

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Intrepid Mac and Ruth Blankenhorn invented Rancho Mirage

Name was born of collaboration, intended to convey something special

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

The dinner party was rudely interrupted by startling news announced over the radio. It was 1933, the middle of the Depression, and those gathered at the party had been plenty displeased discussing the first day of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's new bank moratorium when the program on the radio was abruptly interrupted by the report of a massive earthquake in Long Beach some 120 miles away. The guests were now even more dismayed, and several quickly departed to check on their interests at the coast, worlds away from the desert.

The party had been gathered at the Smoke Tree Ranch home of Louis McLaughlin "Mac" Blankenhorn, a prominent Pasadena businessman, realtor and land developer. Blankenhorn had conceived of the ranch and laid out its meandering streets with an eye toward preserving the expansive vistas to the great mountain to its west. He loved the desert's endless sunshine and wildness, often hiking in the surrounding hills. The house he built in 1929 was designed by Garrett Van Pelt of the Pasadena architectural firm of Marston and Van Pelt and was surrounded by open desert. Blankenhorn intended it to serve as a weekend respite from city life.

His wife, Kathryn, had been seriously ill and died in August of 1930, having never occupied the desert house. Three years later, Blankenhorn was entertaining friends from Pasadena when the Long Beach earthquake unceremoniously interrupted dinner. One of the guests at the party was a recently widowed Ruth Anderson Wheeler.

Just two years later Ruth and Mac were engaged. In early 1935, Mac sold his Smoke Tree home to descendants of the Upjohn pharmaceutical family and developed some lots in Little Araby, just to the east of Smoke Tree. He also purchased a large tract of land down valley on the picturesque escarpment of Magnesia Falls Cove, some 15 minutes from Palm Springs by car.

Ruth and Mac were married in June 1935 and moved into a newly constructed house on that large, otherwise empty tract of land they dreamed would become a new desert neighborhood.

Mac, Ruth and their compatriot Laurence Macomber were sitting on the steps of the just constructed tract office, contemplating the development scheme for their new adventure and brainstorming names for it. Ruth recalled: "There, on the porch, we enjoyed a picnic lunch."

They anointed the new streets in honor of great



Early aerial view of the desert that would become Rancho Mirage, c.1945.

COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

desert places of North Africa. Their home would be on Sahara Road. The Veldt, Tangiers, Tunis, Biskra and the generic Dunes and Desert roads paid homage to the sands from which the new community would sprout. Access by camel was contemplated and would be appropriate and would certainly attract interest.

But for the entirety of the project, they wanted a name that conveyed something special. Ruth recounted that the gentlemen were "puzzling what the name of this development should be and asked my advice. As far as the eye could see the acreage was uninhabited. I thought of the weary pioneers searching for water, searching for a rest spot and shade." Ruth suggested "Rancho Mirage." She liked the image it conjured, and the gentlemen readily agreed. "Little did the three of us think of the growth the future would bring."

The original plat map trumpeted: "Rancho Mirage: A community of atmosphere and charm — where each home regardless of cost will be in keeping with the artistic plan of the community as a whole."

Macomber served as the sales director. The tract offered "modern attractive small homes" of four to six rooms on 100-by-100-foot lots in the subdivision that were described as "Early American" in style in a 1937 advertisement in the Pasadena Star-News. The ad-

vertisement and accompanying article boasted that Rancho Mirage offered "one hour more sunshine" than Palm Springs and possessed "the finest water system in the valley."

Ruth reported: "In no time at all, sixteen homes were built. Mac and I had furnished our home completely at Barker Bros. in one forenoon ..." She made a long list of everything a home would require and purchased a whole house of appointments to install on Sahara Road. With the house completed, the entrepreneurial couple couldn't resist selling it some two weeks later. "We built another, on Anza Road ... Robert Ainsworth was our architect for our Pasadena home and again for the tract homes at Rancho Mirage."

The development of Rancho Mirage was hindered greatly by the outbreak of World War II. "The shortage of gasoline was acute — so few buyers, or even residents, could go and come from the desert. Rancho Mirage, in a way, was fortunate. The War Department requested the rental of all homes to the Army officers, those in training — Patton's troops — for the Ethiopian combats, the sand dunes and terrain being so very familiar." The Blankenhorn home on Anza was occupied by General Pick.

During the war, Mac instructed astronomy students at Cal-Tech, and Ruth was in charge of scheduling 150 nurses' aides at Huntington and St. Luke's hospitals in Pasadena. In 1943, Mac died at age 58 following a surgery. Ruth sold their interest in Rancho Mirage to a syndicate of investors.

In 1945, the new owners of Smoke Tree Ranch, Fred and Mazie Belle Markham, deeded Ruth a lot in acknowledgement of Mac's contribution to that endeavor. Ruth subsequently moved to Tacoma and sold the lot, donating the proceeds to All Saints Church of Pasadena in Mac's memory. She remarried, and with her third husband, Henry O. Wheeler — who, interestingly, had the same last name as her first husband — moved back to the desert to Smoke Tree Ranch, where in 1977 at the age of 91 she recorded an oral history with the Historical Society of Palm Desert about the earliest attempts at development between Palm Springs and Indio and the advent of Rancho Mirage.

Rochelle McCune of the Historical Society of Palm Desert recently partnered with California Revealed organizing, digitizing and uploading the oral histories of a hundred or so early inhabitants of the Coachella Valley recorded in the early 1980s by society volunteers. Their remarkable stories, like that of Ruth Blankenhorn Wheeler, are available at the society and online at californiarevealed.org. McCune has begun the arduous task of researching each participant in depth to write previously unknown chapters to the history of the desert.

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.