

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Lesser-known builders of Palm Desert

Tracy Conrad

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The origin story of Palm Desert is marked by big dreams, lust for land, business acumen, and familial rivalry as well as brotherly cooperation. The determination of Cliff Henderson is widely known. But his brother Randall recorded his own quieter version of some of the most seminal events. Randall wrote a summary for the Rotary Club in 1960, and saved his extensive correspondence, replete with the smallest of details. Among those details are some interesting characters who are mostly unknown to the usual telling of the story of the building of the town.

Randall's passion was Desert Magazine, and the building which housed the operation was an iconic symbol of Palm Desert for many years, standing near the corner of Portola Avenue and Highway 111. That spot hadn't been where landscape architect Tommy Tomson planned for it when he was laying out the city. Instead, Tomson originally placed it in the very middle of the new town, near San Luis Rey Avenue, sandwiched between land owned by Cliff Henderson and one Raymond Wilson. (Wilson would come to play an important part in the development of the desert and figures mentioned later in the story.)

A staccato letter to Randall Henderson from Harry O. Davis, in November 1945 reveals the serendipity of events that shaped the eventual history. Typed on stationery for Hacinto Date Gardens, it reads, "Combed Palm Springs yesterday for architects. Found two and asked them both to get in touch with you. One man named Frey...doesn't think much of Pueblo architecture. Best man I think will be Williams who has his office in the pent house (sic) over Ransom's office. Entrance from the stairway off the Plaza. Says he knows Pueblo type and is in fact considering two residences for cli-



A 1948 photo shows the Harry Williams-designed Desert Magazine building in Palm Desert. COURTESY THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT

ents now. Suggest you see them...or rather Williams."

Harry J. Williams had come to Palm Springs at the behest of his most important client back in Ohio, Julia Carnell, to build a shopping center near the famed Desert Inn where she stayed during the winters with her friend and hostess Nellie Coffman.

In a feat of true innovation, Williams created the first mixed-use building in California, La Plaza, with gracious storefronts arranged along a sheltering colonnade with office and small apartments for the shopgirls and chauffeur's above. Described in *The Desert Sun* just before opening, "the \$600,000 Plaza project consisting of 34 shops, theatre, garage, market, service station, storage building, etc." was nearing completion to the delight of would-be shoppers.

That Davis recommended Williams as the architect for the project meant a lot. Davis and Randall had traveled together thoughtfully looking for architecture to emulate for Randall's magazine headquarters. They'd explored the whole of the desert southwest in search of how to properly build his Pueblo dream, and sourced examples for Williams' design.

Randall elaborated, "...I had been busy making plans for my new construction program. I received much valuable help from Harry O. Davis who had then retired after an active career and was residing on his date garden just east of the Palm Desert townsite. Davis, in his active career, had been a trouble-shooter for the William Randolph Hearst organization, and knew the publishing business well. Also, he had been

manager of the Pan-American Exposition in San Diego in 1915, and again in 1935, and had built and managed the Olympic Village in Los Angeles when the Olympic Games were held there in 1940."

There was a complicated negotiation brokered by Raymond Cree that landed Randall's Desert Magazine Pueblo-style headquarters, designed by Harry J. Williams, on 40 acres of land sandwiched between two tracts, one owned by Cliff Henderson and the other Raymond Wilson. Randall's new land comprised 20 acres given to him by his brother, and 20 acres carved out of the 160 acres of a land patent granted to Raymond Wilson and coveted by Cliff Henderson. The deal, orchestrated by Wilson, fostered cooperation between the two Henderson brothers, and resulted in Wilson selling his land to Cliff.

Wilson had a small homestead on his 160 acres as required by the terms of the land grant. Married to the heiress to a large fortune, Wilson hadn't lived there, but rather in a fine house in Palm Springs when not in an even finer one in Bel-Air. The little Palm Desert homestead was empty when Albert Frey, the same architect that Harry Davis reported "didn't think much of Pueblo architecture," was in need of a place to stay.

Albert Frey figures prominently in the built history of Palm Springs, and his early photo albums are in the collection of the Palm Springs Art Museum. A single page features three images taken by Frey of the Wilson homestead in 1935 at what would become the center of Palm Desert and a temporary home for Frey. The first is of the little house and water tower, the second is of the modest interior and the third, labeled simply "Looking North" shows a vast expanse of gloriously unbuild desert.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.