

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Hollywood at home here over the decades

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The 1968 newspaper advertisement tried to invoke wonder: "Imagine! Movie Star's Former Home! Four plus bedrooms, 3 large baths, king-size pool. Furnished for \$47,900. Submit your down payment. Owner will carry 1st trust deed at 7% or will lease with an option to buy."

The prospect of writing a mortgage check to a bona fide movie star was intriguing. The ad failed to identify the mystery star; it was anybody's guess who it might be, considering the very large number of homes in the Palm Springs area owned by movie folk.

Realtors regularly trumpeted movie star provenance to improve the cache of a house. Any home owned by a star must surely have been more charming than one not previously inhabited by a Hollywood type.

On Friday, Oct. 14, Palm Springs Historical Society docents Vinny Stoppia and Jim Cook will present a veritable cavalcade of information about "Hollywood at Home in Palm Springs" at the Cultural Center. Imagine!

Illustrative of the presence of Hollywood royalty in the desert, one of the best anecdotes about a movie star deciding to put down roots in Palm Springs concerns Frank Sinatra.

Hanging out with his best pal Jimmy Van Heusen, Sinatra found refuge in Palm Springs in the 1940s. Strolling down Palm Canyon Drive eating an ice cream cone, Sinatra was relaxed and on vacation. Wearing a sailor hat, he wandered into the architectural offices of E. Stewart Williams.

Sinatra decided he wanted a house in Palm Springs. He was visiting often and wanted to live here for real. He asked Williams for a house designed in Georgian style: columns, pediment and red brick. Sinatra had grown up in Hoboken where Georgian style seemed redolent of success and evocative of a permanent home.

Williams was concerned but never-



"The House of Tomorrow," also known as the Elvis Honeymoon House, just after completion in the early 1960s. PROVIDED BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

theless obliged. Williams designed a Georgian manse, but also a complete second house of a swanky, desert modern design that he hoped would intrigue Sinatra. The sleek design featured long horizontal lines and clerestory windows surrounding the large swimming pool. It provided extensive outdoor living with an expansive view of Mt. San Jacinto. It was sexy.

Roger Williams, Stew's brother and partner, recounted years later that Sinatra was persuaded to build the more "desert appropriate" design. The commission established Williams' career and Roger understood that, "We'd have been ruined if we'd been forced to build Georgian in the desert." Instead, the Williams firm became foremost amongst the many modernist architects practicing in the desert in the midcentury.

Sinatra's "Twin Palms" house became the standard for glamor and casual living.

Parties at the house were legendary and seduced even more of the Hollywood crowd into desert living.

Hollywood had been in the desert since the inception of moviemaking and there are intriguing parallels between the two towns. The shared population of movie folk had a major influence on the development of both through the decades.

and establishing the Racquet Club.

Hollywood was definitely comfortable around its pool and in the Bamboo Bar. Visited by stars from Marilyn Monroe to William Powell and movie moguls from Frank Capra to Darryl Zanuck, the desert's allure prompted many movie people to buy themselves a house.

By the time Sinatra built Twin Palms in 1947, there was definitely an established residential movie colony in the desert. Soon after, Dinah Shore and Kirk Douglas moved in.

The biggest stars in the country by then, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, called Thunderbird Country Club home, building a house designed by African American architect Paul R. Williams.

The 1950s and '60s saw an explosion of modern architecture and the firm establishment of the desert as a destination for the celluloid rich and famous.

The desert began to supplant other choice spots. Elvis came to Palm Springs, not Hawaii or Las Vegas where he'd been in the movies, for his real honeymoon. He rented the "House of Tomorrow" for a year for \$21,000.

In the '70s and '80s, Sonny Bono moved to town and started a business. Frustrated with the city bureaucracy, he ran for mayor and won, launching his political career. His Mesa neighborhood house, once part of the King Gillette (as in razorblades) estate also sold recently.

Stoppia and Cook bring their stories to the present day with amusing anecdotes about current movie stars like Leonardo di Caprio, who bought the Donald Wexler-designed Dinah Shore house. They will also review films set in the desert in the recently like "Don't Worry Darling" which was filmed in the Twin Palms neighborhood of Palm Springs (no relation to Sinatra's similarly named house).

The lushly illustrated frolic through the decades of "Hollywood at Home" promises to be big fun. Tickets available at pshistoricalociety.org/products/hollywood-at-home.

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