

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Amado Salinas serves desert in tradition of heroic father

Tracy Conrad

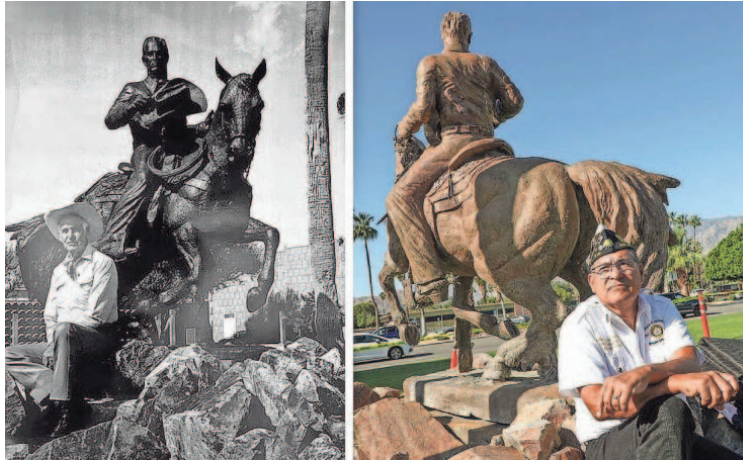
Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Melissa Harloam Garrison, 46, and David Wayne Garrison, 58, were arrested Tuesday night following an investigation by the Riverside Police Department's Narcotics Unit. Finding themselves stranded in the scorching heat of the desert summer, the Salinas family was relieved and simultaneously apprehensive at the approach of the tall stranger in a large cowboy hat pulling up behind their broken-down car. Amado Luis Salinas had been traveling with his wife and four small children in 1962 when their tire blew out by Windy Point on Highway III. Perplexed and perspiring, Salinas was debating whether to start walking when Frank Bogert pulled over and inquired what was going on.

Salinas, unsure of the query, explained that he did not speak English. To his relief, Bogert responded in fluent Spanish and ascertained the difficulty. Bogert ferried Salinas into town, bought him a spare tire and some drinks for the kids. The men rushed back to the waiting family, where they changed the tire and got the Salinas family back on the road. Years later, Amado Cano Salinas II, one of the children stuck in the sun that day, remembered Bogert watching and waving as the family motored on.

The Salinas family had been following the crops from Visalia to Coachella when the elder Salinas decided to settle his family in the desert. He found work at the City of Palm Springs and then joined the California Department of Transportation, Caltrans, working on road maintenance crews. Fifteen years after being stranded by the side of the highway, Salinas was present at a far more serious highway incident.

The Desert Sun reported in January 1977: "A Caltrans employee saved the lives of a West Covina man and his wife, who is pregnant, by pulling them from the burning wreckage of their car after it was rear-ended by a truck. The California Highway Patrol said Amado Salinas of Palm Springs pulled Angela Leon, 20, and her husband, Alfredo, 25, from their car after it was knocked 300 yards across Hwy. 85 south of Polk Street ... Mrs. Leon and her husband were knocked unconscious inside their car..."



(left) Frank Bogert in front of the statue of him on horseback, early 1990s. (right) Amado Salinas II protests the removal of the Frank Bogert statue at Palm Springs City Hall on May 17. COURTESY NEGIE BOGERT / JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

Further details explained that the car had been rear-ended by a tractor-trailer, flattening and igniting the car's fuel tank and sending it hurtling toward the working Caltrans crew, who narrowly escaped disaster. Salinas left his reclamate-spraying equipment and ran to the burning car. He found the passenger door jammed and thought the woman inside was likely dead. Reaching the driver's door, he managed to open it and pull Alfredo Leon free. But Leon's unconscious, pregnant wife was still trapped inside.

Salinas recounted the events for the newspaper: "All of a sudden something inside the car exploded with a pop and glass shot out. I hesitated for a moment, but I knew I had to go back for her ... I just did what anyone would have."

The couple and Salinas were all transported to Indio Community Hospital and treated for their injuries. Angela Leon would later give birth to a child she would name Amado in honor of the hero who had saved her family.

Salinas was acknowledged with California's highest honor: the Gold Medal of Valor for Heroism. He was also recognized by the Carnegie Hero Fund with the Carnegie Medal, given to individuals in the United States and Canada who risk their lives to an extraordinary degree saving or attempting to save the

lives of others. The story of the accident and Salinas' heroism was reported in newspapers throughout the state.

The younger Salinas benefited greatly from his father's decision to settle in the desert. He excelled at school in athletics and music, playing the French horn and trumpet. When in high school, he worked in a downtown men's store. Once Bogert came in to buy some clothes. The young Salinas recognized Bogert by his walk and stature. He recounted the harrowing experience of being stranded on the highway and thanked Bogert for helping his father, thinking it had been as memorable for Bogert as it had been for Salinas as a young boy. Bogert demurred, he'd done what anyone should have.

Amado Cano Salinas II would follow his father's example of service to others. After school he had a distinguished career in the Navy as an Aviation Flight Systems Specialist, making sure all avionics functioned properly. He left the Navy to part of the Aerospace team for Hughes Space and Communications, working with NASA on the development of the Space Shuttle Transport Craft STS to satellite systems. He worked at Northrop and the Department of Defense as a System Analyst in Southern California. In the private sector he worked on projects internationally and

all over California. He worked as FAA flight certification engineer for Boeing's aerospace 787 Dream Project.

Salinas volunteers for multiple veteran causes. He is a lifetime member of the American Legion and VFW and is currently the 1st vice commander at the Owen Coffman post and is running for commander.

This week Salinas inadvertently made the newspaper. He hadn't pulled anyone from a burning car like his father had, but nonetheless, many people found his unplanned act newsworthy, even heroic. Salinas arrived at City Hall to see the full-sized bronze statue of the man who'd randomly helped his family 60 years ago. The Salinas family had been in trouble, stranded on the side of the highway in an inhospitable and menacing desert. Bogert had made all the difference for them by doing a kind thing.

The statue of Bogert was ordered to be removed this week by the Palm Springs City Council, after a complicated controversy over disputed events in the late 1960s in Section 14 that has divided the community of Palm Springs over the past two years. As Salinas watched the crane poised to lift the statue, he found himself suddenly compelled to action: "How to prevent them from ripping out Frank's statue until we could get a ruling, until we could have a fair hearing in court? So, I sat down."

Salinas' simple act paralyzed the crane. He sat at the base of the statue blocking the removal for hours, eventually momentarily relieved by others inspired by his bravery. Salinas spent the night to ensure the crane would not return until after a judge decided the statue's fate. The next day, the judge did indeed put a temporary halt to the statue's immediate removal. There will certainly be further legal wrangling.

Salinas, 60 years hence, still feels a debt of gratitude to Bogert. "I recall how Frank's kind gesture, simply doing the right thing, could have such a long-lasting effect. Who would have ever thought that one day I could be of help to Frank and his family?"

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.