

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Arthur Newman's sage advice, good works benefited desert

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The president of the Franklin Life Insurance Company, Charles Becker, vehemently protested: "The \$300,000 earmarked for a city hall should be used in the purchase of land and the construction of a municipal golf course. No one comes to Palm Springs to admire the architecture of our city hall. People come here for recreation."

Becker may have correctly stated the case in 1954 when the debate was raging about the potential expenditure, but he was mistaken in the long run about visitors coming to admire architecture.

He was, however, right on the mark regarding recreation. His argument continued, "A municipal golf course would enable persons in the middle-income bracket to come to Palm Springs and enjoy the game of golf. It would make it possible for more people to enjoy golf here in view of the crowded conditions of the existing golf courses now in operation."

In the valley, there were a few golf courses already in operation and in great demand, but they were private clubs and not readily accessible to the average guy. The O'Donnell Golf Club was well-established. Thunderbird Country Club had just opened in Rancho Mirage, which hadn't yet incorporated as a city but was already on its way to being dubbed the playground of presidents and the golf capital of the world.

Palm Springs would heed Becker and build a municipal golf course — actually more than one — but it would also build out its city hall.

Four decades later, in 1993, Rancho Mirage was having its own debate about building a fancy, new city hall and civic center complex. The controversy was fierce. The town would ultimately make a very different decision than Palm Springs had done in 1954.

In 1993, Rancho Mirage had less than 10,000 residents, and one of them was Arthur Newman. He had been around the desert for almost 40 years. He was against superfluous building projects and wasteful spending. He favored a library instead.

Newman knew about organizations and proper spending. He served in World War II in the Army Air Force, had a degree in business administration from University of Michigan, experience running his father's successful sporting goods store and he'd managed the movie productions for his world-famous, movie-star brother, Paul Newman. In his own estimation and everybody else's, Arthur Newman usually gave pretty good advice.

Newman said his goals for the council were cohesiveness, harmony, fiscal responsibility and controlled growth. According to the Desert Sun Editorial Board at the time, the Rancho Mirage City Council was known for its "vitriolic infighting that has brought city government to a virtual standstill."

Newman adamantly opposed building a new city



Patty and Arthur Newman at a fundraiser for Angel View. DESERT SUN FILE PHOTO

hall and wanted to bring that notion not just to a standstill, but to a full stop.

Newman's wife, Patty, had concerns. "Based on the history of this council, I'm afraid ..."

But his brother, Paul, encouraged him to apply and was quoted in The Desert Sun saying: "You're always saying how great the desert is; if there's problems there, why don't you offer your services?"

Arthur thoughtfully responded: "He's younger than me, but I still take his advice sometimes."

Born one year, three days and 10 hours apart, Newman and his brother were practically twins.

In 1964, Erskine Johnson reporting from Tucson, Arizona recounted: "'Pardon me,' says the visitor to the movie location, 'aren't you Paul Newman?' The young man in boots, blue denim and cowboy hat resembles Newman except that he's taller and slimmer. Their voices, however, are identical and the visitor stares incredulously when the man replies: 'Sorry, I'm Paul's brother. That's Paul over there talking to the director.' 'You could have fooled me,' says the visitor. 'Happens now and then,' Arthur Newman explains to me later about the near carbon copy looks and voice, the latter so similar to Paul's that even relatives have mistaken one for the other."

The article continues that Arthur has mostly given

solid advice to his younger brother, but readily admits he made a few miscalculations along the way.

"It all started back in (Ohio) when Paul was appearing in summer stock and Arthur was learning to manage the sporting goods store owned by their father. 'When dad suddenly died,' I talked Paul into leaving acting to join me in the store. But he hated it and eventually went to Yale to study drama. He wanted to be a teacher of drama. My advice to him then was, 'You'll make much more money as a teacher than as an actor, but I still think you could make even more with me in the store.'"

Newman continued: "Later he wrote me that he was leaving Yale to try acting in New York. I told him he was an idiot not to finish college, to become a drama teacher. When he found Broadway tough to crack, I told him: 'See, you should have remained at Yale.' Then came the play 'Picnic' and he was hailed as a new star. 'Warner Bros. offered him a bundle for movies and I immediately advised him: 'Don't jump, Paul. Maybe someone else will offer you a better deal!'"

Johnson's story elaborated, "Again, Paul shrugged off Arthur's advice and signed with Warner Bros. "That time,' Paul likes to complete the story of Arthur's second-guessing, 'he finally was right. Remember — I wound up in a fight with Warners over the roles I was getting and it cost me \$500,000 to break my contract."

Newman's tenure on the Rancho Mirage City Council lasted until 1998 when he retired. Residents were deeply grateful for his service and felt his advice had been exactly right. He worked tirelessly to put the decision on the ballot and the voters agreed with him, solidly rejecting the idea.

Rancho Mirage resident Robert Apple summarized in a letter to The Desert Sun: "When (Newman) joined the council, it was on the verge of creating an architectural and financial disaster. Arthur Newman led the fight and with a Herculean effort put the measure on the ballot. It was soundly defeated and an impractical fiasco was averted." Apple added, "Arthur Newman was a breath of clean fresh air and his management and analytical skills will be sorely missed."

Newman would spend another decade in service to the community. Together with his wife, their philanthropy was prolific.

These days, attention is focused again on his handsome brother due to Ethan Hawke's new multi-part documentary, "The Last Movie Stars," which explores a 50-year long marriage and shares candid images and extensive movie clips from the long careers of Joanne Woodward and Paul Newman. It's an alluring paean to another time with stunning pictures.

In the desert, with less fanfare but no less importance, his look-alike brother, Arthur, gave sound advice and made a big difference.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun.