



President Dwight D. Eisenhower and friends walk in front of the entrance to the palatial Eldorado Country Club. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# Eldorado Country Club and golf course lives up to its name

**Tracy Conrad**  
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He won the deed to hundreds of acres in the remote desert in a poker game in 1957.

Milton Page, known as "Farmer" Page because of his "shuffling gait and ill-fitting clothes," was well acquainted with gambling when he acquired the 792 acres of fruit orchards in what would eventually become Indian Wells.

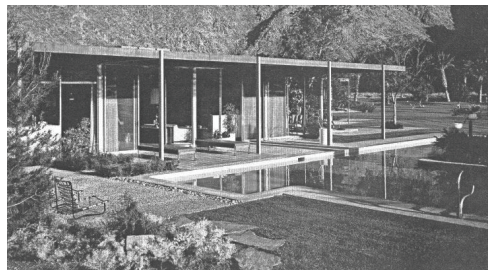
Ironically, he was not familiar at all with farming. He had owned Los Angeles' grandest gaming establishment, the El Dorado Club downtown and used the same name for his newly acquired ranch hoping it would truly be his city of gold, a place of fabulous wealth and opportunity.

How Johnny Dawson and Jimmy Hines, expert professional golfers, got Farmer Page interested in golf isn't exactly clear. But they wanted a super-fancy, upscale golf course in the desert.

The sheltered cove owned by Page seemed a perfect spot. Building of golf courses in the United States exploded between the end of World War I and the start of the Great Depression; from less than 750 to over 6,000 in those dozen years, with the august Los Angeles Country Club and swanky Riviera Country Club amongst them.

Page would have been familiar with where the money was in Los Angeles and was perhaps intrigued. The wealthy patrons at his gambling institutions also belonged to those fine clubs.

Page had been exonerated in the



Modernist architect William F. Cody designed the Cannon House at the Eldorado Country Club in his signature style.

murder of what can only be described as a fellow gangster, and was run out of town, eventually to the newly established gambling haven of Las Vegas. And it was there, in that other desert, he won the deed that would bring him to the Coachella Valley.

Dawson and Hines knew Page, and they also knew some fancy, fine people. Millionaire industrialist Robert McCullough became a founder of Eldorado Country Club and permanent chairman of the board, putting it on the golf map.

A consortium of businessmen golfers was formed to develop the ranch.

Construction started with the golf course. The front nine was carved from a citrus grove and grape vineyards. The



Underground parking for the golf course was a unique feature of the Eldorado Country Club clubhouse that was designed by Cody.

back nine cut through two date palm groves. Palm trees were removed and transplanted along other fairways and seven lakes were created and were used for water storage for the sprinkling system.

Incredibly, the newly minted club procured the Ryder Cup Matches and was featured in Sports Illustrated Magazine in 1959. The American team, captained by Sam Snead, beat the British.

The Los Angeles Times sports writer Braven Dyer commented on the desert and the coup of getting the Ryder match: "When the late Phil Henderson and his brother Cliff conceived Palm Desert...they never dreamed they'd see a setting such as hosted the Ryder Cup matches last week. When Cliff and Leonard Firestone built Shadow Mountain...there were exactly six houses in Palm Desert. It wasn't until two years later that the town got a post office. The spot which now is splendid Eldorado originally was owned by Farmer Page whom the boys over at Las Vegas know pretty well."

The article goes on under a sub-headline of "Pros Rave About Eldorado," musing, "small wonder the British golfers lost. Accustomed to an atmosphere of austerity, Eldorado was just too elegant for them." Dyer continued, "I asked Gene Sarazen, who has played golf all over the world if he had ever seen anything like the Eldorado, with its \$1 million clubhouse. 'Yes,' replied Gene, 'the Palace of Versailles.'"

That palace of a clubhouse was designed by modernist architect William F. Cody.

Coming off the course, golf carts could drive under the building for parking.

The dining room with its soaring 14-foot ceiling was enclosed by glass on three sides. Wrapping around this glass box was a deep front terrace sheltered from the sun with a 24-foot overhanging roof, framing the spectacular view of the mountains beyond.

Cody created a light and airy building suspended on razor-thin posts. The approach from the parking lot featured long reflecting pools. The golf course spread out at the base of the Santa Rosa Mountains; surrounding the fairways were large building sites for private homes, some also designed by Cody.

The private homes attracted important people.

By 1963, there were 46 homes around the course, including one occupied by former President Dwight Eisenhower and his wife Mamie.

Eisenhower had come to the desert as a sitting president in 1954. It was one of the biggest things to have ever happened here.

He stayed at Smoke Tree Ranch with his friends Paul Helms, of Los Angeles' Helms Bakery and Paul Hoffman, chairman of Studebaker Corporation. When out of office, he wanted to retire to the desert.

He landed at Eldorado after being shooed down valley by Smoke Tree residents wary of the hullabaloo caused by the Secret Service and the crowds that followed the president. (Frank Bogert, cowboy mayor of Palm Springs, recalled decades later that Eisenhower loved mariachis and every time Frank had a band for whatever reason he would take them down to Eldorado to play for him.)

Eldorado invited the ex-president to become an honorary member of the club, and there he played golf, painted and enjoyed retirement. The congenial atmosphere was reflected in his request to be called General Eisenhower, rather than Mr. President.

The whole desert community and his generous neighbors at Eldorado, which by now had certainly lived up to its name, would go on to honor Eisenhower by naming the much-needed emergency medical facility they envisioned after him.

Farmer Page died an ignominious death in 1960 and didn't live to see what happened with his ranch.

The 1963 Bob Hope Classic Golf Tournament, held at Eldorado, featured Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer and raised money for the cause.

Eisenhower would go on to participate in the groundbreaking for his eponymous Medical Center, with then California Governor and future President Ronald Reagan in 1967.

Since then, Eldorado has continued to grace the desert as a truly golden spot.

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