

# THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

## History: Prietos helped shape town

### Family likely helped resolve street name

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Eugene Prieto would joke with his friend and fellow police officer Nick Crawford about whether it was properly called Tahquitz or Tahquitz-McCallum Way. The joke was it depended upon exactly where you were in town.

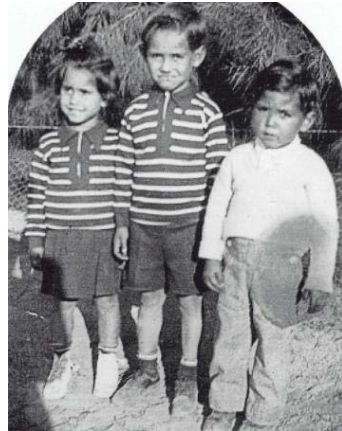
The main east-west street in Palm Springs was originally called Spring Street really early in the 20th century. The street ran adjacent to the hot, bubbling mineral spring on the reservation, so the designation made sense. The street was renamed Tahquitz-McCallum Way by the 1930s.

But by the 1960s discussion began about the propriety of the hyphenated name. Indian agent John McCallum, designated by the federal government to supervise the tribe, hadn't been particularly sympathetic to the plight of Indians in Palm Springs. For that matter, neither had his daughter Pearl. Some thought their last name wasn't appropriate for a street on the reservation.

The heart of the reservation, Section 14, was bifurcated by the street. It was there that Eugene Prieto was born one month before the incorporation of the city of Palm Springs in 1938. He grew up with his sisters Vera and Veronica, and their brother Benjamin, and the street dividing Section 14 in two definitely didn't have the hyphenated name on that square mile of the reservation.

The dust-up discussion about the McCallum suffix persisted until 1991 when deference to the tribe finally prevailed, and the street name was changed to Tahquitz Canyon Way. Doubtless Eugene Prieto and his friend Nick Crawford approved. And their gentle poking fun, their long-running joke, probably helped resolve the controversy.

Eugene Prieto was imminently sensi-



From left to right: Vera, Ben and Eugene Prieto are seen in this undated photo. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

ble and a natural leader. He and the Prieto family have quietly been shaping Palm Springs since its inception.

Eugene was born on Section 14 in a house on the corner of Arenas and Calle Encilia, a few blocks south of the main thoroughfare — what is now named Tahquitz Canyon Way. His mother Ramona Fontes arrived in the desert in 1924, and his father Tony in 1925 (where he worked at the El Mirador Hotel, becoming fast friends with Lawrence Crossley and Frank Bogert).

At Palm Springs High School, Eugene impressively lettered all four years in football, basketball, and track and he still set some records in track that remain unbroken. His athletic accomplishments regularly made headlines in the newspaper.

Upon graduating in 1957, he joined the U.S. Navy and served in active duty to 1961, returning home to join the Palm Springs Police Department, where he and his friend Nick Crawford corralled kids from all the different neighbor-



From left to right: Eugene, Vera and Ben Prieto are seen in this undated photo. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

hoods, keeping them safe and out of trouble. A warning, and a quick trip home in a squad car from Nick or Eugene was enough to keep anybody in line. And as a Boy Scout Master for Troop 118, Eugene set an example of good behavior for multiple generations of boys.

A Desert Sun article in 2000 noted "Eugene has an uncanny memory for names, places and dates, relating many stories of his youth." Perhaps that partially explains the teasing about the Tahquitz name. The article also observed that Eugene and his wife Cynthia Rojo, "have watched the city grow, the streets being repaved and the original buildings replaced." He witnessed more than a few streets being renamed.

Eugene wasn't necessarily opposed to business or development, advocating for keeping up with the down-valley cities. He was circumspect about the history of which he was so much a part, and his uncanny memory and persistence served that history.

Eugene and Vera demonstrated that

persistence, their devotion, over decades. Their uncle, Roaul Prieto had gone off to WWII when they were children, "but the Prieto family never forgot their relative who worked on cars and whistled war tunes. They remembered even the smallest details, like the wording of the telegram when he was drafted...and they waited anxiously..." to learn his fate. For four years it was unclear if Roaul had been killed or was just missing in action. Eugene recalled, "Sometimes I get emotional when I think of my grandma walking to the post office for four years not hearing from her son."

It had been so cold on April 6, 1945 that "the exhaust from the B17 Flying Fortress crystallized, fogging the windshields of the other planes in (the) formation. Unable to see, one pilot drifted down for a clearer view. Another man directed his plane up for the same reason. They hit."

Roaul died in that fiery crash over an east German town. After four years of uncertainty, the Prieto family finally learned his fate. He had eventually been buried in a cemetery in Belgium. Some 60 years later, in 2004, Eugene and Vera, his nephew and niece had not forgotten Roaul, and made the newspaper with their effort to bring home his remains, requiring scads of paperwork and legislative action by the Congress.

A decade later, Eugene was instrumental in helping the tribe assemble an exhaustive history of Section 14 for an exhibit that eventually went to the Smithsonian in Washington, including the story of the name of the street at its center.

Last week marked the passing of Eugene Prieto after a life full of accomplishment and great service to others. To his sister, dear darling Vera, the whole of the desert community gratefully remembers and sends condolences.

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