

# Thanks for the memories

## Palm Springs architecture imported by rich

Wealthy desert patrons wanted piece of paradise

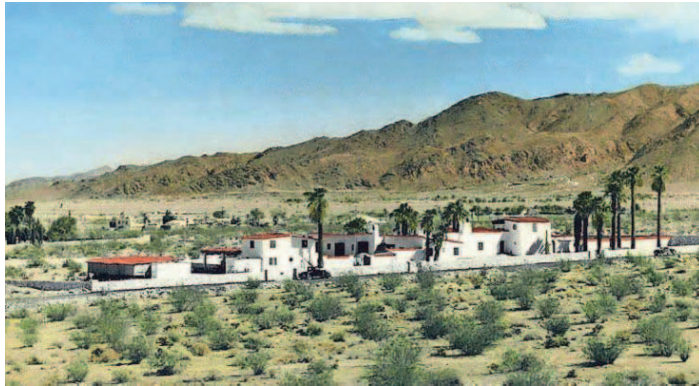
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Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Early in the 20th century, important people visited the desert and then wanted their own piece of paradise. The resulting architecturally significant homes and thoughtful gardens represented the most desirable styles of the era. A respite at the Desert Inn was frequently the starting point. Hotel guests were entranced with the vivid colors and unusual plants they found here. The weather was uncommonly beautiful during the winter months. Many extremely wealthy guests enjoyed innkeeper Nellie Coffman's fine hospitality and decided to bring their equally prominent architects, from wherever they called home, to design their desert digs.

Perhaps the first and most significant was Thomas O'Donnell, who loaned Coffman \$350,000, an huge fortune then, to rebuild and expand her establishment in the popular Spanish-Mediterranean style.

In exchange, she was to build him a house in the same style on the mountain behind the Desert Inn. Published in House Beautiful Magazine in 1928, the home was called Ojo Del Desierto, or Eye on the Desert, as it offered vistas of the empty desert that stretched for miles below.

Soon, other prominent personages followed suit. William Mead, a Los Angeles banker and two-time state legislator, commissioned a house by Architect William J. Dodd, the designer (with Julie Morgan) for William Randolph Hearst's Examiner building in Los Angeles, set against the mountain at the terminus of Spring Street, now Tahquitz Way. Mead's good friend Roland Bishop, one of the largest manufacturers of crackers and cookies in the country, used the same blueprints for his house



**The Arthur K. Bourne Residence, 1933, was designed by Wallace Neff. Bourne was the heir to the Singer Sewing Machine fortune.** PHOTOS BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN



**The John Burnham Estate is shown in what is now the Tennis Club Neighborhood, in the 1930s.**



**The Deep Well Ranch pool is shown in the 1930s.**

right next door.

King Camp Gillette of safety-razor fame, who likewise frequented the Desert Inn, bought acreage in the foothills south of Palm Springs in what is now called the Mesa. By 1926, he had already commissioned renowned California architect Wallace Neff to build an estate in the early California Spanish-style in Los Angeles County's Santa Monica Mountains. Neff subsequently designed Gillette's Palm Springs house with a guesthouse, in the same style, but the vast es-

tate and garden was later subdivided and the buildings greatly altered.

In the 1930s, Fred and Mazie Belle Markham would sojourn regularly to the Desert Inn from Pasadena for the healthful benefits to their young asthmatic son, Charlie. Mazie Belle fell in love with the desert. After many subsequent visits "out of town" at Smoke Tree Ranch, the Markhams bought the entirety of the ranch and proceeded to expand it and sell home lots to their friends. Early homes were constructed

under the architectural supervision of Marsten and Van Pelt from Pasadena; and then for the following fifty years Albert Frey served as ranch architect.

Nearby, Frank and Melba Bennett similarly developed Deep Well Ranch. Featuring a main dining room with hand-hewn beams and an expansive swimming pool, set in the center of a vast lawn, Deep Well boasted cabins scattered about immense grounds for its guests. The Bennetts meanwhile resided in a two-story Monterrey Adobe in Las Palmas.

George Newhall, a wealthy San Francisco landowner, built a Spanish home adjacent to Ruth Hardy Park that was a tour de force in tile. The midnight blue bathroom is still talked about today. The house was featured in California Arts and Architecture magazine in 1931. Subsequently owned by Mr. and Mrs. S.L. De Graff of Tonawanda, New York, it survives today unsubdivided.

John Burnham, an architect from Chicago who is often understandably confused with the John Burnham, the son of Daniel Burnham, the great architect of the Columbian Exposition of 1893, built a house and artist colony near pioneer Pearl McManus' pink palace in what is now the Tennis Club neighborhood. The Burnham house tucked into the hillside and featured a great terrace and grand windows, and below, hugging the mountain, there were small apartments and studios for artists. After extensive remodeling and restoration of the gardens, it is known today as Colony 29. Most importantly, Nicolai Fechin, the Russian painter of western scenes, lived and worked there.

By the 1940s, there were so many showplace homes that the Palm Springs Villager, the forerunner to Palm Springs Life, featured a monthly article with pictures of private homes aptly titled, "It's Lovely Here!" Each month locals would be treated to a peek inside one of the desert's fabulous estates. Decades later, such pictorials of fabulous desert homes remain a pleasure.