

# Writer saw Palm Springs in a different light

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USA TODAY NETWORK

In a bid to bring tourists to Palm Springs, it began marketing itself as “America’s Foremost Desert Resort” by the 1920s. In actuality, there weren’t too many other desert destinations of any note anyway.

But the idea of a supremely stylish desert resort was touted, and much reinforced by the presence of glamorous movie stars, captains of industry and elite easterners who had discovered the little village and were visiting here in droves.

One such blue blood visitor to the desert was Cleveland Amory. Amory was an upper crust Bostonian who would become a notable writer, a founder of the animal rights movement, and a host on the Today Show. As a teenager, he had been interested in journalism. He was president of the Harvard Crimson during his tenure there, but journalism was not considered a suitable profession for young men from substantial families in the 1930s.

After graduating from Harvard he became the youngest editor ever hired by The Saturday Evening Post. He served in the army and military intelligence in World War II and came home and began writing books and magazine articles, gently poking fun at pretentious society. His wry observations about the mores of the upper class were wildly popular as he clearly knew what he was talking about having come from the top echelon. His 1952 book, “The Last Resorts,” cleverly puns about most loved recreation sites of the very wealthy — including Palm Springs.

The idea for the book may have come from extended articles he had written in the 1940s for Harper’s Magazine about many tony resorts, including one about Palm Springs in 1948 entitled, “Palm Springs: Wind, Sand and Stars.” The article begins with a clever little ditty,

“Oh, give me a home, Where the millionaires roam,  
And the dear little glamor girls play—Where seldom is heard,  
An intelligent word, And we round up the dollars all day.”

His research about the town was extensive. His assessment is replete with specifics. He begins, “The inhabitants of this gaudy region live for the most part in glorified bungalow courts, dress in bejeweled dark glasses and as little else as the law allows, and give their address as Palm Springs, California. They are a kindly, civilized people. They grow grapefruit so sweet you do not need sugar on it, and they grow lawns without topsoil, from seeding to cutting, in seven days. But just how their habitat became America’s most fashionable desert resort—it is not only the Palm Beach of the



**This is the east entrance and luncheon patio at the Desert Inn.**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

West but also the admitted mecca of the Hollywood mink shift—has puzzled many observers. It would seem to have taken miracles.”

His clever writing goes on to elucidate how that happened and he sketches written portraits of the locals along the way. He continues, “Roughly speaking it did. Among other things it took such widely different personalities as the late Marilyn Miller and Albert Einstein, such widely different events as a New York City political scandal and the suicide of an Australian tobacco millionaire, and such powerful influences as the sun-tan craze and the emergence of a new American Society. It is, of course, an artificial place. But Palm Springs is perhaps the most honestly artificial of all major resorts.”

He goes on to recount the Cahuilla history, the founding of the Desert Inn by Nellie Coffman, the advent of the “flossier” El Mirador Hotel. He notes, “From the Mirador pool, which was the first swimming pool in the country to have a trough dug underneath and a plate glass window installed for underwater breast-and-leg photography, pictures of stars and starlets emanated to the four corners of America. The bare midriff dress reputedly originated from beside the Mirador pool, and the most famous single picture was a so-called ‘Beauty and the Beast’ shot of the late Marilyn Miller, the Sunshine Girl, tanning herself beside shorts-clad Jimmy Durante.”

He details the arrival en masse of movie stars and their subsequent house-buying and -building. And quotes the ingenuous slogan developed by Frank Bogert and Tony Burke that Palm Springs was the place where “the sun shines on the stars.”

Amory researched and reviewed the Racquet Club and the Tennis Club, Smoke Tree and Deep Well ranch-



**The El Mirador Hotel pool and grounds have a spectacular mountain view. Cleveland Amory called it “flossier” than the Desert Inn.**

es, and the building of Thunderbird Country Club. He jokes about the illegal gambling at the Dunes, describes the lavish home of Jacqueline Cochran, ridicules the offerings at the bookstore, and discusses the advent of Palm Desert. He gossips about various movie stars, and lays out the ambitious plans for the multimillion-dollar project of the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway. He even discusses La Quinta and pokes fun at a roadside sign declaring firmly: “We are going to have a library and an art museum.”

Amory is amused and seemingly approves when he quotes Priscilla Chaffey, the editor of The Limelight News, as saying frankly, “the climate here is sexy,” as she recalled querying Alvah Hicks, prominent businessman in town, about what might be the latest scandal. Hicks replied, “There isn’t any. We’re too broad-minded for scandal.”

Amory heard the little song he quoted in the opening of his article sung by minstrel Johnny Boyle in the lobby of the Desert Inn. He noted that the Desert Inn was the most conservative spot in an easy-going town. Among many things he detailed about the inn, he quotes the favorite motto of the inn’s manager, Earl Coffman, saying it “might well serve as the motto for all of Palm Springs. ‘Early to bed and early to rise and you meet few prominent people.’ ”

That last line might more properly read: “And you meet quite a few prominent people.” Cleveland Amory would know.