

'DIFFERENT AND USEFUL'

Frank and Melba Bennetts' contributions to life in Palm Springs

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Boston scientist and rubber expert Henry Pearson bought a large desert ranch 2 1/2 miles outside of Palm Springs in the mid-1920s and dug a well. He struck water at a mere 100 feet but decided to drill further, hoping for oil. At 630 feet he gave up, awash in water. The spot was ever after appropriately known as Deep Well Ranch.

By 1928 Pearson also gave up on ranching in the desert and sold his place to Charlie Doyle, a notoriously cantankerous cowboy and a neighbor just down the way at Smoke Tree Ranch.

Doyle's was the first attempt at dude ranching on the property. But he was wholly unsuited for the hospitality business. In a desperate effort to keep at least one property and himself afloat, Doyle sold Deep Well Ranch after only one year to the Major Everett family from San Francisco. Everett's untimely death then caused his family to sell to a most interesting and uniquely vivacious couple in 1930; and the sale would change Palm Springs itself.

Nine years earlier in 1921, the San Francisco Chronicle printed a bit of juicy gossip under the headline: "Stanford Girl Elopes in Auto and Weds Here; Two Students Get License at Night and Marry After Motor Flight." The story was noteworthy as the Stanford girl in question was Melba Berry, heiress to a vast gold and oil fortune originally mined on the Klondike and then wildly expanded in California oil fields.

The groom, Frank Bennett, was less well-known but had been an extremely popular and charmingly outgoing Stanford student who had distinguished himself in WWI earning the Croix de Guerre from the French government for bravery. Such an elopement was scandalous for the time warranting the newspaper coverage.

The couple braved the disapproval of her family, having children of their own, and several different fits and starts at business endeavors before settling down in Beverly Hills on his comfortable income working for Edward Doheny, the unimaginably wealthy oil man in Los Angeles.

In Beverly Hills, leading a life of comfort befitting an heiress, Melba Berry Bennett decided she was bored. Further, Melba and Frank thought they hadn't really lived up to their college aspirations of helping others and making a meaningful contribution to society.

After an evening of dining, conversation and bridge like many others the young couple had enjoyed, Frank asked his bride, "Well, dear, was your dinner party a success?" Melba considered his words carefully before responding. "I suppose we see too much of the same people, and since we have nothing stimulating to offer each other mentally, we try to outdo each other in what we offer to eat. Silly, isn't it?"

Frank mused, "I wonder what happened to that resolution we made when we were in college that our lives were going to be different and useful." Melba and Frank at that moment decided to climb out of the pedestrian and comfortably mundane rut in which they found themselves.

Casting about for some sort of shared work and a wholesome place to raise their children, with "no false notions about position or money," they alighted on Palm Springs. Frank gave up his lucrative position in Los Angeles, and with the help of Palm Springs friends Phil and Dorothy Boyd, Frank and Melba Bennett purchased Deep Well Ranch, setting out to be useful to others.

In her new book, "Party of Three" Betsy Lumby chronicles the delightful couple and their protean good works benefiting their adopted desert community. Lumby recounts what she can only describe as a love story between Frank, Melba and the desert.

Over the ensuing four decades, the Bennetts transformed Palm Springs and proved exceedingly useful.

They began with Deep Well Ranch. Building new infrastructure and refurbishing guest accommodations, they opened on New Year's Eve. Other hotels kindly sent overflow guests and instead of the anticipated dozen people, they were full-up to capacity with 50 patrons.

They had an elaborate menu planned. Melba recalled years later, "Guests who expected 'plain' ranch fare were due for a pleasant surprise."

Lumby tells the story of that first night, "Then, on the big night, all hell broke loose. It started with backed up



Frank and Melba Bennett pose together in the 1950s. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Deep Well Ranch in 1925 consisted of a few buildings and the eponymous well.



The Deep Well Guest Ranch dining room is seen in 1928. Wealthy socialites and cowboys ate together at long tables.

plumbing and a flood...in one of the guest cottages. Then came another flood call from the (one) about two hundred yards way. Next a 'breathless maid' reported a deluge in (another). The old pipes, it turned out, couldn't handle the workload of a fully booked resort, with all the guests preparing for dinner at the same time."

The lone plumber in the village was out celebrating the new year, and by the

time he was located and arrived to help, Frank and his own staff, working all night, had trenched up pipes all around the ranch, ruining the newly-installed landscaping in the process.

Having been a hero on the actual battlefield, Frank was undaunted and set about his work with alacrity. He was handy with a shovel and a wrench and an easy smile.

The plumbing fiasco was the first of

many challenges the couple faced with good humor and aplomb.

Melba wrote in her diary about Frank's penchant for looking at the bright side of life despite any discouragement. "Sometimes I felt that Fate had nothing else to do except watch for a look of complacency on our faces so she could dip into her bag of tricks and come up with a real heler (sic) to snap us to attention." Such was life in the hotel business. But for the Bennetts, "there was a song to meet every emergency."

Deep Well Guest Ranch would go on to fabled success, hosting celebrities, captains of industry, socialites and honorees, and enduring the Great Depression. Melba became a serious writer, founded the Palm Springs Historical Society and the Palm Springs Garden Club. Frank would re-enlist and serve his country yet again in active duty during the second World War. Through the 1960s they would host marquee charity and civic events. In every endeavor, contributing greatly and proving to be most useful indeed.

The fascinating story of the Bennetts deserves telling in its entirety, requiring a whole book. It has been ably compiled by Lumby, who will visit Palm Springs on Jan. 30 at 2 p.m. at the McCallum Adobe to sign her book. The event is free and further information is available at pshistoricalociety.org.