

What's in a Coachella Valley street name? Lots of history

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

In the earliest days of urban development across the United States, streets tended to call out landmarks like main, church, market, monument, canal, wall or park; or obvious features like hill or shore. References to a street's position or characteristics like east, west, middle, long, short, or circle also made sense, and helped with navigation.

In the Coachella Valley, some of the first street names reflected the agricultural bent of the region. Take for example, palm, date, orange and lemon streets reflecting the local cultivars (as opposed to the ubiquitous oak, maple, pine, walnut and elm that are found in most cities across the country).

One of the best ways to be remembered, or at least mentioned, is to have a street named after you. Like many communities across the country, there are streets in the Coachella Valley named after American Presidents including Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe.

In Palm Springs, Charlie Farrell, the tennis playing movie star turned hotelier, turned mayor saw value in recognizing celebrities. Farrell's novel idea caught on.

It's more interesting and intimate to have Frank Sinatra Drive than Wonder Palms Road, or Bob Hope Drive than Rio Del Sol. And even if you don't remember the singing cowboy, Gene Autry Trail does seem preferable to Bogie Road.

Numbered streets turned out to be a wasted "naming opportunity" and 34th Avenue is now Dinah Shore Drive and 36th Avenue has become Gerald Ford Drive.

Today there's no shortage of celebrity-inspired roadway names up and down the Coachella Valley. There is a DesiLu Court in Indian Wells, and in Palm Desert and Rancho Mirage you will find Bing Crosby, Dinah Shore, Burns and Allen, Jack Benny, Ginger and Buddy Rogers streets. After starting the tradition, Charlie Farrell got a street named



This is a view of Tahquitz-McCallum Way looking west from the airport in the 1940s. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN



Charlie Farrell and Kirk Douglas shake hands after their morning tennis match at the Racquet Club.

for him in Palm Springs, reportedly the first for someone who was still alive.

Some of the more obscure street names here are associated with fascinating stories.

The longest continuous street in the valley is named for Fred Waring, a popular bandleader and entertainer during the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Waring wanted

a way to make the perfect margarita and invested in a device that would crush ice. The "Miracle Mixer" was introduced to the American public at the National Restaurant Show in 1938 and was a huge hit. His eponymous company and the appliance it produced were officially renamed the Waring Blendor. His is now quite literally a household name, but few schoolchildren or adults passing Fred Waring Drive today understand the connection to their kitchens.

Waring was on hand for the big day when his name superseded 44th Avenue. "This means more to me than all the lights on the marquees in the cities where I play." He added, "I'll be going up and down the street picking up the beer cans!"

Lawrence Crossley arrived in Palm Springs in 1924 to find he was the first and only African-American resident. Undaunted, he invested in the El Mirador Hotel, built the city's first hotel golf course there, and eventually owned a laundromat, restaurants, housing de-

velopments and trailer parks.

In the 1930s the Chamber of Commerce in Palm Springs circulated a petition to rename streets with agricultural monikers like lemon, lime, palm, and park in honor of Cahuilla Indian elders. Pablo, Chino, Alejo, Arenas, Patencio, Ramon, Belardo streets and many others evoke the Indian history of this place every time someone gives directions.

In 1926, U.S. Route 99 came through the Coachella Valley connecting parts east with Los Angeles roughly along the current route of Interstate 10. And in the early 1930s, State Highway 111 bracketed the valley floor diagonally following the slope of the western mountains.

Dr. June McCarroll was a nurse with the Southern Pacific Railroad. The office where she worked fronted U.S. 99 in Indio. Having been run off the road by oncoming traffic and having witnessed too many similar accidents, she is credited with painting a white stripe down the middle of the road, which, by visually dividing the highway, dramatically decreased head-on collisions. She is memorialized by a stretch of I-10 through Indio named in her honor.

When there is naming there is always the possibility of re-naming. So the old adage goes, "One day a rooster, next day a feather duster." Spring Street in Palm Springs was changed to Tahquitz-McCallum Way in a dual nod to the angry god of the canyon and the pioneer settler and Indian agent. The McCallum part of the name was eventually dropped going the way of all roosters.

Airport Road was renamed Kirk Douglas Way in 2004 after much consternation about the possibility of re-naming El Cielo in his honor a dozen years before. He was disappointed at the debate and is reported to have joked, "I changed my name before and I'll change it again. Just call me Kirk El Cielo."

Many accomplished people visited or lived in the valley, but few rate a street name. Then again, if you were really important you might get a school or an airport or hospital named after you. But that's for another story.