

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Tunney improved desert land development

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Gene Tunney, the heavyweight champion of the world, spent a lot of time in Palm Springs, and as a result, so did his son John. The familiarity with the desert would serve the area well when the younger Tunney was elected to the House of Representatives from California's 38th district in 1964.

Columnist Bennett Cerf wrote of his arrival at the Capitol: "One of the most promising new congressmen in Washington these days is California's John Tunney, son of the ex-heavyweight champ, Gene Tunney. While campaigning at a street corner in the desert metropolis of El Centro in 118-degree heat, young Mr. Tunney had a valuable piece of advice whispered to him by a well-wisher of 75. 'Son,' was the message, 'you'd better finish up your speech in some air-conditioned building. Nobody in this town is going to vote for a darn fool who campaigns outdoors on a day like this!'"

But vote for Tunney they did. Three times. Tunney was a naturally gifted politician. His mother, Polly Lauder Tunney, was American aristocracy related to Andrew Carnegie, who married the handsome heavyweight champion and raised their kids in Connecticut. John graduated from Yale and studied law at University of Virginia, where he roomed with future Senator Ted Kennedy. (They would remain lifelong friends; Tunney even being consulted over the Chappaquiddick disaster.)

Tunney's unusually intimate knowledge of the desert meant his detailed involvement in the community. In 1964, The Desert Sun reported when members of a local committee wanted to erect a memorial to the assassinated President John F. Kennedy, "Tunney and singer Frank Sinatra, who was a personal friend of Kennedy, agreed to speak" at its installation. He presented copies of Israeli bibles on behalf of the United Jewish Appeal to Sinatra and his daughter Nancy to thank them for entertaining at a fundraising dinner at the Riviera Hotel.

With Phil and Jo Regan he attended the opening of Howard Manor in 1966. That same year, he attended an invita-



Frank Sinatra receives honorary Cathedral City Mayorship on May 30, 1972, from U.S. Senator John Tunney, a longtime friend of both the singer and the Kennedy family PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

tional campaign cocktail party "at the Mr. and Mrs. Peter Siva home (with) over 300 guests ... in support of Ernest Robles, Democratic nominee in the new 43rd Congressional District ..."

The paper noted that Phil Harris, bon vivant bandleader, "was in rare form at the testimonial dinner honoring Congressman John Tunney." He anticipated the growing scarcity of natural resources in the region and pressed for funding for studies of the increasing salinity of the Salton Sea. He also worked to raise funds for the flood control and wrote a bilingual education bill. Regardless of political affiliation, his youthful energy was undeniable.

The Desert Sun reported in December 1965: "More than 500 persons turned out last night to a \$50-a-plate dinner to hear U.S. Postmaster General Lawrence F. O'Brien praise Rep. John Tunney as one of the leading builders of the Great Society."

Tunney helped negotiate the land lease in Section 14 with owner Elizabeth

Monk for the new, desperately needed post office. "Growth Demands It" read the headline regarding the project.

The article explained: "A bigger, better post office will mean more efficient mail handling and overall mail service for the people ... One likely spot for a new post office is on Section 14 behind the Spa Hotel. No definite action has been taken on an exact location, but Section 14 is the place thought to be most suitable."

The tenants on Monk's 2.5 acres on Amado were served notices to vacate, as reported by the paper in June 1969, "paving the way for groundbreaking and construction ... Notices to vacate have been delivered to eight families who live on the land, as well as the city of Palm Springs and Edgar McCoubrey, both using the land for parking ... the tenants will be given 30 days to vacate the property, but have known about the move for the past year or so."

Tunney demonstrated how deeply he understood the local predicament of Indian land by authoring a tax bill. "As it stands now, lessees such as the Spa Hotel, Plaza Motors and Canyon Country Club pay a possessory tax each year on the Indian land on which their businesses are located. The bill proposes to pay an amount equal to taxes which would be imposed on Indian lands if they were not held in trust."

Tunney further championed the rights of Indian owners by focusing attention on the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

In May 1967 the paper reported "Both Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall and Rep. John Tunney have, in the current matter of Indian trust funds, emphasized a point which this entire community should bear fully in mind: Investigation of the handling of those funds in no way indicates a blanket accusation of the Indians' guardians and conservators.

Many of those guardians and conservators have been and are our good neighbors in Palm Springs, valuable contributors to our community life ... Congressman Tunney, in turn, pointed out that Udall's statement that the issue would be investigated ... 'should not be construed as an indictment of the integrity of all conservators, guardians and trustees ...' that investigation should be

pursued with thoroughness, without the slightest effort to gloss over any misdeeds, no matter who is involved. But if there be guilt, let it fall only on those who have earned it. But until the facts are in, all of us should withhold judgment of any individual."

While Tunney was hard at work in the weeds of legislative and oversight issues in the mid-'60s, the 1964 California Senate race was being hotly contested.

The Desert Sun editorial page opined: "Three weeks from today, the voters of Palm Springs, along with the voters of every other city and hamlet in the state, will go to the polls to choose a man to represent California in the United States Senate ... California needs a full-time Californian in the nation's upper legislative halls. George Murphy has been in public and civic life in this state for more than 30 years ...

"He is a Californian who will champion California ... Pierre Salinger's surprise entry in the state's political arena is still the subject of much conjecture. Who wanted him in the state's U.S. senate race? Who advanced the money to finance his campaign? Why was Gov. Brown so eager to appoint him to the vacant senate seat so that the billboards blazon forth with 'retain' Pierre Salinger as senator? These questions have not been answered satisfactorily. Salinger's injection into California politics, like that of Robert Kennedy ... into New York's and John Tunney ... into Riverside County's have caused them all to be termed carpetbaggers."

Republican Murphy won in 1964, only to be challenged in 1970 by none other than Democrat Tunney, who looked every bit as if he could have been born a Kennedy. Murphy was asked before the election to evaluate his opponent and was gracious: "I think he is an exceptionally attractive young man ..." Despite being labeled a carpetbagger, Tunney prevailed and would continue to use his knowledge of minutiae of desert issues during his term in the Senate.

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