

# The origins of Palm Springs' Desert Hospital

## Facility served village with 14 people in 1934

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In December 1934, Nellie N. Coffman reflected on her 25th year of owning and operating The Desert Inn. She had arrived a quarter of a century earlier with her physician husband to start an health sanatorium which quickly became the finest hotel accommodation on the desert.

"I have watched the growth of the little village from fourteen people (exclusive of our Indian neighbors) to its present size with a great deal of interest; worried over its 'growing pains' and rejoiced over its achievements. I have seen the first desert highway in the State of California built through here, celebrated the coming in of domestic water, telephone, electricity and gas. It was here my boys left and returned from the Great War. I have seen the development of the bicycle craze; the development or rather the underdevelopment of the 'short' and now the Jinrikisha."

Her first guests arrived to find a hospital shelter in a little frame shack with awning flap windows and a hostess who knew how to cook three excellent meals a day and keep her guests entertained in a Palm Springs which indeed numbered 14 inhabitants, as she noted, "exclusive of the Indian neighbors."

The accoutrement of civilization followed her establishment on the desert, with none being more important than medical facilities. No institution, besides the library, was held in the same esteem as a hospital was, in those first years.

By 1940, a second Great War was raging in Europe, and in Palm Springs, the need for a public hospital, and year-round medical care was dominating civic debate. The city was just two years old, having been incorporated in 1938.

The town boasted several physicians. Dr. Henry S. Reid started a clinic and solarium and then expanded to build private hospital. He had taken care of many emergencies and charity cases and worked tirelessly to bring proper medical care to the desert.

In public meetings he said he was glad to see an interest in medical and hospital problems but stated that the people of the community must be willing to "dig down in their pockets and pay and pay" if they plan to build and maintain a public hospital.

The question was not as much about raising the capital to build a hospital, but the funds to continue to operate it, especially through the summers.

The foremost citizen of the village then spoke. "Thomas A O'Donnell talked at length on the subject. He was of the opinion that a doctor on duty here all summer is even more important than getting a community hospital. He pointed out there already is an emergency hospital here during the season (the Reid Hospital) but here isn't even a doctor here in the summer for emergen-



Desert Hospital was for many years the tallest building in town. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Dr. and Mrs. Reid surrounded by their family in 1969. He created the first hospital in Palm Springs. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

cies."

"Mr. O'Donnell declared Palm Springs must not go through another summer without the services of a medical doctor. He stated he would subscribe to a fund to pay the salary of a summer doctor for the village."

"Mr. O'Donnell stated there's a lot of loose talk about the great need for a public hospital here. He pointed out that he loaned \$57,000 to Dr. Henry S. Reid so he could build a hospital for emergencies. Dr. Reid's Hospital has answered the purpose up to now; he has never turned out a case, asserted Mr. O'Donnell."

Tom O'Donnell had earned his right to speak. He loaned Nellie Coffman the extravagant sum of \$350,000 in 1925 for the conversion of The Desert Inn from clapboard and tent houses to proper Spanish-Mediterranean buildings. He donated the first \$10,000 to build the Welwood Murray Library, and now he offered to donate \$25,000 toward the

\$100,000 required to build a public hospital. He pledged to help raise the remaining \$75,000, as would Nellie.

He wanted the hospital to be operated by some government agency, either the county or the city. And if possible, "he said he would like it to be an open hospital where any doctor licensed by the state of California can treat his patients."

The newspaper chronicled the gratitude of the town, editorializing, "A commendable example of 'flowers to the living' was the presentation of a testimonial scroll to Palm Springs' beloved benefactor Thomas A. O'Donnell...organized for the specific purpose of honoring this philanthropist.

Usually we wait too long before we acknowledge the good that has been done. Palm Springs owes a debt to Tom O'Donnell it can never pay in dollars, nor would he accept it. He has been giving and giving with no thought of recompense, but only to help the town he loves, and to give health and pleasure to others."

Less than a year after this discussion, the United States entered World War II and the federal government purchased the El Mirador Hotel, turning it into Torney General Hospital which served the nation and the little town until after the war.

A prodigious effort and extensive debate followed regarding whether to build a new facility or purchase Torney General Hospital from the federal government. The machinations are too much to recount here.

Having been approved by voters in 1948, the Desert Healthcare District was created to serve a 457-square-mile section of the western Coachella Valley and

had taxing authority. Tom O'Donnell's wish to have a governmental agency in charge was realized. The hospital built by the district was a single building located on almost 8 acres adjacent to the El Mirador grounds. The project cost some \$500,000, not the originally projected \$100,000; \$450,000 for the building and \$50,000 for the land.

Dedicated in December of 1951, "Desert Hospital represents an important milestone in the development of Palm Springs and is tangible evidence of civic effort and cooperation on the part of the citizens of this community. The handsome, modern building with accommodations for 38 patients, ranks among the state's finest small hospitals. It was designed by local architects Clark and Frey and Williams, Williams and Williams.

In equipment and architecture it represents the best that money, combined with knowledge and imagination can produce."

The hospital would undergo numerous additions and expansions, championed by many others. The low-slung original building would soon be dwarfed by a modern tower. But the first building and that initial effort was crucial.

"The new Desert Hospital not only represents the best in scientific design for the treatment of patients, is a building of charm. It has a quality of graciousness and pleasing warmth, extremely rare in an institution devoted to public service."

More than 500 people attended the 1951 dedication. Neither Nellie Coffman nor Tom O'Donnell lived to see it but both had been instrumental in imagining the finest hospital facility for the desert they deeply loved.