

Desert Circus a much-beloved local event

Tradition began in 1934 and grew into a weeklong celebration and festival

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Many local residents of the City of Palm Springs lament the end of the long-standing community tradition known as Desert Circus Week.

The tradition began in 1934 in the depth of the Depression and ended in 1986 due to a lack of community support. The express purpose of the celebration in the beginning was to bring amusement to residents and raise funds for a building project at Our Lady of Solitude Catholic Church.

The idea came from Thelma Wertheimer, wife of the owner of the Dunes, a casino that was located in Cathedral City, and the Colonial House, which is still in operation as the Colony Palms Hotel today. As the story goes her husband, Al Wertheimer was trying to gain favor with certain matriarchal power-houses who were adamantly opposed to any type of gambling being permitted within the city limits of Palm Springs.

A small group of local residents organized a parade and some children's games that would be played on horseback at Cody Field located on the northeast corner of Ramon Road at Sunrise Way. In the very beginning it was a day-long event without a name but by 1936 it was christened the Desert Circus.

Year after year the number of events grew and so did the number of days that Desert Circus ran. It became a weeklong celebration that grew to include not only a parade but luncheons, fashion shows, rodeos, gymkhanas, steeplechases, live stage performances, circus acts, dances and even a "Kangaroo Court."

Local business owners as well other residents were arrested by a group of female sheriff's deputies for not wearing western attire or for not having a Desert Circus badge that was basically a



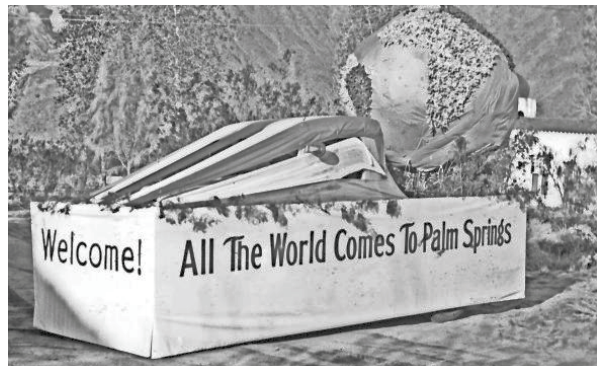
Attendees enjoy a Desert Circus costume party circa 1975.

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get-out-of-jail- free card. Those individuals who were caught and cited for not complying with the dress code were confined in the stocks (usually located in a place where liquor was served) and held at the court's pleasure until a suitable fine had been paid. The proceeds from the Kangaroo Court, as well as all of the events held during Desert Circus Week, were donated to local charities.

Beginning in 1958, the Desert Circus planned to honor each one of the 48 states during the celebration. If this plan would have been carried out it

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Desert Circus Lykken's Store float, with the phrase "All the World comes to Palm Springs" written on the side, is seen circa 1936.

Circus

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would have been completed in 2008, allowing for the admission of Hawaii and Alaska as states in 1959.

Texas was the first state honored. Palm Springs residents Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn collaborated with El Mirador Hotel owner Ray Ryan and composed the song "1200 Miles from Palm Springs to Texas" specifically for the event. Dean Martin sang the song for the first time at the gala ball held at El Mirador Hotel.

Throughout the '50s and '60s Desert Circus Week grew in stature. Some celebrities who served as either the Grand Marshall or as the Queen of the parade included: Bob Hope, Shirley Temple, Clark Gable, Alice Fay, Randolph Scott, Janet Leigh, Jayne Mansfield, Debbie Reynolds, Gene Autry and Lucille Ball, just to mention a few. All of the celebrities chosen for the honor donned western regalia and joined with local residents to celebrate Palm Springs's western heritage.

The 1963, Desert Circus Week gave a nod not only to the past but to the future as well. The theme of the parade was the opening of the \$7.7 million Palm Springs Aerial Tramway. Of course there was a big parade and California's governor, Edmund Brown, led the way. The Desert Circus Queen was Lucille Ball and Gene Autry was the Grand Marshall, with Troy Donahue acting as the High Sheriff for the events to follow. The Golden Tramway Ball was the gala event that included dining and dancing at El Mirador Hotel.



Walt Disney rides with local kids in a Disneyland stagecoach at a Desert Circus parade circa 1955.

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As the '60s made way for the '70s, interest in the Desert Circus continued to be strong but eventually the community support waned and the much-loved event that had been a Palm Springs' tradition for 52 years was laid to rest in 1986.