

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Tree tradition grew with the community

Desert Inn added its own gift of connection at Christmas

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In anticipation of the winter holiday in 1939, the newspaper carried almost daily articles: “Palm Springs children of all races, creeds, nationalities and of all social positions are welcome to attend the Community Christmas Tree on Saturday afternoon, Dec. 23, and receive their Christmas stockings from Santa Claus himself.”

The custom of a community tree was born in 1919 when a bunch of children gathered along the picket fence surrounding the Community Church wistfully watching the children of the congregation playing around a decorated tree.

Two young teachers had set up the Christmas tree outside the front doors of the church intending to bring some yuletide feeling onto the desert sand. The festive, but home-made, decorations sparkled in the winter sun. Both the children and the teachers grew increasingly uncomfortable playing around the tree while their friends from school stood outside the fence, yearning. The teachers were unsure of what to do. They only had



The Community Church Christmas tree in 1917 surrounded by children.

COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

enough cookies for the children of the congregation.

Nellie Coffman, the owner and operator of The Desert Inn, happened by just in the nick of time. The teachers explained the difficulty. Coffman immediately proclaimed that, “On Christmas, there should be a tree and a gift for every child in Palm Springs. Bring them over to the Inn.” All the kids, inside and outside the fence, left for the inn.

The Desert Inn always had a splendidly decorated

tree for its guests during the holidays and 1939 was no different. The children were dazzled by tree. The inn welcomed everyone with refreshments making an impromptu party and sent the little people home with apples, oranges, raisins and dates.

The Desert Inn already had an elaborate holiday program that featured an archery tournament, breakfast horseback rides, sunset horseback rides, tennis exhibitions, and dinner dances. There were ping pong tournaments, putting contests, travel lectures, badminton round-robins, outdoor picnics, gin-rummy games and nightly live music. The Community Christmas Tree event was easily folded into the fun.

Coffman had started a unique desert tradition. The Community Christmas Tree would mark every winter holiday after for four decades. Every child in the village was invited to attend the celebration held generally in the week before Christmas.

There was a committee formed. First administered by Mrs. Philip Boyd, wife of the mayor, eventually members of the Women’s Business Club took over. They collected and wrapped gifts, local businesses gave toys, candy and money to purchase gifts, volunteers organized the distribution of presents.

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Community tree

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Each year the event was more extravagant. By the 1930s, visits by old St. Nicholas were arranged and he handed out stockings stuffed with treats and toys. The event had grown so much it could no longer be accommodated in the lounge or lawn of the inn. The newspaper in article in 1939, twenty years into the event, continued, "It is estimated that approximately 850 children will receive their Christmas stockings at the tree this year, which will be held at the Desert Inn Mashie Golf course on West Tahquitz Drive."

The newspaper carried appeals for help with the event: "It will be a great satisfaction to you to see each child receive a stocking full of Christmas goodies from Old St. Nicholas himself."

The entire community was enlisted. "Local school children are cooperating in making a real success of the event. They have sent out letters asking for discarded or broken toys and have received good response. However, more are needed. The school shop has been converted into a toy shop, and the boys spend their shop period repairing all the toys, while the Girl Scouts and other girls are dressing the dolls repaired by the boys. All these gifts will be placed on the Community Christmas tree for the children."

As the date of the event grew closer, the newspaper articles detailed what to expect: "The Community tree program will be as follows: Santa Claus will arrive by plane at the Palm Springs airport from the North Pole at approximately 12:45 pm. He will be motored to the El Paseo building where the parade will start at 1:30pm sharp. The parade will proceed down Palm Canyon Drive through the village to Tahquitz Drive and will travel west along Tahquitz Drive to the Desert Inn Mashie Golf course.

"Activities will start at the tree at about 1:45 pm. There will be Christmas carol singing and Santa will present stockings to all the 'good little boys and girls of the village.'"

"Everyone, 'oldsters' and 'youngsters' alike, are invited to attend the Community Christmas tree. Grownups are requested to come and bring their children. Everyone attending the Community tree this year will have to

go through one gate, where each child will be handed a ticket entitling him to his Christmas stocking."

The logistics of handing out 850 stockings was well and thoughtfully planned. "The children have been requested by the Coordinating Council to be courteous and not to shove, as there will be ample stockings to go around."

After Coffman's death in 1950 the location of the event changed but the annual tradition continued, although in somewhat different form.

In 1952, Earle Strebe hosted the village children at his downtown movie theater to see "Miracle on 34th Street" for free, and stockings were handed out by Santa to all of the children who attended. "The movie also strengthened the wavering believe of many of the children in the age-old tradition of Santa Claus, Theater Manager Warren Strebe reported, explaining that a typical comment heard as the children left the theater was 'maybe there is a Santa Claus.'"

"More than 800 children attended the theater party, the largest crowd in its history, and all were given a gift as they left. Included among the things given were comic books, ceramics, candy Santa Clauses, cracker jacks and candy kisses."

By 1958 the event had grown even further; the Business Women of Palm Springs assembled over 2,000 gift packages and distributed them to every elementary school in the city. "Santa Claus made three appearances...at Community Christmas tree events at Frances Stevens, Cahuilla and Katherine Finchy schools with the remainder of the schools picking up the sacks and holding Christmas parties. Approximately 1700 stockings containing oranges, candy, cany bar, nuts, a toy and a balloon were distributed to children of grade school and pre-grade school age."

The community embraced its visitors: "In addition, while Santa traveled from school to school, he distributed stockings to young visitors to the city who were on the sidewalks watching the procession."

Nellie Coffman's proclamation, that all children would have a tree and receive a holiday gift, was made so by the whole generous community.

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