

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Palm Desert's storied origins now collected

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Luke Leuschner is headed to UC Berkeley to study architecture, really architectural history, straight from the Historical Society of Palm Desert where he has been expertly sleuthing the history of the town for years.

Palm Desert has an interesting and unusual history. The domain of Cahuilla Indian farmers of the now extinct San Cayetano tribe and a few members of the Montoya family, early maps labeled the area as a sandy spot in the sandy expanse between Palm Springs and Indio.

In the 1920s, date palms were planted and cultivated, and Palm Village was on the map. There were scattered homes on even further flung lots during the Depression. In 1943 General Patton was on the desert to prepare for the fight in North Africa establishing a maintenance camp and motor pool on Portola Avenue in the middle of what would become the upscale shopping district of El Paseo.

Palm Desert was developed by Cliff Henderson and his brothers Randall, Phil and Carl, along with their brother-in-law, famed landscape architect Tommy Tomson, and their investors among whom were industrialist Leonard Firestone, movie-star Harold Lloyd and radio personality Edgar Bergen.

Acquiring 1,600 acres, the Hendersons began with the construction of the Shadow Mountain Club, surrounding home lots and a publishing concern that would lionize the desert itself with a magazine that changed its very perception by cultivating interest in all aspects of the Southwest.

Cliff Henderson was a seriously big thinker. He built the Pasadena Winter Garden, organized the National Air Races and developed the Pan-Pacific Auditorium in Los Angeles. His vision for the desert was as expansive and he pursued it doggedly.

Phil worked side by side with Cliff and suggested the name for the newly



A 1947 billboard for the new development near the intersection of Portola Avenue and Highway 111. COURTESY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT

minted town.

Their brother, Randall conceived of "Desert Magazine" where he served as editor and expert on the desert environment and its surrounding mountains. The magazine had wide distribution and was an encyclopedic offering of all things desert: art, geography, history, and culture.

Randall would donate land for the first library. Carl managed Cliff's real estate concerns in Brentwood, while Cliff served as a pilot in WWII and was lured to the desert to market acres of sand with the advent of the family adventure.

Cliff would go on to donate land for the first church, school, and fire station, transforming the open desert into a real community.

It was their brother-in-law, Tommy Tomson, who would give Palm Desert its gorgeous aesthetic appeal, laying out the streets south of Highway 111 and designing the huge figure-eight-shaped swimming pool of the Shadow Mountain Club.

The Shadow Mountain opened in 1948, attracting families from around the country who were accustomed to the finest of country clubs and they

were not disappointed.

Leonard Firestone was the eponymous director of the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company and invested heavily in many facets of Cliff Henderson's desert projects, becoming one of the pioneers of the new town.

The amalgamation of their names produced the Firecliff Lodge, an attractive hotel designed by Walter S. White. (Historical Society of Palm Desert board member Merilee Colton wrote about White for The Desert Sun in 2016, lamenting the dilapidated state of one of his most iconic houses, the Miles Bates house. It has since been gloriously restored and was featured during Modernism Week.)

Luke Leuschner got interested in Walter White and his designs in Palm Desert when researcher Volker Welter from UC Santa Barbara was working on the definitive book and exhibition of White's work. Luke helped with the exhibit and quickly became fascinated by the various neighborhoods comprising the city, which incorporated in 1973.

Luke and his friend, Susie O'Hair worked tirelessly producing "Becoming Palm Desert" the definitive survey on

the subject.

Their interests evolved from the Henderson brothers, to other developers and architects like William White, and on to William Cody and Ric Harrison, whom they discovered designed scores of buildings in Palm Desert.

They found the Cody-designed Carl Henderson office thought long since demolished, scads of Ric Harrison-designed homes in the Silver Spur neighborhood, and the model homes for many other swanky developments.

And of course, their studies involved the vast holdings at the Historical Society of Palm Desert.

The collection is housed in the city's first firehouse, an historic building. It contains the voluminous papers, communications, and development plans of Cliff Henderson. Augmented by even more donations of memorabilia and ephemera, the collection is immense.

At the December 2019 meeting of the Society, Luke met Rochelle McCune, a retired archivist for Gap, Inc., who had recently relocated to the desert from San Francisco after 20 years of vacationing here.

Rochelle breezed into the Historical Society looking to do research on her new home. The timing was auspicious, and she began applying her decades of experience to the collection under the tutelage of the board. She and Luke have become fast friends together embarking upon a staggeringly ambitious program of digitizing the collection.

They have since scanned architectural renderings, rare blueprints, thousands of building permit cards, and fascinating vintage photographs.

To learn more about their project, peek at the Historical Society of Palm Desert website, hspd.org or email hspd.firehouse@gmail.com.

Many people retire to the desert after successful careers elsewhere. Luke is headed the other direction, off to college, after having already created a fine career already contributing to the preservation of the history of Palm Desert.