

# Disneyland in the Thousand Palms desert?

Paul Wilhelm imagined it, and laid out a vision

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Writing to his business associate on August 21, 1957, Paul Wilhelm of Thousand Palms laid out a vision of a desert utopia. Wilhelm had inherited 80 pristine acres with water and native palms from his father while he was away fighting in World War II in Europe. He returned home to the quietude and solace of his very own oasis, a veritable wonderland, that would be the nidus around which he would dream of building a paradise.

Wilhelm recounted that he and his attorney attended a meeting at Desi Arnaz's Western Hills Hotel at Indian Wells in Palm Desert to learn about incorporating a company that had been tentatively set up. Frank Bogert, president of Western Hills and someone who Wilhelm acknowledged had been promoting the desert area for years, would lead the board. Robert Distler was named vice president; and Lee Dobbs would serve as secretary-treasurer. The papers were sent to Sacramento, and over the phone, they received approval of the name of the corporation: The Living Desert Wonderland.

Wilhelm thought that the Living Desert Wonderland would be the finest project in the entire country. It would be carefully planned, landscaped beautifully, and architecturally sympathetic to the desert and its western atmosphere, as would be fitting to the natural palm oasis. The development would settle hotels, cottages and motels on the desert sand to accommodate thousands of visitors.

Wilhelm's dreams were quite elaborate, even grandiose, given the existing condition of his holdings which consisted of a small cabin and a few outbuildings and dirt roads leading to a small railway depot that punctuated the long ride between San Bernardino and Yuma.

His fantasy was for a spectacular recreational area and multi-million-dollar improvements that would become one of the country's major attractions, rivaling other attractions in the state, even the country. He dared to dream it would rank in popularity with Disneyland, and be as successful or perhaps even surpass the "Happiest Place on Earth."

When Disneyland was proposed, it probably sounded as preposterous as The Living Desert Wonderland. Given that example and the success of Disneyland, perhaps Wilhelm's 1957 fantasy didn't seem so improbable to those he tried to interest in the project. It did



**Paul Wilhelm, a naturalist and writer who lived in Thousand Palms Canyon.** PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

seem truly wonderful given the litany of attractions to be included.

The living desert world would be represented throughout the area in living varieties of plants and animals, including reptiles, mammals and birds. It would feature swimming, boating and fishing, hot mineral baths, ghost towns, gold mines, borax, uranium and silver mines. Horseback riding, camels, burro packs into the Little San Bernardino mountains up to Joshua Tree National Monument would also be offered, all while preserving the natural flora, particularly the native palms.

He imagined colonies for writers, artists, rockhounds, desert rats, and places where visitors might shop. The history of the place would be preserved, including ancient Indian trails. There would be

a museum housing Indian artifacts and telling the pioneer history.

The old Bradshaw Stage Line stop-house would be rebuilt from maps of the 1860s, when the stage line ferried miners from San Bernardino to the Colorado River basin in search of gold. The development would recreate a stagecoach to meet people from the airport and bring them to their desert accommodation, in a small reenactment of those journeys.

Wilhelm's imagination ran wild with possibilities. The Living Desert Wonderland would encompass Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm and every world's fair attraction in one spot.

To finance the scheme, Wilhelm explained that Distler outlined that the stockholders of the company would be the original landowners and would be-

come the Board of Directors. The directors would authorize a search and campaign to enlist national companies like 20-Mule-Team-Borax, Coca-Cola, and Monsanto Chemical in the project, approaching them with franchise arrangements offering plots of ground for displays in which they might advertise their wares.

The franchise money would be used to support salaries, office expenses, advertising, architects, geologists, pool construction companies even manpower to dig artesian wells and propel the project forward. The potential franchisees were endless, and with that ever-expanding list of companies advertising, the corporation stock would soar, enabling further development.

Wilhelm contemplated a worldwide news release including United Press, Associated Press, newsreel, and television campaigns to bring the project to the attention of the world.

Wilhelm's showcase of desert beauty would be not just for desert dwellers and surrounding big city visitors, but for the whole nation, for the entire world for that matter. In its wide expanse of recreated desert scenes, in its animals and plants, its mines, and ancient history it would naturally become world famous. Every visitor, student, nature lover, botanist, doctor, lawyer, engineer, family on an outing of genuine desert exploration; people seeking health in the healing mineral baths; those looking for leisure and recreation — all would applaud The Living Desert Wonderland.

Wilhelm ended the business letter with a simple offer to meet at the airport should the businessman care to travel to the desert in support of the project.

The project never came to fruition. Assembling the landowners was arduous, sometimes contentious. Selling the corporate stock would prove difficult despite the anticipated boon. Seeking approbation and investment, Wilhelm sent a prospectus to the Walt Disney Company with the development pitch. After a long while, the packet was returned unopened. And unlike Disney's dream, Wilhelm's development was not to be.

Instead, preservation of his precious palm oasis would supplant the notion of hotels and tourist attractions. The trails through the pristine desert were realized, but only populated by occasional hikers. The inhabitants of the oasis remained only the native birds. And the palms themselves, nestled in the crack of the earth through which freshwater seeps, persist as they have done for millennia.

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