

Spectacular architecture, art adorned this Palm Springs bank

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"In the United States, perhaps even in the world, the village of Palm Springs is without parallel. In the short span of seventy-five years, it has become the nation's resort capital, where the successful and outstanding in the arts, science, industry and public life come for the renewing of the spirit which is so pleasantly possible in the warm sun and dry air of its beautiful desert setting."

That bit of hyperbole and flourish began a small pamphlet published by the Security First National Bank in 1959 to commemorate the opening of a new bank branch in the village.

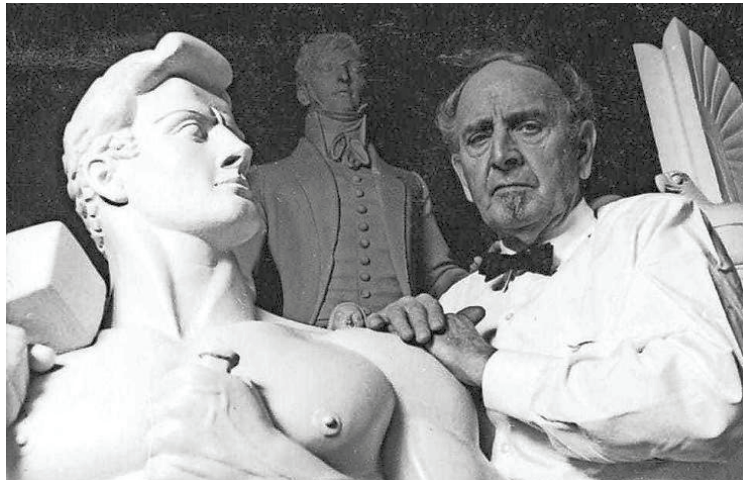
The souvenir brochure further proclaimed, "And this is not all. Palm Springs is also the year-round home of an increasing number of substantial citizens from coast to coast who have chosen to make the desert a way of life, and who have brought the best of living to the desert." And no doubt those substantial citizens needed a bank in which to make substantial deposits.

Accordingly, the bank devoted considerable resources to making an architectural and artistic statement in its Palm Springs branch, announcing that since the "great and near-great from all over the world" are now drawn to Palm Springs as a "mecca for relaxation" the history of the town was "worth translating to the permanence of sculpture."

In an incredibly ambitious gesture, the bank commissioned "a pictorial record of the unfolding of this desert area from the dawn of prehistoric times, through the arrival of the first white settlers, to the present day."

The sculptor brave enough to attempt such a grandiose assignment was Lawrence Tenney Stevens. Stevens was known by the time of the commission, having won the prestigious Prix de Rome for sculpture in 1922 with which he received a fellowship for, studying at the American Academy in Rome.

He was an indefatigable advocate for American art and was known for creat-



Lawrence Tenney Stevens poses next to his stylized self-portrait bust. This is one of the last photos taken before his death in 1972.

COURTESY OF JOHN FAUBION/LAWRENCE TENNEY STEVENS TRUST

ing allegorical figures. A contemporary and colleague of Daniel Chester French, who created the giant seated statue of Abraham Lincoln for the memorial in Washington, and working at the same time as Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mount Rushmore, Stevens is increasingly being recognized today.

For the desert bank, Stevens was commissioned to produce two monumental panels depicting the entirety of the history of the area (no small feat!). He designed twenty-two tile plaques, which were grouped into two eight-by-twelve foot panels of eleven plaques each: one portraying the past and the other, the present. The panels were to be found at the entrance to the main lobby, positioned at right angles to the door, and placed so they could be seen at the same time.

The bas relief plaques were made of highly-fired, unglazed terra cotta with grog, each sculpted and carefully placed in the kiln for firing, after which they were assembled into their respective panels.

The panel depicting the past was

it into a resort oasis (the brochure does mention the Cahuilla Indians, and the presence of an abundance of water as crucial to the future development).

The plaques featured the trials and tribulations of the early pioneers, the plants and animals of prehistoric eras, and the trek of Juan Batista (sic) de Anza, not necessarily in that order. An entire plaque was appropriately devoted to Nellie Coffman, dated 1909, as arrival was a seminal moment, as she created the whole idea of a resort town. The panel depicting the present featured the numerous leisure activities of the newly minted resort town.

The remainder of the brochure highlights the handsome architecture of the building, boasting, "the charm of the desert is felt in its simplicity and quiet beauty. In the bank, this feeling has been reflected by the architect through the use of natural materials by the adaptation, in design and plan, of nature's flowing lines and forms."

Typical of these materials were the native stone veneer, a native aggregate of river-run gravel taken from a stream bed near Palm Springs and set in a matrix of concrete, and Whitewater Canyon stone, quarried and rolled down the mountain. The architect, Joe Wong, imported from the Arizona desert, created a splashy waterfall of water running through the crevices of the rock wall.

The interior featured "black sequin" formica counters, and specially designed furnishings "including the very wastebaskets themselves, which were designed by the bank and are now in production in Grand Rapids, soon to be available to all banks."

But the most unique feature was perhaps the open-air customer conference room, possible only in Palm Springs, "where the ceiling is the blue sky." An invitation was "extended to all to visit the Palm Springs Ramon Road Branch, and to enjoy the features that have made it a reflection of the Palm Springs way of life." And the invitation surely extended to opening an account with a substantial first deposit, befitting such a fine banking institution.



This plaque at Security First National Bank depicts Nellie Coffman founding the Desert Inn 1909. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

headed by message, "The Desert is the Test of the Worth of Your Spirit." The brochure explained that the epigram was attributed to a 1920s cowboy artist and symbolized those who first came to the raw desert and stayed to transform