

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

King Gillette had plan to beautify the desert

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Wandering the grounds of The Desert Inn in a bathrobe, looking somewhat disreputable, maybe a bit disheveled — perhaps in need of a shave — was a good friend of proprietress Nellie Coffman. The ragamuffin visitor would prowl the delightful gardens daily. When another hotel guest looked askance at his unusual costume and habitude, Coffman allowed that the gentleman could certainly wear what he liked, as he was a good customer and was none other than King Camp Gillette.

Gillette was fabulously wealthy despite his appearance, and extremely famous as the inventor of the safety razor and disposable blades of his eponymous company. His visage graced every package making him recognizable around the globe. After discovering Palm Springs, he would decamp from colder East Coast climes to live at The Desert Inn for winter months in the earliest days of the hotel.

Having been enchanted entirely, and particularly by the glorious gardens, Gillette wanted a desert place of his own. He soon bought a large swath of land in the Palm Springs Mesa and built a stately Spanish home, and as importantly, began extensive plantings. In the ensuing years, he would build more houses and multiple out-buildings, including gates, one of which survives as an entrance marker to the Mesa itself. His original holdings have now been subdivided many times and the houses remodeled many more. (Years later, Sonny Bono would own one parcel.)

Gillette also bought hundreds of acres farther out, with his son, King Gaines Gillette, as recounted by Olive Orbison for the *Indio News* in 1949. “It was a wasteland. Mesquite, creosote bushes, smoke trees and desert flora of varied description covered the sands almost to the height of a man’s head ... so high was the vegetation that (one) day King Gillette, Sr. was making a morning prowl, and became lost and a searching party was sent out to find him.” History does not record if Gillette was wearing a bathrobe that day.

Gillette exuberantly experimented with date palms and exotic cacti with a grand plan of beautifying the desert.

Olive Orbison continued, “These two dreaming pioneers bought (the land) because it was the only logical spot for a resort community similar to Palm Springs The final clearing accomplished ... the planting began. And then along came the Depression, money grew tight, labor was poor and gradually every activity ceased, for there was no fighting the difficult conditions.”

Indeed, Gillette had been a profligate spender, albeit with superlative taste in real estate. He’d acquired



The Gillette gate at the Palm Springs Mesa in 1930.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



The King Gillette estate in the Palm Springs Mesa area in 1928. He planted date palms and exotic cacti.

hundreds of acres in the Santa Monica Mountains for a magnificent ranch, and commissioned Wallace Neff to design a Spanish Colonial Revival-style mansion of 25 rooms with a gloriously tiled fountain overlooking an unrivaled vista of rolling hills dotted with native oaks. (Years later, Bob Hope purchased the property.) The handsome house was completed in 1929, just before the stock market crash in October that year. Gillette’s fortunes dissipated.

Long before his relative poverty, Gillette had unusual ideas about capitalism, especially for a wealthy cap-

tain of industry. In 1894, he published “The Human Drift” advocating that all industry and manufacture should be taken over by a single corporation owned by the general public. The utopia he envisioned would be sited near Niagara Falls supplying power to one giant, happy city called Metropolis. In 1910 he furthered the vision with the book “World Corporation,” a veritable prospectus for the company. Gillette offered Theodore Roosevelt the presidency of the company for a fee of one-million dollars. Roosevelt declined. In 1924, Gillette continued with yet another book, “The People’s Corporation” penned with co-author Upton Sinclair.

Sinclair himself was a serious author and ardent socialist. Sinclair would go on to write another hundred books and became the Democratic Party nominee for Governor of California during the Depression, running on a campaign called, EPIC, “End Poverty in California.” Because of his socialist ideology, Republicans seized on the tepid support by potentially squeamish Democrats and, in the 1934 election, pumped \$10 million into what historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. called “the first all-out public relations blitzkrieg in American politics” handily defeating the idealistic Sinclair simply by labeling him a socialist.

(Sinclair’s own desert connections are interesting, having been the guest of Samuel Untermyer at The Willows during the early 1930s, perhaps crossing paths with his co-author during Gillette’s last years.)

Gillette had been forced out of his own company and his misfortune in the stock market crash caused an equally precipitous decline in his lifestyle and health. He became seriously ill and died in July 1932. Shortly after in 1933, his son sold the hundreds of acres of the carefully cleared desert to W.A. Johnson, who proceeded to subdivide it, naming it Palm Village.

Gillette had begun the most ambitious of planting plans for his large land holdings but was interrupted by his untimely death. It is unclear if it was Gillette or Johnson who hired famous landscape architect Charles Gibbs Adams, who as Olive Orbison remembered, “had laid out the Hearst Farm, the Kellogg Ranch, and the renowned little city of Beverly Hills” Adams’ design included “beautiful curving streets, planned to take advantage of every superb view. Dates, grapefruit and oleanders were planted ... beauty began to appear everywhere.”

Gillette understood the potential garden spot but hadn’t lived to see it come to fruition as Palm Village and later, Palm Desert. His imagined utopia of a shared industry and community also eluded him. Yet, his ingenious disposable razor blades persist, making his name practically synonymous with shaving.

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