

Eden



Eden

JOURNAL OF THE CALIFORNIA GARDEN & LANDSCAPE HISTORY SOCIETY

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Opposite: Detail from Francis H. Dean's biomorphic paving at the Howard Webb Residence, Palos Verdes Estates, 1955; photograph by Julius Shulman, courtesy Getty Research Institute. Above: Dean's Riverside Mall, 1967.



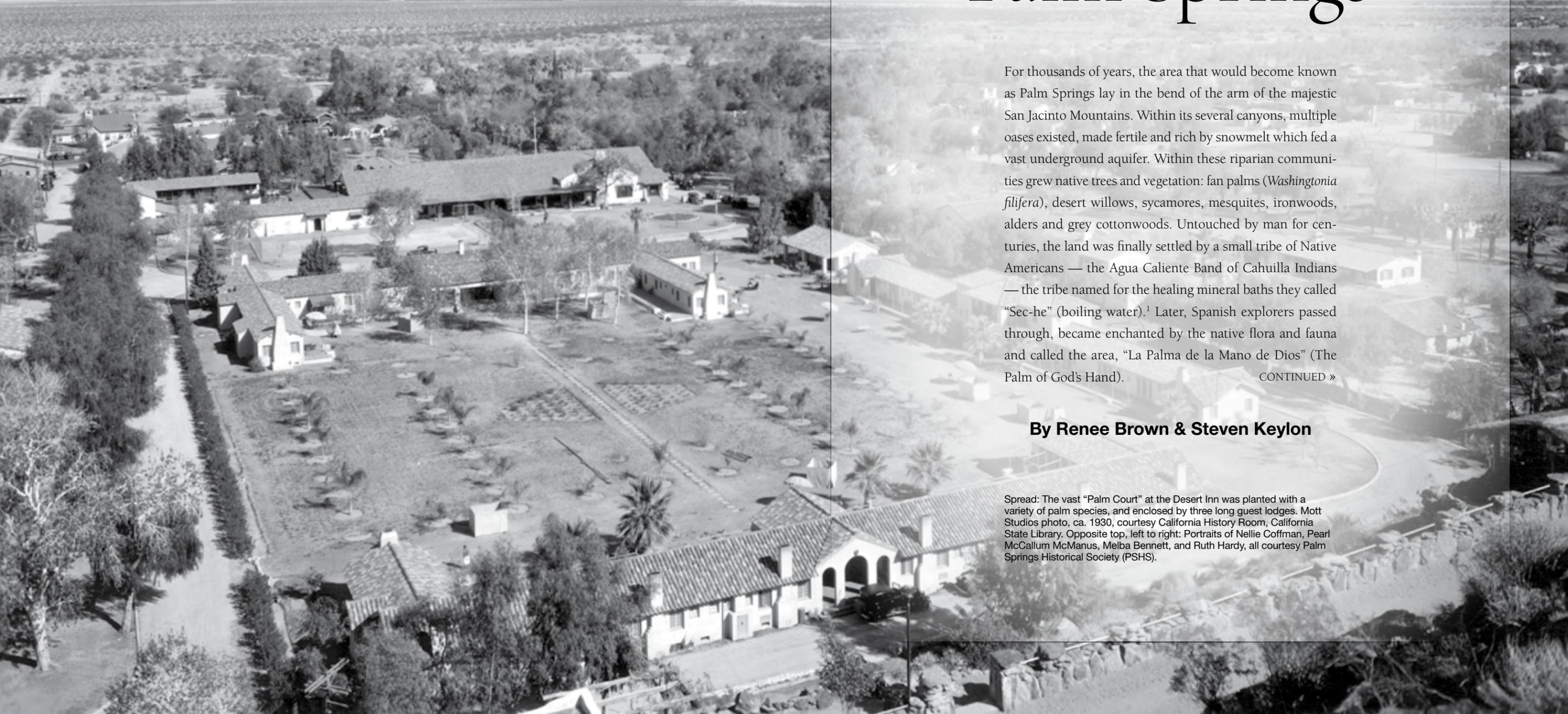
The Founding Mothers of Palm Springs

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).¹ 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).

CONTINUED »

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 Studios photo, ca. 1930, courtesy California History Room, California State Library. Opposite top, left to right: Portraits of Nellie Coffman, Pearl McCallum McManus, Melba Bennett, and Ruth Hardy, all courtesy Palm Springs Historical Society (PSHS).





Above: James C. Sawders, *At the Desert Inn, Palm Springs, California, 1941*, for Keystone View Company. Courtesy Keystone-Mast Collection, California Museum of Photography, University of California, Riverside. Opposite, left to right: The old Tahquitz Ditch was the main landscape feature at the early Desert Inn – the tent cabins were sited alongside it. Quaint rustic bridges crossed the murmuring water. Ca. 1910s. Courtesy PSHS; The Desert Inn’s popular outdoor dining patio was adjacent to the lobby. Courtesy PSHS.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the salubrious desert climate and mineral springs drew people seeking cures for respiratory ailments, especially tuberculosis. But starting in the 1920s, Palm Springs became known around the world as a playground for the rich and famous, a village with beautifully landscaped resorts and a growing number of fine estates.

The transformation of Palm Springs from a sleepy village for invalids taking the cure into an internationally recognized destination was made possible by a group of strong, tenacious, and creative women, all of whom shared a passion for the native beauty of the desert and spent their lives working toward the betterment of the community. These pioneer women came from diverse backgrounds, but their shared love of the desert created a unique matriarchal society. Their glorification of the desert landscape was contagious, drawing Hollywood to the resorts they created — a uniquely twentieth-century American phenomenon.

This article focuses on the four powerful women who worked to shape Palm Springs into one of the world’s premier resorts. They include two genuine pioneers: Nellie Coffman and Pearl McCallum McManus; and the second generation, Melba Bennett and Ruth Hardy, who built upon their legacy, using landscape design to improve the growing community.

“MOTHER COFFMAN”



Nellie Coffman
(1867–1950)

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.² 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 tender non-conformist,”³ 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 vogue 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.”⁴ 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 hotelier), 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. Tired of the dampness and chill of the beach community, Nellie took her first trip to the desert in 1908, where she “came, saw and was conquered.”⁵ She convinced her husband to close his practice in Santa Monica and open a sanatorium in Palm Springs to treat people suffering from respiratory ailments. “October 16, 1909, found me bag and baggage in Palm Springs, the proud possessor of an acre and three-quarters of ground, a small, six room cottage, one 10 by 12 tent house and four little screen rooms we salvaged out of the old hay barn.”⁶ Nellie put up a sign on the rail of



the wide porch, which read “The Desert Inn.” From the beginning, her credo was to provide good food, clean and comfortable 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 Cahuilla Indians in the 1830s and enhanced with stone walls by Judge McCallum, 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 mountain, gathering rose petals and mesquite blossoms as they fell.⁷

Sandy silt often blew onto the grounds from the dusty road in front of the Inn. “Mrs. Coffman saw to it that devil-grass covered the street. Early, very early in the morning, 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.”⁸ 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.

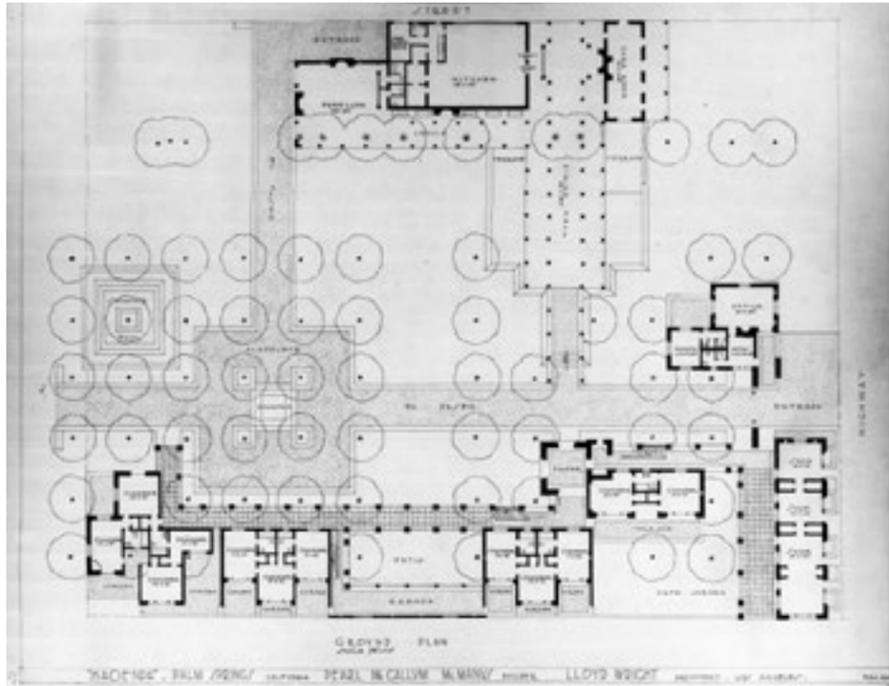
During one particularly arid winter, when she feared her trees and shrubbery might perish, Nellie “conceived the unheard of idea of boring a well on her property. Everyone said it was a crazy idea, but she went ahead with her plan. Lo and behold, she struck water. Hers was the first water struck in the far end of the Valley. The Coachella Water Company threatened suit, whereupon she told the president if he would come to Palm Springs she’d duck him in the water from her trial well and give him a real baptism. He never showed up!”⁹

In 1914 Nellie and Dr. Coffman divorced; Nellie and her sons, George Roberson and Earl Coffman, retained ownership of the hotel. After the divorce, with no doctor on the premises, she began to discourage invalids and started to replace the tent houses with more substantial bungalows, hoping to cater to a more upscale crowd. This happened just as World War I broke out in Europe, forcing affluent families who were accustomed to the Grand Tour of Europe to alter their plans and find something closer to home. Many had heard of Nellie’s Desert Inn, and upon visiting, grew to savor its charm. By the early 1920s, thanks to Mother Coffman, Palm Springs had become a major destination for the wealthy.

The movie industry, which had become established in Los Angeles around the same time as the Desert Inn, began using the desert as



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.



Left to right: Architect and landscape architect Lloyd Wright's ground plan for the Oasis Hotel, 1924. Wright sited the buildings to retain existing mature trees. From Palm Canyon Drive, guests drove through an "entrada" into the interior courtyard. Two axial "paseos" intersected at a large square fountain. The guest rooms opened out onto small private gardens. Courtesy PSHS; The tower of the Oasis Hotel contained several guest rooms, and was adorned with filigreed woodwork and textile block. Courtesy PSHS; French actress Lili Damita, husband Errol Flynn and actor Guinn "Big Boy" Williams fish for their dinner in the Tennis Club's trout stream. Courtesy PSHS.

a stand-in for such locales as the Sahara Desert, and moguls, "with Hollywoodian perspicacity arrived in droves with camera crews, equipment, bit actors, stars, starlets, and hopeful stand-ins straining at the acting leash."¹⁰ The resulting publicity photos, showing the stars at play at the Desert Inn, were published around the world, keeping the glamour of the resort in the public's mind. Early on, Nellie had predicted this, telling her hotelier father "Someday, Los Angeles will be a big, crowded, noisy city. I want a sandpile for them to play in."¹¹

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, multimillionaire 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, she leased him land on a cliff overlooking the hotel to build a home — "Ojo 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 tile roofs 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..."¹²

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, gnarled 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."¹³

The site plan and landscape design that Coffman and Tanner conceived gave guests a feeling of seclusion 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 De Anza's 1774 trek through the Coachella Valley.¹⁴ 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 walks, loggia and portal.¹⁵ 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 sited 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 — 'sunlazing,' they call it in Palm Springs — letting 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 swim after a brisk set of tennis or badminton. Courts are strategically located in the thirty-five-acre gardens of the Desert Inn.¹⁶ Besides the mashie 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 Pearly Gate, I am going to ask the gatekeeper if I can start a boarding house in the sky."¹⁷

Coffman and her sons ran the Desert Inn for over forty years. In appreciation for all she had done for the village, droves 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 1966 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 Rios Clemente Hale Studios in the center. Mother Coffman's wrought iron gates announcing the Desert Inn will then be reinstalled to honor her memory.

"AUNTIE PEARL"



Pearl McCallum McManus
(1879–1966)

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 minutiae of life."¹⁸ Like 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 John Guthrie McCallum. "This Scot, 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

McCallum, entering middle age, had already proved his vision as a pioneer lawyer in the American West. He was a founding member of the American Party, cast one of California's first electoral votes for Abraham Lincoln, and served his country as Indian Agent to the Mission Indians.¹⁹

When his son Johnny became ill with tuberculosis, McCallum, seeking a drier climate, abandoned his successful law practice in San Francisco and moved his family — wife Emily; sons Harry, Wallace and Johnny; and daughters May and Pearl to San Bernardino. Then a Cahuilla Indian friend of McCallum's, Will Pablo, told him of an even warmer, drier place, with hot mineral springs that were considered sacred and curative by the Indians.

When McCallum first saw the desert, he believed the land would be valuable if water could be introduced. With the help of Indian friends he built the nineteen-mile stone-lined Whitewater Ditch and improved the existing Tahquitz Ditch to irrigate 80 acres that would be used to grow crops. He began planting: "From Florida was imported a choice nursery stock of Indian River sweet oranges. Early Newcastle and Royal apricots were planted. In the vineyards grew Black Hamburg, Rose of Peru, Flaming Tokay and Early Sweetwater grapes. Almond, fig and other trees were set out."²⁰

Because Emily McCallum felt lonely and uncomfortable in their humble adobe cottage (she, unlike her husband and children, considered the landscape "barren"), McCallum also purchased a large home in the then-fashionable West Adams neighborhood of Los Angeles where Pearl attended the Marlborough School for Girls. The family divided their time between Los Angeles and Palm Springs as McCallum worked to realize his vision for Palm Springs as the finest city in the Colorado Desert and a center for agriculture. He promoted the area with advertising that touted the desert climate as providing an early growing season.²¹

The death of his beloved son Johnny was followed by 21 days of torrential rains that caused a devastating flood. McCallum replanted, but the crops died in what was to be an 11-year drought. McCallum suffered additional crushing blows: the federal courts denied him rights to water coming down from the canyons, and this was followed by the death of his son Wallace. McCallum himself died in 1897 from what doctors called a weakened heart. His son Harry died in 1901, leaving Pearl and her mother struggling to maintain the property. Following her mother's death in 1914, Pearl, though financially strapped, nevertheless heeded her father's admonition that at all costs, she "pay the taxes . . . [to] hold onto the land." That same year she met and married real estate mogul Austin G. McManus of Pasadena, and with

his guidance and advice she evolved into a successful developer, making the deeds for the land she sold reversible if she didn't approve of the architecture to be built. Over the following years she would have to sell off much of the original McCallum land holdings, but she shrewdly maintained her retail properties along Palm Canyon Drive — which grew to be worth millions.

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 1924 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 architect and landscape architect Lloyd Wright, son of the legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright. In contrast to the existing resorts with Spanish-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."²²

That the hotel would be a memorial to her father was a crystal-clear objective for her. McCallum challenged Wright to incorporate the old McCallum adobe into the plan with an equally important requirement: "I insisted that the orange and cottonwood trees on the grounds be integrated into the structure even if it cost twice as much."²³ Wright's ground plan for the eight-acre site retained 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 cottonwoods 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.²⁴

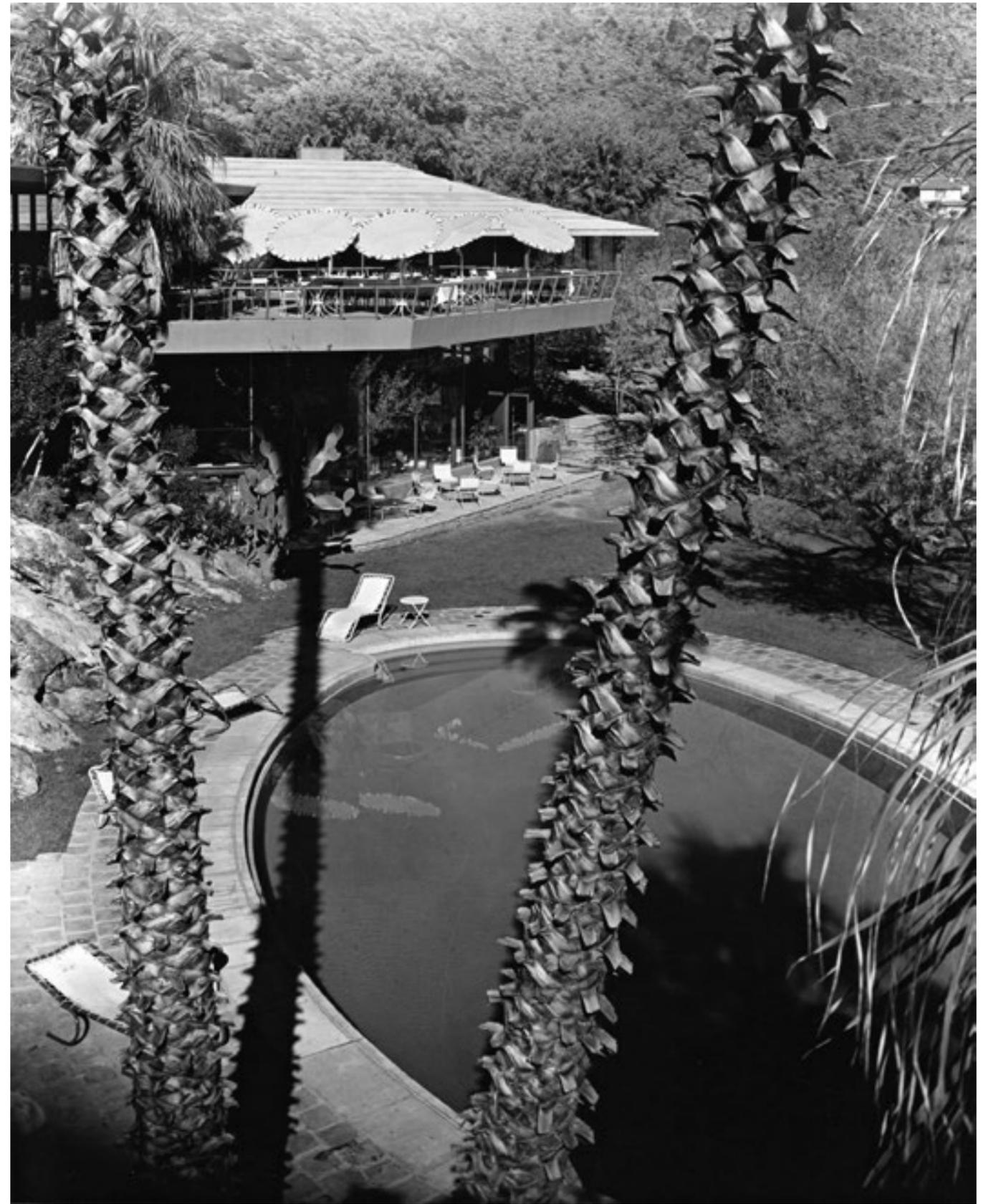
Wright's architecture was equally innovative and expressive. He contrasted the stark, formal simplicity of thick, steel-reinforced concrete walls with more decorative elements to provide texture — filigreed wood trim and his (and his father's) signature "textile" blocks, their patterns harkening back to the site's Native American roots. Large pottery oil jars atop the horizontal buildings lent an exotic air. A soaring sixty-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 grapevines soon began swallowing the building, while broad open outdoor rooms were carpeted in Australian rye grass. Combined, the opulent, romantic flair of the Oasis felt like a Maxfield Parrish painting come 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.

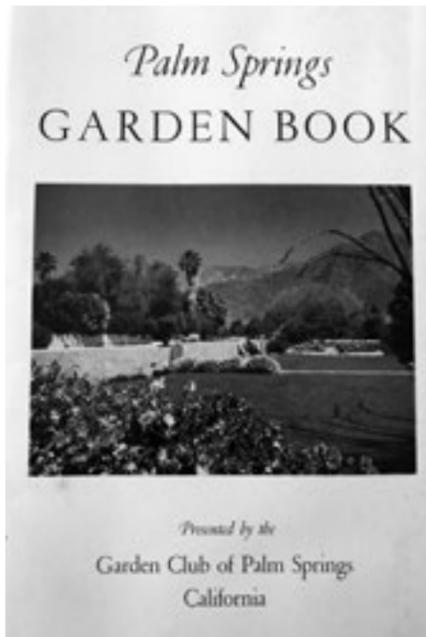
TENNIS CLUB

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 1937. 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 architect, Philip Ormsby (a recent graduate of the USC architecture program), and his partner Lloyd Steffgen 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."²⁵

Ormsby and Steffgen 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



Architect Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones remodeled the Tennis Club clubhouse in 1947. Julius Shulman photograph, courtesy Getty Research Institute.



a broad, flat grass terrace with rustic granite walls created by stone artisan 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 inset 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.”²⁶

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 ball easier to see. The courts were open to mountain views, making games visible from the stone terraces above, and improving 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.”²⁷ 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 adjacently. With the addition of tables and chairs set out on the lawn, it became an ideal spot for a lazy luncheon.²⁸ The Club opened for business in late 1937.²⁹

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.

Fortunately, 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 lived 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 Eloyse Berry was born into a colorful Los Angeles family on August 1, 1901. Her father, “Hen” Berry, was “replete with adventure.”³⁰ 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.”³¹

At the end of the gold rush, Berry and his brother Clarence came home with \$450,000. 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.³² 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 the Deep Well Guest Ranch. They were so enamored of the desert that the following year they bought the Ranch in partnership with Mr. and Mrs. Philip Boyd. (Boyd became the first mayor of Palm Springs in 1938.)

Like the nearby Smoke Tree Ranch, Deep Well Ranch was an exclusive western-themed “dude ranch,” where movie stars and titans of industry could dress up and play cowboy for the winter, albeit with all the amenities of a country club. Guests were encouraged to “do and dress as you please.” The 70-acre campus, designed by African-American architect Paul R. Williams, was described as a “broad oasis walled in by long hedges of brave green trees.”³³ Williams designed charming “Old California”-inspired cottages, made of “Adoblar” (a hard-fired brick resembling adobe) and topped with red-tiled roofs. The



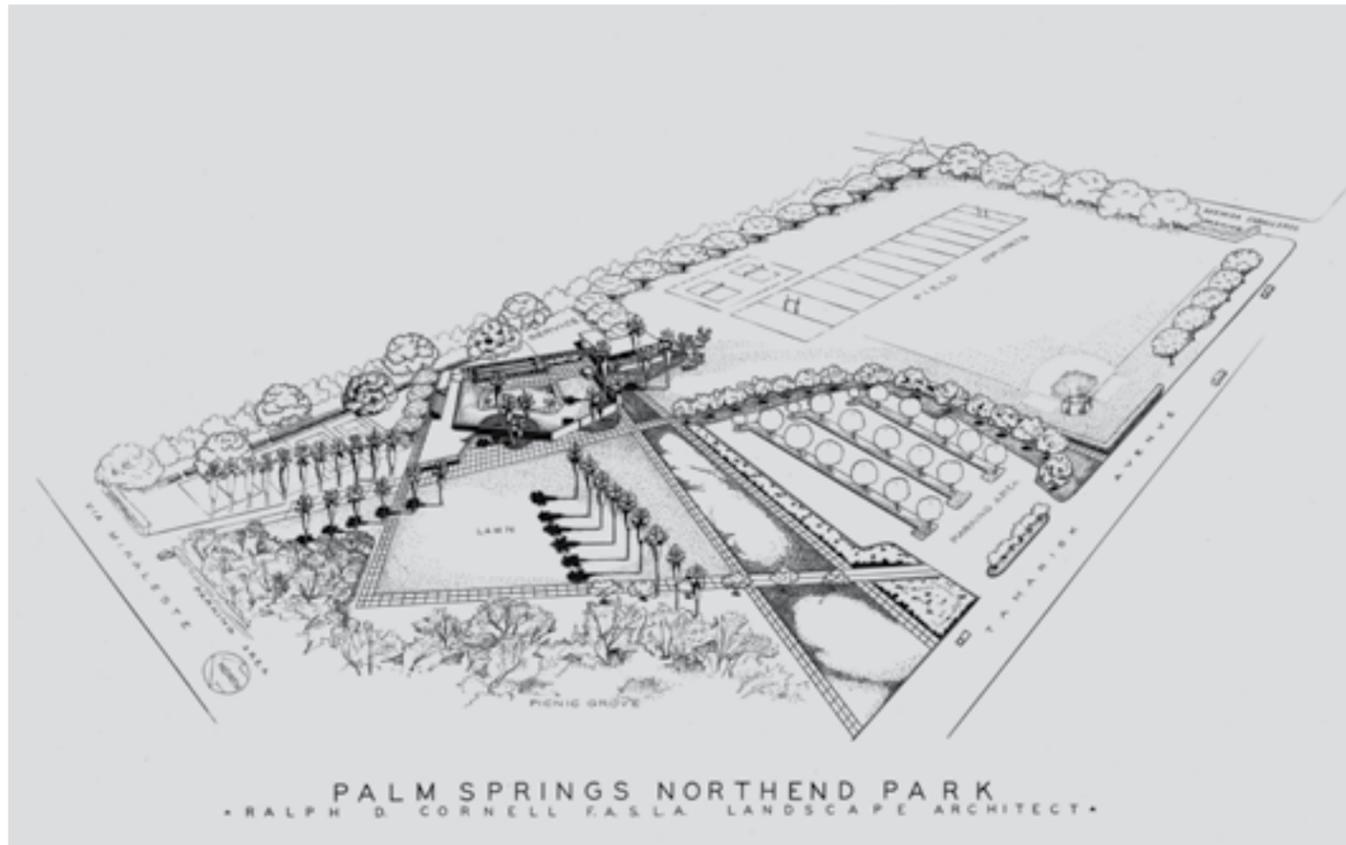
site plan was organized around a rambling but cozy communal “Long Room,” surrounded by ramadas and patios covered by palm-fronds. Open lawns contrasted with more intimate hedged and tree-shaded outdoor rooms, while walks bordered by flower beds led to the swimming pool, tennis court, and other recreational amenities. “Whether you are a Republican, a Democrat, or a Technocrat, you will find the balmy sun and restful desert quiet of Deep Well Guest Ranch entirely impartial. Science provides no more potent remedy for tired bodies and frazzled nerves.”³⁴ For the next 18 years, Frank and Melba Bennett lived at and managed Deep Well Guest Ranch. This was a true labor of love for a woman who lived for horses and the art of entertaining. During the dark years of Depression and World War II, Bennett added fun to every activity planned at the ranch, drowning out much of the gloom of the outside world.

Melba and Nellie Coffman shared a special friendship. Melba recalled that Nellie’s “advice was always good and that she never hesitated to give [it] freely, even to her competitors, as Deep Well Guest Ranch could have been viewed. ‘What do you say to people to get rid of them?’ Bennett once asked Coffman when she had some ‘undesirables’ under her roof. ‘Why, Melba, I don’t say anything. I just wait it out... the gardener puts a little too much

fertilizer around by their windows, a little breeze comes, and that’s all it takes.”³⁵ Their friendship was reciprocal: “Melba, what kind of a shot are you with a gun? There’s a sign right out there on Palm Canyon Drive that shouldn’t be there. Go out and shoot it down, tonight,” Nellie instructed her friend. The sign that offended Mrs. Coffman was an advertisement for “colonics.”³⁶

Bennett was one of the first organizers of the famed Desert Circus, and, as part of that, produced and directed the “Desert Insanities” (later the “Village Vanities”), a fashion show with a twist. In 1939 the *Los Angeles Times* reported that “In fact, the models will be chosen from the ranks of the bachelors and benedicts! Qualifications: good looks, and an ability to strut! (We have several in mind who could tie for first place).” At the “Insanities,” the Times continued, “Lady Bella Bustabodice (Melba Bennett, who tried to look funny but looked beautiful) announced her creations modeled by 12 stunning MANikins — one of them Mayor Philip Boyd.”³⁷ 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, bank, 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 ribbons and flowers. 1940s. Courtesy PSHS. Above: The swimming pool at Deep Well Guest Ranch, 1935. Courtesy PSHS.



Above: Here is Ralph Cornell's axiometric rendering of the landscape for Northend Park, later named Tamarisk Park. Councilwoman Hardy successfully fought for the creation of the park, which was renamed "Ruth Hardy Park" in her honor after her death in 1965. Ralph D. Cornell Papers. Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA. Opposite, top to bottom: Opera singer Lily Pons on the grounds of the Ingleside Inn. Pons famously stayed at the Ingleside Inn for ten consecutive years. There is still a Lily Pons Suite at the hotel today. Courtesy PSHS; Cornell's site plan for the Palm Springs Field Club, 1948. Though it's been changed, this is now Sunrise Park. Ralph D. Cornell Papers. Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

grocery store and see every woman sporting a Palm Springs Hat.

Active in almost every phase of civic life in Palm Springs, Bennett was founder and President of the Palm Springs Historical Society, one of the first members of the Palm Springs Racquet Club, on the Board of Directors of the Desert Museum, a trustee of the Palm Springs Unified School District, one of the founders of the Welfare and Friendly Aid Society, a trustee of the Welwood Murray Memorial Library, one of the most active members of WAIF-ISS, and fundraising chairman and diligent worker for the Palm Springs Child Development Center, and a member of the Sierra Club.³⁸ Melba Bennett seemed tireless in all that she did, but Nellie Coffman grew concerned and warned her about burning out, saying in a letter, "From one busy woman to another. I heaved a great sigh when I heard you had taken on the onerous duties of directing the Palm Springs Insanities again. However I know that you will rise to the occasion. Only remember that you're not made of steel or iron, and some day you will feel the results if you keep going too hard. Ease up a little, girl, ease up."³⁹

In addition to all her charitable pursuits, Melba Bennett was an author. She wrote two books about her major literary interest, California poet Robinson Jeffers: *Robinson Jeffers and the Sea* (1936) and her highly-regarded biography of Jeffers published after Jeffers' death

in 1962, *The Stone Mason of Tor House* (1966). 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-rivaling each other in a riot of colorful blooms."⁴⁰ Bennett began writing gardening articles for the *Desert Sun*, and had a monthly feature in the *Palm Springs Villager* magazine in the 1950s called "Through the Garden Gate, with Melba Bennett."

In 1956, 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 will thrive here, and the soil, feeding, watering, etc., to best grow them."⁴¹ 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."⁴² 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, keeping three acres for themselves, and engaged architectural designer Cliff May to design their new home. The surrounding land was subdivided, and is today the still-fashionable Deepwell Estates neighborhood. After a short bout with cancer, Melba Berry Bennett died in 1967.

"THE FIRST LADY"



Ruth Hardy
(1892–1965)

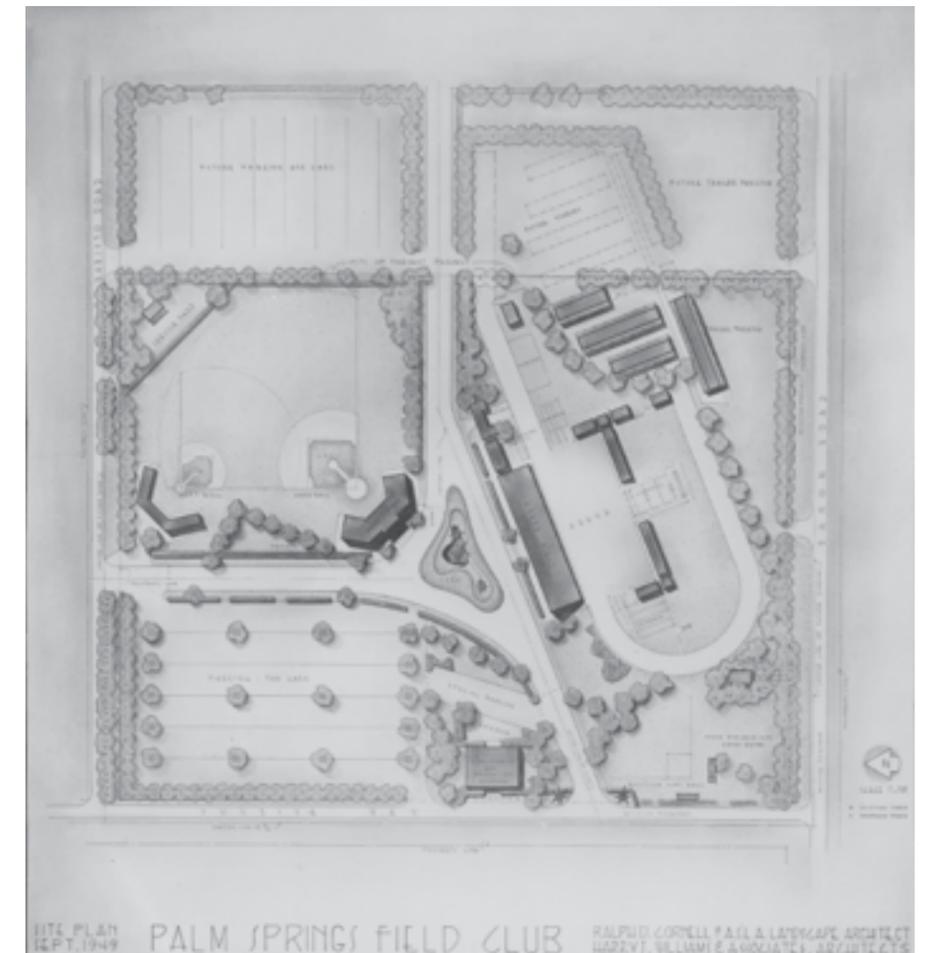
As a fellow hotelier (and fellow Hoosier), Ruth Hardy naturally looked up to Nellie Coffman, respecting her ability "to get things done, and practically followed Nellie around to get ideas."⁴³ The women shared a mutually respectful long-lived friendship. Hardy so devoted herself to the village of Palm 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."⁴⁴

Born Ruth Herdrich on May 6, 1892 in Lebanon, Indiana, she graduated from the University of Indiana in 1915, marrying Jackson Hardy in Arizona in 1930. In 1932 the couple moved to Palm Springs, purchased the Casitas 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.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ 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,"⁴⁷ while "stately palms and colorful shrubbery give beauty and serenity."⁴⁸

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 several 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 Neel's Nursery, Hardy enhanced the landscape adding many more flowering shrubs.⁴⁹ 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 urchin 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, 1940.⁵⁰ Ruth Hardy filed for divorce soon after the opening and ran the hotel alone for the next twenty-five years.⁵¹





Above: Councilwoman Ruth Hardy at the planting of the first palm tree on Palm Canyon Drive, the project for which she is remembered most. From left: architect Albert Frey, Hardy, architect E. Stewart Williams, July 1949. Courtesy PSHS. Opposite: Ruth Hardy's alley of palm trees along Palm Canyon Drive lit at night, in front of architect E. Stewart Williams' Oasis Commercial Building, 1953. Courtesy PSHS.

During World War II, when international travel became impossible, the hotel flourished.⁵² 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."⁵³ 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 tan!"⁵⁴ 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 home in Palm Springs.⁵⁵ Other notables who made the Ingleside Inn their home in the desert were Greta Garbo, Elizabeth Taylor, Margaret O'Brien, J.C. Penney, Salvador Dali, 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 thousands of poinsettia plants, so that by 1950 it was "believed to be the largest profusion of poinsettias in Southern California."⁵⁶

In 1948 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.⁵⁷ Film star Charlie Farrell, co-founder of the Racquet Club, was appointed Mayor in that same election and he named Hardy Chairwoman of the Palm Springs Parks and Recreation Board. Her first order of business was the improvement of parks and public green space in the city; she had recognized an unmet need of the growing number of permanent residents, as well as the need for a better experience for visitors. "Something

must be done in the way of recreation, places where visitors can sit down amid green foliage and luxuriant carpets of grass. Instead, the hundreds of visitors that come here on weekends are forced to wander up and down Palm Canyon Drive until fatigue is written clearly on their faces."⁵⁸ The *Desert Sun* reported: "Our new councilwoman, Ruth Hardy, is leading the way to the much-needed park and playground development . . . for the Village."⁵⁹

Hardy's first step was to meet with famed Los Angeles landscape architect Ralph D. Cornell (See Eden, Fall, 2014), who was collaborating with the local firm of architects, Williams, Williams and Williams, on major improvements to the Palm Springs Field Club, long the site of the Desert Circus and other city events. Under Hardy's direction, the Field Club would get many new amenities, including a baseball diamond in the hope that a major league baseball team would come to Palm Springs for spring training.⁶⁰

During her first year in office, 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 land. Hardy was a fierce opponent, arguing that "the property in question was the number one project in a projected park system for the city. This parcel of land is more important than the development of the Field Club as a park site."⁶¹ Hardy prevailed, and again worked with Cornell and Williams, 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 lockers and a community room, football and softball fields, a barbecue area, and ample open space planted with grass and a wide variety of Cornell's signature palette of drought-tolerant trees and shrubs. The *Desert*

Sun reported that the improved Field Club and Tamarisk Park would make Palm Springs "more attractive as a resort, more desirable as a permanent residence, and more conducive to profitable business ventures."⁶²

The project for which Councilwoman Hardy is most remembered, however, was the 1949 installation of over 300 signature palms along Palm Canyon Drive. Spaced some 35 feet apart and reaching 20 feet or more in height, the palms formed a stately allée through the main business district from Tamarisk Road to Ramon Road. Neel's Nursery provided the trees, a selection of native *Washingtonia filifera* and *Washingtonia robusta*. Hardy insisted on proper watering, arguing at a City Council meeting against a proposed cut in the irrigation budget that "even if we plant only one city block with trees, let's do it right. Trees must have water, so let's be assured of sufficient amounts for periodic watering."⁶³ Other civic leaders noted that "the installation of the trees along Palm Canyon Drive will do more for the appearance of the town than any other single thing in many years, and when lit up at night, 'the Village will look like a veritable fairyland.'"⁶⁴ After the planting in the summer of 1949, the city honored the palms in "The Blessing of the Trees" ceremony — an old Spanish custom. Hardy proposed planting flowers (petunias, African daisies, or lantana) beneath the newly planted palms with the goal of the "covering of every inch of unpaved area about the trees to make Palm Springs the most beautiful town and Palm Canyon Drive the most beautiful thoroughfare in the country."⁶⁵

Hardy served twelve years on the Palm Springs City Council. When she retired in 1960, in recognition of her years of exemplary service, the City Council unanimously voted her "Mayor for a Night."⁶⁶ At the time of her death in 1965, Ruth Hardy was called the "first councilwoman and the city's greatest



beautifier," and in honor of her devotion to her adopted city, Tamarisk Park, which she had championed, was renamed Ruth Hardy Park. The Ingleside Inn, home of famed Melvyn's Restaurant, continues to draw many guests from far and wide. Melvyn's remains a popular place to dine among locals and visitors alike.

A LASTING LEGACY

In the years after the deaths of these pioneering women, Palm Springs began to lose some of its luster. In an effort to maintain the village's status as the definitive desert

destination, subsequent civic leaders made short-sighted decisions, such as demolition of Mother Coffman's Desert Inn, replacing it with a shopping mall. For decades, Palm Springs languished as development moved down the Coachella Valley. 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' standing as the premier desert resort. The Founding Mothers would be proud. ■

Endnotes

1. Research suggests the Cahuillas settled in Tahquitz Canyon over 5,000 years ago.
2. "Nellie's Boardinghouse," Marjorie Belle Bright, ETC Publications, 1981, iii.
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*
5. "Sands of Time," Brochure produced by the Desert Inn for its guests, 1935, unpaginated.
6. "Nellie's Boardinghouse," Marjorie Belle Bright, ETC Publications, 1981, 28.
7. Steve Vaught, "Sentinels in Stone," Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, 9.
8. "Nellie's Boardinghouse," Bright, 60.

9. *ibid.*, 59.
10. *ibid.*, 67.
11. *ibid.*, 67.
12. *ibid.*, 93.
13. "Famed Guests Play in Her Sandpile," *The Desert Magazine*, January, 1938, 4.
14. Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza was the first non-Native American to set foot in the Coachella Valley during his 1774 expedition. He was travelling from the Tubac Presidio, near what is Tucson today, to the San Gabriel Mission and finally Monterey, California.
15. "Palm Springs Inn Addition Now Finished," *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1926, 104.
16. "Inn Scene Rendezvous," *LAT*, December 18, 1936, 42.

17. "Nellie's Boardinghouse," Bright, frontispiece.
18. "The McCallum Saga," Katherine Ainsworth. Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1973, 195.
19. "The McCallum Centennial — Palm Springs' Founding Family," *Palm Springs Life*, April, 1984.
20. "A Productive Oasis at the Edge of the Desert," *LAT*, March 19, 1922, 161.
21. Pearl's oldest brother Harry grew watermelons that weighed 50-100 lbs. He took them to county fairs all over Southern California and entered a 100 lb. watermelon in the State Chamber of Commerce's "California on Wheels" exhibit.
22. "The McCallum Saga," Katherine Ainsworth. Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1973, 195.

23. *ibid.*, 184.
24. "More Rooms To Be Built," *LAT*, February 22, 1925, 104.
25. "New Tennis Club To Be Completed In Near Future," *Desert Sun*, January 7, 1938, 1.
26. The swimming pool and tennis courts were built by the Paddock Engineering Company.
27. "The New Palm Springs Tennis Club To Formally Open Gates February 5th With Exhibition Tennis and Driving," *DS*, January 28, 1938, 16.
28. "New Tennis Club To Be Completed In Near Future," *DS*, January 7, 1938, 1.
29. The Tennis Club had an exclusive opening on Sunday, November 28, 1937. After an exhibition tennis match with Frank Shields, an exclusive cocktail party around

- the distinctive pool was attended by guests such as Errol Flynn and Lily Damita, Groucho Marx, Fay Wray, Jinx Falkenberg, Lew Ayres, Frank Morgan, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Ray Milland Society Column, *LAT*, December 5, 1937, 76.
30. "Accident Ends Eventful Life," *LAT*, March 15, 1929, 11.
31. *ibid.*, 11.
32. "College Romance Leads to Marriage," *Oakland Tribune*, May 13, 1921, 9.
33. "Deep Well Guest Ranch," advertisement, *LAT*, February 4, 1929, 21.
34. "Deep Well Guest Ranch," advertisement, *LAT*, January 9, 1933, 19.
35. "Mother of Palm Springs," *DS*, June 30, 1955, 12.

36. *ibid.*
37. "Chatterbox," *LAT*, March 9, 1939, 26; "Circus Week — Palm Springs," *LAT*, March 19, 1939, 66.
38. "Melba Bennett, 'Grande Dame,' Dies of Cancer," *DS*, September 16, 1968, 1-2.
39. Nellie Coffman. Letter to Melba Bennett, February 25, 1948. Melba Bennett papers, Palm Springs Historical Society.
40. *Palm Springs Garden Book*, Garden Club of Palm Springs, California, 3.
41. "Garden Book Off Press in Time For Christmas," *DS*, December 19, 1956, 8.
42. "Palm Springs Garden Book," Garden Club of Palm Springs, 3.
43. "Nellie's Boardinghouse," Bright, 85.

44. "Palm Springs Mourns 'First Lady of Service,'" *DS*, January 11, 1965, 1.
45. "Birge Estate is Reported Sold; To Be Made Hotel," *DS*, October 18, 1940, 1.
46. Drawings exist in the George Washington Smith archives at UC Santa Barbara for a proposed residence for Mrs. Birge in Palm Springs. Two different plans, sketched by Smith's designer Lutah Maria Riggs are extant, though the drawings differ from what was actually built. The design has been attributed to Tanner.
47. "Desert Estate Now Hostelry," *LAT*, December 13, 1940, 4.
48. Advertisement for sale of Birge Estate, *DS*, February 26, 1937, 3.
49. Neel's Nursery advertisement, *Palm Springs Villager*, May-June, 1950.

50. "Announcing the Opening of the Ingleside Inn," advertisement, *LAT*, December 4, 1940, 35.
51. Ruth Hardy had previously filed for divorce from husband Jackson in June, 1939, claiming that he had "mismanaged the affairs of the hotel and has endeavored to 'exclude her' from its joint management and control. She declared that Hardy is 'continually drinking alcoholic intoxicants,' spending money for parties which should otherwise be used for living expenses." *DS*, June 9, 1939, 1.
52. "Many Reservations Foretell Big Year at Ingleside Inn," *DS*, October 8, 1943, 5.
53. "More about... Lily Pons," *DS*, November 19, 1943, 7.
54. *ibid.*
55. "Lily Pons Here For Brief Rest," *DS*, November 10, 1944, 1.

56. "Poinsettias Riot of Color at Ingleside," *DS*, December 8, 1950, 8.
57. "Four New Councilmen Take Seats Tuesday," *Desert Sun*, April 16, 1948, 1; "15 Seek 5 Council Posts," *DS*, March 5, 1948, 1.
58. "First Park System Step Presented," *DS*, May 7, 1948, 1.
59. "The Publisher's Corner, by Oliver B. Jaynes," *DS*, June 8, 1948, 1.
60. "Speed Park Board Action," *DS*, June 4, 1948, 7.
61. "Fight Over Torney Land for Proposed Park Looms," *DS*, September 21, 1948, 4.
62. "The Publisher's Corner, by Oliver B. Jaynes," *DS*, September 16, 1949, 1.
63. "Adequate Water for Street Trees," *DS*, June 3, 1949, 1.

64. "Tree Planting Operations Set for Start," *DS*, June 21, 1949, 1.
65. "Flower-Lined Drive Latest Beauty Step," *DS*, October 4, 1949, 1.
66. "Palm Springs Mourns 'First Lady of Service,'" *DS*, January 11, 1965, 2.

The Landscape of the Palm Springs Woman's Club



April 29, 1939. "BEGINNING A GREAT PROJECT. Mrs. Warren B. Pinney, President of the Palm Springs Woman's Club, turns the first shovel-full of dirt for the new Club House on Baristo Road, as directors of the building committee, contractors and architect look on. Left to right, Mrs. Thomas O'Donnell, John Porter Clark, architect, Raymond R. Wilson, contractor, Mrs. Nellie N. Coffman, Mrs. A.G. McManus, Mrs. Pinney, Raymond M. Sorum, contractor, and Mrs. Harold Hicks." Courtesy PSWC

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,"¹ 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."²

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."³

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."⁴ Officers were voted in, with Coffman named honorary President, and Pinney elected President. Next, a letter from an absent Pearl McCallum McManus was



read, creating “a ripple of pleased surprise” when it was revealed that McManus was going to donate the land for the new clubhouse, to be chosen from any one of her available properties. She was enthusiastically elected an honorary member.⁵

After touring several options, “three choice lots” (measuring 128 x 200 feet in all) at the corner of Cahuilla and Baristo near McManus’ Tennis Club were chosen. Local realtors valued the land at over \$6,000, “a very handsome present for the first two weeks of the club’s existence.”⁶ With the building site secured, more than \$12,000 would be needed to build the 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 “Operry” House — “He Done Right by 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. Porter Clark (1905 — 1991) had graduated from the architecture program at Cornell University in 1928, and after returning home to Pasadena spent several years apprenticing under architect Garrett Van Pelt at the firm Van Pelt & Lind. At the suggestion of Culver and Sallie Nichols,⁸ Porter Clark moved to Palm Springs, as there was more construction going on there in the depths of the Great Depression than in Pasadena or Los Angeles. Unlicensed, he worked under the Van Pelt & Lind name, designing a number of residences in the desert, and was joined in 1935 by Swiss-born architect Albert Frey. Porter Clark obtained his license in 1940, becoming both the first university-trained architect as

well as the first licensed architect to live and work in the desert. Over the next several years Porter Clark and Frey designed an impressive number of buildings all over the Coachella Valley, from International Style to Traditional.

For the Woman’s Club, Porter Clark designed a clubhouse with the “graceful style of architecture peculiar particularly to Palm Springs — low, rambling, with long, flowing graceful lines.”⁹ The simple contemporary stucco building had a large, rectangular volume with hipped roof, containing an entry hall and spacious auditorium with stage, which could seat 200 or be opened up for dancing. A low, horizontal flat-roofed wing housed the kitchen, dressing rooms and rest-rooms, its U-shape framing a large, sun-filled patio. Providing ample room for outdoor activities, the patio was enclosed by a curving brick wall and held yet another stage.

In April 1939 after approval of the plans, a call went out for bids with the stipulation that work must be started within seven days of acceptance of the bid. The contractors chosen were Raymond Wilson and Raymond Sorum (Wilson’s wife was a charter member), and they, along with and the majority of the sub-contractors, worked at cost to keep within the limited budget.

As the building was being planned, a landscaping committee was formed, led by Mrs. Harry Bedford-Jones and Pearl McManus; the committee selected prominent Los Angeles landscape architect Katherine Bashford, who, like Porter Clark, would donate her services. Bashford knew McManus — both were graduates of the Marlborough School for Girls (Bashford’s sister Louise graduated with McManus). Though attributed in newspapers at the time to Bashford, the design exhibits all the signatures of her partner and principal designer, Fred Barlow, Jr. (See *Eden*, Winter and



Above, left to right: Architect John Porter Clark’s rendering of the clubhouse for the Palm Springs Woman’s Club, 1939. Courtesy PSWC; The newly installed landscape at the Palm Springs Woman’s Club, late 1939. Landscape architects Bashford and Barlow designed a monochromatic palette of varying shades of pink — here a sea of pink sand verbena — to complement the Mediterranean pink Palm Springs Woman’s Club. Courtesy Palm Springs Woman’s Club archives (PSWC). Below: native California *Washingtonia filifera* clusters that anchored the outdoor patio, framing the outdoor stage and views towards the mountain. Courtesy PSWC. Opposite: Cover of the first Palm Springs Woman’s Club directory, 1939. Courtesy PSWC.



Fall, 2013). Bashford and Barlow had done extensive work in the desert, often in collaboration with Porter Clark and Frey, and were familiar with the plants that would survive the unique climate. For the Woman’s Club, they developed a comprehensive set of plans that could be implemented in phases, as the budget allowed. A local landscape designer/contractor and nurseryman, Millard R. Wright, worked with the club members to install the landscape.

Because the stucco building was painted “Mediterranean pink,” with off-white accents, 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.

At the rear of the building they called for several mature multi-trunk olive (*Olea europaea* ‘Manzanillo’) specimens to be planted in a row. Their dusty gray-green foliage and gnarled, gray bark provided a pleasing contrast in texture and color to the sleek modern building, forming a backdrop to the building once they matured. To provide a sense of enclosure on the north and south sides, hedgerows of pale pink oleander were planted — pruned to be a low continuous mass on the north side facing the Community Church, while left to grow tall on the opposite side,

screening out the adjacent La Serena Villas hotel to the south. Deep magenta ‘Crimson Lake’ bougainvilleas would add punctuation marks along the front of the building and were planted along the brick patio wall enclosure to cover it and cascade down.

Bashford and Barlow had a well-known disdain for foundation plantings, so as was their signature practice, they called instead for a mass planting of groundcover — here native pink Desert sand verbena (*Abronia villosa*) — planted in the decomposed granite which surrounded the west and north sides of the property. This broad horizontal plane of dazzling green and lilac pink verbena emphasized the horizontal lines of the building, while being easy to maintain during the season in which the building would be used, reverting back to decomposed granite during the summer.

Within the brick-walled patio, the designers anchored the space with two clusters of towering native *Washingtonia filifera* palms, a pair on one side, a cluster of three on the other, breaking up the symmetry of the space. Framing the outdoor stage and views toward the mountain, the trees were planted directly into a large panel of tightly-clipped emerald green turf. The southwest corner of the patio was planted with a specimen Australian *Leptospermum*, whose dramatic sculptural form added a punctuation mark, along with more pink flowering color. More color was introduced with Bashford and Barlow’s signature scattered pots of geraniums and specimen plantings, giving the patio a feeling of informality.

On November 21, less than a year after the idea had been presented to the community, the Palm Springs Woman’s Club moved into its new clubhouse. Off to a good start, they had a new gathering space, “no mortgage and money in the bank,” according to a news clipping. “From now on, Palm Springs has a new element to consider in its Woman’s Club — a force strong in unity and community service. May the new home into which it moved this week long shelter an organization of usefulness, vision and integrity. And may that power, which is so grave a responsibility, never falter, and never fail to answer the need of a worthy cause. Happy days in the new house.”¹⁰

The Palm Springs Woman’s Club is still going strong, and recently celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary with a rededication of its building. ■

Endnotes

1. “New Quarters For Woman’s Club,” undated newspaper clipping in 1938-39 Palm Springs Woman’s Club scrapbook, Palm Springs Woman’s Club archive (PSWC)
2. “The Birth & Growth of the Palm Springs Woman’s Club,” newspaper clipping in 1938-39 Palm Springs Woman’s Club scrapbook, (PSWC).

3. “Palm Springs Woman’s Club Launched with Luncheon at El Mirador,” newspaper clipping in 1938-39 Palm Springs Woman’s Club scrapbook, (PSWC).

4. Bylaws of the Palm Springs Woman’s Club, 1938. (PSWC).

5. “Palm Springs Woman’s Club an Actuality,” clipping from the 1938-39 Palm Springs Woman’s Club scrapbook. (PSWC).

6. “Woman’s Club Selects Site So. Of Church,” clipping from the 1938-39 Palm Springs Woman’s Club scrapbook. (PSWC).

7. “\$2,500 Gifts for Woman’s Club House” and “Mellerdrammer Nets \$500 For Club House,” 1938-39 Palm Springs Woman’s Club scrapbook. (PSWC).

8. Culver Nichols was a local real estate developer and Palm Springs booster. Wife

Sallie Stevens Nichols was the daughter of P.T. Stevens, the original owner of the El Mirador Hotel. Culver Nichols

9. Undated newspaper clipping, (PSWC)

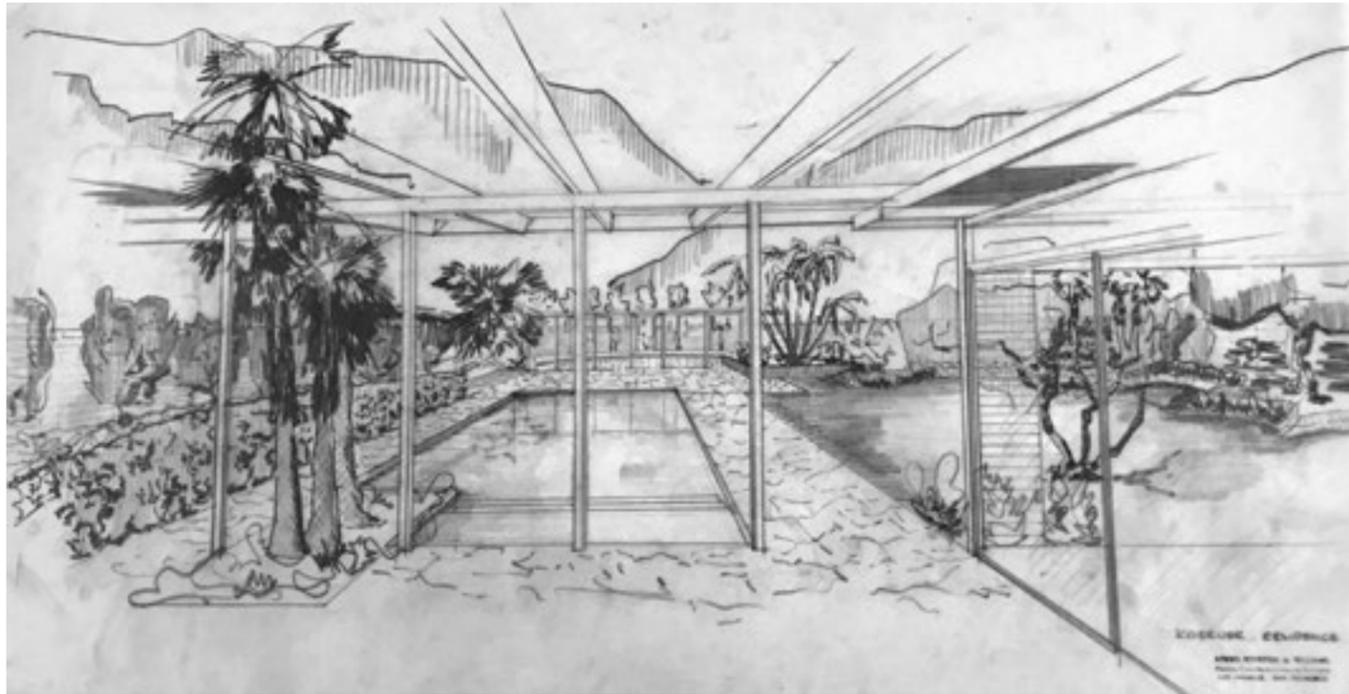
10. “New Quarters for Woman’s Club,” undated newspaper clipping in 1938-39 Palm Springs Woman’s Club scrapbook, (PSWC).



FRANCIS DEAN

AND THE ART OF
MODERN LANDSCAPE
ARCHITECTURE

By Lauren Weiss Bricker, Ph.D and Keiji Uesugi, ASLA



In 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 Eisner 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



Previous spread: Union Bank Square, EDAW, 1968. Above: Francis Dean's perspective sketch for the Leon Koerner Residence in Palm Springs, 1955. Opposite: Riverside Mall, EDAW, 1967.



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"¹ 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 1950s (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

Above: Sketch for a playful florist's kiosk for Union Bank Square, which featured translucent Plexiglas domes, their circular pattern repeated in the paving underneath. Opposite: The completed landscape at the Koerner Residence in Palm Springs shows the swimming pool with Arizona sandstone paving, a long bed of white petunias, and the retaining walls made of large slabs of stone. Julius Shulman photograph, courtesy Getty Research Institute. Following spread: Photograph of Union Bank Square landscape, EDAW, Bunker Hill, Los Angeles, 1968.







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.²

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.³

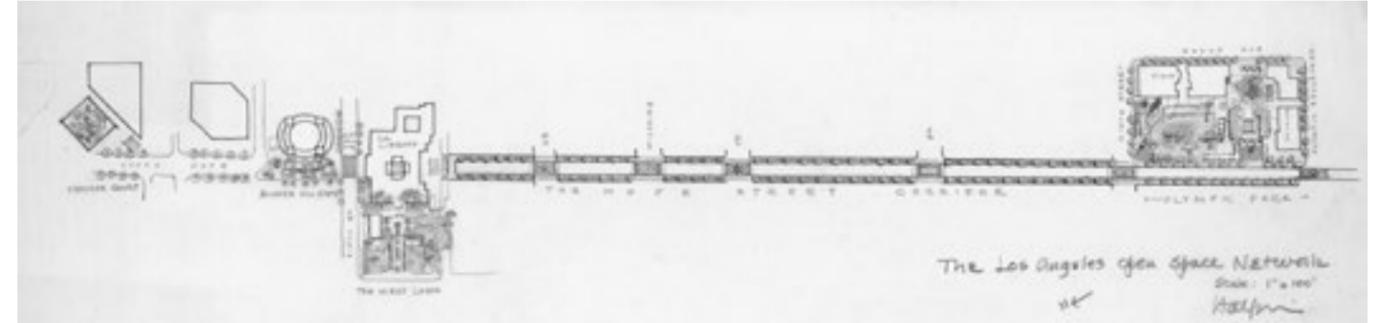
In conclusion, he saw the education of landscape architects as closely tied to these values:

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.⁴ ■

Endnotes

1. David Gebhard and Robert Winter, "An Architectural Guidebook to Los Angeles," Gibbs Smith, 2003, 236.
2. Francis H. Dean. Testimony to the Board of Forest Appeals, *Barton Flats Recreation Management Composite Plan*. 1970.
3. Francis H. Dean. *Environmental Ethics Interchange*, 1987.
4. Francis H. Dean. Summary statement from *Nature, Love and Logic by Design*. 1990.

Above: Rendering of the landscape at Union Bank Square.



Member News



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 Exhibitions, 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

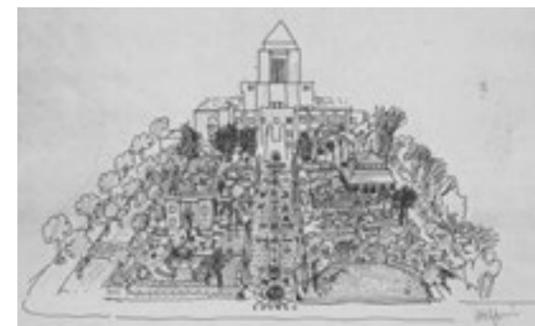
Held as part of a three-month series of public events honoring Halprin's rich local and national legacy, this symposium will be suitable for enthusiasts of Modernist design and landscape architecture, practitioners and urban planners, fans of Los Angeles and those interested in the city's history, and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



California Garden & Landscape History Society

www.cglhs.org

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Front Cover: The oval pool at Pearl McCallum McManus' Palm Springs Tennis Club, 1937, was called "The Most Photographed Pool in the World." This large-format Kodachrome image was taken in 1940 for the National Geographic Magazine. J. Baylor Roberts photograph, courtesy National Geographic Creative. Back Cover: Francis Dean's landscape for the Palm Springs home of Mr. and Mrs. Leon Koerner featured exuberant beds of drought-tolerant color. Eckbo, Royston and Williams, landscape architects, 1955. Photograph by Julius Shulman, Courtesy Getty Research Institute.