

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Easter in the desert always included fabulous hats

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Old superstition held that wearing new clothes at Easter meant good luck for the remainder of the year. Starting in the middle of the 19th century, upper-crust New Yorkers would take the long way home parading up Fifth Avenue after church, displaying their finery, in hopes of an even more prosperous year to come and some added social prominence having outdone their friends.

From such elitist beginnings comes the tradition of Easter parades reflected in the famous movie of the same name some 100 years later. The song "Easter Parade" was written by Irving Berlin, and the screenplay by a team of writers, including a very young eventual desert-dweller, Sidney Sheldon, who along with Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett (a married couple and writing team) received the very first award for the "Best-Written American Musical" at the first annual Screen Writers Guild Awards.

The little village of Palm Springs was not to be eclipsed by high society in New York. Easter finery, complete with elaborate hats, was desert tradition. Easter happens to coincide with the most glorious time in the desert: Spring is beginning, the citrus blossoms, petunias, sweet alyssum make the evening air heavy with natural perfume. There is no better time to visit the desert, as the punishing heat of summer has generally not yet arrived. With so many visitors in town, the hotels had to arrange amusements.

The El Mirador, the Desert Inn, Thunderbird, La Quinta Hotel and Shadow Mountain Resort all had lavish celebrations where visitors could parade their Easter outfits and, most importantly, their headgear. Silly contrivances for hats were best. The desert idea of outdoing one's neighbor had to do with how outlandish and outrageous your decorations could be.

Melba Bennett, the founder of the Palm Springs Historical Society, was most famously known for being the inventor of the Palm Springs Hat, a concept that held sway in the desert for decades. The Palm Springs Hat was a homemade thing, fashioned from a cowboy hat and adorned with plastic flowers, birds and



Brunch at the El Mirador hotel featured an Easter bonnet contest.

PROVIDED BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

maybe a small stuffed animal. It's arrangement in the brim of the hat was akin to ikebana and was very personal. So, Palm Springs took to making Easter bonnets with unusual fervor. There was nothing more important than having a spectacular chapeau for Easter brunch and the parade.

And parades were ubiquitous; every desert town, country club and neighborhood had some sort of gathering. But the big parade was that held in Palm Springs, which generally started at the El Mirador garage and proceeded southward down Palm Canyon Drive. Children proudly donned their carefully constructed bonnets and their new togs on their way to extravagant luncheons.

One year, the Glee Club from Redlands was pressed into service for a concert. Thunderbird had a marionette show for children under 10 years old on Saturday evening and a magic show in the afternoon. An elaborate breakfast Easter morning preceded the egg hunt.

At the Ranch Club, the children's Easter party would start around 11 a.m. at the pool with an Easter egg hunt, followed by a magic and puppet show in the Rodeo

Room. The notice trumpeted: "Hot dogs, hamburgers and other snacks will be served at the snack-bar in the pool area for the children. Buffet brunch starts at 12:30 with music and entertainment ..." presumably for the adults.

"To fill those Easter baskets ..." Desert Sweet Shop advertised that it had "a complete assortment of delicious chocolate eggs ... especially good are the huge chocolates stuffed with cream fondant, fruit and nuts.

"Easter bunnies, little chicks and colored eggs shared the spotlight with dozens of pinafores and Sunday-suited little girls and boys at the Desert Inn early on Easter morning. Following a festive breakfast party in the Sombrero Room, the children participated in the annual and greatly anticipated, Easter Egg hunt on the lawn."

The Easter Hat party at El Mirador happened during brunch, with prizes awarded for the most beautiful, zany and original hats. The party was open to the public and hotel guests. All over the valley, there were noted speakers, vocal and musical entertainments, gala luncheons, children's fashion shows, pet shows and

dinner dances.

The Desert Sun covered them all. "Busy Easter holidays followed by a succession of golden spring days put the Village in a good mood ... the small fry were enjoying in full the annual Easter (egg) hunt ... Playing the Bunny rolls were 'teenagers.' ... Fun was had by the adults, too, hanging over the fence watching with glee the procedure of the lively hunt ..."

But the most important part of the Easter celebration in the desert was the sunrise service, another old idea. Watching the sun mimicking the ascent from the grave of Christ was a solemn and beautiful observance. In 1917 Nellie Coffman of the Desert Inn held the first sunrise service in the desert. Coffman was friendly with her fellow hotelier Frank Miller from the Mission Inn in Riverside. Several years earlier, Miller started an Easter sunrise service from Mt. Rubidoux and Coffman liked the idea.

The Desert Inn had lovely switchback trails laced up the mountain to its west. Celebrants lined the pathway up the mountain and the driveway up to the O'Donnell House above to watch the sun peek over the little mountains to the east. There was a large white wooden cross erected on the mountain trail.

In 1939 the service was moved to the Promontory, the large rocky terrace built by Tom O'Donnell as a make-work project during the depression to give employment to any person who needed a job. The pastor and choir were stationed above on the Promontory with attendees below on the golf course, listening, under the brow of their Easter bonnets.

The rites of springs are celebrated in myriad fashion these days. The Coachella Music Festival and The White Party have become part of the scene. There are elaborate Easter egg hunts in the park and at the Living Desert. With the new amusements, it seems Easter bonnets don't hold the same allure as in decades past. But they should be reconsidered. Imagine the number of "likes" pictures of contemporary partygoers and revelers might get were they wearing some of the fabulous bonnets of the past.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.