

# How Palm Springs High School got its start

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*Where the mighty mountains rise  
To the reddening western skies,  
Where the desert sands gleam white  
In the jeweled starlight  
Round the campfire flames, we sing  
To Palm Springs High*

The Palm Springs High School alma mater isn't sung around a campfire much these days. Campfire or not though, thousands of students have graduated from the high school since its humble beginnings.

Elementary education was made a requirement in 1918 by all states in the union. So, a century ago just going to school was a privilege; and going to high school was even more rare. In many areas, children were not accorded a high school education until the middle of the 20th century. Early on, the desert community, though far away from big cities and civilization, worked hard to provide a high school education for its children.

The framers of California's first Constitution in 1849 set the standards for the state's role in education. It was Miss Katherine Finchy who set the pattern and manner of education in the Coachella Valley. Arriving in Palm Springs on a "sweltering September day in 1922" the young schoolteacher, recently graduated from Occidental College, pulled into the Whitewater train station ready to tackle her first teaching assignment.

In her memoir, "A School on the Desert in the Roaring Twenties," Finchy recalled shielding her eyes from the blowing sand as she was driven across the desert in a buckboard wagon by Marcus Pete, a local Cahuilla. She was taken directly to the schoolhouse and greeted by Miss Willie, the other teacher at the school. The two women shared a home that was located on the school grounds, referred to as the "teacherage."

Many people in the community came out to welcome the new teacher to town and gathered on Main Street (now Palm



Postcard shows Palm Springs High School c.1950s.

PHOTOS BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN



First school in Palm Springs is located at the intersection of Andreas and Indian Canyon.

Canyon Drive) for a celebration. At the same time, cameras were set up to film Tom Mix galloping down the street for a western movie. The crowd was more interested in continuing down Main

new school, the 1926 bond issue raised an impressive \$33,000.

Curriculum included English grammar, Spanish, algebra, general science, U.S. History and physical education, including activities that only the desert could provide like riding the burros that roamed around the sagebrush and cactus patch across the street from the school. Lunchtime rodeos and bareback riding contests provided ample exercise as well as amusement for the children.

As there was nothing in the valley, high school students were transported all the way to Banning. The 25-mile journey made their school day long and the weather sometimes made the trip impossible. This practice continued until 1938 when Palm Springs High School was constructed thanks to the original bond measure. The \$33,000 amount was insufficient and donations were then made by several citizens to complete the building.

A long rectangular, graceful Spanish building offered a shaded colonnade along its southern exposure to shelter students from the afternoon sun when moving from classroom to classroom.

Increasing enrollment and a growing town, prompted further expansion of the campus under the design direction of Williams, Williams, and Williams. Exquisite, modern buildings were sited adjacent to the Spanish colonnade that paralleled Ramon Road. The mix of Spanish and modern buildings reflected the aesthetic of the wider town, with fine architecture in all styles becoming common as wealthy visitors summoned their famous hometown architects to the desert to design their homes and businesses.

The community quickly outgrew having a single high school, and every city in the valley would eventually have its own. Serving thousands of kids in scores of disciplines, schools are now taken for granted, no longer only a privilege for the wealthy. And each spring, students graduate from high school in the desert.

Street and into the dance hall at Mutascios's for Miss Finchy's welcome party, than in watching the filming.

The first school in the village of Palm Springs was located at East and Lemon streets, now Indian Canyon Drive and Amado Road. The students were divided into two groups with the primary grades in one classroom with Miss Willie, and the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grades in the other classroom with Miss Finchy.

As the population grew, the Palm Springs Desert School was built with donated land and funds from P.T. and Frances Stevens, the developer of the El Mirador Hotel and his wife. Soon after it was completed in 1927, Frances Stevens died and the school was renamed in her memory.

Enrollment continued to grow and the forward-thinking little town passed a bond issue. Optimistically envisioning more classrooms, a library, a large auditorium, indoor plumbing, a cafeteria and an apartment in the main building for Miss Finchy, now the principal of the