

Asians worked closely with Nellie Coffman amid war, racial tensions

Tracy Conrad

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The waitresses who worked at The Desert Inn lived over the storage room at the back of the kitchen. The quarters were known, accordingly, as "No Man's Land." Most of the women were never married. They were of multiple ethnicities and backgrounds and would come for the winter season on the desert and go for the summer to Yosemite or Yellowstone.

Then, as now, housing was expensive in town, so The Desert Inn provided for their employees on the grounds of the hotel, creating its own little city. Working-class people not so lucky to be employed at the Inn were largely obliged to live on Section 14, where they could find modest rent, or frame up a little shelter and squat, hoping not to be noticed by the Indian landowner.

In the 1930s, the Inn's original building, at the corner of Palm Canyon and Tahquitz, came to be called "Manila" as the upper floors were for the Filipino men working at the Inn. Nellie Coffman, the owner herself, lived in the back of the first floor of that same building, behind the shops at the front on Palm Canyon.

Kitty Kieley Hayes, great granddaughter of Nellie Coffman, describes the Inn as "a little United Nations." Employees were considered a part of a larger family "and there are many stories about how (the Inn) went above and beyond to be certain all were treated fairly. That's why Nellie was called Mother Coffman." Kitty continues, "Its hospitality was known worldwide as it welcomed people from all walks of life as both guests and employees." Nellie had some 250 employees at the height of her operation.

In the very earliest days, Nellie hired many Cahuilla people like Sol Baristo, who delivered wood and set all the fireplaces for guests and swept out the ashes; a street in town now bears his name. Marcel Saturnino, for whom a street is also now named, was another valued Cahuilla employee. Nellie paid for his burial in the Welwood Murray Cemetery.

Soon there were many different people were arriving looking for work. The history of Filipino, Chinese and Japanese people in the desert is mostly that of working people, who populated the kitchens in restaurants and hotels, and is not well documented, except at the Inn.

A cadre of five Filipino housemen, bus boys and room service attendants lived in "Manila," with a craftsman named Marcelo, who repaired furniture and kept the paint in the rooms fresh. There are no historical records indicating his family name.

Segundo Rigodan was another Filipino employee; he became Nellie's chauffeur when she was no longer able to drive. He worked all year around. In the summer, he lived in the guest house at Nellie's Banning summer house, Lazy Acres. Nellie had a German shepherd named Amigo and the three of them went a lot of places together. Segundo was in the U.S. Army in WWII and sta-



Ethel and John Harutun with their kitchen staff at the opening of their new restaurant That John's circa 1965.

COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS LIFE ARCHIVES



Chinese cook tends to an outdoor BBQ at The Desert Inn in this undated photo.

COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

tioned in the Philippines after the war. He married local woman, Catalina, and they adopted a war orphan whom they named Nellie.

Santos de Jesus, who was also Filipino, got his start at the Inn and went on to have one of the most successful catering businesses in Palm Springs and then a café in the Sun Center. Santos Cocktail Cheese was shipped around the country. He and his wife, Linda, are buried at Welwood Murray Cemetery.

Yee Wong, the head chef at the Inn, and his son, the sous chef, were from

Hong Kong. These important positions were entrusted by Nellie to their care. Once, in search of more help in the kitchen for her expanding operation, Nellie traveled to Los Angeles and accidentally hired a group of Chinese men from a rival group. There was a clash with those already working at the Inn. From then on, all hiring was done strictly by the chef.

Kitty recalls there was always delicious Chinese food in the kitchen for the employees, and she would beg her mother, Betty, Nellie's granddaughter,

to bring it home. When Yee retired and moved back to Hong Kong, Betty and her husband Tom went to visit him there in 1969. Kitty also recalls Lu Tom, a Chinese man who was responsible for harvesting fruit and irrigating the grounds of the Inn, and a Korean kitchen helper surnamed Kim.

There were esteemed visitors from Asia as well. In November 1942, at the height of WWII, Madam Vincente Lim, wife of Brigadier General Lim, commander of the Filipino Armed Forces, spoke at the Palm Springs Woman's Club. (Vicente Lim was the first Filipino graduate of the Military Academy at West Point in 1914, and at the time of his wife's visit to Palm Springs, he was presumed to be a prisoner of war.)

Before and after WWII, but sadly, not during, flower arrangements were supplied by Keizo and Rose Komura, a Japanese couple, who lived on Calle Roca. They were imprisoned during the war at Poston internment camp in Arizona, where their son Stanley was born in 1943.

Kitty characterizes the tiny town as welcoming and tolerant of all sorts of differences in people, and for that reason collected a variety of people.

"Early Palm Springs villagers lived on the fringe of mainstream American life in many ways...all a little eccentric and accepting of those of a similar demeanor."

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.