

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Cahuilla-Hills in Palm Desert started with \$5

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

"One cannot expect too much for five dollars," Catherine Venn noted in July 1950 for Randall Henderson's *Desert Magazine*. One would certainly not expect five acres of land for five dollars, but that's exactly what Catherine Venn got.

"It was a rainy morning in January 1943, when I read a small item in a Los Angeles newspaper stating that Uncle Sam was opening certain public lands on the desert for 5-acre homestead leases—jackrabbit homesteads they were called. I lost no time in splashing across the street from my office in the city hall to the top floor of the post office building where the U.S. Land Office was located. A half hour later I had deposited a five-dollar bill as my entry fee on a certain (bit) of terrain out somewhere on the Southern California desert."

Venn contemplated it further, really not knowing what to expect, whatever the price. "Five acres of desert terrain could well be a shifting sand dune, a heap of boulders, the middle of a wash or the rocky slope of a mountain."

According to Lou Bellisi of PublicLands.org, the Small Tract Act of 1938 was designed to dispose of "useless" federal lands by leasing up to five acres of public land to applicant citizens for recreational purpose or use as a home, cabin, camp, health, convalescent, or business site. The applicant was supposed to make improvements to his or her claim by constructing a small dwelling within three years of the lease. And with that improvement, the applicant could file for a patent—the federal government's form of a deed—purchasing the parcel for the appraised price (on average \$10 to \$20 an acre) at the regional land office, thus putting "worthless" land into private hands and on the property tax rolls. Most of the available parcels were on the desert and the practice was given the sobriquet of "jackrabbit homesteading" and in the midcentury it took off, fueled by the return of veterans from WWII and by the sudden availabil-



In this undated photo, Catherine Venn's homestead is seen in what is now Palm Desert. PROVIDED BY THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT

ity of building materials that coincided with the end of the war.

The Los Angeles Times called the phenomena "one of the strangest land rushes in Southern California history." Hundreds of applicants flooded regional land offices managed by the Bureau of Land Management after reading how simple it was to file a claim, just as Catherine Venn had done.

Hoarding her gasoline rations allowed a drive to the desert in search of her grab bag parcel. To her delight, her five acres "proved to be fairly level except for a slice of wash, part of a knoll, and nearly all of a little rock hill" for which she would name her new land. Fortunately, a fellow homesteader had bulldozed a road nearby making Rock Hill accessible from the highway, in what is now Cahuilla Hills in Palm Des-

ert, Section 36.

In order to "prove up" the lease and obtain the land patent, improvements of at least \$300 were required by the federal government. "One Saturday...I saw a little cabana parked on a Los Angeles business lot. The thought came to me that something like this might be the temporary housing solution for Rock Hill without crippling my budget too badly. The little midget of a house was 8 x 15 feet and boasted four windows."

Venn had a strong hankering to leave hectic city life behind in favor of the wide-open desert. The miniscule manse would suffice, but how to get it to Rock Hill? "I didn't have the heart to ask any of the menfolk I knew to be my house mover, and believe me, none volunteered. And I could have shipped the cabana parcel post for what one outfit

wanted to charge for moving it to the desert. I decided to be my own house mover and haul the cabana...."

Venn's adventures with the house trailer in tow made for amusing reading when *Desert Magazine* published her account. But her sheer bravery in relocating from a comfortable city existence to dry camping on the desert alone, was even more intriguing. Once a month for six months, the magazine published an installment of her "Diary of a Jackrabbit Homesteader."

In the articles, Venn vividly recounts learning the names of the varied plants on her parcel, making peace with the creatures with whom she was surrounded, becoming acquainted with the few other neighboring homesteaders, and marveling at the unsurpassed glory of the desert. Her story is truly remarkable.

Another intrepid desert explorer, artist Kim Stringfellow traced Venn's journey and the impact of the Small Tract Act in a stunning little book which elucidates this history and then photographs the remains of the pop-up, little jackrabbit habitations built all over the desert. Additionally, Stringfellow has created a confection of Venn's cabana for Desert X, installed behind the Palm Springs Art Museum in Palm Desert.

One can peek through the windows into an idyllic past. Furnished with a comfortable bed, some books (the most important of companions), a typewriter and a rudimentary kitchen which boasts teacups that hint at quiet repose, the cabana seems perfectly complete. Peering into the simple abode, beautifully recreated with period appointments, it's easy to imagine this simple desert existence, sublime in its minimal necessities, as infinitely superior to modern city life.

And it is delicious to know that while Venn didn't expect too much, her price-less adventure had begun for the modest sum of five dollars.

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.