

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# Honoring the intrepid women who built Palm Springs

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In 1948, just two years before her death, Nellie Coffman, the most important woman in the history of Palm Springs, wrote to another hard-working woman villager, Melba Bennett, "You as a woman whose every moment of life is so full of pressing responsibilities, I know that you will be one of the first to understand why I have not written you fully. ... I heaved a great sigh when I heard you had taken on (more) onerous duties. ... However, I know that you will rise to the occasion. Only remember that you're not made of steel or iron, and some day you will feel the results if you keep going too hard. Ease up a little, girl, ease up."

This past week March 8, International Women's Day, brought acknowledgement of women and their pressing responsibilities and onerous duties and celebration of their accomplishments despite enormous hardship. Nowhere is the fortitude of women more evident than in the history of the desert.

Coffman through her sheer determination created the notion of the desert resort with her creation of the Desert Inn. She arrived in 1909 and settled at the base of Mt. San Jacinto to open a sanatorium with her physician husband and a lodging establishment. She was quoted as saying that "with good food, clean lodgings and warm hospitality, the roads and automobiles would come."

Soon, she was proven right and Palm Springs' tourist trade began in earnest. By 1914 it was clear her hospitality operation was superior to her husband's medical practice, and remarkably they went their separate ways, leaving Coffman a single mother with a business to run. Her devotion to quality was evident and made the Inn a remarkable success, lifting the entire town with it.

Coffman had been preceded in the little village by the McCallum women. Emily Freeman McCallum loved the refinements of city life and decidedly despised the desert. She tolerated it for her children who had been struck with typhoid fever, the oldest boy Johnny relapsing with pneumonia. Doctors suggested that moving to a hotter, drier climate would help the children recover. The family moved from the civilization of San Francisco to set up a camp and build an house of adobe brick under a fig tree in the middle of nowhere. The spot was close to a



Zaddie Bunker in 1958 at the Big Bear fly-in. COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

stream of water dripping from Tahquitz Canyon.

McCallum and her daughter Pearl bathed regularly in the hot mineral water that was only a short distance from their home. As her father began to amass a great deal of land, more than 6,000 acres, Pearl became enthralled with the desert and was devoted. The end of the 19th century decimated her father's development dreams. Twenty-one days of rain followed an 11-year drought, resulting in her father's death in 1897.

By 1914, four of the McCallum's adult children were dead, leaving the youngest, Pearl, and her mother with title to his vast real estate holdings and the majority interest in the Palm Valley Water Company. Pearl believed her father had sacrificed his own life to hold onto the land he had assiduously acquired. She would devote the remainder of her life in service of his dream.

After the death of her mother in 1914, Pearl met and married Austin McManus, a realtor who was working in South Pasadena. The couple moved into her family adobe and started a real estate business called Pioneer Properties, building the first apartment and the first housing tract in the village. Pearl was the shrewd negotiator and Austin was the jovial salesman. She made the deeds to her proper-

ties restrictive and reversible, giving her control over land she had already sold. Her perseverance was outstripped only by her philanthropy in later years.

Frances Stevens and her husband P.T. came to the desert because of her failing health in 1912. Frances' health improved with her stay at the Desert Inn, and P.T. purchased more than 1,000 acres north of the village. Water was crucial, and P.T. determined to find a way to provide it reliably and at a reasonable cost.

Frances embarked on a mission to build a new school. She teamed up with Rose McKinney, mother of multiple infamously unruly children, and they formed the first school board in the desert. The Stevens family donated the land at Alejo and Palm Canyon and most of the money for materials. The villagers contributed the labor. By 1927, Frances' dedication and vision resulted in an elegant building that was the proud accomplishment of the entire village. After her death, the school was named in her honor.

Professor Cornelia White came to Palm Springs, not to teach school but to escape the chaos of the Mexican Revolution with her sister, Dr. Florilla White. Along with pioneer Carl Lykken, the stalwart women packed what they could onto a railroad handcar and began pumping their way to the United States. Many sec-

tions of track were blown up by revolutionaries, and the women had to unload the handcar as many as 30 times and push it until they found usable track again.

Arriving safely in the desert from San Diego, the idea of returning to their original home North Dakota and the frigid climate seemed out of the question. Cornelia purchased the Palm Springs Hotel from Welwood Murray, and with the property came the lease for the bathhouse located across the street. The sisters were wealthy and had the luxury of living a recreational lifestyle. They were both part of the group of women interested in building infrastructure that included a public cemetery, a library and a museum. Neither sister married, and both preferred to wear pants instead of dresses. Cornelia said "she did have a dress, she just saved it for funerals."

Zaddie Bunker preferred overalls. She had arrived in Palm Springs with her husband Ed and their daughter, Frances, in 1913. Zaddie took a correspondence course to learn how to fix cars as there was no garage between Banning and Indio and she aimed to change that. She was the first woman in California to get a chauffeur's license, augmenting her income by transporting visitors from the train station to the hotels.

Zaddie saved and purchased property in downtown that she leased to a film company that wanted to build a western town for movie they were shooting. She agreed to lend them money under the condition that they included plumbing in the town that they erected. After the movie was completed, she rented those buildings, ending up owning a good deal of the commercial buildings in town, including a drug store, the first motion picture theater and the Chi Chi nightclub. According to Zaddie, her husband, Ed, "replaced her with a new model." She never remarried, instead at age 65 she got her pilot's license, the oldest woman to have done so.

And Bennett, the hard-working heirless who had been admonished by Coffman in 1948 to ease up and not work too long or too hard, founded the Palm Springs Historical Society in 1955 preserving the good stories of the good women who came before her.

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