

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Gardner McKay's time in the desert

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Years before Connie Stevens, Troy Donahue and Stefanie Powers made it compulsory for every college student in America to spend a "Palm Springs Weekend," there was another uproarious weekend party in Rancho Mirage at a newly reopened hotel.

Touted as "the finest accommodations - heated pool, refrigerated air conditioning throughout. Game and terrace room. Beautifully landscaped. Intimate cocktail lounge," the Whispering Waters Hotel had just been purchased and "redecorated" by a bunch of Hollywood glamour types. "Join the fun entertainment featuring top Hollywood, TV and motion picture stars ... You'll also enjoy continental cuisine and cocktails in our newly redecorated dining room and lounge."

Among the famous television and "picture personalities" on hand to celebrate at Whispering Waters Hotel in November 1960 was Gardner McKay. McKay was new to acting. He joined the owners - established movie stars and some of the best-looking faces on television, Dennis Weaver, Hugh O'Brian and Lloyd Bridges - for the weekend festivities.

A complete unknown, McKay burst onto the scene just a year before on the cover of Life Magazine with a headline that read: "How About Him, Girls? The New Challenger for American Good Looks." McKay was exceedingly handsome but had more to him than just a pretty face.

McKay came from a patrician East Coast family and grew up in Paris, attended Cornell University, dropped out after two years and took up photography and sculpture, making money modeling. He met Richard Avedon, who invited him to go back to Paris for a photoshoot with model Suzy Parker in 1956. The Avedon images led to a Town and Country magazine feature, which bought him an agent and a trip to Hollywood. His good looks earned him a bit part in the movie "Raintree County" with Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift, and he appeared in episodes of "The Thin Man" TV series.

He was "discovered" by Dominick Dunne in a coffee shop reading a book of poetry. It was 1959 and Dunne was the co-executive producer of a television series called "Adventures in Paradise," created by the late James Michener based on his writings about sailing the islands of the South Pacific. Dunne described his find to the head of Fox Television as "a little Gary Cooper, a little Cary Grant, a little Ty Power and a lot of Errol Flynn." He was, Dunne said at the time, "in the parlance of the town, nobody, absolutely nobody, but his attitude declared that he was somebody. I dropped my Fox business card on his table and said, 'If you're interested in discussing a television series, call me.'"



Fox Television publicity photo of Gardner McKay, shirtless and sailing. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Gambling on McKay's arresting pulchritude, they gave him the part. At 6 foot, 5 inches tall, it didn't hurt that he very much looked like a dashing sea captain and actually knew how to sail.

The early reviews were scathing, but Dunne recalled the reviews didn't matter. "Critics said Gardner was wooden, and he was, but that didn't matter either ... The camera took to him, and he took to the camera. People loved his looks, so each week we'd figure out a reason for him to remove his T-shirt ... That may not sound racy now, considering what gets by, but Gardner McKay stripped to the waist, showing hair below the belly button was as racy as it could get back then, and girls and gays in great numbers tuned in to stare at him."

And stare at him they did, despite critics joking about his acting, calling him serious or stiff, in what would be repeated so often it would now be classified as a meme. He was devastatingly handsome. Also, the shows featured exotic scenery and premises, like the episode "Sink or Swim," where a dastardly crime is interspersed with fun and fluffy scenes of comely ladies modeling bathing suits. It was set in Tahiti after all. There was something for the imagination in every show. McKay received more fan mail than all the other actors at the studio put together. And most of the requests were for photos of him shirtless, which happened regularly on the show.

Dunne recalled: "The buzz of the commissary was that Gardner's dressing room had been visited by every starlet on the lot, usually during the lunch break ... Gardner was a classy guy - good goods, as they used to say. Came from money. Park Avenue. Social Register. Spoke French."

"The series lasted three years. Then Gardner did a very interesting thing: he ended his acting career ... the very next day he had a call from George Cukor, who ... asked Gardner to play the romantic lead opposite Monroe. It was the dream of an actor's lifetime - the great George Cukor, the legendary Marilyn Monroe - but it came a day too late. Gardner had made up his mind. He declined the role. Cukor was flabbergasted."

McKay retreated to the deserts of Libya and Egypt, sailed to South America and moved back to Paris. "Adventures in Paradise" was an even greater hit in France. According to Dunne, "It played three nights a week at six o'clock. There were complaints that French women were so entranced with watching Gardner ... that they stopped cooking dinner."

When McKay was nearly 40 years old, a newspaper man remarked on his perennial bachelorhood. He reportedly responded: "Yes, I just have affairs." The list of beautiful women with whom he was romantically linked is long: Julie Newmar, Ann-Margret, Joan Collins, Suzanne Pleshette, Connie Stevens, Barbara Bouchet, Dorothy Provine, Jo Morrow, Loretta Swit, Suzy Parker, Tuesday Weld and countless others.

McKay, the athlete, artist and actor, would subsequently become a first-class author, writing many plays and novels. He won prizes, was a literary critic for the Los Angeles Herald Examiner and taught writing classes at UCLA, USC and the University of Alaska. And he would finally marry and retire to Hawaii.

McKay crossed paths with many who made the desert a big part of their lives. He played in the TV television series "The Thin Man"; the original star, William Powell lived in Palm Springs for years. Darryl Zanuck, the Fox movie studio mogul held court at his house here. McKay entertained locals with Dennis Weaver, Hugh O'Brian, Chuck Connors and Lloyd Bridges at the Whispering Waters Hotel in Rancho Mirage on that important first weekend. And he seriously dated Connie Stevens, whose name would become synonymous with the getaway movie that started the college spring break craze.

Ironically, Gardner McKay's name and the notion of sailing away to some romantic party outpost is the refrain in a 1983 song, "We Are the People Our Parents Warned Us About" by the latest arrival in the desert, Jimmy Buffett.

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.