

Desert dog show was fancy in Palm Springs

Formal local event was organized as early as 1931

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December 7th, 1941 — “a date which will live in infamy,” President Roosevelt would proclaim the next day — dawned bright and sunny in Palm Springs. The whole town had planned for much excitement in anticipation of the annual dog show to be held that day at the Mashie Golf Course behind the Desert Inn.

There was to be a parade and the requisite showing of different breeds of dog with trophy cups and ribbons awarded to the very best. In the days before television, such was the amusement of the day (Philo Farnsworth filed for a patent on the first complete electronic television system way back in 1927, but it wouldn't be until the 1950s that most households in America would have a television set and there would be programming and news to receive on it).

On this bright winter morning in 1941, the little village in the desert was prepared to make its own fun; and emulate big cities elsewhere. It had all the makings of the institutions required to be civilized.

The City of Palm Springs incorporated a few years earlier in 1938. A new and improved airport was envisioned — on the outskirts of town and big enough to accommodate the future. There were luxury hotels, banks, stores and even a direction connection to the New York Stock Exchange. So, a dog show seemed a part of the natural order of things.

After all, dogs were a big part of the community. Man's best friend was wholly integrated into and accommodated in the desert. At Desmond's department store, and up and down Palm Canyon Drive, there were doggie water fountains to ensure the proper hydration of pups promenading with their shopping owners. Stores catered to canines. Fashion models and fluffy companions shared the runways at poolside



Dog Show at the Mashie Golf Course on December 7th, 1941.

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A formal dog show was held as early as 1931, organized by Frank Foster Davis, sportsman and dog show enthusiast, who ran the Desert Kennel Club. In 1935, the Limelight Newspaper proclaimed that “This Sunday is a day for every dog in Palm Springs, provided his pedigree is in order and his points are in line — it's a day that brings four-hundred of the aristocracy of the dog kingdom to the desert to participate....”

Generally held during the first week or two of December, the show was regularly covered as big news by the Desert Sun. In 1939, the paper reported, “California dog fanciers are happy that they will soon again be back in the popular Desert Inn Mashie Golf course with its trees and lawn and easy accessibility to the town. This is one of the most popular locations for a dog show in the state.”

“It's easy to see why the Palm Springs show is so popular — good judges, plenty of good trophies, American Kennel Club rules and a one day open air show in the warm desert sunshine.”

In 1935 competitors included Gary Cooper's Sealyham terrier and Everett Crosby, Bing's brother's, “fine dog from their kennels.” Miss Helen Coffman offered her Welsh terrier. Austin and Pearl McManus and other prominent citizens were sure to enter. Thomas Wanamaker, Jr. exhibited Irish Wolf Hounds; Mrs. F. Nash Cartan, of Malibu, entered miniature schnauzers; Miss Sara Colman Brook from San Diego entered her Aire-dale terrier and Mr. and Mrs. Frank Andrews from Carmel walked Cairn terriers. Entrants from around the state and surrounding ones came to Palm Springs. Dogs ranged “from bumble-bee size to Great Danes the size of ponies.”

Promenading, parading and pranc-

ing doggies weren't the only attraction. There were whippet races and of course, watching the canine owners was most amusing.

Dog shows and breeding were the purview of the aristocracy. Captains of industry and commerce on the other coast were fond of such shows, competing in them just as fiercely as they did in business.

A transatlantic collie trade was spawned by banker and financier J.P. Morgan when in 1888 he set up a collie kennel called Cragston on the Hudson River in New York and began paying record sums for imported British dogs. The prices he paid translate today as sums as large as \$200,000 to \$5 million. One observer noted that such sums “not only set records ... but set the tone for frivolity and excess that makes the fancy, well, fancy.”

Samuel Untermyer, famous New York attorney, entered the fray in 1904 to compete with the robber baron, his neighbor on the Hudson. By 1930, Untermyer was on the West Coast, in Palm Springs, with his collies, and participating in the dog show parade. The desert had certainly arrived as fancy — as fancy as anywhere.

A decade later, on that sunny December morning in 1941, the crowd was thick with people and their dogs. Out of the clear blue sky, the proceedings were interrupted by John Miller who solemnly announced that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. The United States attacked, and the war was on. Some people panicked and left town. Others enlisted.

The village would soon be transformed by the ensuing war. A new expanded airport would be built, Italian prisoners-of-war would occupy the El Mirador Hotel, and other valley hotels would prosper as wealthy Americans found the desert an alternative destination for their holidays, unable to travel to Europe because of the raging war.

And news events in the next decade would be heralded by television, rather than by a friend and neighbor at a gathering of the whole town for the dog show.