

Marx Brothers' impact on Palm Springs lives on

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

"Walking on the Moon Needs Groucho's Pace" read a headline in early summer of 1969 in *The Desert Sun*. The funny headline presumably made sense.

Groucho Marx had been world famous for decades and his silly walk was iconic. The article continued, "A British scientist believes that when men reach the moon they might do well to walk like comedian Groucho Marx, or learn to jump like kangaroos...Groucho lopes along with his knees bent and his body inclines forward." The theory would be tested a few months later when Apollo 11 did touch down on the moon.

That the Marx Brothers were a touchstone for incredibly wide-ranging topics was almost as amusing as their antics and clever lines. In the desert, references continue to pop up everywhere.

Groucho was known for his aphorisms and clever quips, most famously saying he didn't want to be a member of a club that would have him as a member. Ironically, he belonged to lots of clubs and interestingly, he was a founding member of Tamarisk Country Club.

Other founding members included fellow comedians Danny Kaye, Jack Benny, George Burns, and Groucho's brothers Harpo, Zeppo, and Gummo. Groucho and his brothers were fixtures in the desert by the 1940s and 50s. Brothers Gummo, Zeppo and Harpo all built homes on the Tamarisk course or nearby. They enjoyed golfing, playing cards and riding bikes, and the peace and quiet of the desert. They each stayed at the old Wonder Palms Hotel on a road of the same name that has since been changed to Frank Sinatra Drive.

Groucho later had a home in the gorgeously designed Tamarisk Ranchos, set in a date grove, among 15 other homes surrounding a swimming pool, designed by Palmer and Krisel.

According to Melissa Riche, author



Groucho Marx, sans his usual moustache, eyebrows and glasses, with Hary Cohn, President of Columbia Pictures at the El Mirador Hotel 1931.

PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

and historian, the Tamarisk Rancho "homes were built with redwood post-and-beam, using three different roof styles: butterfly, long gable and flat or horizontal gable. It became the first of several communities to be built near Tamarisk Country Club..." There, "Groucho surrounded himself with family and friends. Gummo's home...was on the golf course just across the road from Tamarisk Ranchos. Zeppo also had a home on the golf course, while Harpo chose Wallace Neff to build him a modernist style home nearby." The house was named "El Rancho Harpo."

Frank Sinatra was a friend and fellow member at Tamarisk, who is reported to have joked that the only thing he did better than Groucho was sing. And of

course, Frank Sinatra would eventually marry Barbara Marx, Zeppo's ex-wife, whom he originally met while hanging out with the brothers. And Sinatra would eventually purchase Groucho's house from his third wife, Eden, for Barbara.

The Marx wives were plenty busy in the desert. Barbara Marx (later Sinatra) was ubiquitous in her philanthropy, serving as entertainment chairman of Jane Russell's WAIF ball in 1961, and later having her own charity to benefit children.

Susan Marx, wife of Harpo, had been a Ziegfeld girl, and was brought to Hollywood to play opposite John Wayne and W.C. Fields. She met Harpo at a dinner party at the home of Samuel Goldwyn.

She was captivated by the comedian and gleefully gave up her career to be with him. Harpo and Susan relocated to the desert in 1949 and never looked back. Susan was elected to the Palm Springs Unified Board of Education and served for 18 years. She was active in the League of Women Voters and the Mountain Protective League, trying to halt hillside development in the valley. She was an advisory planning commission for Rancho Mirage. And she was a moving force behind the Police Show for many years.

The Police Show started in 1950 and all of the Marx Brothers regularly participated. It was seriously star-studded, having starred Eddie Cantor, Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra, Dinah Shore, Jayne Mansfield, Jane Wyman, Gordon MacRae, Dick Haymes and many more. Les Brown and his band of renown played in 1951. It was such a gathering of the glitterati that in 1957 Walter Winchell flew out from New York to emcee.

Harpo was silent on screen but spoke at his last public appearance giving a testimonial at the Palm Springs Riviera Hotel for then Palm Springs Police Chief August G. Kettmann.

Rancho Mirage resident Bill Marx is known both for being the eldest son of Harpo and Susan Marx, and for his own talent as a Juilliard-trained composer and jazz performer. He carries on the good deeds of his parents and is an integral part of the community.

The *Desert Sun* printed a little article in the 1950s that remarked great movie partnerships didn't really last long. "Some partners broke up because they simply wearied of reworking the same vehicle.

The Marx Brothers were such a case. When they split in 1949, Groucho said, "We're sick of the movies, and the people are about to get sick of us. Our stuff is growing stale, and so are we. Anyway, we can all make more money if we go our own ways."

Fortunately, those ways led the Marx Brothers and their families to the desert.