

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# 'Mr. Golf' Milt Hicks was integral to desert growth and development

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Once asked by a golf partner how to make a putt, Milt Hicks advised, "Keep it low." Known in the valley as "Mr. Golf," Hicks was famous on the links and in the board rooms that governed them. And he certainly knew how to make a putt.

Hicks had been an original O'Donnell Golf Club board member, a director of Thunderbird Country Club and chairman of its first pro-am tournament in 1951. With Ben Shearer he thought up and worked out the first Palm Springs Golf Classic and was its first chairman. He was also chairman of the Ryder Cup matches, which gave Eldorado Country Club and the desert its first solid international attention. And with a handful of friends, he started Indian Wells Country Club.

Hicks was indeed a good golfer (he was the Palm Springs Invitational Champion in 1930 and 1940), but the sobriquet "Mr. Golf" was really more about his penchant for having fun and his charming demeanor which made him beloved and quite famous among the very famous.

Notice of his untimely passing at age 52 made the front page of *The Desert Sun*, above the masthead in April 1966. President Eisenhower expressed public condolences. There was an outpouring of grief from all of the major golf clubs. Celebrities like Arnold Palmer, Bing Crosby, Charlie Farrell, Phil Harris, Bob Hope, James Garner, Gordon MacRae, Dean Martin, Randolph Scott and Desi Arnaz organized a memorial golf tournament and planned a statue and fountain to be installed at the new Hugh Kaptur-designed Palm Springs Municipal Golf Course.

Hicks had grown up with the desert he loved. Born in San Francisco, he moved with his family to a home-stead in Desert Hot Springs when he was just one year old. He went to grammar school where Katherine Finchy described him as a "cheerful little desperado, riding wild burros at recess." As a teen, he became a bell-hop at the Oasis Hotel and had a shoeshine stand. He went to prep school in Ojai and then Loyola University, and when World War II came along, he enlisted and served with the 77th Seabees Battalion in the Pacific.

The *Desert Sun* featured a character sketch of Hicks in 1951: "A completely gregarious personality with a love for sports that nearly dominates. A dash of satire that blunts the sharp edges of all that is cruel and hard in life. A perpetual smile with a spiritually up-lifting wise crack for both friend and stranger and you have the delineation of a person named Milton Hicks, Villager extraordinaire.

"It is said that the hardship of war, the galling travail and imminent disaster that may spell death at any mo-



**Milt Hicks monkeys around on the links at Thunderbird Country Club in Rancho Mirage.**

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ment will take the boy out of the man. Wars, the old-fashioned kind or the new ones with jet propelled airplanes cleave the faces of the men who participate in them with bitter lines and cultivates the beds of all their thinking with acid-eating cynicism. Former Chief Petty Officer Milton Hicks came back from two years of service in the South Pacific and rarely even uttered a word about his experience. He was still the same fun-loving Milt Villagers had known as child, youth and man."

The story continued that the greatest tribute ever paid Hicks was "uttered several years ago by Village Surveyor Gerald K. Sanborn. Sanborn served in the same military outfit with former Chief Petty Officer Milton Hicks in the malaria disease-ridden islands of the Pacific during World War II. He repeated the same words the other day. 'I'll just say this and I'm saying a big mouthful when I say it too. When the going was tough, tough enough to break the minds of some men and others had reached the near breaking point — Milt would come up with some wise crack, some joking re-

mark that dug deep. If it hadn't been for him more of us would have gone nuts."

There was more to Hicks than just a hail fellow well met. He played a big part in the growth and development of the desert. He had a string of rental properties along Highway 111. He'd put together the money and the connections to build the new Holiday Inn on Palm Canyon Drive.

He assumed the responsibilities of president of the first building material company in the village from his father, Alvah Hicks. "Ninety percent of the homes and other structures standing in Palm Springs and in surrounding communities have had all or part of the materials that went into their erection purchased at the Palm Springs Builder's Supply Company."

When Hicks returned from the war the company had in operation two trucks and employed 14 men. At the time of the article, the company was operating 16 trucks and employed 70 men with an annual payroll in excess of \$250,000. Young Hicks started work as a common laborer in the yard. He toted lumber, loaded trucks and delivered products to construction sites. "His father did not pamper the son—he worked and hard."

In 1949 Hicks was drafted by the Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce to serve as president. He accepted saying: "I have been assured by the officers and directors of the chamber that hence forth its policy will be wholly concerned with making Palm Springs the outstanding winter resort in the nation."

Under his leadership the chamber would promote recreation, sports and events with the aim of increasing tourist travel to the desert. He charted a course for the burgeoning town: "From now on business people in the Village may be assured of one thing and that is that the chamber will have as its motto: 'for' rather than 'against.' By that I mean the directors and officers have declared they will see that the activities of the chamber shall be strictly chamber business. We will not pick up the cudgel in fighting or campaigning for any pet grievance by any individual or minority group in the Village."

Hicks' all-business program was remarkably successful. Admired for his acumen, he was equally adored for his exuberance, especially about playing golf. The 1951 *Desert Sun* feature interviewed prominent citizens for their impressions of Hicks to understand his universal appeal. Frank Bogert summed it up best, "You can cut the rest of your questions short. Just write that Milt Hicks is the most popular kid on the desert hereabouts."

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