

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Marian Henderson made the desert sparkling clean

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In a Desert Sun newspaper profile, Marian Marsh Henderson quipped: "I am as old as I look and as young as I feel." And Henderson certainly felt young and energetic. A full-time resident starting in 1960 after marrying Cliff Henderson, who with his brother Randall founded the city of Palm Desert, Marian Henderson became an important part of the social and business fabric of the valley.

On duty for one of the many women's clubs, Henderson arranged for the famous aviator Jacqueline Cochran to speak to the group about what to best wear when traveling in Europe.

Henderson recalled: "Then the time came for her to speak. I introduced her and the subject of fashion and travel. She startled us all by saying: 'Do you women know how dirty this desert is? It is just a mess. When I fly over it in my airplane, I can see the shine from all the bottles and cans!'" Cochran kept up the tirade for her entire time at the podium, never once mentioning fashion.

Curious about Cochran's wrath, Henderson got in her car to investigate. "All I saw was vacant lots littered with trash and bottles and cans. Why, there were even a few fires burning haphazardly here and there. It was awful. The area where we were around Shadow Mountain looked fine — but when you got away from there, it was unbelievable. There were pieces of abandoned cars, machinery and piles of junk and trash all over the place. Apparently, the idea with some of the people was: If there's a vacant lot ... throw something on it!"

Henderson had visited the desert as a teenager and recalled: "Back in the '20s, the desert was paradise ... pure white sand as far as the eye could see." But now, it was fouled by litter everywhere she looked.

Henderson sprang into action. The newspaper noted: "Riled up, Henderson called on about three chambers of commerce and told them she was going to clean up the desert. They responded by



A pink Desert Beautiful stand offers free litter bags. COURTESY OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT, MARIAN HENDERSON COLLECTION

saying they would be willing to help if she would tell them what to do. And that is how her organization Desert Beautiful got its start."

Henderson went to her friend Walt Disney and asked him to create a logo for her newly minted Desert Beautiful organization to help popularize it. "After a few tries, they decided on a cartoon character of Old Harry Oliver and his mule, Maude, and dog, Whiskers."

Litter bags printed with the new cartoon logo were printed by the thousands. The little bags were designed to hang from the roll-up window handle or from the pop-up door lock and be an easy place to put trash, rather than throwing it out the window onto the pristine desert.

Henderson procured 100 55-gallon oil drums from the city of Newhall. She deposited them at the College of the Desert and at the National Date festival fairgrounds and various fire departments to be used as recycling centers. Once a week a truck from San Bernardino would make the rounds and pick up the separated bottles cans and newspapers. She put her barrels out at the very first Bob Hope Classic Golf Tournament where they were filled to the brim by visitors.

Irritated by "eye-sore" gas stations

popping up all over the valley, Henderson "was none too pleased. She couldn't understand why they had to be so unsightly." She made several lobbying trips to Sacramento and succeeded in having a statewide law passed requiring all new gas stations to beautify at least part of their outside areas with landscaping.

In October 1963 the newspaper reported: "This attractive blue-eyed honey blonde has been general chairman of Desert Beautiful since its inception. Although only a year old, it seems that the organization has been in existence for years and years. The slogan, 'Pick up, Paint up and Plant' has become a common one — not only to those of us living between Rancho Mirage and Bermuda Dunes, but to residents from Palm Springs to the Salton Sea."

It was amazingly true. In just a year's time, Henderson had 12 communities in her program, including Palm Springs, Indio, Coachella and Desert Hot Springs. She administered the year-round clean-up program from offices located in the Desert Magazine building on Highway III in Palm Desert. And Henderson had recruited an impressive list of advisory board members including James O'Brien, former mayor of Indio; Leon Kennedy, agricultural expert and resident of LaQuinta; Pearl McManus, major landowner; and Harold Hicks of the water company in Palm Springs. She recruited architects, realtors, civic leaders, and government officials for the project.

Henderson vowed: "We will make the desert 'sparkling clean' — from one end of the valley to the next."

She pleaded with school children about the importance of keeping the desert clean, creating a junior division of Desert Beautiful that sponsored essay contests, recruited young helpers for cleanup expeditions and encouraged students to keep school grounds tidy to encourage an awareness at an early age about pride in a clean and attractive community.

Henderson implored business owners to beautify their buildings and add landscaping, and the organization created an eponymous award to draw posi-

tive attention to those that did. (The winners were photographed, and the images are being scanned by the Historical Society of Palm Desert, creating an unrivaled catalog for their collection.)

The group promulgated signs reminding drivers that it is "Unlawful to Litter Highway III."

Henderson's effort to beautify the desert was concurrent with the national Keep America Beautiful anti-litter program. (Keep America Beautiful popularized the word "litterbug," the etymology of which is variously reported as coined in 1947 by New York copywriter Paul B. Gioni for the American Ad Council or coined and popularized by the New York City subway system as a play on jitterbug, the 1930s dance craze. A sadly cynical but convincing argument that Keep America Beautiful was about shifting attention in post-war America from big corporate producers of throw-away packaging to individual litterbugs and was an intentional distraction by manufacturers to continue their wanton and profitable practices.)

Henderson was an early and influential environmentalist, and her program was a monumental undertaking. She was advocating cleanup and recycling before most anyone else. Her appearance in scores of Hollywood movies was not as important to her as preserving the natural beauty of the desert. Active and energetic in the effort for more than 40 years, Henderson was feted multiple times for her unique contribution to the community. At one gala, there was even a song composed in her honor, the lyric explained, "She's cleaned up the desert / Planted trees galore / Sponsored poster contests / Essays and much more."

In 1985 Henderson offered: "The most important thing in my world is Desert Beautiful. We're losing what we had and if we don't hold the line on the desert's beauty and the open space concept, we'll lose it forever."

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