

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Exquisite Abernathy House was center of music, art

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His similarly named cousin was making national news a few years before James Logan Abernathy decamped from Kansas and moved to La Jolla with his wife, Zemula.

The Abernathy family of Kansas City was prominent and prosperous. Way back in 1856, James L. Abernathy and his siblings William and John founded Abernathy Brothers Furniture, a wholesale and retail furniture business in the thriving city on the Kansas side of the Missouri River. James was the most distinguished of the three brothers, having attained rank of lieutenant colonel in the Civil War and serving as mayor of Leavenworth for having banking and insurance concerns. Understandably, many of his descendants were named after him.

As the family was notable, all their doings, parties, occasions and nights on the town were newsworthy. So years later in 1938, when Carolyn Ridemour Abernathy filed an injunction with the court to stop her ex-husband James Logan Abernathy from marrying Chicago socialite Caryl Nicholson, the sister-in-law of actor and producer Orson Welles, it was front page stuff.

The New York Daily News reported: "Gold Coast marriage became a race between Dan Cupid and the Sheriff tonight with a prospective bridegroom in hiding and his debutante bride-to-be standing helplessly on the sidelines."

The sheriff went to the furniture company office and asked for James L. Abernathy. He was shown to an office. The sheriff summarized: "Then it was all up as far as serving the papers there, the man kicked the papers on the floor and told me I had the wrong man." He had served James L. Abernathy, II, the bridegroom's similarly named cousin.

Happily married, James Logan Abernathy, who had been erroneously served, moved to La Jolla with his unusually named wife and was safely out of the headlines. Zemula Abernathy died in 1951 and her husband, James Logan Abernathy, married Helen Beatty in 1957.

The winters get cold and damp in La Jolla, and the couple found their way along a well-worn path to Palm Springs where they would be featured in the newspaper regularly for their philan-



The Palm Springs International Jazz Festival will bring a joyous celebration to the valley May 14 and 15 as part of the Oasis Music Festival. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

thropy, swanky parties and, most importantly, for their exquisite house.

The masterpiece of a house was designed by master architect and bon vivant William Cody in 1962. Its L-shaped wings were stacked against a central pavilion recalling architect Richard Neutra's "pinwheel" floor plans in an exuberant answer to his Kaufmann house a short distance away. Each building wing was topped with a hipped roof finished with deliciously thick wood shake shingles surrounded by a lanai that luxuriously traced the footprint of the house producing some 10,000 square feet of covered, and therefore shaded, space. The overhanging roof plan, punctuated by thin posts, doubled the living space of the house, sheltered the pool and made for the ultimate party setting.

The artist first came to the desert in 1945 to draw plans for a contemplated addition to the Desert Inn. Soon he was working all over the Coachella Valley. Palm Springs had become a fashionable weekend and winter retreat for the rich and famous in the midcentury. Those patrons needed architecture.

Cody's career flourished along with the city. He completed the Del Marcos Hotel in 1947 and was recognized by the AIA Southern California Chapter with an honorable mention. The Thunderbird Dude Ranch hired Cody in 1950 to transform itself into the stylish Thun-

derbird Country Club. The sexy design led to other commissions for clubhouses, civic buildings and residential developments.

Cody's Eldorado Country Club, Tamarisk Country Club, the Racquet Club and the Tennis Club disseminated mid-century modern design throughout the valley and further afield in California, Arizona, Texas, Cuba and Mexico. He worked expanding the Palm Springs Spa Hotel starting in 1960, imbuing it with celebrant style.

Cody's residential projects emphasized key elements of the modern aesthetic: simplicity of form, natural light, and a seamless connection between inside and out. His designs also reflected his personality: exuberant, sybaritic and sociable. He loved a cocktail party.

The Abernathy furniture concern was bought out in 1950, making both headlines and the whole family even more fabulously wealthy. It was understandable that some member of the family would be found in the desert and that James Logan Abernathy would ask William Cody to design his new house.

The James and Helen Abernathy joined Palm Springs society and their activities regularly made the paper. Described as "prominent in social and sport circles in addition to the art world." The Mrs. Abernathy was a member of the Palm Springs branch of the

American Penwomen, and Palm Springs Pathfinders. With her husband she was a member of Thunderbird Country Club, the La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club and the San Diego Yacht Club. The Abernathys regularly entertained at the house, hosting benefits, friends' weddings and cocktail parties.

They founded the Palm Springs Civic Art Association. Helen was an accomplished artist, having studied at the Hopkins School of Fine Arts in San Francisco under Rudolph Schaeffer, University of California, Berkeley with Charles Orson Horton and at Scripps College in Claremont with Millard Sheets and Henry Lee McFee. She signed her paintings in capital letters, HAB.

Their purpose was to establish an art gallery and a school for painting with "a contemporary approach and feeling." They wanted to establish an art center for the development of "art, music and theater for use by the general public." In addition, a gallery, known as the Palm Springs Contemporary Art Gallery, was set up in a part of the El Paseo Theater Building on Palm Canyon Drive. Board meetings were held at the Cody-designed pavilion home.

The Palm Springs Civic Art Association would eventually partner with the Desert Museum in an effort to "house every form of creative expression" where the museum would become "a center for the entire region where painting, theatre, and music will find a home." The modern idea of such cultural offerings still reverberates in the valley today and the Abernathy House is still in the very center of it.

The house will be the site of a benefit, offering a rare chance to attend a cocktail party akin to those thrown in the midcentury. In the tradition of the Abernathys, the Palm Springs International Jazz Festival is bringing a joyous celebration to the valley May 14 and 15 as part of the Oasis Music Festival. Headlining is Grammy winner Christian McBride. Tickets are available online for the musical performances (oasismusicfestival.com) and for the cocktail party at the Abernathy House at oasismusicfestival.com/portfolio-item/abernathy-house.

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