

# THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

## History: Councilwoman led ward vs. at-large vote

Tracy Conrad Special to The Desert Sun

Some generously called her a maverick. Others thought she was just a scofflaw. Still others would eventually find her plain objectionable. But Mary Carlin was elected to the City Council in Palm Springs in 1958, unseating Jerry Sanborn, the then mayor. Described as a 29-year-old "pretty housewife" she won over voters in Ward 4 where she and her husband owned an hotel by championing road-paving at that northern end of the city, and complaining that the south end unfairly received all the improvements and attention.

Carlin arrived in Palm Springs from Oklahoma after high school and with her husband opened the El Tram Hotel at 2525 North Palm Canyon. Traffic driving into town would pass her establishment where she brazenly posted her room rate, \$6.50, on a sign, flouting the ordinance prohibiting such display.

Other hotel establishments complained bitterly and urged the city to have the police unceremoniously oversee the sign removal. Carlin protested that the prohibition was unconstitutional and in 1955 the California Supreme Court ruled in her favor forcing the city to amend its ordinance. The controversy over, Carlin literally and figuratively pounded the pavement. Three years later, in 1958, she was elected.

The year of Carlin's election was uncommonly busy and interesting.

The Agua Caliente Tribal Council was in the national news for negotiating the first long-term lease of tribal land for the development of the Spa Hotel. Comprising Vyola Ortner, LaVerne Saubel, Elizabeth Pete Monk, Flora Patencio, and Eileen Miguel, the all-female tribal council set an example in the city and made the election of a woman to the city council seem entirely appropriate. Mary Carlin would join pioneer hotelier Ruth Hardy on the dais. The tribe also released its plan for Section 14.

The new Robinson's store — "jewel box of the desert" — opened in its architectural splendor on Palm Canyon. Bonanza Airlines started service to the



Mary Carlin, Frank Bogert, and George Beebe being sworn in by Palm Springs City Clerk Mary Gene Ringwald on April 16, 1958.

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desert and a Western Airlines plane crashed just off the runway at the airport. Voters approved a bond issue for a new junior college that would come to be known as College of the Desert. The Desert Turf Club started selling stock for a quarter-horse racetrack that would never come to fruition.

Four of Palm Springs' leading hotels reported burglaries of some \$120,000 worth of jewels with the FBI finally arresting nationally known jewel thief Harry Silamore for the crimes. The real estate board railed against "For Sale" signs mounted in front of homes.

Pearl McManus sold the land between Palm Canyon and Indian Canyon at the corner of Ramon road for a new Sak's Fifth Avenue store. The city started construction on the municipal golf course and began the negotiations to purchase the Desert Inn for parking. El Dorado announced the completion of its new one million-dollar clubhouse and it was announced the Ryder Cup matches would come to play on the course there in the new year.

The Board of Education caused an uproar when it passed a seemingly innocuous policy resolution declaring "any establishment ... that sold liquor, cigarettes, or narcotics 'off limits' to high

school students." And Ruth Hardy launched a bond initiative to save Demuth Park. The year 1958 also saw George Beebe, the favored incumbent in Ward 2, ousted from the City Council by Frank Bogert.

But among all the headlines for the year, the argument about the route of Highway III through town and the discussion of paving it, was persistent. The issue had propelled Mary Carlin to her council win. (When asked by a reporter who she hoped the next mayor would be, as the council would decide, Carlin said "I think it will be Frank Bogert.")

The two new councilmembers, Bogert and Carlin, were almost immediately faced with the other big political issue of the year: wards versus citywide elections.

There was frustration by many residents that the city was divided into seven wards. A citizen's group advocated for at-large, citywide elections. The council assiduously avoided making any public pronouncements on the issue, until Carlin, unabashedly led the charge against dumping wards.

Less than a year into her council service, after not a few other controversies, including the at-large election debate, a recall against Carlin was initiated, with

"crowds crying 'impeach her,'" for perceived shortcomings including her continued "unlawful" refusal to remove her hotel's rate sign. In a cunning move, she rechristened her hostelry, "6.50 Hotel," incorporating the price into the name. The maneuver further enraged her detractors. (She ultimately lost the right to post hotel room rates in a ruling where the amended ordinance was upheld, but Carlin managed to retain her seat, "by going to court to point out discrepancies in names signing the recall petition.")

After a few more years of debate regarding election structure, The Desert Sun Editorial Board weighed in. "The right of a citizen to vote in every municipal election, unrestricted by geographical circumstance, is enjoyed by the citizens of 99 percent of California ... we believe ... that (in) city-wide elections, more candidates of ability will be induced to serve, unbound by gerrymandered political boundary restrictions. Much has been said of the fact that Palm Springs has grown under its ward system of government. So did New York City under Tammany. But it did not grow because of marathon council sessions, buck passing, or constant obstruction ... regardless of the sincerity of council members ... we believe it will grow faster, in a more orderly fashion, and more economically with councilmen responsive to the wishes of all the people, expressing their approval or disapproval at every election."

The people agreed, and at-large elections were won by an overwhelming margin. Carlin had been right about Bogert becoming mayor in back in 1958, and in 1982, 20 years after the adoption of citywide elections for council, the people of Palm Springs voted to also directly elect their mayor, rather than have it rotate amongst councilmembers. And that year, the first directly elected mayor was none other than Frank Bogert.

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