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THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Nellie Coffman had a vision for Palm Springs

Tracy Conrad

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Where mighty Mt. San Jacinto gently steps onto the valley floor may be found the site of The Desert Inn. Built through the imagination and vision of Nellie Norton Coffman, The Desert Inn is the very reason Palm Springs and the surrounding Coachella Valley came into international consciousness over a century ago. That fame persists today and is directly attributable to the tenacity and fortitude of Nellie Coffman, making the site of her endeavors hallowed ground. She struggled and built on this spot and “far above our poor power to add or detract” we should not forget what she did here. Nellie arrived with big dreams of making Palm Springs into “an attractive place for attractive people.” Her presence on the desert was transformative; a marvel of fortitude and forward-thinking.

She came with her husband, Dr. Harry Coffman; Harry to start his medical practice and tuberculosis sanatorium, Nellie to start a little hotel. Marcus Pete, a local Cahuilla man, met them at the Seven Palms train station and loaded their belongings into his buckboard wagon. He transported them across the seven-mile stretch of desert that led to the village of Palm Springs. As they came around the base of Mt. San Jacinto, the wind suddenly ceased, the swirl of dust abated, revealing the little village. There was no electricity, no telephones, no air conditioning and no paved roads. There were a handful of white settlers and many more Cahuilla Indians living in close proximity to the hot mineral springs which bubbled up, defining the center of town.

In September 1909, the Coffmans paid \$2,000 down on a two-acre parcel across the street from the Palm Springs Hotel at the corner of Main and Spring streets, today’s Palm Canyon Drive and Tahquitz Canyon Way. A thick-walled house with a granite fireplace sat in the center of their property. Harry Coffman took down the original fences and replaced them with a white picket fence. They erected tents near the Tahquitz



The Desert Inn, at the base of Mt. San Jacinto, is seen in this picture circa 1930.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ditch that ran across the property; and they built ramadas, covering porches with roofs made of palm fronds that provided shade from the withering desert sun. And they hung out a sign signifying they were open for business.

Within a few years though, Harry was gone. Nellie, now a single mother, persevered. With the help of a substantial loan from oilman Thomas O’Donnell, the tents and clapboard houses of the early hotel were replaced with solid concrete in the fashionable Spanish-Mediterranean style so popular in 1920s California. Designed by William Charles Tanner, The Desert Inn eventually sprawled lazily over 35 acres, carefully pieced together by Nellie at the foot of the mountain.

Nellie soon became world-famous for her gracious hospitality, impeccable taste, good nature, devotion to quality, generosity and kindness to her neighbors, guests and employees. The Desert Inn was known for its elegant architecture, specimen landscaping, outdoor amusements, upscale shops, capacious dining room and incomparable service.

Guests from cooler climes would de-

town still depends.

She worked to establish the Board of Trade, a precursor to the Chamber of Commerce. She founded the Welfare and Friendly Aid Society, organizing the business community to provide for those in need. She was a trusted friend of her Indian neighbors. And she was a tireless proponent of Palm Springs incorporating into a city. All the while improving the prospects for the town and for her hotel business. At its height, The Desert Inn employed over 200 workers to serve about the same number of hotel guests.

World War II created a whirlwind in Palm Springs. Wealthy visitors could no longer make the Grand Tour of Europe and instead headed west to the allure and mystery of the desert. While The Desert Inn lost many of its employees to the war effort, more and more servicemen and their families came to town, the city saw a shift from wealthy tourists to everyman visitors. General George Patton brought troops to train at Chiriaco Summit and soldiers on leave from Camp Young met their loved ones in Palm Springs, filling hotels and admiring The Desert Inn. After the war ended, the city experienced a population boom led by soldiers returning to the lovely village.

When Nellie died in 1950 she had accomplished her dream: the town was thriving. Glamorous celebrities were commonplace. The place was so attractive, wealthy elite visitors were importing their own architects to build them fancy new houses in the avante-garde, new modern style. Businesses of all types were prospering. Five years after her passing, Nellie’s two sons sold The Desert Inn to movie star Marion Davies, William Randolph Hearst’s longtime companion, in a transaction orchestrated by Gregson Bautzer, Hollywood lawyer and raconteur.

The subsequent demise of The Desert Inn is a tangled, sad story that illustrates lack of foresight, reverence and understanding in the blind pursuit of profit.

During construction of The Desert



Mr. and Mrs. Thomas O’Donnell — he loaned money for The Desert Inn — attend a rodeo with Nellie Coffman.

camp for the winter and take up residence at her hotel in sunny Palm Springs. The siren call of the town was, “It’s lovely here!” Indeed, it was. Nellie was setting the standard not just for the desert but for hotels everywhere. Together with Frank Bogert, Tony Burke and others, she set about building a name for this lovely but unknown little spot on the edge of nowhere at the foot of the mountain. She ended up creating an international cache upon which the

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Inn, Nellie was quoted as saying it was built to last for a hundred years. It was, in fact, incredibly difficult to demolish, taking much longer and requiring the heaviest of equipment. Nellie would have built it that way: solid, substantive. The lovely garden spot with scattered bungalows and meandering paths was razed to the ground for parking and a shopping mall that failed over multiple iterations, perhaps because of the sin of destroying The Desert Inn.

Pausing now, 111 years later, in in tiny recognition of the work achieved by a singularly industrious woman, her dream of creating a destination out of barren desert does not seem so far-flung. Her efforts hallowed the ground at the toe of the mountain. She defined the Palm Springs desert for the decades after her arrival, inventing the very concept of a resort town, conjuring it up out of mere sand and dust Nellie took the desert and with sheer ingenuity and industry transformed it into an internationally recognized resort that balanced development with a congenial village life. More than one-hundred years later, a little deference to Nellie Coffman seems just and entirely in order.

The city's new downtown park is sited on a small sliver of The Desert Inn, the hallowed ground that is the true heart and soul of Palm Springs. The Desert Inn, the life's work of the remarkable Nellie Coffman, brought national renown to Palm Springs and secured its reputation as not only a playground for the rich and famous, but a destination for those seeking the health benefits of desert living. The city has a tradition and long history of naming its parks after female pioneers like Frances Stevens and Ruth Hardy. It is only fitting that we remember this history and name the new downtown park after Coffman, the most important civic leader of the 20th century, as it is the very ground, the hallowed place, where she walked and worked.

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.