

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Remembering NY Mayor Walker's 1931 desert vacation

Scandal-plagued official finds recuperation despite hoopla

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Setting the tone for his unique style of governance, Jimmy Walker had been 90 minutes late to his own 1926 swearing-in ceremony as mayor of New York City. Indeed, Walker was perfectly suited to govern an ungovernable and irrationally exuberant New York City during the roaring 1920s.

Dubbed "Gentleman Jimmy" and "Beau James" for his sybaritic ways, Walker was the very embodiment of the "Age of Wonderful Nonsense." Owing to his cheerfully professed inability to get to the office before noon, if at all, after an evening of nightclubbing, Walker soon also had the sobriquet of "Night Mayor." Rather than be outraged by such dissipation, the citizens of New York City loved their glamorous, high-living mayor and reelected him in a landslide in 1929.

Dashing, witty, charismatic and a hopeless clotheshorse, Walker exuded all the glamour of a Hollywood movie star, so it seemed quite natural that he would someday make an appearance in Palm Springs, in a manner that would be the stuff of movies.

Ironically, that visit would be precipitated by the onset of the Great Depression which made Walker's lifestyle less amusing to those who were suffering mightily. Inquiries into graft and corruption in the city began to swirl around him and to make matters worse, his long-time mistress Betty Compton, in a fit of pique, had run off and married. Now both she and Walker had spouses with which to deal.

Maintaining a carefree public countenance during the growing scandals was taking a toll of Walker's health to such an extent that by 1931 his doctor ordered him to take an immediate rest. In March, he headed to his friend Samuel Untermyer's desert home in Palm Springs, across the country and a world away from New York.

But in order to rest, he would first have to survive the overly enthusiastic denizens of Palm Springs who were anxious to roll out the welcome wagon in a most unusual way no one would soon forget.

On March 14, 1931, the westward bound Gold State Limited was "attacked" by a gang of masked men about half a mile outside of the Palm Springs train station. While dozens of passengers and crew peered out the train windows, newsreel cameras whirred busily out on the usually deserted sands filming the masked bandits who had intercepted Walker's private train car and ordered the mayor to come out and "reach for the sky."



New York City Mayor Jimmy Walker reaches for the sky in March 1931 after being apprehended by Palm Springs cowboy "bandits" on his arrival to town.

PHOTO COURTESY TRACY CONRAD/GAYLE STUDIO ARCHIVE

Thoroughly exhausted and possibly hung over, Walker nonetheless played good sport with his hands held up high and made his way out onto the desert while the photographers snapped away. In quite literally the middle of nowhere, Walker could not escape the traveling press peppering him with questions far more menacing than the fake guns pointed at him by the "hold-up" men. One reporter wrote, "With his face drawn and lines etched about his mouth and eyes, he refused to talk about the New York political situation and declared that he is solely in Palm Springs in search of health."

With that, and a cheery wave, Walker scrambled up the sandy embankment and back into the sanctuary of his plush private railcar, where no doubt a steaming cocktail awaited. Walker would have normally thoroughly enjoyed the hoopla, but he was truly worn out and genuinely needed some quiet. That too would have to wait a bit longer.

After gliding the final half mile into Palm Springs, the great train came to a stop at the gorgeous little Spanish Colonial depot, where another welcome reception waited. With the dust quickly buffed from his handmade loafers, Walker stepped of the train and was greeted by great fanfare of the contingent locals and visitors from as far as Los Angeles who wanted a glimpse of the famous mayor.

With the fusillade of flashbulbs popping and newsreel cameras rolling once again, Walker was greeted, not by an important government official, but rather by Jack Warner of Warner Bros. Pictures, fueling specula-

Dashing, witty, charismatic and a hopeless clotheshorse, Walker exuded all the glamour of a Hollywood movie star.

tion that if Walker were to retire, or be removed from government, he would certainly find a new, rather fitting life, in sunny Hollywood.

After a lot of shaking hands with the throng and dodging more press questions, Walker disappeared into the waiting Untermyer limousine for the ride into town. Less than three minutes into the journey, the car was intercepted by a swarm of pretty "Cowgirls and Indians" on horseback. The posse pulled Walker from the safety of the limousine and stuffed him into a big open-air wagon drawn by four horses.

A cacophony of whoops and cheers accompanied the wagon bearing the captive Walker into town kicking up a cloud of dust that blanketed the motorcade as it followed in hot pursuit. At the entrance to town, a "gang" of some 40 cowboys galloped around the wagon engulfing it. One cowboy grabbed the mayor's fedora off his head, replacing it with a 10-gallon sombrero with a foot-wide brim. His sartorial splendor thus destroyed, Walker found himself at the head of a parade down Palm Canyon Drive.

Looking utterly ridiculous in his gigantic headgear, Walker bravely waved to the cheering crowd all the way to the entrance of The Desert Inn where another welcome committee stood waiting. After some niceties, Walker was finally able to retire in peace perhaps gratified that despite the scandals enveloping him, he was still evidently quite popular.

Like his friend and host Untermyer, Walker quickly found the magical restorative qualities of the desert working wonders on his depleted constitution. By the very next day, as he walked the short distance to noon mass at Our Lady of Solitude Catholic church, there was already more spring in his step.

Walker would spend the next two weeks in blissful relaxation with only two regularly daily appointments: an 11 a.m. informal press conference out on the terrace and an afternoon sunbath in the same location.

He still refused to discuss anything related to New York City business, preferring to comment on much less thorny matters such as the unexpected heat wave and visits by some of his friends from the West Coast.

A fully rejuvenated Walker held his last press conference on March 31, 1931, and remarked, "I certainly have a warm spot in my heart for Palm Springs. I came here a sick man and I am now ready to go back to New York feeling physically fit again. I have never met such a hospitable people with everything in the world done to make my visit here a genuine rest."

A crowd of 500 well-wishers cheered him as he departed from the train station. He was gifted dates and wildflowers from locals and a basket of fruit from Nellie Coffman, the proprietress of The Desert Inn herself. He clutched the sombrero with which he'd been topped on arrival. Walker concluded, "I will say farewell, but not goodbye. I'm coming back to Palm Springs and in the not distant future. I've had the vacation of a lifetime here."

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.