

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

History: Indian land development spanned 20th century

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The last spiritual leader (or “Net”) of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, Albert Patencio, was the repository of the ancient wisdom of his people; he was the last person to thoroughly know their legends, their genealogy and their spiritual beliefs. When he died on Nov. 8, 1951, much culture and knowledge perished with him. His guidance regarding how to live on the Agua Caliente ancestral lands was lost.

Patencio embodied amalgamation, the blending of daily desert life and forced assimilation caused by the checkerboard pattern of the reservation in the Coachella Valley. Born in the 19th century, he’d seen the arrival of white settlers to the valley. He’d worked at The Desert Inn from its inception in 1909 as a handyman and would drive the team to the Southern Pacific Railroad station to get provisions and pick up guests. He often drove Nellie Coffman, the inn’s proprietress, in the same rig. The two had ridden together in that same fashion in the Desert Circus Parade in 1950. Coffman died later that year, and with Patencio’s death in 1951, ties to the land and the ancient way of living were lost.

After the last rites for Patencio in the ceremonial round house on Section 14 of the reservation, the round house was burned and the sacred bundle within it. Pragmatically, Flora Patencio, his daughter, and Vyola Ortner, who would become tribal chair, firmly looked to the future.

The incineration of the center of culture would mark a profound shift in the Agua Caliente conception of land. The last spiritual leader was gone. The notions of the past had been scattered to the wind with the smoke from the round house. The tribal council would now provide governance, bravely going forward into the future, determined to produce prosperity for their posterity by making the most of their land. Land would not be a place to live, but a means



Tribal chair Vyola Ortner, Congressman Dalip Singh Saund and Mayor Frank Bogert in Washington, D.C. COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

to produce income.

In 1935 there had been just 50 members of the tribe who could trace their lineage back to the few families living in the shadow of Mt. San Jacinto in 1850 when California became a state.

Reservation land was finally allotted in 1959 to the descendants of those original families. Each tribal member received 47 acres: two acres of land near the center of town, five acres of irrigated land and 40 acres of barren desert or useless mountainside. Then, allotments were “equalized” so that each member had land valued at \$323,000.

The tribe itself would retain in trust the most important parcel of all: where the warm water bubbled to the surface of the earth. Importantly, this spot was not just sacred but also commercially extremely valuable as visitors were willing to pay to bathe in its healing pool in the bathhouse located on the corner of Section 14. The all-female tribal council in 1955 determined to develop a project there that would support the entire tribe.

Section 14 was literally the middle of town. It’s one square mile bounded by Indian Canyon Way, Tahquitz Canyon Way, Alejo Road and Sunrise Way. The section was home, a place to live, for Native people and new arrivals alike. Working poor of all ethnicities hoping for a better life in the construction and tourist trades that had sprung up in the desert with visitor interest in the salu-

rious climate settled on Section 14, often with no attendant paperwork or formal lease. The area was described by the newspaper as “the desert’s worst slum.”

Through the 1950s the all-female tribal council, Riverside Congressional Representative Dalip Singh Saund and Palm Springs Mayor Frank Bogert tirelessly lobbied in Washington, D.C., to enable long-term leases that would make commercial development viable. The first long-term lease was made for the most important corner in town: the site of the bathhouse at Indian Canyon and Tahquitz Canyon.

The much-desired development caused the perceived need for removal of makeshift buildings and general clean-up of the area. On behalf of the tribe, and at their request, the City of Palm Springs facilitated this. The vibrant and diverse community living on Section 14, Native people as well as Mexican, Black, Filipino and white settlers, looked to move to other parts of the city or other cities altogether to make way for development. But where to go?

In November 1968, the managing editor of The Desert Sun, Al Tostado, wrote a series of 13 articles detailing the history of Section 14, saying “it first became the target for a clean-up effort early in 1961, though experiencing some initial opposition to a city survey of the slum area and its condition which had been ordered by the Federal Government Housing Agency.”

Tostado recounted that in the early 1960s it appeared that the city’s “attempt to solve its problem of relocating the scores of people who were to be evicted from their ramshackle dwellings on Section 14 was taking a step forward.” Section 14 residents had been under an “eviction deadline from the Bureau of Indian Affairs that had already brought demolitions and burning of homes in the area.”

Multiple new housing developments were proposed by various developers. “On June 27, 1961, The Desert Sun re-

ported that more than 430 families facing eviction from homes in Section 14 had aid coming from two directions: a six-month moratorium on evictions announced by Mayor Frank Bogert; (and) a promise from Federal Housing Authority representatives to the City Council that action would be speeded to certify city eligibility of financing guarantees for low-cost housing, both private homes and rental property.”

But land was prohibitively expensive. Private developers required higher density to build the much-needed housing. The Palm Springs Planning Commission summarily rejected rezoning to accommodate higher density proposals. Disputes ensued.

Tostado quoted the July 1961 paper further: “Mayor Frank Bogert, long active in trying to solve the housing problems of the minority groups in Section 14 said he thought the (higher density zoning) would be a good thing. ‘I think we ought to...let them have the zoning they want,’ he said, ‘Due to the housing emergency at the present time, we have to lean over backwards.’”

The fight over the zoning and development of Indian land would continue for another decade and result in myriad disputes and lawsuits. Patencio could not have possibly imagined what the 20th century after his death had wrought for his land and his people.

Through the years, the federal government, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the City of Palm Springs and the State of California all presumptuously weighed in on how Indian land should be administered. In 1977, the city and tribal councils made a seminal, and sometimes uneasy, Land Use Agreement, which has provided guidance since.

The cooperation between the tribe and city has produced immense prosperity, but the lack of housing for working people of all ethnicities persists.

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