

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Thousand Palms Oasis preserved by a poet

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Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

No one bothered to actually count the trees at the oasis, but the name Thousand Palms seemed the appropriate acknowledgement of their large number. According to Wikipedia, large colonies of palms have been similarly named.

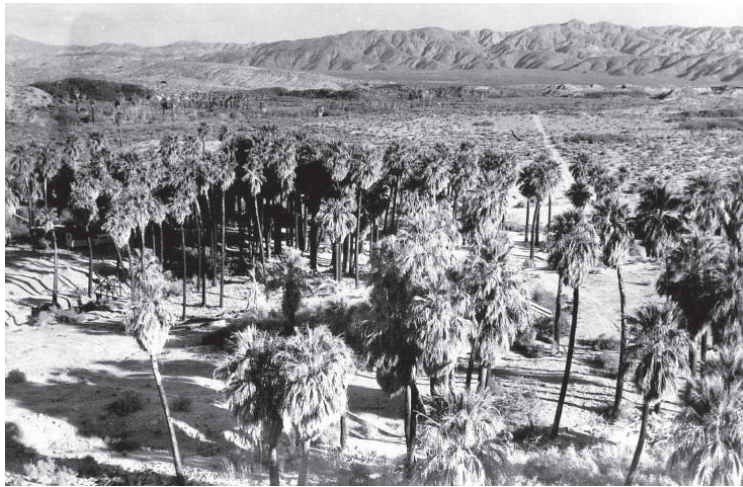
This particular oasis first appeared on maps as early as 1874 as "100 Palm Spring" but by the 20th century was inflated to 1,000. It does indeed have too-numerous-to-count palms and freshwater springs and pools created by the rent in the earth known as the San Andreas fault.

According to Bureau of Land Management, more than 183 bird species have been recorded at Thousand Palms Oasis, including Gambel's quail, black-throated sparrows, phainopeplas, black-tailed gnatcatchers and American bitterns. Cactus wrens nest among the chollas. And the oasis is home to several endangered species. The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians have lived peacefully alongside the birds and under the shade of the palms for centuries.

The area was specifically preserved in 1986 but its history was unclear according to Robert Joplin, a long-time docent at the Thousand Palms Oasis Preserve. Joplin relates an interesting tale: "Much of the history of the 1000 Palms Oasis from 1945 to the late '70s was not known. It had been replaced with a mixture of fact and folklore ..."

The abbreviated story said that Paul Wilhelm, the owner of the Thousand Palms Oasis, contacted his neighbors wanting to conserve the precious land. The group aggregate their holdings to preserve the oasis for future generations.

According to the Bar None Group, Paul Wilhelm described himself as "a naturalist who lives in Thousand Palms Canyon" in the postscript of his articles for the *Indio Daily News*. The plaque at the oasis dedicated to him reads, "This magnificent desert fan palm oasis is dedicated to the memory of Paul Wilhelm, desert writer, poet and naturalist. Paul devoted his life to the protection of these palms and the surrounding desert. Through his writings and conversations with visitors, he opened his arms and heart, passing on his deep love of the



Early aerial image of the Thousand Palms Oasis COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

desert and its history for all who listened."

The Bar None Group notes, "It was the part about his being a poet that piqued our interest." (As a group devoted to poetry and art, that makes sense.) Their website recounts the early history: "Wilhelm's father bought the Thousand Palms property ... from the original settler at the turn of the 20th century to feed his livestock. The younger Wilhelm first set eyes on the oasis that would become his home when he was 9 years old, and so began a lifetime love affair with the desert that was only interrupted by schooling and service during World War II."

Wilhelm would later recall: "During the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium, my brother Pat wrote that he had been out to see the oasis; 'Part of it has been vandalized. But the main thing is that Dad has passed on and he has left the 80 acres to you.'"

How far away from the horrors of war must the dreamy oasis have seemed to the poet. He returned home after surviving the war to his "Vagabond House" and the 80 acres left to him by his father. Wilhelm described himself as a desert rat poet, in homage to his famous desert rat neighbor, Harry Oliver, publisher of a little magazine of the same name. To survive in the desert, one had to be resourceful and a bit dusty. It was a proud

designation.

Wilhelm proceeded to write about his unusual environs and publish charming stories in the *Indio Daily News*, *Randall Henderson's Desert Magazine* and other periodicals for the rest of his life. His papers are collected and enumerated in the Online Archive of California and contain an exceedingly wide range of subjects like: "Early Desert Teachers Were True Pioneers," "Desert's great bloomin' tree, Ironwood," "A Famous Desert Swamp ... how Louis Wilhelm traded a span of mules and a wagon for the Thousand Palms Oasis" and "Desert Lore: Others Should Emulate Indians' Respect for All Living Things."

The notion that Wilhelm, poet and naturalist, sought to preserve the palm oasis is straightforward enough but falls woefully short. That the oasis would survive for posterity was by no means guaranteed. Joplin points out that there is much more to the story, and it features a character not previously mentioned and who might have changed the fate of the magnificent stand of palms.

Letters of the mysterious character, Mr. John Wight were discovered in the archive of the University of Montana, Missoula and illuminate the more complicated story. Wight was an oil, gas and land speculator based in Billings, Montana, and he was the president of the

Thousand Palms Oasis Development Corporation. Visiting the desert in the late 1940s, Wight met Wilhelm and they became friends for the rest of Wight's life. He purchased 160 acres adjacent to Wilhelm's holdings.

Wight had the idea to bundle together their land, and the land of other neighbors for a master-planned development with the oasis at its heart. In 1955, seeking investors, Wight distributed a brochure touting a 1,520-acre development: "There is ample and suitable ground space for construction of hotels, bungalow cottages, swimming pools, small lakes, rodeo ground, racetrack, assembly hall, golf links and a private air landing field."

Wight's development plans for Thousand Palms were nothing short of fantastical and would have likely spoiled the oasis. Wight continued to try and sell shares in the Thousand Palms Oasis Development Corporation without success into the late 1960s. Three other iterations of the project, in 1958, 1972 and 1981, thankfully also failed to come to fruition. However, the last effort, in an impressive feat, amassed 19,000 acres under the ownership of a land speculator from Canada.

Environmentalists were frightened by the prospect of development ruining the pristine oasis and by 1986 managed to purchase the amalgamation of holdings instantly conserving a vast tract of land. The creation of the Coachella Valley Preserve, with the Thousand Palms Oasis at its core, resulted. Joplin points out the irony of the multiple developers unwittingly helping the preservation effort by their sequential accumulation of land.

Both the poet and the developer, Wilhelm and Wight, understood the special allure and magical environment of the oasis. That the poet's vision for the land prevailed is as unusual as it is fortunate. Today the Thousand Palms Preserve is a place of serenity that welcomes visitors to Wilhelm's wonderland. Walking along the San Andreas fault sheltered by what must surely be thousands of ancient fan palms, visitors can't fail to appreciate the sublime poetry of nature found there.

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