



“From Dream to Reality”

A History of Palm Desert - V. Folkers

Curator / Palm Desert Historical Society

This is the way one of the earliest pioneers tells about the very beginnings of the place we call, Palm Desert.

At a small party in his home Clifford Henderson explained how he put together the major portion of what is today our beautiful city. Shortly after World War II he sold his interest in the Pan-Pacific auditorium and sport arena in Los Angeles. His brother, Randall, knew about his dream to establish a post-war community and had found a suitable cove at the base of the Santa Rosa Mountains.

Cliff and Phil, another brother who had been Cliffs right-hand man for years, came to the desert and called together a group of investors to form the Palm Desert Corporation. Leonard Firestone, Edgar Bergen, Harold Lloyd, and many business associates who had worked with Cliff on previous projects and trusted his judgment formed the group. With this money they hoped to acquire sufficient land at "bare rock" prices.

There was a small group of tiny businesses and homes on the north side of the Indio Highway (Highway 111) called Palm Village. On the south side of the highway there was barren desert and two or three homesteaded parcels. The Riverside County land files were searched by Cliffs secretary to get names and addresses of all recorded property owners east of Highway 74 and south of Highway 111. They used penny postcards and an unsharpened pencil stub to ask people if they were interested in selling. This method would not give the deed-holders any

Centro to the desert cove, Cliff offered him more than a dozen acres of free land on which to build his Desert Magazine building



and some apartments for his employees. Randall agreed to his brother's plan. The day the land promotion was "dedicated", a small decorated grandstand was erected in front of the just-started publishing plant on Highway 111. This ceremony was held in 1946, and is the historic basis for the Historical Society's Founder's Day award which became active in 1982.



Another structure, the Firecliff Lodge (Fire for Leonard Firestone and Cliff for Henderson) was going up on a dirt road which became El Paseo, Cliffs "Fifth Avenue" in the desert.



The very first post office was located on San Pablo in a Quonset hut and had three employees.

Overview Timeline

provided by John Frain
Greathouse Marketing
Palm Desert/Desert Historian
1942 - 1973 (Incorporation)

1942

General Patton's Vehicle Pool stationed along Portola, Headquarters located at what is now Washington Charter School

1943

General Patton trains troops for desert warfare at Camp Young, east of Indio, and sets up maintenance camp in Palm Village. First residential development begins, in a sub-division called "Palm Village." Site later developed into El Paseo.

1944

In April of 1944, the Army ordered the Desert Training Center closed and the operation was dismantled. Some 6 huge concrete emplacements for tank repair were left standing west of Portola and south of Shadow Mountain Drive after the Army withdrew its operations.

On October 20, Randall Henderson receives an honorable discharge from the services. He returns to southern California and explores prospects for where to relocate Desert Magazine. He explores the prospect of developing "Palm Village" and he invites his brothers Cliff and Phil and the three brothers travelled out to the desert in November and met on the proposed land. The brothers asked Randall to obtain 1,620 acres for possible subdivision. In November, Randall Henderson moves Desert magazine from El Centro to Palm Desert

1945

Cliff Henderson forms Palm Desert Corporation, with Bergen and Leonard Firestone listed among the directors. Other directors were Justin Dart, E.L. Cord, Harold Lloyd, Frank Biveley, Earl Coffman (Father of the Palm Springs Tramway) Emmett Jones, Henry Kink, Dr. John Lordan, Alden Roach, Stephen Royce, Donald Russ, Carl Spuier, William Stewart Jr. and Oscar Trippett. Fire Cliff Lodge and the Shadow Mountain Club, several office buildings, and a few homes were built. Thirty years later this area would become the city of Palm Desert.

1946

A Total of 6 Houses along Hwy 111
The first market in Palm Village, Palm Village Market, opens in March of 1946. It was located near the Gillette Ranch irrigation reservoir that used a gravity flow northward toward the grape, date and grapefruit orchards. Bob Keedy was the manager of the store and always had fresh produce



idea that a Los Angeles "promoter" wanted to establish a new community in the Coachella Valley. They purchased the lots that constitute south Palm Desert. In order to entice Randall to move his printing plant from El

The first Chamber of Commerce was established by Cliff Henderson in 1954.

Tommy Tomson, Cliffs brother-in-law, was a land planner who designed all the streets so they were winding with few throughways. Portola and El Paseo were the only straight streets, until the County extended Grapevine in the 1960s. Carl Henderson, another brother, was a realtor and invaluable in the sales aspect of the project.



The Shadow Mountain Club with its famous figure-8 pool was opened with great fanfare in 1948. It was advertised as a family club, and it filled that roll to the delight of its members and visitors. There was dancing and dinner for the adults, and children of all ages



were entertained by Betty Crocket. Hank Gogerty built the Desert Air Park and Hotel on Rio del Sol Road so residents and visitors could reach the desert by private plane. This property is now the Rancho Las Palmas Resort & Country Club.

Cliff donated land for the first church, school, and fire station. Palm Desert Community Church on Portola Avenue was the first building to be erected. Prior to that, members met outdoors, some even arriving on horseback. The Palm Desert Community Presbyterian Church is now located on Highway 74. Another piece of land on Portola was used for the George Washington public school. The

fire house nestled in the Sandpiper development on El Paseo gave a permanent location to the volunteer fire department. Later on, Randall Henderson donated a piece of land for Palm Desert Library, also on Portola.

Palm Desert's first property was offered for sale in November 1946, and within two weeks over a quarter million dollars worth of land had been sold. Several homes and two hotels, the Firecliff Lodge and Twin Palms, were constructed. The opening of a new post office marked the birth of Palm Desert as a real community. The formal opening of the Shadow Mountain Club lasted four days and nights beginning on December 10, 1948. It was the biggest social event in the west that season. Socialites, military officers, business leaders, film and radio celebrities, publishers, editors, writers, and photographers came from all over the Southland. Entertainment included Art and Dottie Todd, water shows, fireworks, and Edgar Bergen with his sidekick, Mortimer Snerd.

During the late 1950s many businesses were established in Palm Desert. Bob Keedy started his coffee shop; Ed Mullins, the Palm



Desert Pharmacy; Jerry Malone's service station; the Carpenters furniture store; Bud Godfrey, Palm Village market; the Andrews built the first grocery store; the Eckerts, hardware and lumber; Jeannette Constantino, the first secretarial service; Faye Kennebeck, Airlansea; the Markleys, Christine's shop; Jean Martin, the first bookkeeping service; and some artistic ladies started the Shadow Mountain Palette Club. In 1951 Palm Village officially joined Palm Desert. The first shopping center was built by the Hansons. Thanks to Dr. & Mrs. Ruge, civic groups and the Women's Club the first library was opened.

In the 1960s and 1970s Palm Desert grew by leaps and bounds. The community was doubling in size every 3-1/2 years. It was known as "The Golf

**Overview Timeline
provided by John Fraim
Greathouse Marketing
Palm Desert/Desert Historian**

1947

On July 14, the first post office opens in Palm Desert, followed by a fire station, church, library and pharmacy. Getting a post office in Palm Desert was a key event in its development. Firecliff Lodge opens. It becomes the first great attraction in the area for visitors. It was a venture between Clifford Henderson and Leonard Firestone.

1948

Cliff Henderson begins real estate development north of Highway 111, under the name "The Palm Desert Corporation." His brother Randall Henderson moves his publication, "The Desert Magazine" into the first commercial building in the area, still standing, at the southeast corner of El Paseo and Highway 111. Cliff Henderson opens the Shadow Mountain Club, which attracts celebrities and publicity to the area.

The first apartment building in Palm Desert opened in 1948 next to the Desert Magazine Building. It was built by Randall Henderson to house the staff of the Desert Magazine. Five apartments, each with two bedrooms and a bath, were arranged around a pool in the center courtyard. The apartments are the site of the current restaurant Jillians.

1949-1950

The Palm Desert Fire Control Station was built. It was the only building west of Highway 74 and the first permanent firehouse in Palm Desert. It was built on land donated on El Paseo for this. Today, it houses the Palm Desert Historical Society.

1951

Palm Village and Palm Desert officially merge into "Palm Desert."

1952-1953

William Boyd (Hopalong Cassidy) and his wife Grace retire to Palm Desert where they build their winter home. Development in Palm Desert by March of 1953, seven years after construction first began to develop Palm Desert there are 30 miles of roads, 150 homes completed (another 24 underway), 14 hotels representing investments in excess of \$3.5 million.

1954

The Palm Desert Chamber of Commerce is incorporated

1955-1957

The Palm Desert Lodge, the "Pink Motel" was built along Highway 111. Bing Crosby purchases 16 acres south of Highway 111 that was later to be called the Silver Spur Ranch, and becomes honorary Mayor in 1958



Overview Timeline
provided by John Fraim
Greathouse Marketing
Palm Desert/Desert Historian

1958

The Sandpiper Condominiums began construction on 55 acres west of Highway 74. College of the Desert founded and plans to build a campus through bond issues totaling \$5.5 million.

1959-1960

The Sandpiper Condominiums began construction on 55 acres west of Highway 74. College of the Desert founded and plans to build a campus through bond issues totaling \$5.5 million. The new city of Palm Desert has 3,000 residents, with the population doubling every 3 1/2 years. Celebrities like Ike and Mamie Eisenhower, Harold Lloyd, Fred Waring, David Janssen, Gerald and Betty Ford make Palm Desert their home.

1961

Palm Desert has a population of 4,600 and an assessed valuation of \$14 million

1962

Classes begin at the College of the Desert.

1968

Palm Desert population estimate of 8,462

1973

City of Palm Desert Incorporates

Notable Dates

1987

JW Marriott Desert Springs Golf Resort starts. It is the largest development ever undertaken in the desert. When it opens off of Cook Street and Country Club and still surrounded by a good amount of undeveloped desert land.

1997

The City of Palm Desert opens Desert Willow Golf Resort in an effort to increase tourism and revenue to the City.

2000

The city of Palm Desert has become one of California's fastest growing cities. In 1980 the population was 11,000 and then 23,000 by 1990 and 41,000 in 2000

2002

Current population of Palm Desert has grown to 42,350, with another 31,000 making Palm Desert their seasonal home.

2004

Chamber of Commerce celebrates 50 years

2010

Palm Desert Chamber become Palm Desert Area Chamber of Commerce

Capital of the World" in the middle 1960s. Although known as a resort area, Palm Desert took pride in its cultural and religious institutions. There were two elementary schools and a private school, with a new high school



on the horizon. Located on 160 acres, College of the Desert opened its doors to students in September 1962.

Plans were being laid for the Living Desert Reserve in the early 1960s. It was a one-of-a-kind project unique to our fair city. Planting flora and landscaping of various desert areas on the globe was only the beginning.



After two attempts at incorporation, the City of Palm Desert was finally a reality in Nov. 1973. The government's staff, after passing through two initial city halls, is now settled on the south end of a huge Civic Center Park. Besides a state-of-the-art band

shell for musical programs and movies, interesting art pieces, and all kinds of areas to play sports, it now has an aquatic center. The Y.M.C.A and the Palm Desert Community Center are also on the property.

The Chamber of Commerce will be celebrating it's 60th anniversary of incorporation in 2014 and is now the Palm Desert Area Chamber of Commerce, housed in the Leed Certified Henderson Community Building, named after Randall Henderson.



As the College of the Desert continues to offer classes to high school graduates and adults who want to further their education, Palm Desert now has California State University and the University of California. These campuses are located near the city's northern borders along Interstate 10. Since the middle 1990s our young people no longer have to move away from home to attend these institutes of high learning.

The success of the City of Palm Desert can be credited to the continuing excellence of the City Council and the city staff as they handle their responsibilities. Citizens speak of their satisfaction with their beloved community and demonstrate pride in how their families thrive here in the desert. Retail sales help to keep our government fiscally sound, and visitors who come to enjoy our resort facilities and attractions are happy to return year after year.

Photos Courtesy of the Palm Desert Historical Society

Article Courtesy of V.Folkers Curator Palm Desert Historical Society

Timeline Recap Courtesy of John Fraim, Greathouse Marketing

More stories, information, photos and much more available at the Palm Desert Historical Society

housed in the the original Palm Desert Fire Station.

72-861 El Paseo Dr., Palm Desert CA.

FREE ADMISSION

760.346.6588 www.hspd.org

Open 10a - 3p October - May on Monday, Wednesday, Friday & Saturdays



2013 Historical Society Board Board pictured: Don Graybill, Bonnie Bowie, Hal Rover, Adele Sandman, Brett Romer, Kim Housken, Madonna Marman, Louise Neeley, Robert Tyler, Anne Tuttle, Harry Quinn