

HISTORY

Rudolph Schindler's strange and varied clients in the desert

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Frank Lloyd Wright, the influential and preeminent architect of the 20th century is quoted as remarking about his acolyte Rudolph Schindler: "Personally, I appreciate Rudolph. He is an incorrigible bohemian and refuses to allow the Los Angeles barber to apply the razor to the scruff of his neck. He also has peculiarly simple and effective ideas regarding his own personal conduct. I believe, however, that he is capable as an artist. I have found him a too complacent and therefore a rotten superintendent. The buildings that he has recently built in Los Angeles are well designed, but badly executed. I suspect him of trying to give his clients too much for their money. I should say that was his extreme fault in these circumstances of endeavoring to build buildings."

The quote is illustrative of Schindler in a few important ways: his extreme eccentricity and his unusual clientele. Much has been written about Schindler's "bohemian nature." The early 20th century was a time of intellectual pursuits, tolerance, sexual freedom and explorations of all sorts. Schindler embraced these trends and then some.

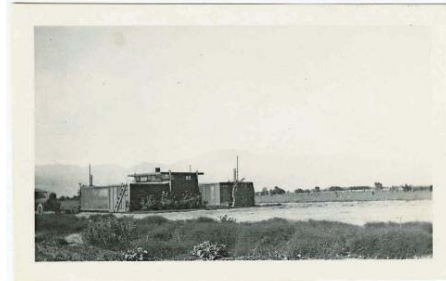
Schindler's clients are an interesting subject themselves. In the desert, they are an eccentric and varied and, in some cases, downright bizarre. But Schindler seems to have made the most of the opportunities to work. Luke Leuschner of the Historical Society of Palm Desert has documented their stories.

The most unusual of Schindler's clients in the desert was his first, Paul Popenoe. In 1898, the United States Department of Agriculture created a special program of explorers to travel the world in search of new food crops for the country to cultivate. According to Sarah Seekatz, writing for National Public Radio, "These men introduced the country to exotic specimens like the mango, the avocado and new varieties of sweet, juicy oranges."

Popenoe went in search of date palms in the Middle East in 1911 with his brother Wilson at the behest of their agriculturalist father. They returned with thousands of specimens of to plant in the Coachella Valley to inaugurate the date farming industry in Southern California.

Popenoe's knowledge of agriculture and early acknowledgement of Mendel's revolutionary ideas on the laws of inheritance would lead him to a career of plant exploration, heredity and eugenics. His prolific writings on eugenics and forced sterilization became particularly abhorrent after the Nazi holocaust, and Popenoe pivoted to concentrate on proper families and marriage which earned him the title of "father," and what is now routinely called marriage counseling.

Popenoe was clearly enchanted by the desert and commissioned a cabin from Schindler. The conservative, purportedly scientific Popenoe and the bohemi-



Paul Popenoe cottage in Indio in 1922 from R.M. Schindler papers, Architecture & Design Collection.
COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

an, free-living Schindler somehow collaborated. Modeled on Schindler's own King's Road house, the Popenoe cabin was completed in 1922 in Indio. It is widely considered to be the first building in the Coachella Valley of what is now known as modern design.

Schindler's talent won him the attention of other desert denizens, including Pearl McCallum McManus herself. In 1930 he drew up a subdivision of multiple houses for McManus and someone named Kopenlanoff, across from Del Tahquitz Hotel.

Female clients were not in short supply for Schindler. He had a commission in 1926 from Jessica Morgenthau for a prospective studio. Morgenthau was an antiques dealer from Pasadena and associate of Lois Kellogg, the wild, strong-willed heiress living a decidedly avant-garde lifestyle of which Schindler doubtless approved.

Kellogg was rich — filthy rich — and after coming from Chicago in 1912 for a winter stay at The Desert Inn, she became enthralled with the area, returning again and again until in 1919, when she purchased her first parcel of land in town, located south of Baristo on Palm Canyon Drive, just shy of Ramon Road. She dressed exotically, lived unconventionally, surrounded by a posse of exceptional women who were busy exploring their power and sexuality. And to support that lifestyle she built a Moroccan-inspired castle and aptly dubbed it Fool's Folly.

Maryon Toole also had an alternative lifestyle. In 1946, Schindler designed a house for Toole to be built in Palm Village, an unincorporated area that would become part of Palm Desert. Many desert dwellers with idiosyncratic or alternative lifestyles wanted privacy. Toole and her close friend Sharlie "Lee" Andrews accordingly left little historical record.

The house Schindler designed for them is its own legacy. It features stone walls that protrude into the interior of the house, seamlessly incorporating the outdoors. Large glass walls and clerestory windows and an enormous cantilevered roof were dramatic and

inventive. Schindler said: "the whole is shaded by an ample but lightly poised roof reminiscent of a giant oak leaf." The revolutionary but functional design fit his peculiarly private client.

Another unusual client of Schindler's was Harriet Cody. Cody arrived in Palm Springs in 1916, one of the significant pioneer women who created Palm Springs. She hailed from Philadelphia where she married a promising young architect, Harold William Bryant Cody, cousin of Buffalo Bill Cody, and moved to San Francisco with him for a job. When he contracted tuberculosis, the desert provided hope for his recovery.

Harold Cody was commissioned to be part of the design team working on the extensive remodel of the Mission Inn in Riverside. He was also hired by Kellogg to design and supervise construction of Fool's Folly. He suffered recurrent bouts of pneumonia and was unable to complete her project; he died in 1924.

Harriet Cody took the last of their savings and bought land. An accomplished horsewoman in both the English and Western traditions, she opened a livery stable to rent horses to guests staying at the Desert Inn. She also boarded horses for visitors that included movie cowboys like Tom Mix and Jack Holt who came to film movies in the desert. Cody realized she could not make a living just renting horses.

She bought four cottages from the California Exposition and opened a small hotel, the Casa Cody, located at 175 S. Cahuilla Road, now the oldest continuously operating hotel in the city of Palm Springs. In 1931, Schindler designed a residence for her that was never completed. In 1942 she asked him to draw up a Palm Springs Officer's Club for all servicemen who were stationed in the desert.

Hassell Donnell was one such serviceman. Discharged in 1925 due to ill health after 14 years of service, he was advised to go to the desert. According to the publication "Hi Desert Dreaming," Hassell and his wife, Lida, were motoring to California when "they heard of Twentynine Palms and decided to continue there, arriving by way of Amboy; resulting in their homesteading 100 acres..." The Donnells averred that their intentions were to stay for a year, but they never left.

The transplanted Easterners took root and started a small gasoline station for the convenience of their friends and a guest house called the Mission Inn. As time went by, the visitors and friends who returned outnumbered accommodations, so additions were made and the inn became known as Donnell's Desert Hotel. A small grocery was added, and the development of the town followed. In 1931, Schindler designed an expansion for the hotel. It was not ever realized as Hassell died in 1933, but Lida and her children persisted, as does the hotel.

Despite many of his designs being unrealized, Schindler and his distinctive crowd of clients left their imprimatur on the desert.

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