

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Pearl McCallum influenced desert's architecture

Land developer's design choices resonate today

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By the time Pearl McCallum was a mere 30 years old, she had buried her father, all of her brothers, and her sister. Her mother was in fragile health and died in 1914 leaving Pearl to try to realize her father's dream of a fertile desert and friendly destination. She inherited his vast tracts of desert land. Her tenacity and taste would turn the desert into a modern architecture showplace.

Soon after her mother's death, Pearl was in dire poverty. Desperate, she sold a valuable piece of land from her father's original 80 Palm Springs acres with its water rights, for only \$500. That was a mistake she said she would never again repeat.

Left alone by the untimely demise of her entire family, Pearl married Austin McManus. The former haberdasher from Pasadena first came to the desert at night by train, walking 7 miles through the sand in his dress shoes, hoping that he would not step on anything that crawled. The dandy gentleman said he knew he loved Pearl when he came to see her a second time. He would prove an able partner in her real estate endeavors.

The couple moved into her family adobe home which still stands and is the home of the Palm Springs Historical Society. They started their own land development business called Pioneer Properties. Pearl reserved the office of president of Pioneer Properties for herself and listed Austin as secretary. His charm won many buyers, but she had the final say in every transaction.

Pearl's zeal to safeguard the future of "her" village led to her dominating each business transaction. Her deeds were densely laced with all sorts of architectural restrictions and covenants over the use of land she sold. Some buyers were bitter over her post-sale controls. But Pearl was a shrewd land trader and businesswoman always looking to better the community.

With the development of the tourist trade, she decided to augment accommodations by building a hotel, her first foray into major development. She hired Frank Lloyd Wright, Jr., known as Lloyd Wright, who was estranged from his famous father, but an architect in his own right. Pearl bravely imagined his expertise and individual talent could make her vision a reality. In 1924 they began construction.

Sited directly across from Nellie Coffman's Desert Inn, Pearl's Oasis Hotel was thoroughly modern: built of concrete, with a distinctive pattern created by the slip-form technique. In style, it was Moderne as was fashionable in the 1920s and drew much attention and ad-



Architect Lloyd Wright, Pearl McCallum McManus, Austin McManus and contractor Quinn Spalding turn the first spadeful of dirt for the Oasis Hotel 121 South Palm Canyon Drive in 1924. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

miration upon its completion, particularly for its charming tower, a tribute to her father.

The tower remains today tucked behind the Oasis Commercial Building, added by E. Stewart Williams, his father Harry and brother Roger along with a 44-unit hotel addition in what would become known as "mid-century modern architecture." That design has long since been covered up by subsequent remodels. But the shape of the original pool remains at today's Palm Mountain Resort.

A trip to Amalfi in 1927, Italy inspired a gorgeous pink Spanish Mediterranean mansion for Pearl and Austin, tucked into the mountainside west of the village. Slightly south of her home, she started The Tennis Club after she witnessed the success of The Racquet Club near the El Mirador Hotel. She hired Phillip Ormsby, a recent graduate of the USC School of Architecture, and Lloyd Stelgen to design a simple two-story Monterey-inspired balcony, a huge lounge, a dining room, and a card room.

Doors from the second story led to a flat grass terrace, with rustic granite walls designed by Dee Miller as well as a 150-foot-long stone staircase descending the slope from the terrace. The foot of the staircase opened up like the sweep of a fan.

A photograph of the unusual oval pool was used by the California State Chamber of Commerce in its promotional literature which earned the swimming pool the title of "the most photographed

pool in the world." The Tennis Club opened for business in 1937.

After World War II, Pearl hired A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams to redesign the clubhouse creating the Bougainvillea Room. More structures were built over the years, but Pearl's original tennis courts and oval pool remain. Spencer's Restaurant occupies the original entrance to the club.

Pearl's first housing development, called Palos Verdes Estates was begun in the early 1930s. Bordered by South Palm Canyon Drive as it makes its 90-degree turn to become East Palm Canyon Drive, this subdivision had approximately 350 large lots upon which stylish Spanish Colonial Revival homes sprang up. Some of these bungalow-size houses were under construction before Palm Springs became incorporated in 1938.

In 1937 she donated land at the corner of Baristo and Cahuilla roads to the Palm Springs Woman's Club for a clubhouse, hiring John Porter Clark to design the building. The extant building is charming in its restraint.

Now in the land development business, Pearl met Paul Trousdale while he was building his own home in Smoke Tree Ranch and decide to partner with him. Trousdale was making a name for himself building large tracts of modern houses throughout California, most famously Trousdale Estates in Los Angeles.

Trousdale assembled architect Allen G. Siple, a USC graduate and landscape architect Edward Huntsman-Trout for a

project they would call Tahquitz River Estates. The team designed eight master floor plans and built more than 200 two- and three-bedroom homes on each side of the Tahquitz Wash. The original sales brochure states boasted, "The lots, averaging 10,000 square feet, are carefully and individually surveyed to be earthquake-proof!"

Each house featured a gracious "lanai", shaded "breezeway" and a "crystal clear wall of glass" in the living room.

Downtown, Pearl hired Welton Beckett in 1960 to design the original Saks Fifth Avenue located at the corner of Ramon Road and Palm Canyon Drive. And for the J.W. Robinson building she chose Charles Luckman Associates and William L. Pereira. The nationally and architecturally significant commission was published in *Architectural Forum* magazine in 1958, also receiving the First Honor Award in 1958 in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects (AIA)* and the Triennial Honor Award in 1960 by the Southern California Chapter of the AIA.

A parade of some of the most important architects of the midcentury produced work in the desert thanks to Pearl McCallum McManus' perspicacity and courageous design choices. She created the basis of the rich architectural legacy for which Palm Springs is known today.

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