

The “Unofficial” History of Deepwell  
By Ron Root

Part 1

As a newer resident (1996), I find myself slightly handicapped as a neighborhood historian. But smitten by the charm of Old Palm Springs, I have been moved to research and write about our lovely Deepwell. My love for the Coachella Valley really started in the “golden celebrity era” in the late 40’s. I came here with my parents as tourists from Laguna Beach to “star gaze.” Yes, we saw movie stars, but as a child, I was more impressed with riding a camel in Indio as part of the “Arabian Nights” festivities.

Many years later, while searching for a home to fit my semi-retires state of mind, I heard Realtors make strange references to Palm Springs neighborhoods such as Las Palmas, The Movie Colony, Araby, The Mesa, Little Tuscany and lovely Deepwell. Although these areas were not defined on my AAA map, I eventually garnered some sense of location and more importantly, the nature of each neighborhood. In 1992, Palm Springs Life launched a series of short profiles about these neighborhoods. As I relate stories, I will draw information from the few existent written sources. But the liveliest resource will be you, the individuals who have resided here longer than I have.

Please share any information you can about how the area developed, resident celebrities, interesting moments and decisions that shaped this place we call Deepwell. I plan to relate this information bit-by-bit in our newsletters and create some historical archives for the newly reorganized Deepwell Home-owners Association.

Where did the “Deepwell” title come from? What existed before homes began springing up? What important people lived here? More celebrities lived in the area than one might guess. How has the neighborhood evolved? I have found some answered to these questions.

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Part 2

The earliest residents of the valley were the Agua Caliente tribe of the Mission band of Cahuilla Indians and later the Mexicans. They called this desert “The hollow of God’s Hand” (La Palma de la Mano de Dios). I like that better than “God’s waiting room” as some call it today. A small Indian village with about 15 acres planted the figs and grapes existing here in the Deepwell area.

In 1880, two white men, W.H. Van Slyke and M. Byrne of San Bernardino purchased the first Palm Springs ranch land from an Indian, Pedro Chino. These first speculators sold John McCallum a fifth interest in their accumulated 320 acres. He, in turn, leased land to a Welwood Murray for a small wood and adobe hotel to be built in 1886. Water moved 19 miles across the desert via a stone-walled canal called the White-water Ditch. Many fruit orchards were planted.

Promoters developed the area with two syndicated being formed. McCallum and three other men formed the “Palm Valley Land and Water Company.” “The Southern California Land and Immigration Company” was the other. The area called Smoke Tree Ranch today was originally developed as “Palmdale.”

Early prosperity slowed to a trickle with an eleven year drought starting in 1894. Many settlers left the area.

This brief foundation of Palm Springs as a community will be followed in our next issue with the development of the Deepwell Ranch Estates.

More detailed information covering the pioneer days are handsomely displayed at the Village Green Heritage Center in the center of downtown Palm Springs.

Again, I appreciate any information about celebrities who lived in Deepwell for part 4 of this history.

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Part 3

In 1912, after George Hamilton Fitch was defeated by the 10 year drought, he sold to a man named Walker who replanted apricots, olive and pepper trees.

In 1916, Oliver McKinny leased and later acquired Fitch’s land and planted apricots, alfalfa and castor bean trees.

Unfortunately, water control was diverted to the north end of town so everything died except the hardy castor beans.

A decade later, Henry Pearson, a scientist, purchased the property. He drilled a well and hit water at 100 feet. With scientific curiosity, he drilled even deeper passing several water stratum and quit at 630 feet. Thus the name Deepwell was coined. A ranch house with guest house was built by Alva Hicks.

In 1928 Charlie Doyle bought and converted the structures into the Deepwell Guest Ranch with accommodations for 22 guests. It was really more like a resort than a dude ranch.

The following year Doyle sold to Major Everett and Carroll Smith. They created hacienda-type buildings around patios. Two years later, the Bennetts and the Boyds first operated, and then purchased the ranch. Frank and Melba Bennett ran the ranch for the next 18 years. Phil and Dorothy Boyd lived in the village (Phil became the first mayor of Palm Springs in 1938). He built the first few homes next to the ranch and named the streets after horses – Pinto and Palomino.

In 1949, the ranch and twenty surrounding acres were leased to Yoland Markson of Boston. The acreage was then subdivided. Bill Grant, a locally popular developer of Thunderbird Ranch was purchaser and developer. Later streets were named after desert flora – Cactus, Manzanita, Ocotillo, Mesquite, Palm Tree, Driftwood and Sagebrush.

La Paz Dude Ranch was turned into a hotel in 1950. Eventually it became La Paz Condominiums. L’Horizon, adjacent property later became Suntan Lane.

In the sixties, a theater-in-the-round featuring world famous performers was located behind Biltmore Place.

Bill Bone, a major valley developer built Deepwell Condominiums on the original Boyd-Bennett ranch site in 1970.

Cougars and boa constrictors in Deepwell! We will cover that curiosity and the celebrity keepers in the next newsletter.

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Part 4

The William Holden Estate at 1323 Driftwood is one of the largest and most recognized homes in Deepwell. It was the site of our first potluck party of the revived Deepwell Neighborhood Association in 1998, hosted by Jan and Steve Reid.

This home was created in 1955 by George and Marcia Barrett. He was the District Attorney of Cook County and Marcia was an artist. The house sits on nearly an acre, comprising four city lots. Mrs. Barret designed the house which covers over 4000 square feet. It was built by Joe Pawling. The Barretts were art and object collectors of the Far East and needed the appropriate house for their authentic possessions. The house was basically charcoal, black and white in color. East met west in desert style architecture with an oriental flair.

The original furnishing used accents of citron, turquoise and peach. They called it “Apricot Hall of the Desert Moon.” Shoji panels, teakwood, floor pillows and old Chinese museum pieces rested on white terrazzo floors.

William Holden purchased the house in the mid sixties. He loved Palm Springs as it reminded him of Kenya, where he also had a home. He actually introduced some African plants and trees to the Coachella Valley.

He needed a place for his African-Oriental collection. Bill, then in his 50’s, separated from his wife Ardis, considered Palm Springs his American headquarters. His mother lived in the house next door on the North side. Other women in his life were Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Capucine, and Pat Stauffer and in 1974 he met Stephanie Powers. She spoke 7 languages and became the ideal travel companion for Bill. He was 56 and she was 32. They never married.

Bill often commuted to Los Angeles on his black Honda motorcycle. In 1975, he cut way back on his drinking, but still smoked heavily. He was known in the neighborhood for his grapefruit margaritas. “Bertie”, Bill’s pet python, kept escaping at parties to the dismay of guests. The snake liked to swim in the pool. Unfortunately, his wonderful personality turned mean while drinking as I can attest to after sharing an airplane passage with him.

He was probably best known for his part in “Sunset Boulevard” in 1949. Ironically, his career began with a film about a handsome young boxer, “The Golden Boy” (1939) and ended with the film “S.O.B.” (1981) which was a vitriolic attack on tinsel town. In 1975 he started designing the 7000 square foot house on Southridge. The home on four acres was completed in 1977 to house his growing art collection. Many of these prized pieces can be seen now at the Desert Museum in Palm Springs.

Nick Shamees, owner of Felix Chevrolet in Los Angeles was the next owner until 1990.

Lou Barransha, a rancher from Thermal and Tippi Hedren, the actress, were the next residents. In an early film, she played a model "Miss Ice Box" in the 50's film "The Pretty Girls." But she is most known for the role as the mysterious playgirl trapped in a telephone booth by "The Birds" (1963) by Alfred Hitchcock. She kept a cougar on the property and eventually opened an animal rescue preserve. Her daughter, Melanie Griffith and husband Don Johnson would visit.

Steven and Janet Reid owned and upgraded the home from 1996 to 1999. Fortunately, they still reside in the Deepwell area. Jan kept the rose gardens in show quality condition nearly year round.

The current owner of the house is David Jackson, a news broadcaster for KABC, Channel 7 in Los Angeles. I remember him from Channel 5 in San Francisco.

We welcome him and his lovely wife to Deepwell.

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Part 5

I have selected to write about the celebrities on each block of Deepwell. Manzanita Avenue certainly had its share during the 50's and 60's.

Unfortunately, our most recent movie star just passed away in August at the age of 87. Loretta Young, who certainly lived up to her name in appearance, resided at 1075 Manzanita Avenue. We will miss seeing her lighted angel display on the corner during the Christmas season. She was a strong supporter of St. Louis Catholic church in Cathedral City and told the local bishop, "She was ready to die and she looked forward to going home." Her last husband, Jean Louis, the Oscar-winning Hollywood costume designer, passed away in 1997.

Loretta, an actress for 75 years, made nearly one hundred movies but was best known for her long-running TV series, "The Loretta Young Show."

On down the street, at 1240 Manzanita resides Jack Stephan, the founder of the L.A. based Stephan's Plumbing chain. He has been a resident since 1971.

One of the first houses on Manzanita, 1297, was owned by Julie London in the mid to late 50s. Ironically, she was my babysitter in the 40's and went on to become a famous singer. She was married to Jack Webb (of TV's Dragnet). Their divorce ended with a huge financial settlement. Later, around 1960, he had the house next door (#1255) built so he could keep a watch on his ex-wife. "Just the facts, ma'am" Jack was also a TV and Radio producer.

On the other side of Julie London Webb at 1315 resided Earl and Anne Goldenberg. When he asked her to marry, he told her he was "rolling in dough." He actually meant he owned a bakery. Later, the Goldenberg's leased their home to Elizabeth Taylor and Eddie Fisher. Liz spent time in Palm Springs with husband, Michael Todd and Richard Burton as well as her mother who lived nearby.

One of the later residents of 1315 was Bill Beck, owner of the Red Tomato restaurant in Cathedral City. The residence is now owned by Jim Jones and his wife, the most recent elected member of the Palm Springs city council.

At 1350, a 30's starlet, Sally Eilers lived with Hoot Gibson, a cowboy idol of the 20's and 30's. They were part people of the best of Palm Springs tradition.

Home to the youngest of the Gabor sisters, Eva lived at 1509 Manzanita. She starred in TV's Green Acres and later represented the world's largest wig makers. Eva's social escort was most often Merv Griffen, who is well known to all of us.

The cute Mediterranean style house at 1516 was the second desert home of the famous entertainer, Liberace. The famed pianist entertained 60 people – his TV show crew, relatives and friends for Thanksgiving 1958. He often performed at the local famous Chi Chi club. His last and most famous desert home was located on Belardo Road in the Las Palmas area of Palm Springs.

Other famous Deepwell homeowners will follow in the next issue.

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Part 6

Notable residents of Deepwell were not always movie stars. Sherman Harris, who previously owned 960 Driftwood, is well known in the community for his wonderful Sherman's Deli and Bakery on Tahquitz Canyon Drive as well as the Alpine restaurant at the top of the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway. Sherman was a war hero and hero to many local charities. Currently, you can spot Sherman about town with our Neighborhood watch leader Rosemary Cinque of 1386 Driftwood Drive.

A most unique home, 1106 Driftwood Dr was built by Liberace for his mother. Unfortunately, she never resided in this 19<sup>th</sup> century, French Chateau style home. Perhaps he couldn't find a grand enough candelabra for the fancy porte-cochere. The home of Phil Moody, a Hollywood musician and owner of the Desert's famous Moody's Supper Club, is at 1440 Driftwood Dr.

A man who came to Palm Springs in 1946 became a well known developer of parts of downtown. He created the Historical La Plaza area, Sun Center and much of Ramon Road and Indian Canyon Drive. He served on the City Council from 1968-1972, not to mention Desert Hospital Foundation, Boy Scouts, the Jewish Community Center, The United Fund, Desert Museum, McCallum Theater, College of the Desert, and the Chamber of Commerce. Zachary Pitts was honored with a sidewalk star at La Plaza Court. His home address was 1105 Calle de Maria from 1958 to 1975.

Until recently, Dr. Ronald Fragen, noted cosmetic surgeon and wife Carol lived at 1208 Calle de Maria.

The highly admired home at 1207 Calle de Maria was designed by the famous architect, Arthur Elrod. Elrod's masterpiece, his own home, is near Bob Hope's hilltop home on the hill referred to as Southridge.

The Jerry Lewis's family owned a home at 1349 Sagebrush Road from the late 50's into the 70's. First known as the Martin and Lewis comedy team of television and later in films, he then went on to open about 200 theaters, called the Network Cinema Group. We currently look forward to seeing him on the annual Muscular Dystrophy Telethon.

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Part 7

Calle Rolph had its share of celebrities too. The famous Latin bombshell, Carmen Miranda, came to Palm Springs hoping to alleviate her chronic sinus problem. Before going to Hollywood, Carmen gained fame in the 1939 Carnival, Rio De Janeiro, by dancing and singing in a hoop skirt with a basket of fruit balanced on her turbaned head. Her home was 1044 S Calle Rolph in the late forties. She was married to David Sebastian. Carmen loved the bar-be-que and often had notable guests such as Marlon Brando. She passed away in 1955.

At 1290 S Calle Rolph, lived the famous character actress, Marjorie Main. Born in 1890 in Action, Indiana, she began her career at a late age as a stage actress. After a long contract with MGM, she was loaned to Universal to become the popular movie character, "Ma Kettle." Completing 9 films as the same character, Marjorie retired to her homes in Los Angeles and Palm Springs in the late '50's. She later owned a home on Rimrock and a retreat in Idyllwild. At the age of 85, Main died after a long battle with cancer.

Oscar Mayer, the famous Chicago meat packer, purchased homes in Deepwell twice. The two homes he owned were located at 1353 S Calle Rolph and 1155 Cactus Road. The property on Cactus was owned by Carl Lesserman, the developer of Pay-Per-View television.

The oldest street bordering Deepwell is Mesquite Avenue. Ginny Simms, the vocalist for Kay Kyser's band, lived at 1139 E Mesquite Ave. Russell Wade, Indian Wells realtor and 40's actor, was at 1422 Mesquite Avenue. Charles Winninger, who played Cap'n Andy in the 1936 version of "Showboat" resided at 1580 Mesquite Ave.

The newest street developed had only one house that dated back to the '50's. The home was built by Rick Harrison, a popular local architect at 1055 Suntan Lane. His modern style is similar to William Cody, another notable architect in this area. He had the street to himself until the early '60's.

We will again notice children in our neighborhood with the 2001 opening of the totally rebuilt Cahuilla Elementary School. What a handsome contemporary structure it has turned out to be. (Did you notice it takes literally years to build a school, but only a few months to create a huge, new Casino?) We welcome all those who will be involved in the new campus and wish them well and the hope that it will continue to enrich our neighborhood.

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Part 8

After the dining room of the Deep Well Inn burned down in the 1960’s, the condominiums of Deep Well Ranch were built in 1976. Elizabeth Taylor had a place there as well as the famous manager of both the Dodgers and later the Giants – Leo Durocher. Also of interest, our popular Smoke Tree Village opened in 1965. Designed by Howard Laphan of Palm Springs, it included Ethel’s Hideaway run by John and Ether Harutum. They previously the Hideaway, a night-spot at Deep Well Ranch, and originally operated the legendary Dollhouse in 1945.

There seems to be some confusion concerning whether our neighborhood should be identified as Deep Well (two words) or one word, like our street named Deepwell Road. Our area was originally advertised in the Villager (the predecessor to Palm Springs Life magazine) by Boggess Realtors in October 1952: “Coming attraction – in the immediate future, a quality subdivision to be known as Deep Well Colony Estates”. An aerial view photo of the empty lots, boasting of fine paved streets with cement curbs and gutters accompanied the ad. The large mid-section of lots was prepared for homes all at once and later the existing older streets were added to Deep Well.

Generally, the age of the homes reflect the age of the street created. Homes on Mesquite Avenue date from the ‘30’s, Calle Rolph and Calle Marcus and Sunrise Way from the mid 40’s, followed by Palomino and Pinto. In 1952 ten streets were developed, including Calle de Maria, Paseo de Marcia, Deepwell Rd and others named after desert plants. By 1956 there were three residents on a newly created street called Palm Tree Lane.

“Cactus Slim” Moorten helped suggest the botanical street names and was responsible for landscaping most of the older “desert style” gardens in Deepwell, especially ones with large bolder and native plants. His wife, Patricia, now in her 80’s, still resides at nearby Moorten Botanical Garden in the Cactus Castle, a historical landmark home previously owned by photographer Steven Willard.

Willard’s love for desert flora was manifested through his outstanding print collection recently acquired and displayed at the Palm Springs Desert Museum. His black and white photos are similar in style, but actually preceded those of Ansel Adams. His hand-colored prints truly reflect the beauty of the Coachella Valley.

As mentioned before, the latest development in our area is the total reconstruction of the Cahuilla Elementary School at a cost of 10.5 million dollars. It has an enrollment of over 600 students. It seems that the renewed interest in mid-century modern homes as well as the consistency and convenience of our neighborhood, has contributed to the continuing desirability of Deepwell.