History of the Coachella Valley & Palm Desert
Speech given by Hal Rover, President
at the Mayor’s Breakfast 6/10/2003

If you allow yourself to dream a bit, you may see the early Cenozoic development of the Pacific plate as the earth’s surface cooled and buckled, mountains elevated and valleys formed. The Coachella Valley is just a continuation of the Gulf of California.

The Salton Sink, as it is known, reaches from the Whitewater Pass to the Gulf and includes sand dunes, faults, gorges, bedrock, volcanic knobs, hot springs, hot brine wells and snail and clam shell deposits. It is the largest dry land area below sea level in the western United States.

The Colorado River emptied into this part of the Gulf, and for 300 or 400 years deposited a silt delta across the Mexican border and alternately caused the Sink to fill and evaporate. This area became known as the ancient Lake Cahuilla, not to be confused with the current reservoir at the end of the Coachella Canal. You can see evidence of old Lake Cahuilla in the water stains above La Quinta on the mountain walls. This valley took its name “Conchilla” as dry beds yielded millions of tiny sea shells when 18th century Spanish explorers saw no lake before any Salton Sea.

Of course, the Salton Sea is just an accident that happened 100 years ago, when a flooding Colorado River broke its banks in Imperial County to our south. Only herculean efforts by the Southern Pacific Railroad and Imperial Irrigation District restored the river to its banks by 1907.

While our nation was still forming in the late 1700’s, there began to be stirrings and some human movement threading its way in and out of valleys and mountains. The Cahuilla Indians were active all over this area on its alluvial fans and rocky terrain. They lived in scattered rancherias, each with its open space and water supply somewhere nearby. The Portrero band of Beaumont, Aqua Caliente of Palm Springs, Rincon, Toro, Martinez, La Mosa and Cabazon all were living off the low desert lands.

There was a “red flag up” about this desert. Even Juan Baptista de Anza made his way paralleling the Mexican border in 1774, avoiding unknown spaces out to the north. He moved west through the Imperial Valley and climbed out through Borrego Springs and Oak Grove on his way to colonize San Francisco.

In 1769 Junipero Serra found his way along the coast as he began to build his mission chain to Sonoma. About 1820 the padres of the San Gabriel Mission established a rancho in the San Gorgonio Pass. Still, no one was venturing to the vast lowlands.

Around 1815 there were scattered reports of Indians having knowledge of salt deposits, and of oxen-drawn carretas making their way to open deposits below sea level in the Salton Sink. In 1823 Captain Juan Romero successfully journeyed from San Gabriel to Tuscon with the news of a good well at Indian Wells; but Romero reported to superiors that it was “completely impractical.”

The Spanish period of history in California ended in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Only a few stout souls reportedly explored ways to traverse a trail from Mexico to Sonoma.

When California was admitted to the union in 1850, the first legislature created 27 counties. At that time the Coachella Valley area was all part of San Diego County, until Riverside County was carved out in 1893.

On January 9, 1847 the well-known Mormon Battalion reached the Colorado River. They had
trudged from Fort Leavenworth to Santa Fe to the river. Upon encountering the Algodones Dunes west of Yuma, they dipped south, emerging at Plaster City. The Battalion moved again through the Sand Diego Mountains and Warner's Ranch, then to San Luis Rey Mission near Oceanside. Again, no one was testing the unknown desert; it was too risky, availability of water was questionable, and temperatures were unlivable.

An active and growing population was awakening throughout the west as gold became the elixir and stirred hope in the hearts of hearty men and women. News, sometimes slow to spread, carved deep desire in men to search for precious metals to make them wealthy and secure. It was a risky existence.

One such sighting became reality at Ehrenberg, Arizona across the Colorado River from Blythe. Word spread through the new state. Prospectors from Sutter's Mill and all over the west hurried south only to find a foreboding desert to forge; but forge it they did and the well-known Bradshaw Trail was established.

In 1862 William Bradshaw of the California Freemont Expedition decided to capitalize on traffic and established a wagon road through the desert to Ehrenberg. There were stations at Whitewater, Agua Caliente, Indian Wells, Torres and Martinez. Chief Cabezon was reportedly most helpful in receiving new routes through Palm Springs and the desert to complete this gold route. Each location required adequate quantities of water for weary hopefuls as they prayed for gold at the end of the rainbow. Dos Palmas is still a viable oasis, it and the Bradshaw Trail can still be traversed to this day, now by automobile. It parallels 1-10 from Hwy. 86 to the river.

The U. S. government set up a railroad expedition to explore the pass to Yuma in 1853. Lt. R. S. Williamson and William Blake, a geologist from the Smithsonian Institute, combed a roadbed for a rail and water route in order to complete the transcontinental railroad to Yuma. The push for railroad extension caused serious water needs, as the now giant steam engines required vast supplies at regular intervals always near railroad sidings. By 1876 Indio (then known as Indian Wells) was connected by rail to San Bernardino and Los Angeles. One year later the line was completed by Yuma.

A member of the Williamson Expedition, the 27 year old William Blake was a geology, mineralogy, and archeology expert who studied the physical aspects of the Coachella Valley and the Colorado Desert. He prophesied that artesian wells would be discovered all over Mecca, Thermal, Coachella and Indio. There was some marked success by the Southern Pacific Railroad in digging wells at that time. It was later, by 1888 that his prediction was to be fulfilled.

In the years following Blake’s statement about artesian wells, a growing number of farmers who homesteaded the area found volumes of water just below the surface. Greater numbers realized the need for collective water development as land acquisitions slowed due to too many users sucking liquid from the southeastern desert floor. A proposal in 1917 to channel water from Baldwin Lake and the Whitewater River to the Imperial Valley hit Coachella Valley settlers like a brick. How could anyone bypass this valley to supply the wants of others in the northeast Imperial Valley?

Production of dates, vegetables, and citrus were attracting great interest among farmers now, since there was an active railroad available for shipping. Because of the mushrooming needs for water, the time was ripe to enter this collective water effort. Settlers must protect their rights, and so the Coachella Valley County Water District was formed in May of 1918.

About this time and a few miles to the west, a handful of property owners saw this alluvial fan and dunes called Palm Village (soon to be Palm Desert) as a bubble of opportunity. For 36 square miles of Indian Wells and Palm Desert, the first record in 1910 show that well-drilling was done by Walter Schmid. Eighteen wells had been drilled by 1919, and the Palm Desert Community Services District was established to handle the growth.

The stage was set for a dream to become a reality.” Who would have guessed that the Henderson brothers, Randall, Cliff, Phil and Carl could nudge a new community out of what was officially called Sand Hole by the United States government.

The war was over, materials became available, and mirages occurred in the form of the Desert Magazine Building (now L.G.’s Steakhouse) and the Mountain Shadow Club (the first real social magnet in paradise to draw buyers who wanted to own a little piece of it) Both of these facilities were opened in 1948. It was not long before 1620 acres were purchased and divided into 17 parcels of land south of Highway 111, where houses began to sprout up and a city would eventually be
realized.

Edgar Bergen, developer of the Charlie McCarthy puppet, invited Cliff and Randall Henderson to visit him at his ranch on Portola. He was recuperating in this dry climate and believed the brothers could also benefit.

Randall Henderson decided to move his publishing business and popular Desert Magazine, published since 1937, from El Centro to this new area. He had begun his publishing venture with 618 subscribers, a total circulation of 7000. Mostly because of Desert Magazine circulation, a new post office was built and opened in July of 1947.

Cliff and Phil Henderson, Edgar Bergen, Harold Lloyd, Leonard Firestone and others owned the Pan Pacific auditorium in Los Angeles and had many contacts with the rich and famous. A town layout was completed and 19 investors accumulated large sums of money to build roads and water mains. The cove was made ready for a whole community. In early 1945 Cliff and Phil formed the Palm Desert Corporation to secure funds for streets and water, sales promotion and landscaping.

Phil, the third brother, died August 1, 1946, leaving most of the developing to Cliff because Randall was inundated by the workings of his publishing company (Desert Magazine). Randall never became a direct participant in the community development project. However, he was always pushing for a complete community; libraries, theater and churches.

Much of the planning by the Henderson brothers began as early as 1944. It was in January of 1945 that Wilson McKenney met with Randall at the Desert Magazine site. The magazine and printing site was then begun by R. P. Shea of Indio at a cost of $216,000.

These two Hendersons, Cliff and Randall, took different paths to the same end. Cliff was more publicized and better known on a national level. He was the first director of Los Angeles International Airport in 1928. He launched construction of the airport's first buildings before becoming the Managing Director of the National Air Races from 1928 through 1939. He originated several aviation expositions including the Bendix Trophy Race, the Thompson Trophy Classic, and the Powder Puff Derby. One aeronautical history book stated that, next to Charles Lindberg, Cliff did more than any other individual to attract American attention to aviation. He was listed as the P. T. Barnum of aviation.

Clifford Henderson's career spanned two world wars, beginning with the 35th Ambulance Unit in France during World War I. He served with the Army of Occupation in Germany and was commissioned in 1921 at Clover Field, California. World War II found Cliff in Dakar, Africa as the Military Commissioner, and after the invasion he served as assistant to Lt. General Harold George in the Army Air Corps, where he retired as colonel at war's end.

The rest is more history. In 1946 few believed Cliff and friends paid an average of $26 per acre for 17 parcels. Water was still their darkest threat. The cost of lots on El Paseo was $4000. They dug the first well at 612 feet, and eventually six others were added to supply growing demands.

Cliff had lofty plans for Palm Desert. Twenty miles of streets and water mains were built before a lot was sold. He was brash enough to cover all this property with a property owner's association with contract covenants and restrictions. Cliff wanted a class development. Twelve miles from Palm Springs; a huge dream and maybe with a huger ego. A few great people, with several Hendersons in the lead, and look what developed. Phil administered, Carl sold, Randall preserved, and Cliff developed. That may be oversimplified, but this community came along rapidly and soundly as the plan unfolded.

We have only a few years of history since the 1940's, but this all happened because of early exploration, foreknowledge, and pain-staking study. There truly was a formation process. The entire country was really in its infancy. Pioneers with curiosity and spirit bounced in and around this area until enough believers came and stayed.

The Juan Baptistas, Junipero Serras, Cahuilla tribes, and William Blakes had little water, no railroad, and meager backing; but gradually the process evolved into a united front. Slowly tenacity wins, because of a few dreamers who came through the Pass.
At times I'm afraid we fail to grasp what real pioneers accomplished, because we have, in our time, been given so much to start with. Read history and discover the truth. So-o-o, join us at the old fire station on El Paseo. It's your Historical Society! It's free! The Historical Society of Palm Desert now stands ready for your personal exploration and inspection. Please come and bring students. All are welcome to discover the process. We house the following:

- An archival history growing steadily under the direction of Ginny Folkers who has been the acting curator for 16 years (As of the 2003! Ed.).
- A Desert Magazine collection in annual folders dating from 1937 through 1979.
- Photo library with hundreds of local history pictures. (Now thousands.Ed.)
- Pump Organ brought to Palm Desert by the first homesteader in 1929, originally from the Nixon's Whittier home.
- Firefighting: Tools of the Trade, depicts artifacts dating to the 1700's on loan from Desert Memories, Inc. by Bob and Carolyn Green.

Bob Green is a retired Battalion Chief with the California Division of Forestry. Thirty-five years of service did not dull his interest in the history of firefighting.

Carolyn is Bob's wife and brings a lot to the table as an educator, having just completed 12 years as principal of Cielo Vista School in Palm Springs. Carolyn adds volumes to Bob's knowledge of his trade and is his equal in this history and interest.

(Bob has since passed away and the entire collection is now managed under the auspices of Fire Memories Museum. Ed.)

**REMEMBERING**

**“PILGER’S PUDDLES”**

by

Harry M. Quinn

My grandfather, Harry Caldwell, had arthritis in one hip and one arm, so liked to soak in hot water. During the early 1950s we would go down to the old hot springs near Niland that was run by a Mr. Pilger so he could soak in natures provided hot waters. While reading the book by Seddon (1989:11-14) memories of some of our times down there were brought back. Seddon (ibid.:12-13) shows “Old Spa” to have nice rocked walled pools for bathers and talks about all the trailers that were there. However, when we went to the mineral spring the only rocked lined pool was the one around the well. This collected the water and channeled it down an old creek bed. The water in the pool was too hot for anyone to enter, but as the water traveled down the wash it cooled. People would find an area with the temperature of water they wanted and build a rock and mud dam across the creek, then enjoy the new puddle they had created. The flowing water would quickly remove the mud from the new puddle and one soon had nice clear water to soak in. From this method of making areas to soak in came the name “Pilger’s Puddles.” Seddon (ibid.:4) shows a picture of the old pool and fountain, but with far more trailers than I ever saw down there. The rest room facilities consisted on a single old outhouse that had been built out away from the pool and creek bed. Mr. Pilger had an office trailer between the pool and the outhouse, but closer to the pool. I still have a picture of my grandfather and his dog Toi in front of Mr. Pilger’s trailer. At that time there was his trailer and about three or four other trailers. We camped in my grandfather’s old umbrella tent.

My grandfather and Mr. Pilger liked hot water, so could often be found in the same puddle up close to the main pool. On a few occasions they would be joined by one or more other people, but most people did not like their water that hot so would be found farther down the creek. I think this love of hot water by my grandfather is why our family became good friends with Mr. Pilger.

One of the old trailer groups was a family with three or four kids who lived there on a semi-permanent basis. The husband made his living doing odd jobs and going into the bombing range at night to obtain scrap metal which he sold in town. On one visit down there we found the family and their trailer were gone. When we asked about them we were told that he had been killed by a piece of ordnance that he was trying to take apart. Then, someone came down and removed the trailer and the remaining family members to a new location, but we never found out where they went. This meant that I was usually the only kid down there when we went to use the hot springs after that. I still have a few fragments of ordnance that he gave me.

Another of the trailer group was a man who was deathly afraid of snakes. Back then people did not use antifreeze; they just drained the radiator and refilled it before starting the car again. One morning this man went to fill the radiator and when he opened the hood, there was a red racer coiled up atop the radiator. He quickly ran back and grabbed a .22 cal rifle he kept in his trailer and took a shot at the snake. He missed the snake but managed to put at least one hole in the radiator. So my grandfather went out and collected some dried rabbit “smart pills” and poured them into the radiator and then added water. While this did not plug
the leak, it slowed it down enough so that the man could get his car into Niland and get it repaired.

Another person that I can remember was a man who made fossils to sell in town. He would attach beetles, small lizards, and dragon flies to rocks and then set them in the main pool where the hot water came out. The hot water was saturated with Calcium Carbonate, so as it cooled it would precipitate an orange-brown coating on the rocks and the attached animals. It would take about a month to create a new fossil, so about once a month he would take them somewhere and sell them. I am sure there are still some people today who have these recent made fossils in their collections.

We would wonder around down there collecting blocks of pumice which were scattered all around the area. One day my dad found a rather large pumice rock which we took home. My dad took it to work in the trunk of his car and when his boss came out, he acted like it was a heavy rock and tossed it to his boss. Based on the size, his boss did not know if he should try and get out of the way or catch it. His boss, Mr. Ray Moley, caught it and everyone out there got a good laugh over it, including his boss. Ray had never seen a rock that big that weighed so little.

Back then, we would sometimes go fishing in the canal when we were down there. At that time they had not yet introduced fish into the Salton Sea so the only fish to be found there were the Mullet off the Whitewater River Delta. The area near the hot springs had lots of pumice rocks and a few ironwood trees, so just for fun we would rig up our fishing gear with a pumice float and an ironwood sinker. This would usually get the attention of people who were not familiar with the area as they were not used to seeing a rock float and wood sink. While it looked backwards, it worked rather well. I do not remember catching many fish no matter which way we rigged up our lines. This made my dad happy, as he did not like fish.

While I am not good with names and cannot remember the names of the trailer people listed above, I still remember Mr. Pilger. He lived in San Pedro in a house on a hill just off of Gaffey Street and not far from where my dad worked. We went to visit him at his place on at least two occasions that I can remember. The times spent down at the old hot springs were enjoyable and a lot of fun for a kid growing up. It was also a good place to wash off the salt after swimming in the Salton Sea.

REFERENCE

Seddon, Mariam 1989  What Ever Happened to the Chocolate Mountain Gang?  A Mike Stanley Publication. PILGERS.NTS

President’s Comment

As I write, Christmas Day is fast approaching. Friends and family are gathering from near and far, looking forward to seeing each other and enjoying being together. Others are having a quiet time at home, remembering those good times now past. It is my hope that you experienced one of these two scenes by year’s end.

As the clean slate of 2015 begins unfolding day by day, may each of us strive to share both love and truth with those around us, being alert to their needs as well as our own.

Thank you for doing your part in making our firehouse a friendly and informative ‘home away from home’.

Sincerely, Don Graybill

Mini-MusterProgram
November 2, 2014
Louise Neeley-Coordinator

Considering the late start of this year’s Mini-Muster program, it went well.

There were many helping hands, Brett Romer, Hal Rover, Adele Ruxton (Art), Jan Holmlund (Historian) and Kevin Merkh, Fire-fighter Station 33.

Today’s good news is that Mike Lewis is willing to accept the position of Mini-Muster Coordinator. I will be willing to assist him for the year 2015 or until he selects his assistant.

Since there are many steps to this program Mike will Chair and keep the Board of the progress and results. The meetings should start this Spring to have everything ready by August.

This entails coordinating dates with: Palm Desert City Council as well with Indian Wells. Station 33 - Fire Department, Schools, Art winners and the Golf Parade.

Adele Ruxton has been grooming Bonnie Paul to be the Art Coordinator.

Editor’s note: Many, many thanks and kudos to Louise for stepping forward and taking the reins of this year’s event. Having not participated in the mini-muster before, I do not think she fully realized what she had offered to take on. But Louise did it with her usual style and capability. Louise, thanks again for stepping forward.
WELCOME: President Don Graybill welcomed all to the fall luncheon and introduced guests that included Mayor Van Tanner and Council member Jan Harnik.

Rev. Kathleen Kelly of the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, Hemet, CA, gave the INVOCATION.

A delicious luncheon was served with a choice of Medallions of Beef or Chicken Fettuccine with Caesar salad, Bread and dessert.

RAFFLE TICKETS: Dick Folkers announced the winners of the raffle assisted by Barbara Eastes.

The luncheon ended at 1:30 p.m.

Bonnie Bowie
Recording Secretary

OUR VIET NAM WAR MEMORIAL
By Harry M. Quinn

When is the last time you stopped by our Viet Nam War Memorial to pay tribute to the Coachella Valley people who gave their lives during the Viet Nam conflict? It is located over near the base of our flag pole but I seldom see anyone looking at it or honoring our lost military personnel. I call it a conflict as I hesitate to call it a war as it was never fought with any intention of winning. In fact, the United States has not fought a conflict to win since WWII.

I have always been told that at least one name was left off of the monument. During our yard sale I happened to as Teresa Pawley if she knew the name of a person left off the monument and replied she did, he was Gerald Blaine Singleton of Indio. He was born 8/20/45 and was killed on 7/22/70. Her best recollection is that he was on his third tour of duty as a Green Beret in Thua Thien Province of Viet Nam when he was killed. He had risen to the rank of SSGT at the time of his death. He can be found on the Virtual Vietnam Wall of Faces, Panel 8W; Row 44.

Donations from the Board Minutes

President Don Graybill presented the transit and some tools used by Tommy Thompson to lay out the city of Palm Desert, donated by Duchess Emerson. Don also displayed a painting of the Desert Magazine building donated to HSPD by the artist, Ron Backer. Don reported that Bob Leo had won a Ron Backer painting in a raffle and donated it back to HSPD.

2014 Yard Sale
Adele Sandman

The Firehouse Yard Sale is over for another year. We had an over-the-top sale, great items and treasures were donated. Thank you all for your generous support.

We are already starting to collect for next year. If you have items, they may be dropped off at the museum or call for a pick-up.

Again thank you all for helping to make the sale a success.

Next year’s sale will be under the leadership of Merilee Colton. She has new and fresh ideas and we are so happy she has volunteered for the yard sale event.

New members

James and Cynthia Frawley
Judy Fitzgerald
Dennis Guinaw
David Herman
Matt and Mary Ann Monica
Van Tanner

Passed

Fran Anderson

Laura McCandless
Laura was a longtime resident of Palm Desert and a longtime member of the Historical Society.

Inez Murdock
Longtime member of the Society.

Do you know what this is?
It is on loan to the society from Harry Quinn. Thanks Harry.
Upcoming Events

Desert ARC Art Show at the Museum
Jan. 12, 14, 16, 17
10am to 3pm

Desert ARC Art Show Reception at the Museum
Jan. 14
11:30am to 1pm

Friday Night Lecture
Jan. 23
Portola Community Center
45-480 Portola Ave.
6pm: Coffee and Conversation
7pm: Lecture
Paul Clark, History of Wind Energy in the Valley

Coachella Valley Watercolor Art Show at the Museum
Feb. 2 thru 16, Mon, Wed, Fri. Sat.
10am to 3 pm

Coachella Valley Watercolor Art Show Reception at the Museum
Feb. 7
11am to 1pm

Friday Night Lecture
Feb. 27
Portola Community Center
45-480 Portola Ave.
6pm: Coffee and Conversation
7pm: Lecture
Sid Burk, Military History of the Salton Sea

Picnic in Park – Spring Meeting of the Membership
Palm Desert City Park
Fred Waring and San Pablo
Mar. 29
Gather at 11:30

Board Meetings are held on the third Thursday of each month starting at 9am. They are held at the museum and all are welcome to attend.

Free Notary Public Services
for members of the Historical Society.
Contact the Society at 760.346.6588 or stop by to make an appointment.
This service is provided by Susan Marie Weber.

Fundraiser for the Historical Society of Palm Desert

Sunday Brunch for 4 in the Santa Rosa Mountains at the home of member Marvin Sprene.
Ticket donation: $10 for one raffle ticket, $20 for three raffle tickets.
Drawing will be held at a March 2015 H.S.P.D. Board Meeting. Winner need not be present however winner must be an H.S.P.D. member. Contact the H.S.P.D. to purchase your tickets.
The Sunday Brunch will consist of:

Appetizer
CHEESE SOUFFLÉ

Entrées (Selected entrée will be served to all)
- GRILLED SALMON with a Lime-Butter Sauce on the side.
The mouthwatering grilled salmon is served on a bed of baby spinach and nestled against tomato and avocado slices. Accompanied with Saffron infused Yellow Rice and Broccoli Sauflé. Paired with a Chardonnay. or
- BAKED CHICKEN with a delectable Parmesan Cheese Sauce on the side.
The scrumptious baked free-range chicken breast is blanketed in a delicious Parmesan Panko coating and is served on a bed of baby spinach. Accompanied with Saffron infused Yellow Rice and Broccoli Sauflé. Paired with a Sauvignon Blanc. or
- PORK TENDERLOIN with a zesty mushroom sauce on the side.
The succulent slow-cooked pork tenderloin, infused with a multitude of fine seasonings, is served on a bed of argula. Accompanied with Saffron infused Yellow Rice and Broccoli Sauflé. Paired with a Pinot Noir.

Dessert (Selected dessert will be served to all)
- Cheesecake - drizzled with chocolate
- Fresh Strawberries - marinated in Grand Marnier, served over Häagen-Dasz vanilla ice cream *
- Chocolate Ice Cream - intermingled with Irish Cream Liquor *
* Liquor can be omitted if announced at time of selection.

Support your Historical Society of Palm Desert
BUSINESS MEMBERS

The following local businesses have supported the Society by taking out a membership. We encourage you to patronize them throughout the year. Be sure to mention that you know they are Historical Society members/supporters.

EXPRESS FRAME
44489 Town Center Way, Ste A, 760.773.9228

HIDDEN HARVEST
87711 Peter Rabbit Lane, Coachella, 760.398.8183

FRESH AGAVE MEXICAN BAR & GRILL
73325 Hwy 111, 760.836.9028

MANAGEMENT ESSENTIALS
Accounting Systems/Consulting
Notary Public
760.831.5416

STEWART FINE ART
215 W. Mission Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
805.845.0255

These businesses support us so let’s support them.