

# THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

## Shadow Mountain Club had something for everyone

**Tracy Conrad**

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"Nestled down among the copper-hued foothills of the Santa Rosa range, which juts out to form the great protection for the town, is Palm Desert—home of the beautiful Shadow Mountain Club. Beyond rises the spectacular snow-capped Mt. San Gorgonio, highest peak in Southern California, and there is no lovelier setting than the one created by the ever-changing shadows of the mountains."

This poetic description was the beginning of a fluffy newspaper article some ten years after the inception of the Shadow Mountain Club. Doubtless promulgated by clever public relations at the club, the veracity of the description supported the images from the time.

"One of the tremendous attractions of the club is the enormous figure-eight pool. There is enjoyment here for everyone—even those who don't go in the water and throughout the year the pool is the setting for water ballets, aquatic exhibitions and competitions, providing fun for those taking part, and diversion for onlookers."

The pool was tremendous. Its wide, chubby, snowman silhouette, a massive figure-eight, was laid out to emphasize the views beyond. Designed by Tommy Tomson, the famed landscape architect, it was astonishingly large, 135 feet long and at the extent of the interlocking circles, almost as wide. Janet Dee's water ballet troupes performed regularly on white surfboards floating in its aquamarine waters.

"For the sports-minded—there is plenty of thrilled-packed activity... more than 150 contestants participated in the first annual...open and invitation swim meet held in the club pool. Two national and seven Southern Pacific records were broken in the two-day swim carnival. It can be seen that the pool has become the focus of activity, particularly in the summer."



**Aerial image of the Henry Eggers- and A. Quincy Jones-designed Shadow Mountain Club, set around Tommy Tomson's iconic figure eight pool.** COURTESY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT

The club offered something for everyone. Tennis, bridge, fashion shows, equestrian events, outdoor barbecues, Sunday morning breakfast rides, moonlit hayrides, and golf during the day were followed in the evenings by elaborate theme parties. There was an Aladdin's Ball, a Monte Carlo night, and tropical luaus, but the formal Shadow Ball was the most important social event of the season.

"But when the sun goes down, every evening is a truly glorious climax to the exhilarating fun-packed hours of the day. After dark, whether one chooses the setting of the exquisitely beautiful Shadow Room, the picturesque Indo Room or the spacious colorful lounge, invariably one finds an environment conducive to luxurious enjoyment. Cuisine unsurpassed, companions of your own choosing, services and facilities above reproach—small wonder, indeed, that every club social event takes its place as one of life's treasured experiences."

Indeed, the fame of the Shadow Mountain Club had "spread all over the world." Society columns featured a cavalcade of high-profile captains of indus-

try who chose to holiday in the desert, invariably led by Leonard Firestone of the eponymous tire company.

Tycoons such as R.B. White, President of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, and Clarence Woolley the founder of American Radiator Co., William P. Lear of Lear Wire Recording and Radio, Earl Gilmore of Gilmore Oil and Stadium, and H.F. Johnson of Johnson Wax along with Earl H. Hoover of the vacuum cleaner empire, were all noted as visitors as early as 1950.

Celebrities like Jimmy Stewart, Dick Powell, Robert Montgomery, Loretta Young, Greer Garson, Bette Davis, Jeanette McDonald, Ann Southern and Harold Lloyd were active members or visitors, and had migrated eastward from Palm Springs. Jimmy McHugh even wrote a special song named for the club. Entertainments featured top headliners like Bob Hope, Rudy Valee, and Edgar Bergen.

"The huge semi-circular club house is situated on an advantageous elevation, which provides a sweeping view, not only of the pine-clad Santa Rosas which give this building a spectacular backdrop, but also of the snowcapped

peaks of Mt. San Jacinto and San Gorgonio far across the northern gateway to the Coachella Valley. And from here, too, are magnificent unobstructed vistas of vast desert...."

Designed by Henry Eggers, the architect of the original Firecliff Lodge, the clubhouse hugged the bottom of the expansive pool with a curtain of glass punctuated at the ceiling with sharpened rafter tails. Inside, a massive stone fireplace was topped with a huge copper hood, in another iteration of the impressive fireplace at the lodge.

Luke Leuschner and Susie O'Hair of the Historical Society of Palm Desert explain that A. Quincy Jones was also hired during the early building phases and likely altered the original plans. Luke says that Walter White was hired to redesign the club in 1955 but his concept was never built. And architects Harold Bissner and Robert Pitchford also designed an unrealized cocktail lounge addition.

Baked into the original conception of the club was the idea that it could be bought out by its members once they numbered 300. By the end of the summer of 1953, the purchase was a certainty although its particulars are extremely complicated.

Under its new ownership, the Shadow Mountain Club would continue to build and expand. Additions of two-story buildings eventually surrounded the pool, obstructing the once sweeping views.

The adjacent Sun Lodges advertised a similar scheme of "own-your-own-cottage" but didn't survive similarly unsympathetic additions, and like the Firecliff Lodge was demolished.

Only the Shadow Mountain Club survives. The remarkable pool remains a tribute to the original vision of Palm Desert, still enticing swimmers with "hours more sun" and "lots more fun."

*Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.*