

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Wilson's vital to architectural expansion

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Hazel Eckhart Brophy finally divorced her husband of 25 years for "extreme cruelty and non-support" in 1932. Perhaps she'd waited until after her father's death in order to spare him the embarrassment of the front-page news. Her father, Bernard A. Eckhart had passed away the year before in 1931. He had been one of the wealthiest industrialists in the country, having made an immense fortune in wheat and rye milling. He was on the board of more than half a dozen banks, the Eerie Railroad, Montgomery Ward, Armour & Co, and Chicago Title and Trust Company, in addition to having been vital to the Chicago Board of Trade and a trustee of the governing board of the prestigious Chicago Art Institute.

Accordingly, the newspapers certainly were interested in Hazel's marital difficulties. The Chicago Tribune carried the story in August 1932 under the headline, "Mrs. Brophy Granted Secret Divorce in Reno" and made sure to note that Hazel was Eckhart's daughter. Her husband had not contested the filing. Hazel and her three siblings inherited \$5 million during the height of the Depression. Fabulously wealthy and now divorced, Hazel moved to Los Angeles where her son and daughter-in-law were living, to start a new life.

Within a year, Hazel married Raymond Wilson, a man perhaps as interesting and savvy as her late father. The newlyweds promptly setup housekeeping in Palm Springs and established his construction company in the desert. One of his earliest projects was the Kocher-Samson building designed by newly arrived architect Albert Frey in 1934.

The Limelight News took note, "Prominent Architect Visits Village." Frey had been casting about for what to do after the success of the groundbreaking Aluminaire House in New York. Sent by his collaborator and editor of Architectural Record magazine A. Lawrence Kocher to Palm Springs to design an office for his brother Dr. J. J. Kocher, the paper records he was the



The Kocher-Samson building in Palm Springs was designed by Albert Frey and built by Raymond Wilson. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

"house guest of Mr. & Mrs. Raymond R. Wilson."

The Limelight News rightfully understood the importance of the Kocher-Samson building as it "brings new angles to local architecture and stands out as one of the most interesting projects of the year." (Little could they have imagined how important the new modern architecture, started with that one small building, would become to Palm Springs.)

During construction of the Kocher-Samson building Wilson received a land patent for 160 acres in the middle of what would become Palm Desert and built a small house and water tower on the property. Frey was offered that accommodation, and the spot would figure prominently in the Palm Desert land scramble a decade later between Cliff and Randall Henderson in which Wilson would play a pivotal role.

Back in Palm Springs, Wilson was engaged to build the Community Church on the corner of Baristo and Cahuilla roads, designed by William Charles Tanner, the designer of The Desert Inn and O'Donnell House. The important landmark building would be the site of worship for Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower

on their visit to Palm Springs in 1952.

By May 1936 Wilson's work garnered the attention of The Desert Sun, "The Raymond Wilson Company will start construction next week on their own office building on Palm Canyon Drive, north of and adjoining the Reid Hospital and Clinic (north of Granvia Valmonte.) The building will have five offices, fronting either on Palm Canyon Drive or the large patio. The rear of the building will be two stories in height, with apartments above. Plans call for a duplicate of this unit on the north, to be built next year. The offices will be occupied by Charles O. Matcham, local representative of Earl Heitschmidt, Architect; Raymond R. Wilson Co., contractors; an Interior decorator, and a realtor."

The Wilsons were keeping the finest of company and building homes for those friends. "The Raymond Wilson Company began construction this week on a pretentious home for Mr. and Mrs. Thos. A. O'Donnell, next to the O'Donnell Golf Course and near the aviary. The new residence will be completely air-conditioned. The O'Donnell's are at present living in their hillside home overlooking the Desert Inn and which, it is said, is on Desert Inn property."

The list of important personages for whom Wilson built homes, often designed by Matcham, is long. Harold Vance, the vice-president of Studebaker, William F. Prisk, owner of the Long Beach Press-Telegram, George McManus, cartoonist and creator of the comic strip "Bringing Up Father," and William T. Walker, a Detroit capitalist, were among his clients.

The newspaper monitored his work. "The Raymond R. Wilson Co. has been extremely busy during the past year constructing some very fine homes, and the prospects are for a very busy spring and summer. Mr. Wilson stated yesterday that the demand is for a better class of homes that have been constructed here in the past."

Mrs. Tom O'Donnell, Winnifred, was chairwoman of the building committee for the Palm Springs Woman's Club and naturally engaged Wilson to realize the design of architect John Porter Clark for the club. Wilson Construction would build many other commercial and civic projects including the Church of St. Paul, Episcopal.

Mrs. Wilson was equally engaged in the community as her husband, hosting innumerable functions for philanthropic causes, all generously covered by the society pages of the newspaper, along with the Wilsons' appearances at the tony Racquet and Polo clubs, and their extensive summer travels to Europe and Hawaii, and back to Bel-Air.

In 1965 Hazel Eckhart Wilson donated \$1 million to UCLA for a wing of the new Health Sciences building, putting her fortune to further good use, and in the service of building and construction that had been so much of her life with her second husband, who survived her passing in 1968.

The history of the desert these days is often told in terms of architects and architecture. But those buildings came into existence through crucially important contractors and builders like Raymond Wilson.

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