Contents

The Founding Mothers of Palm Springs
Renee Brown and Steven Keylon .......................................................... 4

The Landscape of the Palm Springs Woman’s Club
Steven Keylon ...................................................................................... 18

Francis Dean and the Art of Modern Landscape Architecture
Lauren Weiss Bricker, Ph.D and Keiji Uesugi, ASLA .......................... 22

Member News ....................................................................................... 31
The Founding Mothers of Palm Springs

For thousands of years, the area that would become known as Palm Springs lay in the bend of the arm of the majestic San Jacinto Mountains. Within its several canyons, multiple oases existed, made fertile and rich by snowmelt which fed a vast underground aquifer. Within these riparian communities grew native trees and vegetation: fan palms (Washingtonia filifera), desert willows, sycamores, mesquites, ironwoods, alders and grey cottonwoods. Untouched by man for centuries, the land was finally settled by a small tribe of Native Americans — the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians — the tribe named for the healing mineral baths they called “Sec-he” (boiling water). Later, Spanish explorers passed through, became enchanted by the native flora and fauna and called the area, “La Palma de la Mano de Dios” (The Palm of God’s Hand).

By Renee Brown & Steven Keylon

Spread: The vast “Palm Court” at the Desert Inn was planted with a variety of palm species, and enclosed by three long guest lodges. Mott Studio photo, ca. 1930, courtesy California History Room, California State Library. Opposite top, left to right: Portraits of Nellie Coffman, Pearl McCahon McManus, Melba Bennett, and Ruth Hardy, all courtesy Palm Springs Historical Society (PSPHS).
Nellie Coffman, beloved by all who met her, was the undisputed matriarch of Palm Springs for over forty years. “With the arrival of Nellie Coffman, the future of Palm Springs was positively assured. She had unlimited energy, vision, courage, and faith,” said Melba Bennett. “The town of Palm Springs grew up literally in the shadow of the legendary Desert Inn, which she opened in 1909. Coffman, a tenacious but never-conformist,” was an innovator as well; she introduced nearly everything for which the world-famous resort community would eventually become known; the desert’s first swimming pool, the first golf course, and the first tennis court. Writer Ernie Pyle said of Coffman in 1942, “she started what was to become the whole vast way of desert vacationing, all the great resorts — Tucson and Phoenix and Death Valley — the fancy hotels and the Southwest dude ranches and the thousands in trailers who have discovered the uncanny lure of the desert, it all began with Mother Coffman. The whole thing was built on one woman’s spiritual love of the desert.” Her resourcefulness and kindness were legendary, while the landscape she created for the Desert Inn became the model for all the desert resorts that followed.

Nellie Orr was born in Indiana in 1867. She was a widow with one son, George Roberson, when she moved to Los Angeles (her father James Orr was a Santa Monica hotel owner), where she met and married Harry Lee Coffman in 1891. Together the couple had a son, Earl, and moved to Santa Monica where Harry Coffman opened a medical practice. In 1894 Nellie and Dr. Coffman divorced. In 1909, Nellie and her son, George Roberson and Earl Coffman, retained ownership of the Desert Inn site was the old Tahquitz Ditch, an irrigation channel started by the native Caballu Indians in the 1830s and enhanced with stone walls by Judge McCullum, the first white settler in Palm Springs. The soothing sound of the running water became a decorative feature in the landscape, and as business prospered, tent bungalows were added along the banks of the old Ditch. Charming rustic bridges spanned the stream, which murmured as World War I broke out in Europe, fording affluent families who were accustomed to more upscale accommodations, impeccable service and warm hospitality. The desert itself would provide the only amenities Nellie cared about, her four “S’s” — space, stillness, solitude and simplicity. One of the most interesting features of the Desert Inn site was the old Tahquitz Ditch, an irrigation channel started by the native Caballu Indians in the 1830s and enhanced with stone walls by Judge McCullum, the first white settler in Palm Springs. The soothing sound of the running water became a decorative feature in the landscape, and as business prospered, tent bungalows were added along the banks of the old Ditch. Charming rustic bridges spanned the stream, which murmured as it flowed down the mountains, gathering rose petals and mesquite blossoms as they fell. Sandy silt often blew onto the grounds from the diniy road in front of the Inn. "Mrs. Coffman saw it to that devil-grass covered the street. Early, very early in the mornng, I remember seeing her out front with a hose, wetting down the sand and grass. This chore she attended to all winter, spring and summer.” It was concern for her beloved mature trees that led Nellie to an innovation that would change the Coachella Valley and pave the way for more widespread growth.

During one particularly hot and winter, when she feared her trees and shrubsry might perish, Nellie "conceived the unheard of idea of boring a well on her property. Everyone said it was a crazy idea, but she went ahead with her plan. Lo and behold, she struck water. Hers was the first water struck in the far end of the Valley. The Coachella Water Company threatened suit, whereupon she told the president he would come to Palm Springs, he’d drill him in the water from her trub well and give him a real baptism. He never showed up!”

It was concern for her beloved mature trees that led Nellie to an innovation that would change the Coachella Valley and pave the way for more widespread growth.
By 1922 Coffman owned 35 acres. She then borrowed $35,000 from the Citizen’s National Bank of Riverside to begin the first major expansion and improvement of the hotel. Around this same time, multi-millionaire oilman Thomas A. O’Donnell (1870-1945) began staying at the Desert Inn, becoming Coffman’s close friend. O’Donnell helped Coffman realize her full vision for the Desert Inn; in 1924 he personally provided a loan for new construction in the amount of $350,000 (equivalent to $5,000,000 today). In exchange, he leased land on a cliff overlooking the hotel to build his own “Ojai del Desierto” — designed by architectural designer William Charles Tanner. Tanner also designed the new Spanish-Colonial Revival structures for the Desert Inn, elegant white-painted board-formed concrete buildings with the rough of hand-cut tile in variegated shades of red, purple and ochre. As elegant as the new structures were, it was the landscape at the new Desert Inn that guests would remember the most. Writing of her time recuperating at the Desert Inn in the 1920s, Hollywood gossip columnist Louella Parsons recalled, “Orange trees, flowering plants, and a riotous garden had been transplanted there by the energetic Nellie, who had made a veritable oasis out of sand and rocks.”

Before Coffman and Tanner began planning the design of the new hotel, Coffman made it clear that she wanted the old Tahquitz ditch to be retained, but even more importantly, she asked Tanner to preserve the mature desert willows, guadalupe mesquites, and fluttering cottonwoods that had been there decades before she arrived. When she saw Tanner’s proposed site plan for the first time, in dismay she said, “I looked at the plans and found that they had ignored my trees. ‘What are you going to do about that willow tree?’ I asked Mr. Charles Tanner, the architect. ‘Cut it down, of course,’ he replied. ‘Indeed, you’ll do no such thing,’ I told him. ‘You’ll just cut it in two and move half of it forty feet south.’ He thought I was crazy, but he did it.”

The site plan and landscape design that Coffman and Tanner conceived gave guests a feeling of inclusion and privacy — though they were steps away from town. From Palm Canyon Drive, the wide entrance featured a pair of stately square columns and wrought-iron gates, both announcing “The Desert Inn” in stylized script. Through this gateway, a wide, curved driveway lined with an alley of native Washingtonia filifera palms, opened onto a large motor court — Nellie’s “Court of Remembrance” — its perimeter ringed with specially planted commemorative palms. From here, guests found the elegant and comfortable lobby and adjacent dining room, with its mural depicting Dr. Anza’s 1774 trek through the Coachella Valley. Just outside was a popular outdoor dining patio, enclosed by boxes bursting with flowering color and paved in old gold patio floor tile from the Los Angeles Pressed Brick Company. The same tile paving was repeated in the main dining-room floor, the walls, loggias and portals. Vines climbed up the Monterey-inspired balconies and spilled down almost to the ground, while large glazed-pottery oil jars and scattered pots of assorted plants and flowers gave a feeling of relaxed informality.

From this central heart of the resort, guests, bellboys, gardeners, and maids walked or bicycled to and from the visitor accommodations situated throughout the 35-acre campus. Behind the lobby building was a cactus garden and tennis court, and beyond that stretched an enormous open panel of turf planted with a collection of various species of palm trees (The Palm Court) and enclosed by long, low guest “lodges.” Scattered around the remainder of the property were charming one- and two-story cottages with wide loggias and long covered porches offering ample shade and views of the simplicity and beauty of the desert landscape.

Though the landscape could be enjoyed passively, it was also designed for active recreational use. “Whether they prefer to spend long hours just dozing — sunbathing,” they call it in Palm Springs — setting life come as it may; or whether they want action — they may find it here. [Coffman has provided] generously for the guest’s comfort and amusement. A turquoise swimming pool reflects cloudless skies, inviting a room after a brisk set of tennis or badminton. Courts are strategically located in the thirty-five-acre gardens of the Desert Inn.”

Besides the main boulevard course on the Desert Inn property, guests were invited to use the private nine-hole O’Donnell Golf Club bordering the Desert Inn just north of the swimming pool. Once complete, the Desert Inn could house 200 guests; it had several stores (including a Bullock’s), a coffee shop, and an E.F. Hutton brokerage for guests needing to keep in touch with their portfolios. In 1946, Nellie wrote, “when my time on earth comes to a close and I stand at the Pearlly Gate, I am going to ask the gatekeeper if I can start a boarding house in the sky.”

Coffman and her sons ran the Desert Inn for over forty years. In appreciation for all she had done for the village, drops turned out in 1947 to celebrate Nellie Coffman Day. Coffman died June 10, 1950, and in 1955 her sons sold the Desert Inn to film star Marion Davies — who died a few years later. It was demolished in 1986 and replaced with the Desert Fashion Plaza, which, in turn, was torn down in 2012. Today, construction is underway for a controversial 14-acre mixed-use development with a city park designed by Ross Clemente Hale Studios in the center. Mother Coffman’s wrought-iron gates announcing the Desert Inn will then be reinstalled to honor her memory.

In contrast to the motherly warmth of Nellie Coffman, pioneer “Auntie Pearl’s” personality was slightly pricklier. The daughter of the first white settler to live in Palm Springs, Pearl McCallum McManus was important in shaping the development of the community, and possessed “an imaginative force within her nature which kept her active mind constantly conceiving new ideas. She planned, or better dreamed, always on a grand scale, but she left the humdrum details to be worked out by others. Just as she had no time for small talk and gossip, she abhorred the boring minuteness of life.” Luke Coffman, McManus had a deep appreciation for the natural beauty of the desert — particularly the native plants of the Sonoran Desert — and was eager to see them used creatively in desert landscaping.

In 1884, four-year-old Pearl McCallum arrived in what would become Palm Springs, sitting astride the horse of her father, Judge Guthrie McCallum. “This Scott, John Guthrie McCallum, editor, lawyer, politician, was 57 years of age when he came to the place he renamed Palm Valley. Pioneering spirits usually burn brightest in youth, and
Austin G. McManus of Pasadena, and with year she met and married real estate mogul taxes . . . [to] hold onto the land.” That same strapped, nevertheless heeded her father’s maintain the property . Following her moth-leaving Pearl and her mother struggling to weakened heart. His son Harry died in 1901, self died in 1897 from what doctors called a

denied him rights to water coming down additional crushing blows: the federal courts replanted, but the crops died in what was to that caused a devastating flood. McCallum also

were part of an existing windbreak, Wright found some innovative solutions. In other trees were more of a challenge, though Saved also was an enormous, much-loved fig encouraged to help themselves to the fruit). McCallum also

corporate the old McCallum adobe into the plan with an equally important requirement: “I insisted that the orange and clementine trees on the grounds be integrated into the structure even if it cost twice as much.” Wright's ground plan for the eight-acre site contained the majority of mature orange trees, which had been planted in a grid (guests were encouraged to help themselves to the fruit). Saved also was an enormous, much-loved fig tree — said to be a century old. Some of the other trees were more of a challenge, though Wright found some innovative solutions. In order to maintain two old clementine trees that were part of an existing windbreak, Wright built a redwood dining room around them — the tree trunks becoming a part of the room and piercing the ceiling above — creating a spectacular sight. Ingeniously, he managed to

save a single mature orange tree, a part of the original orchard's grid, by making it a feature of the swimming pool — the tree continuing to grow in the center of a small square island within the large square pool.44

Wright's architecture was equally innova-tive and expressive. He contrasted the stark, formal simplicity of thick, steel-reinforced concrete walls with more decorative elements to provide texture — filigreed wood trim and his (and his father's) signature “textile” blocks, their patterns hardening back to the site's Native American roots. Large pottery oil jars atop the horizontal buildings lent an exotic air. A soaring sixty-four-foot tower in the center of the property was lit at night and soon became a landmark. All ground floor rooms opened out onto private patios. Native California grape-vines soon began swallowing the building, while broad open outdoor rooms were car-peted in Australian rye grass. Combined, the opulent, romantic flair of the Oasis felt like a Maxfield Parrish painting coming to life.

The hotel opened in 1925, but within a few years the McManuses were forced to sell. The new owners added several Spanish-Colonial Revival buildings. With the exception of the signature tower and a few storefronts along Palm Canyon Drive, what had been the Oasis was demolished in the 1950s. The McCallum Adobe was moved, brick by brick, to the nearby Village Green, where one can visit it today.

THE OASIS

McManus had a long-standing (and one-sided) rivalry with Nellie Coffman. McManus saw herself and her family as the true founders of Palm Springs, and the fact that most people viewed Coffman and her Desert Inn as the originator of Palm Springs tourism rubbed her the wrong way. In 1929 the competitive McManus decided to build her own hotel, one that would be very different from the Desert Inn. To achieve her bold vision, McManus, who always insisted on the best design for her properties, hired archi-tect and landscape architect Lloyd Wright, son of the legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright. In contrast to the existing resorts with Span-ish-Colonial or local vernacular design, Pearl envisioned something innovative and modern, and while her initial plans were modest, she recognized that she often let projects run away from her. “I never thought about what it would cost — that is the way I do business — I just plunge into it when I get excited and have [often] gone into heavy expenses. But after I achieve what I want to do, it always works out, and I have created something beautiful like the Oasis Hotel.”

That the hotel would be a memorial to her father was a crystal-clear objective for her. McCallum challenged Wright to incor-porate the old McCallum adobe into the plan with an equally important requirement: “I insisted that the orange and clementine trees on the grounds be integrated into the structure even if it cost twice as much.” Wright's ground plan for the eight-acre site contained the majority of mature orange trees, which had been planted in a grid (guests were encouraged to help themselves to the fruit). Saved also was an enormous, much-loved fig tree — said to be a century old. Some of the other trees were more of a challenge, though Wright found some innovative solutions. In order to maintain two old clementine trees that were part of an existing windbreak, Wright built a redwood dining room around them — the tree trunks becoming a part of the room and piercing the ceiling above — creating a spectacular sight. Ingeniously, he managed to

Of all the architectural projects for which “Auntie Pearl” was known, the project of which she was most proud was the Palm Springs Tennis Club, which opened in 1917. It soon became widely known and admired, called “the most beautiful club in the world.” The inspiration for the landscape of the Tennis Club came from fond memories Pearl had of her 1927 honeymoon in Amalfi, Italy, where the stone terraces of the Capuchin monastery captivated her attention and lingered in her mind. She engaged a dashing young archi-tect, Philip Ormsby (a recent graduate of the USC architecture program), and his partner Lloyd Stefflen to assist in implementing her vision for the five-acre site, which was later described as an “enchanted spot with an old-world atmosphere, embodying Italy, Spain and Old Mexico.”

Ormsby and Stefflen designed a simple two-story Monterey-inspired Clubhouse building with a balcony, a huge lounge, a dining room and a card room. From the upper floor of the building, doors led out onto
ed a broad, flat grass terrace with rustic granite walls created by stone artisans Dee Miller from rock sourced at the site. Miller also created a wide, dramatic 150-foot-long stone staircase descending the slope from the terrace. The foot of the staircase spread out like a fan offering access to a large panel of turf inns with a spectacular oval pool before a backdrop of "V"-shaped groupings of palms overhanging the water. This dramatic image became the official insignia for California in the years before World War II when the State Chamber of Commerce used a picture of the pool and palms on its promotional literature, earning it the title of "the most photographed pool in the world." Paddock Engineering, builders of the pool, also built the three tennis courts, considered to be "the finest concrete courts in California." Careful thought was given to the color palette: the concrete courts were acid-stained a deep chocolate brown and the neighboring wooden fences painted a dark green, making the courts easy on the eyes by reducing glare and making the white tennis balls easier to see. The courts were open to mountain views, making games visible from the stone terraces above, and allowing the acoustics on the court, an important asset for the game. As noted at the time, "Good acoustics is one of the essentials of really fine tennis courts." In addition, the courts were electrically lit for night games. McManus retained the old Tahquitz Ditch, which ran through the grounds, widening and deepening it. The mature mesquite trees that lined the ditch were maintained, supplemented by new fruit trees planted adjacent. With the addition of tables and chairs set out on the lawn, it became an ideal spot for a luncheon.26 The Club opened for business in late 1937.27

In 1939 Pearl hired Tony Burke, a local real estate entrepreneur and avid Palm Springs booster, to manage the Club. Under his dynamic leadership, Palm Springs' first bowling green was installed; trout brought from the Whitewater hatchery to the Tahquitz Ditch enabled members to fish for their dinner (prepared for them in the clubhouse kitchen). After World War II, McManus hired noted architects Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones to redesign the Clubhouse building using their signature Late Moderne style. More structures have been built in the ensuing years crowding the site somewhat, but Pearl's famous oval pool and tennis courts continue to serve the Tennis Club. Unfortunately, as Pearl grew older, the bitterness she had felt over various struggles and feuds mellowed, and she began focusing on leaving a lasting legacy to honor her father; she established the McCallum Desert Foundation, which has in the years since given tens of millions of dollars in grants to a wide variety of causes. Pearl McCallum McManus died at age 87 on July 24, 1966.

"LA GRANDE DAME"

Melba Bennett (1901–1967)

Besides Nellie Coffman, there was perhaps no other woman in Palm Springs as universally loved as Melba Berry Bennett. Bennett loved her life with a passion. With style, grace, humor and charm she spread enthusiasm for the things she loved. Palm Springs was clearly the city she loved, and for nearly forty years Bennett devoted herself to the betterment of her city. Melba Elyse Berry was born into a colorful Los Angeles family on August 1, 1901. Her father, "Herb" Berry, was "replete with adventure." He struck it rich in the Klondike Gold Rush, boasting that he "cleaned up the biggest pile of gold ever accumulated in a single day, $63,000 in the yellow metal."28 At the end of the gold rush, Berry and his wife Nellie moved to California, settling in Los Angeles. He bought racehorses, the Los Angeles Angels and San Francisco Seals baseball clubs, and later became involved in the oil industry.

Young Melba attended Stanford and in her junior year met Frank H. Bennett, a senior. They eloped in 1921 and after graduation settled in Beverly Hills.29 Frank Bennett became a partner in Bennett & Charles, a Los Angeles firm that managed income properties. By 1930 the Bennetts were in Palm Springs, managing Deep Well Guest Ranch entirely impartial. Science provides no more potent remedy for "Insanities," the Times continued, "Lady Bella Bustabodice (Melba Bennett, who tried to look funny but looked beautiful) announced her creations modeled by 12 stunning MANi-kins — one of them Mayor Philip Boyd."30 Another Desert Circus tradition Melba started was the creation of the "Palm Springs Hat" — a cowboy hat bedecked with flowers and ribbons — a tradition that caught on and came to symbolize the resort area. Women would try to outdo each other, and it was not unusual to go into any business, bar, or Opposite, top to bottom: The Palm Springs Garden Book, 1956. The book was written, illustrated and designed by Melba Bennett, and was the first book to discuss the problems of gardening in the Palm Springs area; Melba Bennett wearing one of her famous Palm Springs hats, a straw cowboy hat embellished with ribbon and flowers, 1940s. Courtesy PSPHS. Above: The swimming pool at Deep Well Guest Ranch, 1956. Courtesy PSPHS.
famously stayed at the Ingleside PS

Cornell's site plan for the singer Lily Pons on the grounds of the Ingleside Inn for ten consecutive years. There is still a Lily Pons Suite at the hotel today. Courtesy of the Collection of Jeffers published after Jeffers' death (1936) and her highly-regarded biography of Jeffers published after Jeffers' death (1936). Melba Bennett was an author. She wrote two books about her major literary interest, California poet Robinson Jeffers: "A Sport which Demands No Expensive Costuming," which is easier on the temper than golf or tennis, which can be as breath-taking as our Palm Springs Garden Book published in 1962, "The Stonemason of Tor House" (1960). Bennett, who founded the Palm Springs Garden Club in 1946, was the first to write extensively about the unique challenges to gardening in Palm Springs, offering solutions and suggestions from her own experimentation at Deep Well Guest Ranch. She believed that there were "no gardens in the world which can be as breath-taking as our Palm Springs gardens during the spring when trees, shrubs, perennials and annuals are out-竞争ing each other in a riot of colorful blooms." Bennett began writing gardening articles for the Desert Sun and had a monthly feature in the Desert Sun magazine in the 1950s called "Through the Garden Gate, with Melba Bennett." In 1958, working with the Palm Springs Garden Club, Bennett wrote, illustrated, and published The Palm Springs Garden Book. The first book of its kind, it focused on "fulfilling a need shown by queries over the years by newcomers to the Village, on just what type of [plants] plants will thrive here, and the soil, feeding, watering, etc., to best grow them." Bennett wrote that the book would serve as "An introduction to a sport which demands no expensive costuming, which is easier on the temper than golf or tennis, which can be held to a minimum of expense and effort by the introduction of native, drought-resistant plants, or can develop into a purse-taxing luxury, and a muscle-developing hobby, if you become an addict." The book broke desert landscaping into sections: trees (including citrus and palm), shrubs, bulbs, vines, perennials, annuals, lawns, and ground-covers. Faced with development encroaching on Deep Well Guest Ranch, the Bennetts sold the Ranch in 1949, leaving three acres for them- selves, and engaged architectural designer Cliff May to design their new home. The sur- rounding land was subdivided, and is today the still-fashionable Deepwell Estates neigh- borhood. After a short bout with cancer, Melba Berry Bennett died in 1967.

"THE FIRST LADY"

As a fellow botaner (and fellow Hoosier), Ruth Hardy naturally looked up to Nellie Coffman, respecting her ability "to get things done, and practically followed Nellie around to get ideas." The women shared a mutu- ally respectful long-lived friendship. Hardy so devoted herself to the village of Palm Springs that when she died, Mayor Frank Bogert stated, "I don't think there are three people in this world who have contributed more to this city..." And her greatest contribution was to "parks and beautification." Born Ruth Herderich on May 6, 1892 in Lebanon, Indiana, she graduated from the University of Indiana in 1915, marrying Jack- son Hardy in Arizona in 1930. In 1932 the couple moved to Palm Springs, purchased the Castas del Monte Hotel, and successfully ran it for several years. The Hardys then bought the spectacular Birge Estate in October of 1940, turning it into a luxurious hotel — in an astonishing two months. Built in 1925 for Carrie Birge, the widow of Pierce-Arrow Motor Company president George K. Birge of Buffalo, the two-acre Birge Estate was designed by architectural "artist" William Charles Tanner, designer of the Desert Inn, and built by local contractor Alvah Hicks. To furnish the house, Mrs. Birge went to Europe to find valuable antiques (said to be worth more than the house), as well as velvet and damask draperies from Paris, screens and porcelains from China, carved doors from Italy, silver from England and China from Germany. At the time of its sale in 1940, according to the Los Angeles Times: "The property has long been known to Palm Springs visitors because of its distinctive architecture and landscaping. It is completely enclosed by a massive vine- covered wall with wrought-iron gates at the several entrances," while "states palms and colorful shrubbery give beauty and serenity."

Upon purchasing the estate, the Hardys immediately got to work transforming it into a first-class hotel. They subdivided the large house, and with the addition of sev- eral charming bungalows, had a total of 21 rooms, 9 of which had fireplaces — hence the name Ingleside Inn. They retained Mrs. Birge's antique furniture and added French doors that opened out onto the gardens. Working with Nellie's Nursery, Hardy enhanced the landscaping adding many more flowering shrubs. On the western side of the property a tiled lily pond was installed in a grassy courtyard, surrounded by flowers, the pool had a marble statue of an urn at its center. On the opposite side, trees were moved to improve sight lines towards the mountain and a large swimming pool was installed in the large semi-circular panel of turf. The hotel opened on December 5, 1940. Ruth Hardy filed for divorce soon after the opening and ran the hotel alone for the next twenty-five years.
During World War II, when international travel became impossible, the hotel flourished. One of the guests in 1943 was the internationally-known opera singer Lily Pons, who had been sent to the desert to rest and recuperate. “Mrs. Ruth Hardy... and the other guests there entered a practical conspiracy of silence so that she would not be disturbed by the curious and the autograph hunters.” Hardy’s plan worked perfectly, as she left the hotel, Pons declared that she had never felt better in her life, expressing the hope that she might return every year. “Everything was perfect, the weather, the sunshine, the new sights, I enjoyed my stay thoroughly. Won’t all New York be jealous of my life?” She and her husband, the conductor and arranger André Kostelanetz, returned in November 1944 for a week and continued to return every year until 1953, when they finally built their own house in Palm Springs. Other notable guests who made the Ingleside Inn their home in the desert were Greta Garbo, Elizabeth Taylor, Marge O’Brien, J.C. Penney, Salvador Dalí, Greer Garson, and Howard Hughes. After World War II, Hardy started a tradition of planting the exterior of the long wall along Baristo Road with a variety of drought-tolerant plants, so that by 1950 it was “believed to be the largest potted palm grove in Southern California.”

In 1984 Hardy ran for city council and after a hotly contested election she became the first woman ever to sit on the Palm Springs City Council. Mayor in that same election and he named Hardy the “Tamarisk Queen.”

During her first office in handy, Hardy’s big battle was to fulfill her goal to create a public park in the northern residential section of Palm Springs. Twenty-two acres near the El Mirador Hotel had become available and a local developer was vying for the property. Hardy was a forceful opponent, arguing that “the property in question was the number one project in a projected park system for the city and more important than the development of the Field Club as a park site.” Hardy prevailed, and as mayor of Palm Springs, Williams and Williams on plans for the modernist park, to be called North End Park (later changed to Tamarisk Park). The new public park was to include a swimming pool, a clubhouse with locker and community room, formal and informal gardens, and ample open space planned with grass and a wide variety of Cornell’s signature palette of drought-tolerant trees and shrubs. The Desert Museum, 1973, 195.

In historic preservation, have restored Palm Springs. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, for starting in the 1990s, a new generation of leaders, this time in historic preservation, have restored Palm Springs. The Founding Mothers would be proud.
When the Palm Springs Woman’s Club opened the doors of its new clubhouse in 1939, it was the realization of a dream long held by Palm Springs pioneer Nellie Coffman. “Mother Coffman” wanted an organization where a diverse group of women could meet for educational as well as social aims, working to better their community, and in the process, forming bonds with women they might not encounter in their own circles.

Once initiated, the project unleashed the power of an organized effort on the part of women in Palm Springs. “As a political force it is stronger than anything Palm Springs has experienced to date,” and at the end of only four months, the newly-formed Club could boast it had “a paid-up membership of 178, a building lot, plans for a club house, contracts let and money in the bank.”

In December 1938, Luella Pinney, wife of Warren B. Pinney, the managing owner of the El Mirador Hotel, called together sixty “feminine leaders” to a luncheon at the El Mirador to announce the creation of a new Palm Springs Woman’s Club. “Mother Coffman” spoke at the event, telling the crowd, “I’ve felt all along we should have such an organization. In the first place, this is the meetingest town in the world — and look what good times the men have, whether they get anything done or not, and we have the same opportunities. And just think how we could impress them, marching down Palm Canyon Drive a hundred strong to City Hall! I do believe the women of this town can accomplish a great deal, and I am most happy to have an opportunity to do my part in organizing the Palm Springs Woman’s Club.”

Shortly thereafter, Coffman hosted a luncheon at the Desert Inn, where new members were recognized and the by-laws read, establishing that “the object of this Club shall be intellectual improvement, social enjoyment and helpfulness in the community.” Officers were voted in, with Coffman named honorary President, and Pinney selected President. 

BY STEVEN KEYLON

In December 1938, Luella Pinney, wife of Warren B. Pinney, the managing owner of the El Mirador Hotel, called together sixty “feminine leaders” to a luncheon at the El Mirador to announce the creation of a new Palm Springs Woman’s Club. “Mother Coffman” spoke at the event, telling the crowd, “I’ve felt all along we should have such an organization. In the first place, this is the meetingest town in the world — and look what good times the men have, whether they get anything done or not, and we have the same opportunities. And just think how we could impress them, marching down Palm Canyon Drive a hundred strong to City Hall! I do believe the women of this town can accomplish a great deal, and I am most happy to have an opportunity to do my part in organizing the Palm Springs Woman’s Club.”

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After reviewing several options, “three choice lots” (measuring 128 x 200 feet in all) at the corner of Cahuilla and Baristo near McManus’ Tenney Clubs were chosen. Local realtors valued the land at over $6,000, “a very handsomely present for the first two weeks of the club’s existence.” With the building site secured, more than $12,000 would need to be built to club building itself, so an appeal for donations went out to the community. A large donation from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas O’Donnell in the amount of $1,000 got the campaign started, which was soon matched by Mrs. Herbert Carpenter. The Desert Inn Players staged a benefit “mellerdrammer” at the Village ‘Opey’ House — “He Done Right Our Nell” — netting another $500.7

The building committee, led by Mrs. Thomas O’Donnell, selected architect John Porter Clark, who donated his architectural services. Bashford knew McManus — both belonged to the same Los Angeles Tennis Club. Harry Bedford-Jones and Pearl McManus; Bashford and Barlow developed a monochromatic color palette, consisting of varying shades of pink — from the palest flush to deep magenta — to harmonize with the pink structure. They stuck to a limited palette of plant species either native to the Sonoran Desert, or other drought-tolerant Mediterranean climate species that were adapted to the environment.

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FRANCIS DEAN
AND THE ART OF MODERN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE
By Lauren Weiss Bricker, Ph.D and Keiji Uesugi, ASLA
n commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of Cal Poly Pomona’s Landscape Architecture Department, the university will be honoring one of its most celebrated faculty members — landscape architect Francis H. Dean — with an exhibit featuring original landscape plans, photographs, and related materials. The show, Francis Dean, and the Art of Modern Landscape Architecture, will be on exhibition at the Huntley Gallery, University Library, Cal Poly Pomona October 19, 2017–January 11, 2018.

Francis H. Dean, FASLA (1922-2003), was a leading figure in postwar landscape architecture. As co-founder of the internationally-acclaimed firm Eckbo, Dean, Austin and Williams (and its predecessor firms), he demonstrated an outstanding ability to plan and execute projects in a wide range of scales, including private residences, college and university campuses, regional parks, and urban open spaces that covered hundreds of square miles. In 1976, Dean joined Cal Poly Pomona’s Landscape Architecture faculty, and through his teaching and public service, he was a strong advocate for an approach to landscape architecture that drew upon an analytic and creative design process to meet the needs of people while maintaining the overall health and quality of the environment.

Dean graduated from UC Berkeley with a BS in Landscape Architecture in 1948, and was invited by his academic advisor Garrett Eckbo to join the San Francisco office of Eckbo Royston and Williams (ERW). Eckbo recognized the need to establish a Southern California office to meet the region’s growing demand for their services, and in the late 1940s he opened an office in Los Angeles. Eventually the office moved to a new location at 1414 Fair Oaks in South Pasadena, designed by the innovative collaboration of architects Smith and Williams and Eckbo Royston and Williams. Urban planners Simon Esiner and Lyle Stewart also established offices in the complex and the group of three firms created an informal association known as The Community Facilities Planners. Structural engineers Kariotis and Kesler also had offices in the complex.

Postwar modernism strongly influenced the design aesthetic of ERW in the late 1950s. During this period, Dean, initially a designer, was promoted to limited partner in 1954 and then became a full partner in the firm Eckbo Dean & Williams from 1958-64, following Royston’s return to the Bay Area. Dean’s ability to design for varying site conditions is displayed in two of the exhibited residential gardens. First, the Howard Webb garden in Rancho Palos Verdes Estates (1955) is located on a sloped site that was subject to extreme winds. Next is the Leon Koerner house in the desert setting of Palm Springs (1955). Next is the Leon Koerner house in the desert setting of Palm Springs (1955), designed by architect E. Stewart Williams. Dean’s landscape design includes a pool and shade devices, features that were essential to the owners’ enjoyment of the outdoors. Both projects center on designed outdoor spaces that are directly accessible from the house, enabling the lifestyle that flowed informally from indoor to outdoor spaces.

By the mid-1960s when the firm became Eckbo Dean Austin and Williams (1964-73), California’s population had grown to 18.5 million (from 10.5 million in 1950). The office’s design services were in demand in response to urban growth, especially in the areas of campus design — from elementary schools through university campuses and commercial/office grounds, and public parks — to accommodate the need for recreation and protection of the rapidly changing environment. In Pasadena, Garrett Eckbo and his associates were hired to design the new Ambassador College (1947-1970s). Their task was to create a new campus linking the historic mansions lining one side of South Orange Grove Blvd. with the new academic buildings designed by Daniel Mann Johnson Mendenhall (DMJM) lined up on the opposite side of the campus. Mature trees and a central mall defined the north/south axis of the campus dividing the two parts, and a variety of spaces were designed to enhance the outdoor quality of the campus and to meet the functional needs of the college. These ranged from formal spaces linking new and existing buildings to more intimate seating areas.

designed for private contemplation. Francis Dean was the principal-in-charge for the master plan and various development plans for the new California State University, San Bernardino (1964-74). Other academic work included community colleges in Long Beach and Orange County. At each location, Dean and EDAW developed schemes that integrated human and environmental factors, always with the goal of defining a strong sense of place.

The mid-1960s was a period when urban renewal was an essential component in the process of creating the image of Southern California as progressive and receptive to the needs of the business community. Land-use decisions were made that were seen as vital to the urban growth of the region at the time. In Los Angeles, the City’s Redevelopment Agency initiated a massive urban renewal project on Bunker Hill (1965-70), and Francis Dean was one of their consultants. His team attempted to humanize the “big-city illusion of high rise towers” by introducing a plaza on the roof of a parking structure designed to serve the future Union Bank. Comfortable seating beneath a grid of shade trees and adjacent shallow pools makes this a respite from the neighboring high rises.

In Riverside, Dean led the EDAW team in designing the Riverside Mall (1967). A downtown pedestrian mall was selected as an urban design strategy to recapture economic growth when much of the population was relocating to nearby suburbs. As the designers of the Fresno Mall in the 1970s (see Eden, summer 2013), EDAW was a logical choice for the Riverside project. Their approach sought to attract the community by creating a space that encouraged relaxation through the use of water features and seating areas shaded by large trees. The Mall stretched from the Mission Inn to the projected new city hall and received an award from the Concrete Industry. Dean played a central role in EDAW’s design of many parks. These ranged in scale from municipal to regional parks. They include the Huntington Beach Central Park (1971-73), which received a California Parks and Recreation Society Award, the Frank Bonelli Regional Park in Pomona (1969-70) and the Guajome Regional Park in San Diego (1971-73). He also headed a number of important environmental studies, including the Santa Ana River/Santiago Creek Greenbelt Study for the Orange County Planning Department (1970-71), which received awards from the AIP and ASLA.

While Dean was a principal of EDAW and its earlier iterations, the firm established offices in Washington state and Hawaii. Dean opened an office for EDW in Seattle (1958-61), and during that period designed the University of Washington Faculty Club (1960-67). The property was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2016, and as might be expected, some changes have occurred to the landscape over time. Another out-of-state project where Dean was the principal-in-charge was the Science Space Center in Huntsville, Alabama (1967), a museum designed to showcase the Saturn V rocket and other hardware associated with the space program. Francis Dean joined the faculty of the Landscape Architecture Department at Cal Poly Pomona in 1976, where his professional stature added significantly to the reputation of the Department. Prior to that time, he had been a lecturer and visiting critic at a number of universities, including Cal Poly.
Pomona. Dean continued to maintain a private practice, but teaching became the prime focus of his activities. His arrival coincided with the important work undertaken by another member of the department, John Lyle, with whom Dean established a close friendship. They shared deep concerns about the impact that human activity was having on the environment. Lyle was in the throes of developing what would become the Lyle Center for Regenerative Studies, which first opened in 1994.

Dean never wrote extensively about landscape architecture, but his archive contains several articles and transcripts of numerous public speeches he delivered over the course of his career. While Dean's professional work is the strongest expression of his attitudes towards landscape architecture and the environment, his written statements further clarify his values.

One can gain a sense of Dean's visceral response to nature in his description of the Santa Ana River, a natural phenomenon to which he devoted considerable analysis:

“The river is a living thing and, in addition to storing water, delivering water, flushing itself out at times and maintain a beach at the outfall, developing an ongoing ecological interdependence of vegetation and wildlife for its entire length, it presents a true aesthetic visual satisfaction as well as an association relationship for all people.”

With regard to environmental ethics and the importance of the environmental planning process, Dean noted:

Environmental planning exposes us to the very heart of the ethical issues and our comprehension of the ecological needs of any environment. Qualitative changes in the landscape resulting from the interdependence of man’s analytic and creative ability to fashion an entirely new form. It is in the area that ecological systems and in the inclusion of the facets of the scientific phenomenon, the behavioral patterns of people and the needs and experiences of mankind, all come into focus in order to fulfill the results of the process.”

In conclusion, he saw the education of landscape architects as closely tied to these values:

Support the ethical involvement of students in the merits of nature and make it possible for them to experience its value by contributing to the well-being of an earth with a sustainable environment.

Endnotes
2. Francis H. Dean. Testimony to the Board of Forest Appeals, Barton Flats Recreation Management Composite Plan, 1970.

Above: Rendering of the landscape at Union Bank Square.

CGLHS members: Steven Keylon, President; Kelly Comras, Past-President, and Lisa Gimmy also serve on the Stewardship Council of the Cultural Landscape Foundation. Their efforts this year are turned towards the Lawrence Halprin Exhititions, Tours, Lectures and a Dance Performance in L.A., September 29 through December 31, 2017. There will also be an all-day symposium:

Landscape as Catalyst: Lawrence Halprin’s Legacy and Los Angeles

Nov 04, 2017 • 9:30am to 4:00pm
A+D Architecture and Design Museum Los Angeles
900 East 4th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90013

Held as part of a three-month series of public events honoring Halprin’s rich local and national legacy, this symposium will be suitable for enthusiasts of Modernist design and landscape architecture, practitioners and urban planners, fans of Los Angeles and those interested in the city’s history, and others.

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR MEMBERS!

Kelly Comras, CGLHS past president, for being elected a Fellow of the ASLA. “Through her roles as president of the California Garden & Landscape History Society, and a founding member of the Cultural Landscape Foundation Stewardship Council she continues to be extremely effective in broadening the public’s understanding of the core principles of landscape architecture.”

Robert Z. Melnick, FASLA, the recipient of an ASLA Honor Award in Research for his report, “Climate Change Impacts on Cultural Landscapes in the Pacific West Region, National Park System.”

Board Member Jennifer Trotoux, formerly with Architectural Resources Group in Pasadena, was recently named the new Curator of the Gamble House.
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