

# Desert Magazine: A feat of pure courage

## Publication championed better living conditions

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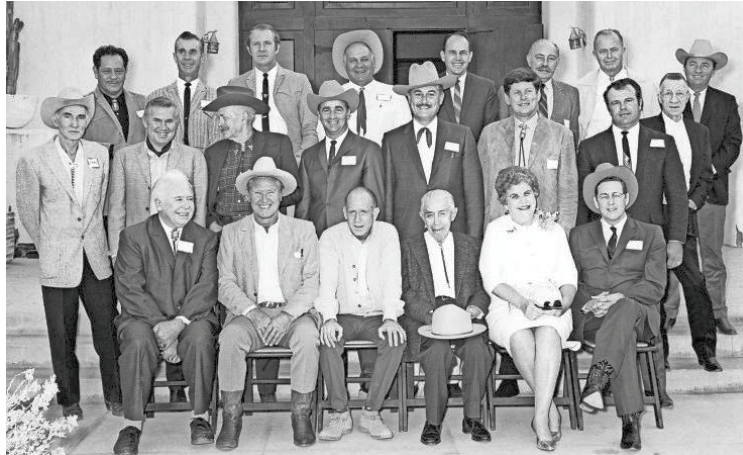
After spending more than 30 years in the newspaper publishing field in Blythe and Calexico, Randall Henderson and his friend J. Wilson McKenney started a periodical devoted to the desert in 1937.

Randall and his brother Cliff were well-acquainted with the vast deserts of Southern California and understood the desert was anything but barren and forbidding; it had allure for myriad reasons. The magazine would elucidate those charms and at the same time champion better roads, water and wildlife conservation, anti-litter campaigns, and improved appreciation and living conditions for desert communities in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and Utah.

Henderson noted that Desert Magazine "is the only journal devoted exclusively to the past history and recent welfare of the fast-growing desertland of America."

The Henderson brothers would go on to found Palm Desert, and in 1948, Randall would build the first commercial building in the town to house his publishing concern in quintessentially southwestern architecture.

Reflecting on the unlikely publication for the Los Angeles Times in 1960, Ed Ainsworth teased, "When you grab hold of a figurative cactus bare-handed and make it turn into a successfully literary venture, you are rivaling the Old Testament of Moses in striking the rock and causing water to gush forth...And that is just about what happened with the Desert Magazine which is published here in this ever-growing resort between Palm Springs and Indio...Who would have thought that you could take a cactus, so to speak, and arouse enough interest in it nationally to create a magazine with



**Gathering of western artists, including John Hilton, Olaf Weighorst, Jimmy Swinnerton and Ed Ainsworth at the Desert Magazine circa 1968.**

PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

circulation all over the East as well as in the West?"

Ainsworth described it as a feat of pure courage. Randall Henderson had been publishing the Calexico Chronicle. He was also a correspondent for The Los Angeles Times. Ainsworth visited Henderson in Calexico during his capacity as state editor for the Times.

"Out we would go in Randall's 'dune jumper,' a Model A Ford with gigantic balloon tires which could skim over the desert's roughest stretches, and, I am convinced could have scaled the walls of the Grand Canyon if put to the test...While we were hunting rock specimens, Randall would talk about his idea that the American public would 'go for' a magazine about the mysterious and romantic desert, with all its history and legend...This was right smack in the middle of the Depression...I never tried to dissuade Randall from his purpose but I surely did think he had more courage than it would have been possible for me to muster...Well, anyway, Randall made up his mind and pretty soon Des-

ert Magazine was born...The first issue set the pattern, although it was put out under modest circumstances in Calexico long before the present imposing Indian-style building with its art gallery was built here...Articles about lost mines, dreadful peaks, deep canyons, courageous prospectors, the Colorado River, pioneer women and creatures of the sand dunes began to intrigue readers from Los Angeles to New York..."

McKenney had a family to feed, and soon left the struggling operation, but Henderson was undaunted. On a visit to Utah to explore Bryce Canyon in 1940 he mused, "Even if the Desert Magazine never yields me more than the crackers and cheese necessary for a bare existence I will always like the job...Desert Magazine invariably finds welcome among that kind of people — folks who never permit the making of money or the winning of power to become an end in itself, but who prefer rather to enrich their lives with knowledge and that greatest of all human qualities — understanding. There is an unwritten bond of

friendship among such people, regardless of creed or color or position in the economic order. The biggest service the Desert Magazine can render is to foster and encourage the kind of culture these people represent."

Henderson persisted, scratching out an economic living, but contributing greatly to knowledge and understanding. He cultivated artists of all types, geologists, explorers and philosophers. Their articles were inspiring. John Hilton, desert painter contributed pieces and maps about semi-precious gem deposits sending tens of thousands of amateur rock-hunters into the desert. San Marino artist Clyde Forsythe contributed paintings of the varied landscapes for display at the offices. Carl Bray, Jimmy Swinerton, Paul Grimm and many more artists also displayed their work or it graced the covers. Intrepid editors scoured the Southwestern United States for stories of adventure. There were articles on plants and gardening. Henderson himself led his readers on all sorts of journeys, ranging from the rapids of the Colorado River to Death Valley and to the tops of Arizona mountains. Ainsworth even "tossed off a few literary masterpieces" for the cause.

Each month's issue including a short story with desert plot, sketches of interesting personalities, travelogs, maps, historical articles, homemaking in the desert, science forums including botany, geology, archeology, mineralogy, mining for the layman, hobbies, sports and poetry. There was a calendar of coming events, and a section entitled "Here and There: Current events to be reported in a concise manner."

The demand for the magazine grew. The mail produced by the operation alone resulted in Palm Desert being awarded its own post office.

Henderson sold the magazine after 21 years of operation to Charles Shelton, a newspaper publisher in Azusa and Glendora in order to take "more time for

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