest to goodness ICEbox. My Dad put a WWII surplus airplane gas tank on top the roof with water only for the plants. The water we drank we had to haul in, in five gallon bottles. We had Coleman lanterns for light at night plus the fire.

We travelled to the Hot Rocks most every weekend except in summer, always stopping in Cathedral City to get a big block of ice, fuel for the lanterns and stove, and food.

We had company almost each stay down there—which was great fun. People couldn't believe such a place existed, but when they got up there, they marveled at Tommy's ingenuity in building such a cabin in the rocks. Often times folks had to sleep on the Mexican tile floors in sleeping bags, or up on top of the Hot Rocks rock pile. The main attraction of the house, aside from the view, was a HUGE sliding glass door which opened the place up to the world. One day when friends came to visit, and we weren't there, the visitors used lipstick to write HELLO and sign their names. My folks were so tickled at that, they continued it for years until that huge window was full of names.

Lest I forget, I must mention the "chic sales" at the Hot Rocks. It was quite popular as the location gave the "visitor" a most gorgeous panoramic view of the desert and mountains. The Hot Rocks still stands, and we visited recently, but the area is so built up with million dollar homes now, it's hard to find the little RR tie house. My family marvels now at the memories of the old Hot Rocks and how Tommy's inspiration resulted in a unique getaway for all of us in those good old days.

The Shadow Mountain Club opening coincided with the advent of the Hot Rocks so many a Saturday we all went down there for marvelous evenings of dining and dancing to Art and Dotty Todd's great music. All ages gathered there in those days, a true family club it was! We ranged in age from ten to the eighties; our dance partners could be each others parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and friends. I recall square dancing with a dear octogenarian who was full of vim and vigor! Great fun! T'was an incredible way for us kids to grow up!

**A**bout now in time, we Tomsons lost our beloved Rancho Mesa Potero home to a slide in our canyon. We had been there when the Palisades was just a village, and my dear Mom usually had the coffee pot on for friends who often stopped by. It was a wrenching experience to watch our home be torn down. And where does one move at such a time? Luckily, we headed up the coast to Malibu and found a darling

little affordable Cape Cod right on the beach. And here is where the name Golden Sands comes in. Tho' my Dad had changed his name to Tommy—someone pointed out to him how nice 'TOMMY TOMSON' would look on a letterhead—he had finally landed ON "goldensands." My Dad named the beach cottage the YACHTHOUSE, built a neat little raft and anchored it out in the ocean where we could go sit and think of Kontiki cossing the Pacific.

ALWAYS his incredible imagination nudged him onward and upward. The beach life helped to stem our great sadness over the loss of our family home. And then the desert became even more important to our family. Dad had a new BIG dream—of retiring to hard work—building an authentic Spanish hacienda.

And so it came to pass that Palm Desert grew to be a most beautifully designed cosmopolitan desert community. El Paseo IS the "smartest address on the American desert!" And the way I see it, it's because of Tommy Tomson's vision. He created the bones, the skeleton as it were, of the area that, as it grew, became more exciting with luscious landscaping, lovely homes, marvelous places of business and a little city that thousands call home!

—Duchess Tomson Emerson,  
April 2011

P.S.: The Hot Rocks area became too crowded for Tommy about 46 years ago so he moved up the hill to Royal Carrizo where he DID indeed, build his authentic Spanish hacienda, with a black smithy, capella and much more! It embraces the last of his many incredible dreams. He passed on in August of 1986—dreaming and designing to the last moment. He was our very own beloved Don Quixote!

Note: Dorris Tomson, always Tommy's beloved, passed away in 1983, just a few months before their 59<sup>th</sup> anniversary.



*Congratulations to Harry Quinn, winner of a dinner hosted by Kay McCune at the Randall Henderson House in Palm Desert and sponsored by the Historical Society of Palm Desert. Randall Henderson was one of the primary developers of Palm Desert, the owner/editor of "Desert Magazine" and the founder of the Southwest Galleries in Palm Desert.*

Pictured are, left to right, Theresa Pawley, Sandy Craig, Fred Montano (co-host), Ann Japenga, Harry Quinn, Christy Porter, Kay McCune (Host), Corine Morley, Kelly Flanagan(co-host).

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