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**Story of Deep Well  
By Melba Bennett**

There is an interesting story behind all the early landmarks of Palm Springs, and one with more up and downs than a roller coaster, is the development of Deep Well Ranch area from an apricot orchard to Palm Springs' newest residential colony known as Deep Well Ranch Estates. But because the nature of the raconteur is to "go back a piece" we will first touch on one of the early Indian legends and the birth of our first town site to give you the feel and set the mood for our story about Deep Well.

Palm Springs today wrestles with the problems of inadequate parking, snarled traffic, and high valuation of property, yet it was only about seventy years ago that the first white man purchased property in Palm Springs. People have come, and they have stayed, so why does the Chamber of Commerce grind its teeth of promotion? If they only knew the Indian legend about Chino Canyon they could relax and leave it up to Chino.

The legend goes that in early, early days, an Indian and his wife lived up in Chino Canyon tending their apricot orchard, and when an occasional traveler passed on the old dirt wagon road that meandered close along the hill to avoid the sand drifts, the couple would look up from their work and call "Hello, George," or whatever the person's name was. The traveler would look back trying to see who had called and where the voice had come from. But they never could see the Indian and his wife who tended their apricots in the canyon, so it always remained a mystery. But in looking back they would receive and retain a memory of the charm of the desert, and they would soon return, often to make their permanent home. The man and his wife began quarreling with each other so Tahquitz turned them to stone. You can see them today, the two large rocks

which guard the entrance to Chino Canyon, and they still call the visitors back to Palm Springs.

This desert was known to the early Indians and Mexicans as "The Hollow of God's Hand" (La Palma de la Mano de Dios.) The valley is surrounded on the north and east by the San Bernardino, Little San Bernardino, Orocopia, and Chocolate Mountains, and on the west and south by the Peninsula Range (San Jacinto, Santa Rosa, and Vallecito).

An official survey issued in 1855 reports that there was one road from Banning to the Colorado River. It entered Palm Springs from the north at the westerly end of Canebrake Road, wandered south to the Catholic Church and on through to the hot springs. It then passed through section 14, crossed Ramon Road at the trailer court and curved southeast to Araby Point. A well-marked Indian trail paralleled the road on the west, from the pass to a point about where the Desert Inn now stands, crossed Palm Canyon Drive and continued on east to the Indian village and fields (the present site of Deep Well Ranch). Here the Indians had about 15 acres planted to figs and grapes. The trail then proceeded to Smoke Tree Ranch, continuing east, a branch climbing south to the Indian Village of Rincon, near Andreas Canyon, and on up through Palm Canyon to the Indian villages in the mountains.

The first white men, looking for land to buy, appeared in Palm Springs in 1880. They were W.E. Van Slyke and M. Byrne, both of San Bernardino. They visited an Indian named Pedro Chino who had developed a very small ranch between the hot springs (Agua Caliente) and the mountains. Chino had planted a few fruit trees and irrigated them with the flood waters. He lived in a small, one-room adobe house not far from the present Hotel Oasis. Van Slyke and Byrne offered Chino \$150 for his ranch. He took it, turned his ranch over to the white men, and rode off on his horse to the Indian village of



Protrero near Banning. The first village real estate transactions had taken place. Then Van Slyke and Byrne proceeded to buy more land, just like you or me.

But they didn't settle here to live. They were our first speculators. Judge McCallum, our own Pearl McManus' father, was the first white man to make his home here. In 1884 he built the little adobe which is now part of the Hotel Oasis, and set out an orchard of apricots and oranges, supplemented by a vineyard and an alfalfa patch. The records of San Diego County of 1887 prove that the Judge must have really been sold on the desert, because deed after deed is recorded in his name. It is also a matter of record that on March 24, 1885, Van Slyke and Byrne granted Judge McCallum a fifth interest in the 320 acres constituting the original town site. The first real estate transaction in the village between two white men.

The water supply was abundant. Water was brought across the desert from Whitewater River through what was named Whitewater Ditch, a stone-walled canal, fourteen miles long. Having achieved this, the Judge realized that the next important step was to have a place for prospective land purchasers to stay, and he persuaded an eccentric Scotsman, Welwood Murray, who was then living in Banning, to move down to the desert. The Judge leased him a piece of property opposite the Indian hot springs, and by 1886 with the help of Indian labor, Mr. Murray had ready for occupancy a small wood and adobe hotel, the first "Palm Springs Hotel." Murray then bought a camel, hired one of the young Indian boys, Willie Marcus, dressed him in an Arab costume, and stationed boy and camel at the Seven Palms station to meet all trains, and to hand out pamphlets. Murray even planted palm trees to give Willie and the camel the proper background.

The promoters were riddled with not only a feverish imagination, but with high optimism. For there are records of two syndicates being formed, one by Judge McCallum and the three

other men, which was known as Palm Valley Land and Water Company, and another, with a capital of \$100,000, known as the Southern California Land and Immigration Company. Also "Palmdale," (now Smoke Tree Ranch) was developed by three men from Boston, who had been talked into the scheme by Professor Wheaton of Riverside. Not to be outdone by Willie and the camel, they built a narrow gauge railroad connecting Palmdale with the Seven Palms station, twelve miles away. They imported two streetcars from San Francisco, the "Market Street," and the "Sutter Street," to carry the passengers, and a wood-burning locomotive to provide the power. And over this railroad arose the first Palm Springs feud: The Palmdale contingent refused the Judge's offer of \$1500 to continue the line into Palm Springs. Some say that the little train made only one run, but even if it made a few runs, there is no doubt that its journeys were to come to an end shortly.

There were torrential rains all over Southern California in 1893 and even that joker, the Los Angeles River, overflowed its banks. Three weeks of rains continued, pouring down on the desert, and even distinct waterfalls on the mountains back of Palm Springs were reported. The desert was dotted now with innumerable little fruit orchards, and the village had enjoyed nearly ten years of propriety and development.

But in 1894 began the terrible ten-year drought, and a story with a different mood. The first few years of the drought did not affect the desert pioneers too seriously because they could use water from the canyon streams to water their crops. New men ventured into Palm Springs. Among these men was the editor of the San Francisco Chronicle, George Hamilton Fitch, who in 1895 bought some of the fields near the old Indian village southeast of the new McCallum town site. Fitch sent John Gilmore, a



correspondent, to manage the ranch but Gilmore was soon replaced by an Englishman, Bert Coons. A small orchard of apricots was set out, and a shed was built where the fruit was to be sorted and packed.

However, as the drought lowered the water level, trouble with the Indians developed. They had a legal right to the first forty inches of water from the Whitewater Ditch and now demanded that the government give them full rights to the water from the canyon streams. They too had orchards. So in 1897 or 1898, the Indians were awarded exclusive rights to the water from the canyons. With the ditch down to a slow trickle, this reduced the whites to hauling water from long distances.

Judge McCallum had been doing considerable worrying over his own orchards, and the news of the government's decision was more than he could stand. The news killed him.

Most of the orchards dried up and many of the early settlers moved away, and the little oasis reverted back to the desert. Murray and his adobe hotel remained. The family of the Judge remained, and sun-worshippers, unconcerned with growing fruit trees, came to relax and regain their health. The spirits of Chino Canyon were still on the job. But it was ten years before anyone of importance was called back. In 1908 Nellie Coffman and her two sons, George and Earl, made a brief visit to the desert from Idyllwild, where they were living. In 1909 Nellie and her husband, Dr. Coffman, moved their family to Palm Springs and built the tent houses that developed into the world famous Desert Inn. With the arrival of Nellie Coffman the future of Palm Springs was assured. She had no money for fancy promotional approaches, but she had unlimited energy, vision, and courage, and faith.

In the meantime, the Fitch property had been sold to a man by the name of Walker from Santa Ana. Fitch's apricot trees had burned out during the drought, but the olive and pepper trees were still standing. Walker planted more apricot

trees about 1912. He watered the trees with water provided by the water company which was then controlled by Mr. Bunker, Senior. In 1916 an enterprising young man by the name of McKinney, and his wife Rose, moved to the desert, took the little money they had and leased Walker's land, and made their first payment on the eighty acres to the west of Walker's property. They set out more apricot trees and a good sized patch of alfalfa.

McKinney also decided that the armed forces could use a large supply of castor oil, and so he planted about twenty acres of castor bean trees. However, about this time, the Palm Valley Water Company changed hands, and P.T. Stevens took over the control. The ditch had been supplemented with a supply of water from Chino Canyon, but Stevens was interested in the development of the north end of the town, and the McKinneys and others in the south end pleaded in vain for water. The McKinneys never cut their first alfalfa, and lost what money they had put in the ranch. The alfalfa and apricots died from lack of water, but not the castor beans. Neither thirty-five hot summers, neglect, nor uprooting and burning have obliterated them. They are still making their fight for survival.

Mr. Henry Pearson, eminent scientist and authority on rubber, purchased the property in 1926. He drilled a well and was amazed to find water so close to the surface. The curiosity of the scientist tempted him and from the hundred foot level where he hit water, he drilled further, and after passing several other water stratum, at 630 feet he called it quits. From this well, the deepest in the Coachella Valley, the property which had been originally cultivated by the Indians, then had been set out as an orchard by Fitch and later by McKinney, and had twice been defeated by the shortage of water, came to be known as the Deep Well Ranch.

Pearson and his daughter, Esther, employed the services of Alvah Hicks and Hans



Hansen to build them a board and batten ranch house. It consisted of a living room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and a tiny library. A small, one room guest house was built at the rear, on the patio. Water was heated by the patio. Water was heated by the solar system. The pipes, covered with glass, were still on the roof of the little ranch house when the Bennetts moved into it in 1931.

But the ranch proved too isolated for the Pearsons, and in 1928 they moved into the village and sold the ranch to an easterner by the name of Charles Doyle, who converted the old apricot shed and the ranch house into guest quarters, and called the place the Deep Well Guest Ranch. He had accommodations for twenty-two guests, but from the early ledgers, it is apparent that there were always plenty of rooms to spare.

Doyle was operating on a shoestring, and in 1929 he had a chance to sell, and took it. Major and Mrs. Everett, and Mrs. Everett's brother, Carrol Smith of San Francisco, were the purchasers. Calling in young Paul Williams, the colored architect, they drew plans for charming hacienda type buildings around pleasant patios. The new buildings were completed early in 1930 and the ranch opened for guests. Unfortunately the Major did not live to see his ambition for the finest guest ranch in California realized. He did that same year, and his widow, with the assistance of her brother-in-law, Fred Warner, planned to carry on until a buyer could be found. But the depression made things too difficult, and Mr. Warner persuaded Frank and Melba Bennett of Beverly Hills to operate the ranch in the winter of 1930 and spring of 1931. Frank had been general manager and vice president of the Town House in Los Angeles.

The Bennetts and the Philip Boyds of Palm Springs were both interested in the purchase of the property. During the summer of 1931 it had reverted to its former owner, Henry Pearson, and that fall the Boyds and the Bennetts combined their interests and bought the property together. Frank and Melba assumed the operation for the next eighteen years, and made

the ranch their home, while Phil and Dorothy continued to live in the village and later Phil became the first mayor of Palm Springs.

In 1930 the only amusement center in Palm Springs was a pool hall that closed at 9 o'clock. In 1931 Earle Strebe, a bright young bell boy at the Desert Inn, rented a projection machine and on Saturday nights ran a movie in the grammar school auditorium. After the movie, the chairs were pushed back and everyone danced. Earle today owns three handsome motion picture houses in Palm Springs. Horseback riding, swimming, and sunbathing were the only pastimes for visitors, but they loved it, grew healthy on it, and came back for more; brought friends, and bought homes, and stayed.

In 1949, with subdivisions crowding the ranch, the Bennetts found it increasingly difficult to maintain the old informal, simple atmosphere that everyone had loved. So, when Yoland Markson, of Boston, fell in love with the place and offered to lease the ranch and twenty surrounding acres, the Boyds and Bennetts decided that it was the best thing to do. Mr. Markson said he would make the ranch the beauty spot of Palm Springs, and that he has done.

This year the balance of the acreage is to be subdivided. Locally popular Bill Grant, former chairman of the Desert Circus, Palm Springs Horsemen's Association, and active in many other civic enterprises, is the purchaser and developer. He is a well-known builder, having pioneered the development of such local areas as Rancho Royale, and Sun View Estates, and is connected with the building and development of famous Thunderbird Ranch and Country Club.

It is fitting that such a man should set the standard of quality for the new Deep Well Ranch Estates and carry on its high tradition. Many of the residential sites have already been acquired by prominent winter residents who are aware of the many advantages of locating their Palm



Springs home in this area. The fact that Bill Grant has placed on his architectural committee men of such prominence as Cliff May (considered America's foremost designer of California ranch-type homes), and Phil Boyd, destines this to become Palm Springs' finest residential colony.

One enters from the Palm Springs-Indio Highway over a beautiful new divided roadway, landscaped and decorated at the attractive entrance. One cannot help but be awed by the panoramic view of mountain and desert on his first visit to Deep Well Ranch Estates.

The Bennetts who, since leasing Deep Well, have been living in the village, are also coming home to roost. After looking over all the possibilities throughout the desert area for a building site and finding nothing comparable to Deep Well with its breathtaking vistas and unique protection from the desert winds, they have decided to retain three acres of the ranch property and plan to build within the year. Cliff May will design their home. They may not have an alfalfa patch, nor will Indian ponies graze near their windows, but it's a sure bet that they will have plenty of water, and a most delightful place to call home.