

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# The road to the rise and demise of Edom

**Tracy Conrad**

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Scratched through the hot sand, the road was much wanted by the ranchers and farmers of Edom. Named for the biblical desert by the Southern Pacific Railroad, Edom was a depot stop along its Yuma line in the late 19th century. The name seemed appropriate for the inhospitable, seemingly empty land. For decades, Edom consisted only of the depot and a few outbuildings in its surround. It would become a tiny outpost of a few hearty pioneers with some unusual settlement ideas.

In 1904, according to Bob Spence writing for the Chamber of Commerce, two homesteaders arrived: Ned McKesson, who created a citrus ranch around a new artesian well just north of the depot, and August Strelow who located a date garden and ranch a bit to the west. These two settlements became dual, and competing, focal points for development.

But citrus and date farming weren't the only ideas of imaginative developers. Cultivating spineless cactus for cattle to consume was in the offing according to the Riverside Daily Press in 1913.

"A new industry is being started in the Coachella valley at the Southern California Home Builders town of Edom. A syndicate has acquired a tract of 1120 acres near Edom and has begun planting it to spineless cactus of the Burbank variety. It is believed by the men interested that the soil and climate of that section are especially adapted to the raising of spineless cactus and the entire tract will be utilized for that purpose. The successful outcome of this new enterprise will, it is stated, open up a vast territory for profit and the outcome of the Edom cactus plantation will be watched with interest by stock men. In addition to the development work on this new tract at Edom, work is being rushed on the planting of the big alfalfa tract for the Southern California Home Builders. The work of seeding to alfalfa is nearly complete and soon the water will be turned into the five miles of cement irrigating pipe which has been constructed and laid on the tract. With the development of these two big tracts and other improvements in sight for the near future, Edom is fast becoming an



**E.C. Willis photograph of the end of Edom; the ceremonial changing of the depot station sign to Thousand Palms.** COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

important factor in the development of the great Coachella valley."

Edom continued to grow in small increments and by varied ideas but remained isolated from the village of Palm Springs to the west and the town of Indio to the east.

As early as 1912, the State of California decided to build State Highway 99, connecting Los Angeles to San Bernardino and Calexico. In 1922 it included roads from Whitewater through Edom to Indio. But a connection from Edom to the village of Palm Springs would wait until the late 1930s.

The Desert Sun reported in November 1937: "Edom road improvement boosters recently graded three miles of an eight-mile road between Edom and Palm Springs. As soon as the entire stretch has been leveled it will be oiled and put in shape for travel. This work will in all probability be finished by spring!"

Completed by 1940, the road was named in honor of Miguel Ramon, the Agua Caliente Tribal Chief. Ramon was a good choice for the pivotal roadway. He was known for his fierce advocacy for indigenous rights and for always wearing a Stetson 10-gallon hat. (The idea of a 10-gallon hat was initiated by painter Lon Megargee whose illustration adorned the satin lining of nearly all Stetson hats made since 1924. Titled

"The Last Drop From His Stetson," the image depicts a cowboy offering his thirsty horse water from his upturned hat.)

With the connection made by Ramon Road, Edom began to prosper. Travelers supported small restaurants, motels, service stations and local produce shops. Saturday night dances were held at Desert Moon Guest Ranch, home of the Hyde sisters. In 1946 a Sunday school began that later grew into a community church. A debate about where the new post office and elementary school would be located sometimes became antagonistic as proponents of each of dual settlements along the tracks vied for superiority.

Importantly, the original desert rat, Harry Oliver, moved in a bit down the highway and began publishing a newspaper that would be read around the world. In October 1948, Oliver reported on a singularly defining piece of news in the history of the Edom with a headline reading "Something New."

The story elaborated: "Edom Station Bows Out as Thousand Palms Comes in. Edom is no more — Thousand Palms is. That is, according to the Southern Pacific and boosters of the Thousand Palms area, eight miles eastward out Ramon road. This week H. R. Gernreich, Superintendent, T. F. Frizzell, freight traffic manager, and George Hanson, passen-

ger traffic manager, of the Southern Pacific visited the community where Ramon Road crosses Highway 99 and officially watched while the depot sign, 'Edom' came down and the new sign 'Thousand Palms' went up. Mary Dickey and Norma Roberson of Thousand Palms officiated at the sign changing. They didn't do the actual manual labor but lent color by posing with the sign. Following that there was a Thousand Palms chamber of commerce banquet at Charley Doyle's Hidden Springs ranch at which speeches extolled the virtues of the resort and its position as the hub of the rapidly growing desert resort country."

Edom was officially gone, renamed into oblivion. According to Spence, just after World War II, "developer Charley Doyle had begun subdividing about 1,500 acres of desert land on Ramon Road, three miles east of the highway. He extended an existing well and tapped into an 'underground hot water vein from the nearby San Andreas fault.' After establishing the water supply, he and the Hyde sisters and other old-timers prevailed on the postmaster to change the name of the area from Edom, which they felt connoted wicked images of Esau selling his birthright for a hot meal, to Thousand Palms as it was already unofficially known."

The roadside community continued to grow until 1957 when President Eisenhower's Interstate Freeway was built between Highway 99 and the railroad tracks. The freeway bypassed the existing businesses on the old highway (since renamed Varner Road), and the cross-streets accessing old Edom were no longer traveled. Further, accessing the freeway was nothing short of dangerous. In 1962 a proper overpass was built at Ramon and Interstate 10, but in the intervening years, the once thriving businesses along Highway 99 had been decimated.

Ramon Road though, the aspiration of the early inhabitants of Edom, would become a major thoroughfare and retail hub 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.*