

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Humorist Bennett Cerf loved books, laughter

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The Desert Sun summarized the allure of the valley in June 1953, “Sun, sand and stars...celestial or Hollywood...are some of the important ingredients that make Palm Springs the nation’s foremost resort. And perhaps a large part of the glamor attached to the name of Palm Springs is due to the fact that it is the mecca of celebrities. Many of the nicest homes in the Village are owned by VIP’s...of radio, stage, screen, industry...and, of course, society...and the telephone directory lists many names that are to be found in the Blue Book, financial reports, or fan magazines. During the season every issue of the Desert Sun has carried its quota of pictures and stories of visiting notables and a check of the files shows an amazing list of ‘Who’s Who’ that have been here this year.” The article goes on to list scores of names, punctuated by commas, interrupted by a singular sentence, “Bennett Cerf was here.”

Cerf, the co-founder of the publisher Random House, wasn’t new to the desert. He’d come west from Manhattan in the 1930s and stayed at the B-Bar-H Ranch, starting a yearly tradition of visiting the desert, sometimes staying with his friend Frank Sinatra or at the La Quinta Hotel.

He’d become famous, following in the tradition of Mark Twain and Will Rogers, by gently poking fun at American society and stupidity. He venerated reading and books, and hoped the American public cared as much as he did. Cerf authored dozens of books and hundreds of articles meant to elicit laughter. Will Rogers once pointed out that “Everything is funny—as long as it happens to somebody else.” Cerf was a careful observer of those happenings and recorded them for the amusement of his readers.

In September 1954, The Desert Sun inaugurated its full-page editorial section and introduced its readers to five new features, including a column by Bennett Cerf. The paper proudly proclaimed that “humor is supplied by the master joke-teller of them all, Bennett Cerf, whose ‘Try and Stop Me,’ is one of the best-read features in Sunday newspaper magazine sections.”

Cerf’s humor was clever and universal; often featuring playful language. The column featured quips and aphorisms, “Advertisement: Attractive kitten seeks position purring in a nice little girl’s lap. Will also do light mouse work!”

“Gross ignorance is 144 times worse than ordinary ignorance.”

“Politicians are like ships: noisiest when lost in a fog.”

“Middle age is when your old classmates are so grey and wrinkled and bald they don’t recognize you.”

He penned rhymes with underlying social commentary, “There once was a student named Bessor, whose knowledge grew lessor and lessor. It at last grew so small, he knew nothing at all, and today’s he’s



Two humorists and publishers in La Quinta: Harry Oliver (left) and Bennett Cerf (right).

COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

a college professor!”

He told pithy jokes, anecdotes, riddles and “atrocious” puns.

“Judge: I’ll just fine you ten dollars this time, but if it happens again tomorrow, I’ll throw you into jail. First offender (an inveterate punster): I get it, Your Honor. Fine today, cooler tomorrow.”

He created tiny stories, “There’s a cop with a sense of humor in Pensacola, Florida. Near an important intersection he’s put up a sign reading, ‘For that Run-Down Feeling, Try Crossing Here Against the Light.’”

Cerf wrote about his famous friend and fellow comedian, Jack Benny. Jack’s “fanatical nursing of a buck is wildly exaggerated in his radio characterization, his sense of values has never been upset by great success. At a fancy night club in New York, a bill for \$57 for a single round of drinks sent him moaning into the streets. His companion was even more completely undone. ‘What are you kicking about?’ demanded Jack. ‘I paid the tab, didn’t I?’ ‘I know,’ agreed the companion (who happened to be myself), ‘but I reached for it.’”

In the desert, Cerf teased about Benny’s golfing skills at Tamarisk Country Club. He laughed with comedians desert-regulars Danny Kaye and George Burns. And sought out fellow humorist, Harry Oliver. After casting about looking for Oliver for several years, he finally tracked him down.

Oliver recounted “Bennett asked me if I could come

right out because he had a golf game at Thunderbird and was catching the afternoon plane to New York. I gathered up a few of my relics, changed from shorts to khaki suit, pulled on my prospecting books, got out my pipe and black hat, and hurried over in my 1928 station wagon.” When Oliver got to the La Quinta Hotel, Bennett was dressed in casual desert shorts and a colorful Hawaiian shirt. Cerf quipped about the photograph taken by his wife of the encounter, “In close proximity but contrasting habiliments.”

The two humorists and publishers hit it off. “I had expected to stay a half an hour, but Bennett said he could play golf anytime. Time was forgotten...the sun stood still and we swapped stories for three hours. The more we told, the better it got and the more we laughed, I don’t know who had the most fun.” Cerf would subsequently profile Oliver in his own writings, recounting the desert rat’s amusing anecdotes.

Seeing the mirthful side of life didn’t preclude Cerf’s serious efforts as an ardent advocate for free speech, challenging authorities over censorship. “Most of the things that are supposed to be so objectionable in books are things that every teenager, in the United States, not only knows, but has talked about at length in school, on the way home from school... One of the greatest threats facing book publishing, and the entire country for that matter, is censorship.”

And with the books he chose to have Random House publish, he contributed greatly to scholarship and citizenship. “I think the right to read, is one of our inherent rights, and I think that people in America today are intelligent enough to decide for themselves what they want to read, without being told, by self-appointed people, you must not read this, or you cannot read this.”

In the desert, Nancy Sinatra attributed the idea of writing a biography about her father to Cerf. The Chicago Tribune reported the story, “It started at dinner one night in 1965 with Sinatra, his then-wife Mia Farrow, and publisher Bennett Cerf. Farrow was complaining about ‘all of the nastiness in the press’ over their difference in age [Sinatra was 50, she was 20] when Cerf said, ‘You’d better write a book about your father, Nancy, and tell the true story—once and for all. Think seriously about it. You have a responsibility. Nancy said she knew by the look on her father’s face she had to write his story one day.’”

Cerf would go on to become a fixture on television and even more famous than before, bringing laughter to huge audiences. The bibliophile ironically also loved television, which was unfortunately supplanting reading altogether. Cerf wryly observed, “There is a mass of people, we might as well admit, who if they weren’t watching television, would be doing absolutely nothing else.”

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