

PALM SPRINGS HISTORY

Tony Burke: Living a fine, but modest life

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The original caption under the photograph read, "The world's greatest scientist...Albert Einstein and his wife, Elsa, are pictured above on the grounds of Palm Springs' El Mirador Hotel in February, 1933." Years later at Einstein's death, The Desert Sun newspaper again carried the picture and explained, "Einstein, recuperating at the desert spa from Nazi persecutions, was revealed to have made a prediction at El Mirador that his famed theory of relativity would lead to the birth of the wonders of the Atomic Age. Palm Springs realtor Tony Burke, former El Mirador publicist, made the revelation at a luncheon gathering.... Burke, the only photographer permitted to snap the Einsteins during their month-long stay, lensed the photo here."

Tony Burke did indeed snap the photo of Einstein, after inviting him to the El Mirador with the clever idea of gaining publicity for the small desert town and the hotel. Einstein had been staying in the early 1930s at The Willows with his friend Samuel Untermyer. It was the biggest thing to have ever happened in Palm Springs, and Burke knew it was newsworthy.

At the time, Burke said the physicist detested photographers and eschewed publicity. When cornered, according to Burke, Einstein would grimace and make clicking sounds in mockery. The world's newspapers and magazines inadvertently learned a lot about Palm Springs while trying to photograph Einstein.

Burke gave the famous scientist a tour of the town and surrounding desert. Einstein was in awe of the Palm Canyon where he was able to wander through the oasis and appreciate the vastness of the mountains and the sky. Burke earned enough trust and good will to be able to pose Albert and Elsa Einstein in the cactus garden under the El Mirador tower for the image he would send to newspapers around the globe. Not only would Palm Springs come to the attention of the world, Burke's protean career was launched.

Burke is described as having "a brogue as thick as London pea soup fog." The Desert Sun recounted years later, "The former British cavalry rider, who served the Crown astride his sturdy steed, came to this desert oasis by a circuitous path. After World War I, the handsome Briton found himself doing riding bits for English Films. In 1923, Burke sailed for the USA and emerged from the train in Los Angeles wearing his plus-fours, his Oxford accent, and the good manners of Jolly Old England."

His movie business friends got him work in Hollywood as a part-time actor, assistant director and frequent "scenario plotter" and during the summers he was a sales manager of cabin sites at Lake Arrowhead. There he met a chap from Palm Springs who invited him to join his real estate office in the desert for the winter. "He accepted. The year was 1929, and Burke ever since has been as much a part of this area as the



Photograph of Albert and Elsa Einstein taken in 1933 by Tony Burke at the El Mirador Hotel. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

daily pink sunrise over the blue mountains."

Despite the Depression, the El Mirador was a happy getaway for Hollywood elite, and Burke was in the company of the most famous Golden Era movie stars, business tycoons and lucky locals. Together with Frank Bogert, fellow horseman and photographer at the hotel, Burke imagined making Palm Springs famous and putting it on the map. "We knocked out the idea that Palm Springs had to be in Florida."

Burke wrote a letter home to London in January 1930 about the celerity and flexibility required by the exceptionally hard times.

"I've been fit and well and happy all along — so don't ever worry about my physical condition or well being. By the latter, I mean my mode of living, as I live in the best surroundings, among the charmingest folk and always have the finest foods — although I haven't had much money making luck yet. I've learned to understand what Mr. Gordon Selfridge once told me — 'It isn't money you need but to be where money is.' I'm living up to that, so never worry that I might be ragged and hungry 6,000 miles away, will you?"

Burke recounted the reverberations of the stock market crash of 1929, "Well — you know the panic that hit this amazing country of sudden ups and downs last

autumn... It naturally had its effect out West. Everybody — big and little — had gambled for four or five years, and suddenly came up with a jolt. Horns were drawn in and money wasn't flowing so rapidly. That hit real estate buying and if yours truly wasn't somewhat versatile and on his toes he'd have been as hungry as some of the poor salesmen who are still seeking other jobs."

"I attached myself to the luxurious El Mirador Hotel and made all my excellent meals, \$150.00 a month, and all photographic and publicity expenses for publicizing the place. Mixed with the rich and famous and have won a reputation as a host, a dancer, 'that nice Englishman' and 'won't you call on us when you come into Los Angeles or Seattle or Chicago or Timbuktu?' They all want to marry me off to some 'charming girl or heiress or daughter.' I know how the Prince of Wales feels, poor chap.... By the way, I'm local correspondent to the LA Times and will send you a few clippings of my stories. Am likely to be Associated Press representative too soon."

He further reported on his finances, "So many thanks for the £3 you...sent me. It came in very handy indeed, as my new job hadn't started then, and I'm caught up with nearly all my obligations from the leaner times. I'm not meaning regarding my living conditions, as I always manage to live well, but regarding money."

And despite lack of money he imagined great prospects for his future, "One never grows old here. Of course, it's possible to dissipate and make a fool of oneself here as anywhere else, but, the sun and clear air is so grand that one lives outdoors all the time."

"You see, it's worse in England, as one can't adapt oneself to other jobs there so easily as here — if you're a go-getter. No money here but I've a chance of hitting it suddenly and live like a millionaire in the meantime. Riding good horses, eating good food, meeting fine and interesting people, working at something I love — writing and publicity — and healthy outdoor conditions."

Go-getter Burke would go on to see the desert become internationally famous and have the rewarding real estate career he'd hoped for himself. Life on the desert in the meantime was wonderful beyond even his exuberant imagination.

Burke eventually moved to Rancho Mirage buying a house on Avenue 38. The ordinary name was anathema to Burke. He was part of the successful campaign in Riverside County to change the name of Avenue 38 to Wonder Palms Road. As reported in the paper, "Avenue 38 smacks too much of the big city and lacks the imagination required for the naming of our desert roads in America's foremost desert resort," scoffed Tony Burke, real estate broker and long time Palm Springs enthusiast."

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