

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# Linking Palm Springs to 'big city' of Banning

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Between mighty San Jacinto and towering San Geronio is a narrow pass traced by the San Andreas fault where the Pacific Plate and the North American Plate relentlessly thrust up the great mountains. The pass separates the coastal Mediterranean climate to the west from the desert of the Coachella Valley to the east and is the narrowest separation of the two mountain ranges.

The stricture rises from the desert floor to a broad, flat bench where may be found the town of Banning. Named for Phineas Banning who was born when the United States was not even fifty years old, the town features interestingly in the history of the desert.

Phineas Banning was born in 1830 in Wilmington, Delaware the seventh of eleven children. At age 13, he moved to Philadelphia to work in his oldest brother's law firm and by his late teens, Banning was working on the dockyards there. Seeking his fortune and place in the world, he abandoned the East Coast for the exotic destination of Southern California. Working for his passage by sea, interrupted by an arduous overland crossing of the isthmus of Panama before the existence of the canal, he arrived in California in 1851 as the Gold Rush was underway. Instead of heading north to mine for gold, he sought his fortune working in the little fishing village of San Pedro, first as a store clerk and later as a stagecoach driver on a line that connected the hamlet with the pueblo of Los Angeles.

He started his own stagecoach and shipping company, naming it for his birthplace, Wilmington, and using the same name for a town he planted on land he purchased next to San Pedro. He began expanding the little port, investing profits into creation of roads, telegraphs and shipping improvements to facilitate trade. Soon Banning had stagecoach lines connecting to cities as far away as Salt Lake, the Kern River gold fields, and Yuma, Arizona. He also owned a fleet of ocean-going ships able



The idyllic Banning Bench boasts orchards in the early 1920s.

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to move goods up and down the California coast, developing a burgeoning trade for his port.

Banning was an ardent Unionist and the outbreak of the Civil War and its potential ramifications for California alarmed him. Banning donated land in Wilmington to the Union, bringing troops to the newly minted Drum Barracks, further developing the area and the port. The grateful American government honored Banning with the symbolic title of Brigadier General.

After the war, General Banning organized Southern California's first railroad, the Los Angeles & San Pedro which he sold to the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1873, cementing his fortune and the future of his beloved port. The Southern Pacific Railroad would follow the path of Banning's stagecoach company from Los Angeles to Yuma through a little town just west of a narrow pass between great mountains; both the town and the pass would eventually be named for Banning.

As automobiles became ascendant, there was ongoing debate about the best route from the East to the West by car. When the various options were still being discussed, a group of car owners and businessmen began campaigning for Phineas Banning's old stagecoach trail,

through the narrow pass. The Banning Route Boosters would hold rallies driving the route for fun and advocating on its behalf. The Boosters celebrated the completion of the road to Palm Springs by visiting The Desert Inn in 1918.

The following year the pavement was washed out by a flash flood and had to be almost completely reconstructed. By 1920, the ride from Los Angeles to the desert was entirely, and satisfactorily, paved. The road further on to Yuma wasn't as comfortable, with a long stretch of plank road, which made Route 66 the preferred passage. (Route 66 would eventually be abandoned as a commercial route when air travel made the scenic highway obsolete, while Banning's is now the major artery of the 10 freeway for travel from Arizona to California.)

For the tiny village of Palm Springs, the town of Banning represented civilization. It was the stagecoach stop and became the train route that formed the major corridor from Los Angeles to Yuma. And for the inhabitants of the Coachella Valley, it was a big city. Until 1938, teenagers in Palm Springs were obligated to ride the bus to and from Banning after middle school, as Palm Springs was too small to support a proper high school.

That Nellie Coffman, the gracious proprietress of The Desert Inn, decided in 1928 to buy herself a home in the foothills above Banning further cemented its importance to Palm Springs. It was cooler there in the summer, but still close enough to the inn, thanks to the nicely paved road. There was a new subdivision nestled up against the mountains above Banning called Lazy Acres, evocative of a peaceful holiday or pleasant retirement, the name conjured up the possibility of swinging in a hammock under a great shade tree. Nellie decided the name perfectly suited her lovely little house as well.

Located on Lombardy Lane, it wasn't quite two acres, terraced with a variety of flowers, a large lawn and surrounding wild violets, and big California pepper and cottonwood trees. There was a grove of almond trees. According to Marjorie Belle Bright in her book, "Nellie's Boarding House," Lazy Acres had comfortable, casual furnishings and an "air of warm hospitality" that animated everything Nellie did. Paths crisscrossed the property offering views, and places to pause and ponder the plantings.

Nellie spent her summers at Lazy Acres in Banning for more than 20 years. Having come of age before the automobile was widely disseminated, Nellie never learned to drive, and instead trusted Segundo Rigonan, her faithful employee, to drive her from the desert, sometimes daily, tracing the 50 miles through the Banning pass celebrated by the Boosters back in 1918.

Phineas Banning's dream of a world-class port for Los Angeles and connectivity to the rest of the country by stagecoach, then railway and finally automobile, was insured by the 1920s. Phineas' sons, William and Hancock Banning would go on to own and develop Catalina Island, which has its own interesting connections to the desert. But that is another story.

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