

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# The Limelight focused attention on local happenings

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The headline read: "There is no smallpox in Palm Springs." The article in *The Limelight* sought to stamp out misinformation being maliciously spread.

"Rumors and outside newspaper publicity to the effect that there is smallpox in Palm Springs are not true. There is no single case of this disease in Palm Springs or vicinity, nor has there been for nearly two weeks ... (when) a case of smallpox was discovered in the campground. This case was immediately isolated and sent to the Riverside County Hospital. Every inhabitant of this campground was vaccinated except for one individualist who refused vaccination and was in consequence quarantined. Staging a revolt against county health regulations, this individual took the matter up with his attorney in Long Beach who is reported to have said that he would split the town wide open with rumors of smallpox epidemic if his client was not released from quarantine.

"It is probable that the rumors, which have been rife outside of Palm Springs, emanate from this source. There have been no subsequent cases. No children from the family originally infected were pupils of the Palm Springs school. Individual cases of smallpox are not unusual at this time of year throughout the country. Palm Springs' single case has no community health significance whatever, and would have been no more than daily county health routine had it not received the malicious attention of the Long Beach attorney who was able to contact metropolitan newspapers with what looked like unusual desert resort news."

"Unusual desert resort news" was just what Priscilla Chaffey was interested in printing in her small independent newspaper, *The Limelight*. Chaffey had arrived in the desert (or as locals said back in the day, "on" the desert) in 1926, and during the height of the Depression cast about for something to do, her husband John having established himself as a Realtor.

The *Desert Sun* was new and was being produced in Banning by Harvey Johnson and Carl Bartko. Those gentlemen came to the desert about once a week to gather the local news. Chaffey thought that arrangement inadequate. She wanted local news and lots of it. She approached Johnson and Bartko, asking to handle the Palm Springs area for their concern.

Rebuffed and, in her telling, insulted, Chaffey was determined to start her own paper. *The Limelight* was wholly produced by Chaffey. She would walk the streets of the village relentlessly looking for news, reporting on the smallest details. She queried business owners and visitors alike.

Having studied journalism in college, she'd had a stint working for the *Riverside Enterprise*. Not just reporting, but every aspect of *The Limelight* was now her job: writer, editor, publisher, distributor. With \$47 to her credit, she convinced a printer in Indio to take a



**Priscilla and John Chaffey at the Polo Club in the 1930s. Priscilla was known for her exotic dress.**

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gamble on *The Limelight*. He would print it and she would pay him when it sold. After the first edition of *The Limelight* came off the press, the whole village celebrated at the *Desert Inn*. Nellie Coffman took the freshly printed paper out of Priscilla's hands and sold the very first edition.

Chaffey was colorful herself, even newsworthy. She dressed exotically, was a proponent of incorporation for cityhood, and she advocated for Indian rights and the abolition of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The stories carried in *The Limelight* were a mix of news, editorial comment and amusing vignettes. She offered advice for "persons of a dilatory procrastinating disposition who put off facing Christmas until Dec. 24. ... Too often in the past have we risked life and limb and exposed the body to evil viruses of every description — not to mention untold mental anguish, and the demoralizing toxins of fatigue, all these things we have sustained and more, in the foolish notion that we should go up to Los Angeles and do our Christmas shopping. And what happens? We return home, fit only for the psychiatrist and the masseuse, only to find that exactly the same stuff could have been bought in Palm Springs at the same price."

She offered extensive opinions and was a tireless booster for the town. "Some silly, ill-advised quibbler was working us over the day to the effect that Palm Springs was retrograding. The 'best people' don't come

here anymore, they are saying in sour tones. Overlooking the fact that all men are created equal according to the tenets of democracy as outlined by Abraham Lincoln, we snuffed and snorted through our nose in a belligerent and antisocial manner and said crossly, 'What is your definition of "best"?'

"Oh," he answered vaguely. "You know, well-known names, wealthy people." So, we are beating his head against the wall and saying words like John D. Rockefeller Jr., Floyd Odium and his record holding flying wife, Jackie Cochran. John Garfield, William Leeds, Howard Hughes, Irving Berlin. Bob Hope, naturally, and Jack Benny, and a whole battery of big steel masters who are feeling skittish about being mentioned, things being as they are in the steel industry ... our audience cried 'uncle.' If 'big' names are 'best' people, Palm Springs has had more of them this season than at any time in its history. The peculiar charm of the desert, healthful sun and peaceful days, seem to appeal to leaders in all walks of life. It always has."

The most popular part of the paper was the society page, and Chaffey decided to hire a society editor. There were important visitors, captains of industry and members of the blue book, the *Social Register*, visiting Palm Springs regularly from the rest of the country. Readers found it intriguing to see how the upper crust spent their holidays. Circulation increased.

The little paper offered headlines like: "Troubles Gather Thick & Fast For Al Wertheimer," explaining the notorious mobster's legal troubles, and "Junior Chamber, Movie Stars To Tangle In Donkey Classic," advertising "a host of notables scrambled aboard a herd of donkeys to take part in what promises to be the baseball game of all time."

Another noted: "Ping-Pong Match Draws Crowd of 200 at Del Tahquitz Sunday," with championship table tennis stars exhibiting their skills. And another, "P.S. Airport Transcontinental Terminus for Weekend as Rain Blankets Coast Cities," reported that "Palm Springs was the only port in California with fair skies above and the coastal gale reduced to a gentle zephyr."

"Altogether eight American Airlines planes and one Pan American plane found safe harbor at the foot of sheltering Mt. San Jacinto ... Several of the passengers upon alighting here said that had they known they were coming direct to Palm Springs, they would have planned to stop over for a few days. Among the distinguished passengers who took a plane from Palm Springs bound for the East was Howard Hughes, millionaire flyer, who abandoned his own plane temporarily in favor of American Airlines."

Chaffey's little local paper persisted for 18 years, competing with *The Desert Sun*, which would eventually acknowledge Chaffey's wisdom in concentrating local happenings.

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