

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Shearer, French instrumental in desert golf, politics

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In February 1939 The Desert Sun recorded that B.F. Shearer arrived from Seattle and headed straight to the links. It was reported he could be seen daily at the O'Donnell Golf Course with Tom O'Donnell himself.

Benjamin Franklin Shearer deserved some diversion; he was an impressive businessman and was highly devoted to civic causes like his namesake. Shearer's adoption of the desert as a second home was fortunate indeed as his presence benefited the entire community.

Shearer's early career as a traveling salesman taught him about the individuality of West Coast towns and cities. He developed his own highly specialized business outfitting movie palaces with their fabulous appointments and would customize designs to fit the locales. (Many of the theaters he designed are now on the National Register of Historic Places.) He outfitted theaters throughout the country with rows of upholstered seats, projection equipment, huge movie screens, tasseled curtains, fancy wallpaper, decorative statuary, embellished columns complete with carved capitals, luxurious carpeting and anything else required.

The best biography of Shearer to be found is contained in Steve Vaught's excellent history of the Committee of 25. Abbreviated "Co25," it was, and is, a private club housed at the north of the O'Donnell Golf Course in Palm Springs. Some thought the club to be purely social, others wanted to emphasize civic duty.

Vaught writes: "Events at the Committee of Twenty-Five Club followed the same pattern of family night dinners each Thursday, private parties given by members, and stag luncheons with prominent guests." But the inauguration of Shearer as president would mark a most exciting chapter for the club and for the desert as a whole. Shearer was extremely well-liked and incredibly energetic and would serve longer than any other Co25 president, a full decade from 1957 to 1967. Under his leadership, the club would embrace

both social and civic goals.

A winter resident of the desert since the late 1930s, Shearer was one of many Co25 members who have hailed from the Pacific Northwest. Shearer expanded from selling fixtures and equipment to owning a chain of movie houses throughout the region. Starting in the 1950s, Shearer paired his passion for golf with business, becoming a West Coast distributor of the pioneering Autoette Electric Golfmobile.

The addition of golf carts to his business portfolio made particular sense in the desert as he not only pursued the game with boundless enthusiasm but was a tireless promoter of its development in Palm Springs. When the O'Donnell Golf Course was turned over to its members, Shearer was named as an original trustee. According to Vaught, he was also actively involved in the creation of both the Tamarisk and Thunderbird Country Clubs. An inveterate joiner, Shearer was a member of some seven separate clubs in the Coachella Valley and several others in the Seattle area.

In the 1930s, Shearer found a kindred spirit in "Dad" French and for some three decades, the pair was at the forefront of desert golf and civic betterment. In addition to founding along with Tom O'Donnell, the Desert Invitational Golf Tournament, Shearer and French also started the Palms Springs Senior Golf Association. There was scarcely a single aspect of golf affairs untouched by these dynamic boosters who were invariably at the center of tournaments, social gatherings, awards ceremonies and celebrations.

One of the most pleasant annual events at the Co25 for many years was the annual "75th Birthday" party held in honor of French. The story goes that when he reached his 75th, he decided to go no further, and from that point forward, each year he would celebrate the "anniversary" of his 75th birthday. From the time of the original milestone in 1951 and continuing over the next decade and a half, there would be a gala party attended by French's countless and closest friends. "One glance at the faces of the distinguished guests," wrote the "Villager" in reporting on the ninth celebration of French's 75th birthday in 1960, "it was obvious 'be-



Benjamin Franklin Shearer, Bob Hope and Rear Admiral Daniel Wagner at Thunderbird Country Club on April 12, 1965. COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

loved' was precisely the feeling these men engendered for the guest of honor."

Vaught writes: "Each year French was showered with praise and gifts from his friends. On one occasion, Charles Lindeman, venerable publisher of the 'Seattle Post Intelligencer' even wrote a poem in honor of Dad. On another 'anniversary' Ben Shearer surprised his great friend by telling him to look out the clubhouse window where a new, custom-built Autoette Electric Golfmobile was awaiting. 'Even Bob Hope looked upon it enviously' observed the 'Villager.'"

French, who was revered in his hometown of San Francisco and was one of the West Coast's most important distributors of Dodge automobiles, passed away peacefully in 1965 a few months after celebrating his 14th "75th Birthday."

Upon the death of French, Shearer assumed the presidency of the O'Donnell Golf Club and as such thought he should retire from the Co25, but the club prevailed upon him to continue. For two more years he juggled both positions just as his best friend had done a decade before him. Under Shearer's energetic leadership, the Co25 continued to grow, expanding its membership limit from 60 to 70 prominent citizens, and the golf club also flourished.

Throughout the 1960s, Family Night dinners grew so popular they began to

seriously tax the resources of the club causing serious discussion of holding them twice weekly to accommodate the crowds. Shearer was proud of the success, telling members, "We have an unequalled reputation for fine, friendly and courteous service and the tops in food. We have been told many times that our food and service is the best in all the U.S.A."

Under the skillful and gracious management of Santos de Jesus, the Co25 operations ran like clockwork. Only on the rarest of occasions was there any kind of glitch. "I have noticed with considerable regret and some displeasure," Shearer was to inform Santos in 1967, "that some of the members of the staff are smoking during service hours ..." There is little doubt that Shearer never needed to make that comment again.

Although the Co25's internal debate over social affairs versus civic betterment continued under Shearer, an event during the 1960s proved that the two aims were not always incompatible, with the creation of Pathfinder Ranch through the good offices of several members.

Shearer founded and was president of the "Home Owner's League." For decades, the league pestered the City Council to properly provide for residents. They raised money for palm trees, lighting, the municipal golf course and park beautification projects. Additionally, they became a serious political force, lobbying against unnecessary taxes, vetting proposed assessment districts and foiling a planned cement plant at the north of town.

On March 31, 1967, at the club's annual meeting, an emotional Shearer bade farewell to his decade-long presidency of the Committee of Twenty-Five. "I am truly devoted to serving our little club. It has always been my endeavor to conduct our Club affairs, under the board of directors, and maintain the friendly atmosphere which has prevailed," he told the members. "It has been an honor and a privilege to have served as your president." Shearer was given a much-deserved standing ovation.

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