

HISTORY

Rock Houses, Millers and Munchkins

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Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

The only tangible exports to New York from Palm Springs in 1938 were highly unusual. The *Limelight News* noted in January that year: "HCM Palm Springs, California — this is the signature along the selvage of thousands of yards of hand blocked cocktail napkins, table cloths, kerchiefs and yardage which have gone to Fifth Avenue shops this winter from the work shop of Helen Cooke Miller. Buyers are Saks Fifth Avenue and Bonwit Teller. These materials hailing from Palm Springs have had a window display in Saks all winter and the Palm Springs kerchiefs have found their way to Bermuda and Miami on the pretty heads of New York ladies.

"With the exception of newspaper publicity, Mrs. Miller's block print designs represent Palm Springs' only export ... Mrs. Miller's workshop is in the little Hopi stone house in Araby where she and Lee Miller have made their home since they were married five years ago. The house, with its vine covered terrace, is an informal clutter of various artistic impedimenta — drawing boards, pieces of sculpture (the work of Lee Miller), elevations of houses, ornament gourds, pottery, swatches of dyed material and material to be designed. There is a long metal tank through which the material passes and rollers from which it is suspended from the ceiling. There is a bright crackling fire in the huge fireplace and a wide, high view window across one side of the room which looks up the pass to San Geronio."

Ann Japenga, writing in 2019, says the Araby collection of buildings were called "Indian houses" by Lee and Helen Miller. The first house was completed by 1925. In 1929, *The Desert Sun* announced that Miller was building a Hopi Village on 20 acres of hillside he owned in Araby and "featured native rock, handcrafted doors, windows and shelves, handcrafted ironwork for the door latches and handmade fireplace tools and anvils. Some of the masonry around the houses was stamped with Hopi designs. There's a parallel equestrian motif, with horseshoes and tie



A view of Lee Miller's Rock Houses in the 1930s. PROVIDED BY THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

rings embedded in the concrete. The floors were a psychedelic swirl of green, yellow, blue and pink rock."

The building foundations were subterranean, making the interior of the buildings cool in the summers. Native rock was stacked and cemented into the very face of the mountain, hiding the edifice in plain sight and giving them a stature that seemed unusually short.

The *Limelight News* found the inhabitants and the site most unusual. "In the midst of all this is Helen Cooke Miller, slim, dark and pretty, looking a little shy and confused by earnest. The block print designs are simple and lively — little desert burros, cactus, mountains and desert. For the nautical minded there are designs of fish, sea horses and seaweed. Most prints are made on unbleached muslin by a special process used only by Mrs. Miller which is as much like developing a film as anything else. The sensitized matter is applied to this material through a fine screen, each block making a separate process — when that run is completed, it is washed in developer and the color gradually becomes apparent and strengthens. Col-

ored dye is not used at any stage of the work, thus there is no need for applying shellac on surfaces to remain white. When it is finished, colors are clear and absolutely fade-proof.

"Palm Springs' only export business is in the pleasant state of having, always, more orders than can be filled. The original and simple designs have a personality which has been recognized with enthusiasm by Easterners."

That those original designs would emanate from such distinctive buildings seems altogether fitting.

Lee Miller's vision for a Hopi village of stone houses tucked into the landscape was unusual even for the desert in the 1930s, which boasted all sorts of interesting characters attracted by the solitude and freedom of the wide-open spaces.

Francis Phillip Wuppermann was imported to the desert from New York by way of Hollywood. The character and character actor had a spectacularly successful career in film. By the mid-1930s Wuppermann had earned a rare, lifetime contract at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and had a firmly established screen

name of Frank Morgan.

On Sept. 22, 1938, Morgan was cast in the part that would immortalize him forever, the Wizard of Oz. He played multiple other parts in the film as well: the carnival huckster Professor Marvel, the gatekeeper at the Emerald City, the coachman of the carriage drawn by the Horse of a Different Color and the guard at the Emerald City that refuses Dorothy and her friends an audience with the Wizard. W.C. Fields had originally been chosen for the film but the studio, exasperated over protracted haggling about Fields' fee, cast Morgan.

A regular visitor to the desert and eventual longtime resident of Rancho Mirage in a ranch-style adobe house at 71845 Sahara Road, near Magnesia Falls, Morgan's presence combined with the diminutive appearance of Miller's Indian houses likely created the Palm Springs myth of "Munchkinville."

The term Munchkin was coined by author L. Frank Baum in 1900 with the publication of his book "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz." Baum scholars debate his inspiration for the name. He never explained how he got the word. "While she stood looking at the strange and beautiful sights, she noticed coming toward her a group of the queerest people she had ever seen.

They were not as big as the grown folk she had always been used to; but neither were they very small. In fact, they seemed about as tall as Dorothy, who was a well-grown child for her age, although they were, so far as looks go, many years older."

After the 1939 MGM movie, children in Palm Springs had no trouble imagining Munchkins inhabiting Lee Miller's rock houses, after all, the Wizard himself could be seen around town regularly. The original concept of an Indian village faded in memory supplanted by a new mythology and nomenclature. Finally designated this week as Class I Historic Sites by the Palm Springs City Council, the rock houses' true history is now recorded and preserved for posterity.

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