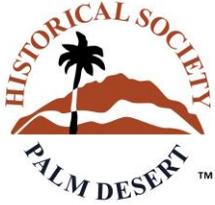


# HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT



## The Hourglass



Summer 2021

### Cahuilla Hills, The Early Days

by Ann Cady Cooper, Historian

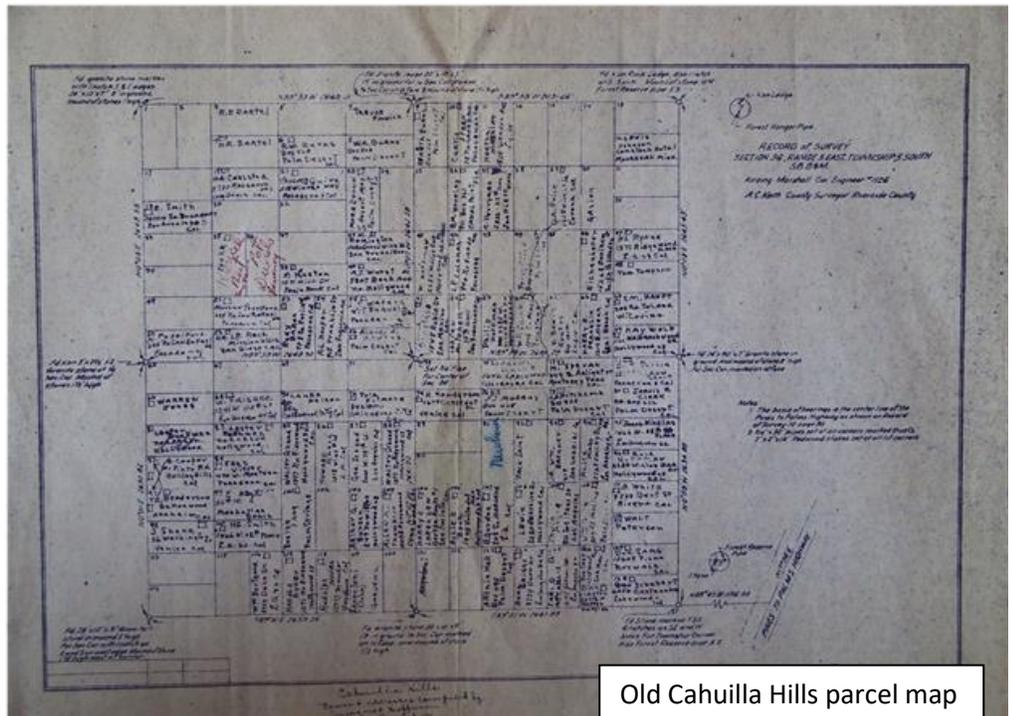
As historian and most likely the oldest homesteader in Cahuilla Hills, I'll share with you some of the beginnings of our beautiful community. My aunt and uncle and my parents homesteaded in 1948, so we've seen Cahuilla Hills from the beginning. I've found some notes made by my father which I've included in my story.

The Small Tract Act was signed into law by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938. RKO Radio in Hollywood employed Carl McCrillis, my uncle. One day a friend stopped by the studio and told him the government was opening up five-acre tracts near Palm Springs, just outside of Palm Desert. After a small structure was built on one of the parcels, the United States Land Office in Los Angeles would check on the improvement and issue a deed for the fee of \$25 if all were in compliance.

"Bring me the details tomorrow and I'll drive down this weekend," answered my uncle.

The next Saturday morning my aunt and uncle picked up my parents, Joe and Catherine Cady and my sister and me for an adventure that would change all of our lives. That was in 1948. As they found Highway 74 easily, the directions indicated there was a dirt road immediately after Silver Spur Trailer Park, about two miles up the road from Highway 111. They turned right and according to the government map, the area called Section 36, Township 5 was directly behind the trailer park. A section of land is a square mile. The dirt road made a sharp right at the back of the Silver Spur.

The precise location of finding your five-acre parcel had been so confusing that the Riverside Civil Engineering Department established monies to mark the corners on each of the five-acre parcels. Finding those markers was another story. They parked and began



Old Cahuilla Hills parcel map

searching, sending my sister and me to help. At last we found a corner and my father stepped off from that corner finding another marker, but this first parcel was rather flat, so we walked the hill where my uncle found one he liked on the highest hill. That would be theirs. Mother and daddy selected their five acres just down the way, a perfect spot for a cabin. My sister and I were so excited: a new adventure.

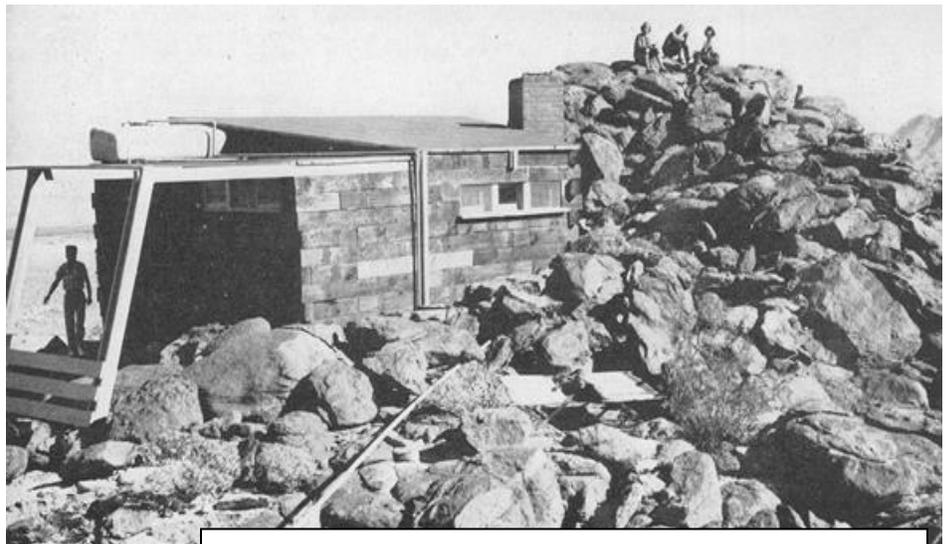
During the following week they visited the Los Angeles Land Office to make their claim. They had a certain time frame in which to build a cabin, or it would revert back to the government. My father had studied drafting in high school and after many visits to the property, designed the home he planned to build himself. Daddy was completely capable of building a house, whereas my uncle was not. Uncle Carl found a man and his son to build his one-bedroom, 500-square-foot cabin with a shed in the back of the house holding a 500-gallon water tank which worked with gravity flow to the bathroom and kitchen. In those days, there was a water truck going to properties filling the tanks. The house cost \$1200.00. Their cabin was finished before ours, so we often camped on our property and visited them for meals.

Daddy had stakes in the ground, dug the footings, placed the rebar, then hired a concrete man to lay the foundation of his 850-square-foot one bedroom cabin. Rebar came up out of the foundation where the walls would be. Mother selected a beautiful mauve cinder block that she said went perfectly with the desert hills and mountains.

My mother complained about camping, so Daddy found a place in Yucaipa which rented travel trailers. He installed a hitch on the car and picked up the trailer on the way down, delivering it back on Sunday nights. We loved staying in the trailer except when the wind blew.

When we finished the bedroom and bathroom, we didn't have to rent the trailer and were excited to move into the cabin. We cooked mostly outside although at some point Daddy bought a propane refrigerator and stove. We worked on the house on weekends and vacations, and eventually it was finished. The day he received the deed was one to be celebrated. They were now the proud owners of the cabin and five acres with a view of the lights in Palm Desert and the beautiful Santa Rosa Mountains. It was a cabin built by the entire family with their own hands. Creativity and so much thought had gone into this lovely soft mauve cabin. Their hearts overflowed with pride and joy. They were indeed pioneers. They were true homesteaders.

Slowly other people, mostly from the greater Los Angeles area, began to find property and build their cabins. The variety of homestead cabins was amazing. Tommy Thomson built a mod Albert Frey-type home in the "Hot Rocks" on the far side of the section where there are many dramatic brownish rocks and boulders. In fact, he built the house with one of the big boulders standing in the living room attached by fitted glass. Tommy Thomson was a noted landscape architect who together with Cliff and Randall Henderson helped found the site plan of the City of Palm Desert and map the street layout.



Tommy Thomson's Cahuilla Hills house under construction

Mrs. Murray had a streetcar brought down to her property. She gutted the inside and turned it into a perfect what would be called a “tiny house” today.

Everyone in the Section knew one another, some being more social than others. There were many potluck dinners, homesteaders walking across the desert to other’s homes. They liked to party in those days, the adults full of laughter, trading stories of improvements they’d made on their homes while the kids sat around a bonfire roasting hot dogs and marshmallows. We were from all walks of life, but we had in common our love for the little valley and beautiful mountains and colors of the desert. We considered ourselves very fortunate.

At a party one night, someone suggested they didn’t like the name Jackrabbit Flats, which the area had been loosely dubbed. We voted on Cahuilla Hills of all the suggestions submitted to our group. And so, the main street coming in off Highway 74 was Cahuilla Way. My father named Cat Canyon Road and Jaguar Road and years later after the flood control channel was built and they took two acres of several parcels by eminent domain, I named the returning street Buckhorn Trail.

Because we lived on a hill, we could see the whole section. In the early days if there were seventeen little homes dimly lit, it meant a majority of the homesteaders were here, using their candles and lanterns, making the inside of the cabins charming and romantic.

By 1953 many attractive cabins had been built in the section and the residents formed The Cahuilla Hills Improvement Association. We called upon the county to help with road grading and several years later electric service from the California Power Company began dotting the hills with power poles and electricity. Electricity changed everything since before that the little cabins were dimly lit at night with candles, kerosene lanterns and fireplaces. On many nights I had gone to bed in our living room to the fire lighting up the room with its flickering light. It was like magic being here and other residents felt the same. In summer, people closed their places until late October or November.

And then in 1959 telephone service was installed. Daddy was one of the first to have a phone since my sister and I played tennis and swam all day at the Shadow Mountain Club, and we could call him to bring us back to the cabin. He was also an employee of Ma Bell.

In 1966, the Coachella Valley Water District installed an 8-inch cast iron main pipe coming up Highway 74 to Cahuilla Hills. The Cahuilla Hills Improvement Association had promoted the passage of a \$1,200,000 bond issue and entered a contract with the Coachella Valley Water District to provide for the main pipe coming to Cahuilla Hills. Our water is supplied by the aquifer from a well in the Valley Production Zone near College of the Desert. It is pumped up Highway 74 to our two enormous tanks on Quail Trail (5501 and 5503). Each tank holds one-half million gallons of water and has booster stations. Old water tanks on top of sheds or up the hill from residents’ homes slowly disappeared as new pipes were added to accommodate Cahuilla Hills’ homes. And so, Cahuilla Hills became rather modernized.

Today, homes in the area usually sell for over \$1M and the feeling of the area is very much rural, with almost every parcel being over an acre and others even larger. The Cahuilla Hills, still my home today, nestled in the foothills of the Santa Rosa Mountains, is a much sought-after area. When I look back to its humble beginnings, I remember with nostalgia the rustic cabins built by the early settlers. These are memories that warm my heart, but time moves on and change is inevitable. It was a different world back then and as many of those homesteaders would agree, it was the best of times.

## President's Letter

I heard an interesting analogy by a well-known pundit the other day. He basically outlined the concept that life is like a car. He noted how cars have big front windows for a reason as so much lies ahead of us, beyond what we can even see, and that is where we should keep our focus. Whereas the rear-view mirror in contrast, with it being much smaller in scale is where we should leave the past. I, like many, am glad to put Covid in the rear-view mirror for sure! Then I started thinking, as stewards of history, it's equally as important that we keep the rear window in view, as well. We are so lucky at HSPD that so many people behind the scenes, volunteering with our Historical Society, are making sure that the past continues to be well-preserved and something we will always have an eye on.

With that gratitude in mind, I'd like to take a moment to highlight and thank two volunteers.

First, I'd like to thank Bob Tyler for his years of editing and writing for our Newsletter, The Hourglass. Bob's been at it for quite a while – longer than I've been part of HSPD, and we owe him a great debt of appreciation for the hours and time he has spent writing about our history. Chronicles that we will keep in our history files. We are lucky to have him continue as a docent at the Firehouse when we reopen in October.

Another volunteer I'd also like to thank is Merilee Colton, who has retired as Board Secretary for HSPD but will continue on the Board working on other projects. Merilee has tirelessly worked on improving the way things get done at the Firehouse and her work getting the Miles Bates' Wave house historically recognized is one of the main reasons this gem, designed by Walter S. White, is still around for generations to enjoy and study. Thank you to Juleen McElgunn for stepping up and taking over as our new Board Secretary!

I know I've mentioned this before, but I am sure you'll be surprised to see the updates to the Firehouse when we open again in October. But before October even gets here, we have another chance to get together! I hope you'll join us for this year's "Going for the Gold" mid-summer Olympics themed party (flyer and info attached.). Can you believe in less than two short years our town will be celebrating its Golden Jubilee? We are looking forward to laying the groundwork for HSPD's participation in this celebration of the City of Palm Desert's incorporation. More to follow on that. In the meantime, I hope to see you on July 23<sup>rd</sup>! And thank you all for enabling us to keep the rear window in view. Until next time,

***Rob Pitchford***

## Grants Committee Update

The Historical Society of Palm Desert is partnering with the California State Library to digitize portions of our collection and place them online for easy access for researchers and the public. We are currently preparing submissions for the FY 21/22 grant year. We will be completing collections submitted previously, the Shadow Mountain Club newsletter Sun Spots and the oral history project, and adding the Cahuilla News Letter, the Cahuilla Hills residents' newsletter from 1954-1961, as well as a collection of photographs of the Santa Rosa mountains from the 1940's.

We are waiting for the text collections we submitted for FY 19/20 and 20/21 to appear online and will let you know when they are available: old Hourglass Newsletters, Sun Spots from 1947-1967 and transcripts of the oral histories will soon be online. Covid slowed the pace of progress at the State Library significantly, hence the wait. Many of the audio oral histories from the 19/20 FY are online; you can listen to them on the Internet Archive at <https://www.archive.org>, search on Historical Society of Palm Desert.

***Grants Committee***

## Volunteer Opportunities – Members Only

If you have a few hours a week to spare, we can use your help! We are in the middle of a huge photo and slides scanning project and have other work that needs to be done as well. You can work from home or come into the Firehouse – we can set you up in a room by yourself if you require. Please call 760-346-6588 for more information. Thank you!

## 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/UCECrQkFgpb9eOIVFPOX1SfA> and sample the offerings; we put up new content every month. Enjoy!

## New Board Members

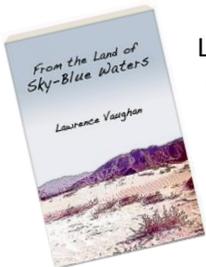
We are pleased to announce two new members to the Board of Directors of the Historical Society of Palm Desert, Greg Ballard and Wayne Connor. Thanks to both for stepping up to a most definitely “working Board”! They each have valuable contributions to share, to the benefit of our membership and the community.

## Member Authors

Barbara Schultz, a long-time member, wrote a book about Clifford Henderson titled Cliff Henderson – Visionary Leader and subtitled The Man Who Made the National Air Races Great and Architect of Palm Desert. It’s the whole story, and a fascinating biography. You can find this book on Amazon at [Cliff Henderson - Visionary Leader: Barbara H. Schultz: 9780965218146: Amazon.com: Books](https://www.amazon.com/dp/9780965218146)



Ginny (Virginia) Folkers, former Archivist at the Historical Society, also wrote a biography of Clifford Henderson titled The Life and Times of Clifford W. Henderson (1895-1984) and subtitled The Barnum of Aviation and The Founding Father of Palm Desert. This book is available at the Historical Society for a donation to the Society. Thanks to the Folkers for this contribution.



Larry Krikorian, long-time member and writing as Larry Vaughan, wrote a book about growing up in Palm Desert, From the Land of Sky-Blue Waters. A first-hand account of what it was like to grow up in Palm Desert in the 1960’s, this book is available from the author. Email to [talosiv@divetri.com](mailto:talosiv@divetri.com) for a copy.

Steven Price, who also wrote a book about Trousdale Estates, has written a book about Marrakesh, titled Pink Jewel of the Desert and subtitled The Architecture of Marrakesh Country Club. Filled with beautiful photos and renderings, this book is available at the Historical Society for a donation to the Society. Many thanks to Steven for his generosity.

## New Members

We added new members in 2020 and 2021, despite the lockdown. Let's welcome them:

Scarlett Adams	Eric and Angela Forsberg	Nathan Moulton
Kelley Bachli	Matthew Gonda	M.J. Outcault Hill
Leticia Bustos	Warner Graves	Heidi Payton
Cim Castellon	Sarah Gruber	Cynthia Phillips
Carrie Colombo and Robert Teeters	Richard Holden	Ron Pullen
Darrell Cozen	Alma Littell	Parker Scott
Bror and Caryn Dahlberg	Paul and Dierdre Lopez	Pam Smith
Michelle and Josh De Feo	JoAnn Macek	Evan and Kirsten Trubee
Ryan Dominguez	Mark and Jill Maroney	Jeffrey Wasserman
Steve and Sunny Elston	Steve Keylon	Marianne and Pat Kelly
John Emmel	Juleen McElgunn and Martin Cattermole	Laine Floan
	James Miller	

And our newest **Lifetime** member: Beverly James (also on the Board of Directors) **Many Thanks to All!**

### Board of Directors

*Rob Pitchford, President; Mark Zimmer, Vice President;  
Susan Marie Weber, Treasurer; Juleen McElgunn,  
Secretary*

### Directors

*Linda Holden Clode, Don Graybill, Beverly James, Nerl  
Porras, Merilee Colton, Erika Sharp, David Toltzmann,  
Greg Ballard, Wayne Connor, Darrell Cozen*

### Free Notary Public Services

For members of the Historical Society, only  
Contact the Society at 760-346-6588 to  
make an appointment - this service is  
provided by **Susan Marie Weber**

### HSPD MISSION STATEMENT

**TO COLLECT, PRESERVE AND RECORD THE  
HISTORY OF OUR CITY AND COMMUNITIES, AND  
TO PROVIDE ACCESS TO THE SOCIETY'S ARCHIVES  
AND ARTIFACTS THROUGH EXHIBITS,  
PUBLICATIONS, PROGRAMS AND EVENTS**



HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT  
INVITES YOU TO ATTEND OUR ANNUAL MIDSUMMER MADNESS

# GO FOR THE GOLD!

Friday, July 23<sup>rd</sup>. 5-8pm

Portola Community Center  
45480 Portola Avenue - Palm Desert

**Cost \$10.00**

*Includes Sandwich, Chips, Drinks, Dessert*

Note: There will be NO Potluck this year

## OPPORTUNITY DRAWING!

We'd appreciate your donation.

Please contact **SUSAN-MARIE WEBER** via phone or text **760.831.5416**

To coordinate drop-off or pick-up of your contribution.

*(Please no deliveries to the Firehouse.)*

**Members, Family and Friends are all welcomed!**

An R.S.V.P. is required by Monday, July 19<sup>th</sup>

So we ensure enough food and drink!

760.346.6588 OR email [hspd.firehouse@gmail.com](mailto:hspd.firehouse@gmail.com)



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Fill out the information below and mail along with credit card information or a  
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**OR**

Join or renew quickly using PayPal on our website: visit [www.hspd.org](http://www.hspd.org) and click on "Join!"

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- Patron \$250
- Bronze Lifetime \$1000
- Silver Lifetime \$2500
- Gold Lifetime \$5000
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