

Hat time in Palm Springs was homemade fun

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

"There was a bird in a cage; the Tramway hat so big it traveled on two sections behind the wearer; gigantic paper sunflowers, mermaids, an Eiffel Tower topped creation; a wedding cake hat, a violin hat, and even one fashioned from the feathered wings of a Canadian Snow Goose. ..."

Hildy Crawford, the society reporter for The Desert Sun, described the biggest ever Palm Springs Hat Parade for a remembrance in the paper in 1970. Some 2,000 women, (and many men) gathered at the Riviera Convention Center for the event.

"Hats that made history included one called 'Palm Canyon Drive.' With battery-lighted palm trees, little cars and shops." Los Compadres members adorned football helmets with flowers led by their coach. No idea was too silly. No ornament to large or awkward to be stuck on a hat.

The Hat Parade began at a time when "entertainment was a do-it-yourself thing." It was the highlight of the social season, with hats being planned during the winter months in anticipation of the big day.

Designs were kept very secret. Residents and tourists alike worked for months on their chapeaux. There were different categories for entries but the basic "Palm Springs Hat," as invented by Melba Bennett was the perennial favorite.

Melba founded the Palm Springs Historical Society in 1955 and was active in countless civic and charitable activities.

Melba and her husband Frank Bennett owned Deep Well Ranch and rode with their guests in the Desert Circus parades. Western wear was required: jeans and white shirts and cowboy hats. But Melba wanted something "more girl-type." She started by gussying up a regular old cowboy hat.

"Soaking one of the hats, she rolled it up on each side and, when it dried to



Hildy Crawford, from left, Anita Haskell Jones, Mary Noel and Jane Wade plan the Hat Parade at the Chi Chi. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Melba Bennett, center, and friends show off their hat creations in Palm Springs.

shape, she trimmed it with fresh nasturtiums from the garden and ribbons hanging down in the back." Her newly invented "Palm Springs Hat" was a sensation, so much so that eventually it got its own parade.

At the Hat Parade, there was a category for men. "Two ex-mayors, both hat addicts, Charlie Farrell and Frank Bogert, and Russell Wade could always be counted on to compete in the men's category, and some must remember the year Roy Bradley literally dripped leis."

The competition was fierce. The



Crawford, a reporter for The Desert Sun, wears a resplendent hat. She wrote of the Palm Springs Hat Parade.

whole town was crazed trying to come up with new and wonderful creations. There was so much demand, Dottie Epling opened the "Zany Hat Shop" next door to the Chi Chi Club and the fame spread as delighted visitors carried the hats home to Chicago, Seattle and Minneapolis.

Years later, Mary Noel created some

of the town's most spectacular and beautiful hats and after that Jane Wade opened her hat shop on the Desert Inn grounds and shipped hats all over the country.

One year, Anita Haskell Jones, a "Denim and Diamonds Queen," added a stuffed skunk to her ribbon-and-flower trimmed hat and won the prize!

The first years of the Hat Parade "lent a little glamour and fun to early fall when people were just coming back to the desert." It then became part of Desert Circus and grew even bigger, necessitating its move to the Riviera's new Convention Center and drawing that two-thousand-person crowd. A show was added, commentary and even a "Hat Song."

The parade and show subsequently moved to the El Mirador and one year, Hildy recalled, there was a dune buggy for a prize and they rode down the ramp of the show in it.

Another year's winner was worn by The Desert Sun's Julie Porter. It was called "Copy Cat"...and she wore pink tights and a tail and had a huge ceramic cat perched atop her head."

The Black Widow Spider hat was startling, as were the fruit and flower basket creations. But perhaps most memorable was Zaddie Bunker's Rocking chair hat that carried out the theme of her plane.

Famous names were added to the Hat Parade. Star of "That Darn Cat" and "The Love Bug" Dean Jones made an early appearance. The Bonaires singing group, Troy Donahue and Suzanne Pleshette attended. Polly Bergen emceed another show. "Big names in the newspaper served as judges, Christy Fox, Lynn Spencer, Cobina Wright and Joan Winchell."

Hildy recalled "there were such startling developments as green hair and pink poodles, and each year there were beautiful bouquet hats fashioned from fresh flowers like Melba's original."

The Hat Parade, just like Melba's original Palm Springs Hat, was just plain homemade fun.