

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

HISTORY

'Deplorable' conditions plagued Section 14 from the 1930s

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None other than Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, at the start of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration in 1933, weighed in on the thorny issue of the substandard conditions on Section 14, 1 square mile at the center of the City of Palm Springs and of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation. This unusual letter was posted on the city's website this week along with numerous other newly discovered documents about the critical area.

In a letter approved on Sept. 8, 1933 Ickes wrote, "Health authorities of the State of California are hereby authorized to enter upon Indian tribal lands, reservations, or allotments within that State for the purpose of making inspection of health conditions and enforcing sanitation and quarantine regulations under the State laws in the same manner as such regulations are enforced in the surrounding territory among the general population."

Ickes was compelled to write because of the issue of jurisdiction over tribal lands. As the reservation was sovereign, the state and city government had no authority. The Department of the Interior and the Congress determined what happened on reservation land and Ickes had to give direction and grant permission.

A crisis was precipitated by the deplorable situation found on Section 14. Conditions in the country in general were poor. The crash of the stock market, bank failures and the Dust Bowl migration resulted in much of the country living in outright poverty and squalor. Roosevelt had triumphed in the election with the promise to do something to combat those dire circumstances made tangible in the tent encampments, shanty towns of makeshift dwellings, popping up all over the country derisively called "Hoovervilles" after the incumbent president.

Even by comparison to other places, Section 14 was particularly impoverished and required attention at the highest levels of government. The complicated issue of Indian ownership compounded the most difficult problem the little desert village had ever faced. (That would continue to be true for decades to come, and still has reverberations now.)

The commissioner of health for the County and City of Riverside issued a report on Dec. 29, 1934 that summarized the situation. "The Agua Caliente reservation at Palm Springs consists of 31,128 acres of which about 30,000 are uninhabited desert or rough foothill country with a few green canyons fed by small mountain streams, which latter however disappear in the sandy soil before



reaching the plain. The most notable of these canyons is Palm which is visited by many thousands of sightseers annually, the Indians charging road toll and deriving considerable revenue therefrom."

"The Indian population of the reservation fluctuates between forty and fifty people. In addition, there are five settlements of whites and Mexicans wherein the residents have their permanent homes, the buildings belonging to them and the land rented from the Indians, the plots being generally about 25' by 100'. In these camps there were 188 people including ten negroes, seventy whites and 108 Mexicans."

"The permanent population above referred to does not include those in the settlements catering to transients and which come under the technical description of Auto Camps. There are ten of these, having an aggregate population which may be roughly estimated at about five hundred."

Surveying the situation, the commissioner stated that in November 1929 there was a population of 138 in the permanent settlements with the following dwellings:

- Trailer cabin: 1
- Stationary cabins: 24
- Tent houses: 6
- Tents: 2
- Substantial cottages: 3
- Rough shacks: 20

A makeshift structures in Section 14 in Palm Springs.

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in a three-room "shack" with six total people and was in process of "installing a flush closet," having lived there for three years.

The shocking sanitary conditions prompted Stella Atwood of Riverside to write frantically to the Health Department in San Francisco in November 1934, "I have just returned from a visit to Palm Springs, which is one of our supposed health resorts in Riverside County... through the auto camps which are springing up over night...the situation on account of these camps is desperate...the shelters, if you have the nerve to call them so, run all the way from little shacks to tents made of gunny sacks, canvass and paper boxes. A cigarette stub or a flaming match would cause a fire that might cost many lives...Really, it is one of the worst plague-spots I have ever seen."

The Division of Immigration & Housing for the State of California responded, sending inspectors to the Auto Camps, after sorting out the jurisdiction issue and obtaining permission from the Indian Agent, John Dady, who requested the department clean up the mess and "gave us carte blanche to go on the reservation."

The inspectors surveyed the 10 auto camps and detailed each camp's particular conditions, noting one had "A few cabins and shacks and many tents, trailer cars and tents with lean-tos and hovels of paper, tin, canvas and other like material crowded together." Another had "a number of cabins, shacks and hovels in more or less of a dilapidated and insanitary (sic) condition, some owned by the operator, others by the occupants."

The inspectors concluded with an understanding of the unique issue in Palm Springs, "These camps as a whole are in a deplorable condition...The Federal Government has no laws or regulations to cover this and as the Health Dept is powerless, the Indian Agency looks to us to solve this problem.... In this clean-up program, we will have some difficulty in handling the Indian as he has been led to believe he is immune from our laws on his reservation."

It would take another letter from the highest levels of government, from John Collier, the United States Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, to reiterate that in accordance with the Secretary of Interior's letter, the state had authority to enforce sanitation laws.

The situation would persist for decades longer and would require not just governmental letters, but official Acts of Congress.

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