

'Distinctive' Firecliff Lodge put Palm Desert on map

Tracy Conrad

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"The Hong brothers, Ed and Bing, who have been chefs at Firecliff Lodge in Palm Desert this season, prepared a special Chinese dinner last week to honor their employers Leonard Firestone and Cliff Henderson..."

By the time of the dinner party in 1950, described above, the Firecliff Lodge, an amalgamation of the names of its two owners, was the most noted hot spot halfway between Palm Springs and Indio.

Just a few years before, in 1946, The Desert Sun chronicled its beginnings.

"Two prominent Southern California businessmen, Leonard Firestone and Clifford W. Henderson, last week announced the formation of a \$500,000 corporation to build Firecliff Lodge, a feature of a new real estate development called Palm Desert."

Cliff Henderson and his brothers Randall, Phil and Carl, along with their brother-in-law the extraordinary landscape architect Tommy Tomson, had already been dreaming up a new city in the desert.

Firestone had vast inherited wealth and had started his own successful businesses. (He even owned The Desert Sun for a time.)

"They reveal work will start shortly on a \$200,000 unit of their six-acre lodge, part of a 1500 acre 'community of tomorrow' already taking shape halfway between Palm Springs and Indio.

"Major business enterprises already have shown interest in the multimillion-dollar project. Union Oil company has leased a corner for a modern service station, and construction of a motion picture theater has been assured.

"Preliminary work on Palm Desert included: a deep water well, 9 miles of surfaced roads, 7 miles of water mains and a system of high-pressure fire hydrants and a 60,000-gallon reservoir."

The Firecliff Lodge, along with the adjacent Shadow Mountain Club, was at



An imaginative spa designed by Tommy Tomson at the Firecliff Lodge.

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the center of the ambitious development. It was an audacious idea: conjure up an entire city from the barren desert sand.

Hedda Hopper's column in the New York Daily News and syndicated nationwide carried a small notice in January 1948 that read, "Cliff Henderson and Leonard Firestone had a gala-opening of their Firecliff Lodge at Palm Desert, over the weekend. The building going on in that miracle city in the desert is something to behold..."

The lodge was designed by Henry Eggers of Kaufmann, Lippincott and Eggers. Its innovative and distinctive rooflines, jutting out and creating an elongated point at the gable, would become iconic for the town influenced other midcentury architects. Tommy Tomson created fabulously flashy pools, made possible by the advent of gunite, but the clover-like pattern for the Firecliff spa was truly astonishing.

In an interview at the Firecliff Lodge in February of 1949, Firestone reflected on their endeavor, "...we feel we are creating something so distinctive that Southern California will be able to attract the smartest people of the world,

who are now going to places like Nassau, Mexico and other foreign countries. We already have progressed beyond the goals set when we started operations... I'm hotter for Palm Desert now than ever and so are all of us who have invested our money in this project."

Indeed, the smartest, most attractive people from all over the country were soon regularly visiting the Firecliff Lodge. There was nightly entertainment and dancing to live music. Movie stars were regulars. Special events amused hotel guests. Society pages all over the country featured their most prominent citizens having a holiday at the lodge.

Henderson bought out Firestone, who would go on to many other projects in the desert. (He hired William Pereira to design a shopping complex nearby, a gorgeous elevation of which was featured in Sunspot Magazine which was unfortunately never realized.)

Lots of architects worked on further additions. Walter White designed a dining room expansion and John Moyer drew bungalow additions, and Warren Frazier Overpeck from Santa Monica reimagined the entire facility in a space-age atomic makeover featuring the Sat-

ellite Room.

The restaurant and cocktail lounge by then could seat 300 guests and featured a massive stone and copper fireplace. There were 10 three-bedroom cottages some with kitchenettes.

The last remodel of Firecliff Lodge in the late 1960s was not enough to boost increasingly lackluster sales.

In 1970, Henderson announced its sale at auction as a major investment opportunity.

Some 3 acres on El Paseo, the complex included a lobby, cocktail bar, dining room, private club and 32 elegantly appointed rooms. The high bidder was also given one year to acquire prime commercial real estate immediately adjacent with a 14-unit apartment building. The high bid was only \$290,000, not even half of what had been invested.

The new owners were done by 1975, when again the newspaper featured a small advertisement of sale.

Firecliff Lodge Hotel, "a landmark for many years" on El Paseo Drive, "the epicenter of activity in Palm Desert" was being offered for a mere \$695,000, barely more than it had cost to construct 30 years before.

"Back when social life was not ranked, rated, critiqued, awarded or even much noticed, the social whirl was centered..." on the Firecliff Lodge. The spectacular start of the lodge seems incongruous with its whimpering end.

The Press-Enterprise interviewed Henderson about its final demise in 1981. "Our whole objective was to get the Palm Springs elite to come to the new town of Palm Desert...12 miles down the road, which was pretty much out in the sticks then."

As he drove past the demolition... Henderson said, "It's like breaking an arm or a limb. I regret to see it happen of course. I just wish they could have saved that big fireplace..."

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.