

# Landscaper shaped state's image

## 'Tommy' Tomson's hacienda-style home in PS was his final project

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Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Like many people after a big career, Golden Sands "Tommy" Tomson retired to the desert, specifically Palm Desert. However unlike most, Tomson's name seemed to anticipate his arrival in the desert, and further he literally laid out the city where he chose to spend his leisure years. The idea of constructing the environment, dictating your surroundings had been practiced by Tomson for decades prior to his retirement; he was a prolific landscape designer and visionary. He conjured up the idea of leisure in Southern California with his innovations in planning the outside and cultivated world.

For his last project, Tomson chose a romantic hill overlooking the desert on which to put a hacienda of his own. He quipped, "I've retired to hard labor," as he built the house himself on a four-acre site intended to resemble a Spanish farmhouse with all the accessories that entailed: a blacksmith shop, a chapel, a "ruin" of an aqueduct, and a fountain.

Stretched out below was the newly-minted City of Palm Desert. Tomson's brother-in-law Cliff Henderson founded the city. A force of nature, charming and charismatic, Henderson was an air and auto show promoter who created and published a magazine celebrating the desert itself and referred work to his talented brother-in-law.

Tomson came to California via Texas from Ohio, working as a surveyor after having completed correspondence



**Tommy and Doris Tomson, daughters Kay and Duchess, and son-in-law Walter visit Hot Rocks, above Palm Desert in 1948.**

PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

school in civil engineering as a teenager. Upon arrival in Hollywood, like many other handsome young men, he thought he might be in the movies. He ended up creating the glamorous surroundings the people in the movie business would enjoy in their own gardens by serendipity.

His skills landed him a job with the Department of Subdivisions at age 20. Los Angeles of the 1920s was having an unprecedented building boom. His obvious talent at land planning afforded him opportunities to work with some of the most famous architects of the time like Gordon Kaufmann, Roland Coate, Wallace Neff, Paul Williams, Cliff May

and Welton Becket. These relationships evolved into mutual respect and friendships. And in many cases, resulted in Tomson designing the gardens for their homes.

He was talented and charming, handsome and stylish. That Tomson would inevitably have a clientele to match seemed natural. He invented his personae and the setting for it. Landscape historian Steven Keylon noted, "he shaped his exquisite landscape design aesthetic by reinterpreting his love of the romantic past within the context of contemporary and livable landscapes, ones that showcased his scrupulous attention to detail and provided

ample opportunities for recreation, socializing, and outdoor living."

Keylon continues that Tomson, "helped shape our image of Southern California as a relaxed, seductive, sun-soaked Eden." In the desert, prophetically named Golden Sands, "Tommy" Tomson created sparkling pools and swanky adjacent pavilions for lounging; stunning, flowering landscapes in which celebrities played.

Leisure in California is defined by the image of the swimming pool. Tomson designed some of the most luxurious resort pools of the entire southwest including the innovative figure eight-shaped pool of the Shadow Mountain Club in Palm Desert, and the piano-shaped pool for Frank Sinatra's Twin Palms house. Indeed, Tomson created one of the first kidney-shaped pools featuring a palm tree-planted island for Cliff Henderson himself, setting off the trend for mid-century houses ever after.

The idealized image of California as a land of leisure for the rich and beautiful was created in the 1930s for the movies with the help of people like Tomson. Tourists arriving at Union Station's South Patio, or the pool of the Beverly Hills hotels or walking the grounds at Santa Anita were elevated into that glamorous world of leisure by Tomson's landscapes.

Steven Keylon writes that Tomson reflected on his immensely successful career by inscribing his well-worn copy of a landscape textbook he bought back in 1922. Listing some of his accomplishments: "Santa Anita, Union Depot, Park La Brea, 1,000 others" — ending with a humorous summary: "No fame — but a good game."

That incredibly good game of Tomson's creation of the landscape of leisure will be expounded upon by Keylon, along with an exploration of the development of desert design on December 12th at 6 p.m. at the Palm Springs Cultural Center. Tickets available at pshistoricalsociety.org.