

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Palm Springs history: A plan for affordable housing and a fight against the federal conservatorships

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Protesting the federally mandated conservatorship of native people, Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians Tribal Council member Edmund Pete Siva was interviewed by the Press Enterprise in December 1969.

"The thing that gets me about this — why should we have a special thing for the Indians? I don't see them running around saying that Walter Annenberg (wealthy Palm Springs winter resident) needs a conservator just because he's built himself a golf course out here. Who cares if a man's an Indian or (Chinese) or Japanese or what?" Pete Siva did not want to be assigned a conservator and he protested.

But knowing it was inevitable, he asked his friend, Frank Bogert to serve as his conservator. Bogert was reticent but agreed.

Dora Joyce Prieto, Tribal Council chairwoman at the time, cheered the newly relaxed attitude of Judge Merrill Brown "to give everybody a chance" to manage their own affairs. Indeed, Judge Brown released two young Indian men from their conservatorships the week the article quoting Siva appeared: 24-year-old Richard Milanovich, after Milanovich gave sufficient assurances that he would be fiscally responsible, and Joseph Patrick Patencio, 29-year-old musician with a family.

Many tribal members complained about the inherent inequity and indignity of the conservator program, describing it "like having a yoke around your neck."

The paternalist attitude of conservators, who were often described as "business managers," was increasingly unwelcome. Additionally, the judges with whom they negotiated during the 1930s, '40s and '50s were often patronizing toward the Indian landowners, and sanctioned deals that benefited the conservator or guardian more than the under-

lying owner.

By the late 1960s, the Department of Interior was finally investigating some conservators for charging what were deemed excessively high fees for their services when the very notion of oversight was thought inherently unfair. If Walter Annenberg could do something as suspect as build a private golf course on his land, why weren't individual Indians allowed to do what they liked with their own land?

Still most conservators fought the idea of emancipating their charges. There were a few supportive of independence, like Frank Bogert, who released Pete Siva when he turned 21, irritating those conservators who wanted to maintain control. (Bogert and Siva would remain lifelong friends.)

Joseph Patencio had been in the custody of Lawrence Crossley early on.

The arrangement had been satisfactory enough as Crossley was a friend of the tribe and was trusted. When Crossley died, Patencio then had a series of contentious relationships with subsequent conservators and launched court battles seeking to be allowed to manage his own affairs.

By the time Judge Brown released Joseph Patencio and Richard Milanovich from their custodial arrangements, the conservator program was being regularly challenged, and a federal task force had produced a report highly critical of the practice. (The Press Enterprise's George Ringwald published further investigative reporting that Judge Brown cited as a reason for his changed attitude.)

Crossley is credited as the first African American resident in Palm Springs.

Born in New Orleans and an accomplished musician, Lawrence Crossley answered a want ad Prescott Stevens, owner of the El Mirador Hotel, put in the paper for a driver to take him back and forth from Los Angeles and was hired.

In New Orleans, Crossley had been "well-known in golf circles" and quickly became involved in the development of

the El Mirador golf course. He also was superintendent of grounds for millionaire Samuel Untermyer, the famous New York attorney wintering in the desert.

Clearly industrious, Crossley was befriended by these prominent businessmen and encouraged, he began to invest for himself in all sorts of businesses. He was given charge of Stevens' Whitewater Mutual Water Company.

He started his own Tramview Water Company, built a small café, run by Mexican-born Marcus Caro, with rooms for rent on Section 14, and in the early 1940s, began marketing a "mystery tea" using a Native American recipe. His Palm Springs Desert Tea sold as far away as the East Coast. He invested in real estate in Cathedral City creating the Tramview Village and Eagle Canyon Trailer Village.

Described as a "long-time confidant of the tribe," he was appointed as guardian for 10 members of the Agua Caliente tribe. In the early 1930s, Crossley acquired approximately five acres of land south of Section 14, near the southwest corner of East Ramon Road and South Sunrise Way.

This would become Crossley Court, the first-known example of land ownership by an African American in Palm Springs. Crossley would go on to negotiate many leases for Indian landowners and the all-important easement through Section 14 for Tahquitz-McCallum Way.

As early as the 1930s, together with Refugio Salazar, a native of Mexico, Crossley attempted to establish alternatives to living on Section 14. This effort culminated in Crossley purchasing a large tract of land outside the city limits. His longtime friend Frank Bogert advocated for the new development and when mayor, even offered to have the city buy the land at a big profit for Cross-

ley, to facilitate it.

Crossley decided to develop the neighborhood himself and it would become variously known as the Crossley Tract Gardens, or Estates.

The 77-parcel subdivision was two miles east of Palm Springs and one mile south of Ramon Road.

Crossley developed a partnership with the Sun-Spa Development Corporation's President Al Casey, who explained, "We're particularly interested in providing immediate, low-cost housing for residents forced to move from Section 14 because of the new Indian Land Leasing Agreements."

Grading began in spring of 1958 and the first home was ready for occupancy by September.

Other buildings were relocated from Section 14, hoisted onto trailers, which slowly crawled down Ramon Road.

The Desert Sun touted the news, "Land Deal to Ease Housing Situation," and "Low Cost Housing Project Announced East of Village." Amenities included paved streets, natural gas, and school bus service — none of which were available in Section 14.

The homes were built to FHA standards and could be had for a down payment of \$50 with monthly payments of \$65. Advertisements promised that buyers were allowed to pick their lot floor plan.

Lawrence and Martha Crossley lived across the street from the model home. In 1959, the Crossley Tract was annexed into the city of Palm Springs and by 1961, some 30 homes had been built. The project faltered with Crossley's untimely death in 1962.

At the time of his death, Crossley was described as "a wealthy Palm Springs businessman." His estate was valued at the gigantic sum of \$1,494,857.31 and included "lands inherited from Indians, and lands he owned in partnership with Indians and...also \$44,551.89 that was due him in fees from 10 different Agua Caliente estates for his services as guardian or conservator."



Crossley