

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

History: Adults started wearing shorts in Palm Springs in '30s

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The Desert Sun

During the mid-century, the height of fashion could be found in department stores and boutiques scattered up and down Palm Canyon Drive in Palm Springs. Featuring tony West Coast styles which had a more relaxed shape in response to the warmer Southern California weather, the casual aesthetic contrasted with the typically sleek, polished East Coast fashions and would soon set fashion trends, taking over the country and then the world.

Women knew that the three best places to obtain the newest fashion trends in resort wear in California were in the cities of Beverly Hills, Newport Beach and Palm Springs. Famous department stores like Desmond's, Bullocks Wilshire, J.W. Robinsons, and Saks Fifth Avenue all had satellite stores in Palm Springs carrying fashions that catered to an affluent demographic willing to spend on vacation.

Shopping for fashion in the desert first started in earnest in the hotels. Bullock's opened a resort shop in The Desert Inn. The Los Angeles Times carried an item announcing its opening in November 1930: "Housed in a newly erected building of Spanish design with red tile roof and gay awnings, the shop has attracted a fashionable clientele...sports and travel apparel for men and women are in the shop's stock of merchandise. There is a room in which articles for men exclusively are shown. Boots, spurs, golf clubs and sweaters contribute a clubby outdoor aspect against a setting of hand-woven rugs of ancient Indian design and deep leather chairs in beige and rust."

Two blocks south of The Desert Inn, La Plaza opened on Nov. 1, 1936. It was a ground-breaking mixed-use development that had a single developer, owner and a specific architectural aesthetic. Expecting crowds, it featured an underground parking garage for 141 cars, the largest in all of Riverside.

Financed by Julia Carnell, a winter visitor to The Desert Inn who was deeply disappointed in the shopping choices in the village, La Plaza was designed by Harry J. Williams her architect from Dayton, Ohio, imported to the desert especially for the job.

Williams designed large display windows with luxuriously beveled edges for Desmond's, the featured store. The Desmond's chain was founded in 1862 and was second only to Harris & Frank as the oldest Los Angeles retail chain. (When the Desmond's corporation liquidated all of its stores in 1986 after more than a century of doing business, only the shop in Palm Springs survived into the 21st century.)

World War II stunted all development due to lack of building supplies and manpower. After the war, building boomed. In Palm Springs, department store architecture took on a distinctive modern look which concentrated on bringing the light through the immense display windows that illuminated the latest, sumptuous clothing styles.

In October 1947, Bullock's opened a new Streamline Moderne building at 151 S. Palm Canyon Drive. The building's geometric, sleek vocabulary was conceived to contrast with its jagged backdrop of mountains beyond. The facade of the front pedestrian entrance and the rear parking lot elevation were symmetrical. A patio was formed on the rear side with a circular bed of plantings placed in the middle.

"The new store will be unique in its expression of desert living." Architects Walter Wurdeman and Welton Becket told The Desert Sun Dec. 14, 1945: "The building is being planned so that a feeling of out-of-door freedom enters every major selling area. Glass walls from floor to ceiling will be bordered by flower and shrub gardens, while opaque walls will be of heat-



Bullock's Department Store 151 S. Palm Canyon Dr. Palm Springs circa 1950.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

JW Robinson's advertisement in the February 1928 edition of the Villager Magazine.

resistant Thermopane faced with adobe and desert stone."

J.W. Robinsons was designed by the Los Angeles architectural firm of Pereira and Luckman and was constructed in 1957, in a modernist pavilion style. Elevated above the street by three horizontal cement steps, the store featured the latest fashions elegantly hovering slightly above the sidewalk level.

A skylight was located above the jewelry department and at midday the sun was reflected by every diamond in the display case. Built on land owned by Pearl McCallum McManus after she moved and reused an apartment complex, Premier Apartments designed by Albert Frey, to make room for a large parking lot west of the building intended for the comfort of shoppers she knew would flock to the store.

Saks Fifth Avenue was built in 1960, also at the request and under the guidance of Pearl McCallum. The luxury store sat at the corner of South Palm Canyon Drive and Ramon Road and was designed by Los Angeles architect Welton Becket.

Shopping became an edifying experience because of the exquisite architecture of department stores. The banal act of buying clothing, sporting goods or cosmetics was elevated to something extraordinary by beautiful surroundings. Vacationers found these fancy stores an amusement and destination in and of themselves.

And while here, visitors wanted to adopt the local habiliments. As longer and warmer days were the

norm in the desert, shorts became a fashion staple for both men and women. But it wasn't always so.

According to Frances Bigelow, the first director of the Palm Springs Historical Society, shorts for American adults were practically invented in Palm Springs.

According to an article written by Bigelow in the April 1955 edition of the *Palm Springs Villager* magazine, local businessmen Herbert Sampson and Al Gardiner were walking down Palm Canyon Drive in the 1930s discussing a new fashion trend that the British were sporting in the tropics after World War I.

The men strolled into Lykken's Department Store and asked Edith Lykken for a pair of "white duck" summer trousers that would be suitable for shortening.

After the pants were abbreviated to a comfortable above-the-knee length, the gentlemen proceeded to wear them as part of their casual summer attire. Sampson said that some remarks made by locals were favorable, but some did not understand why any man would want to bare his legs, no matter the temperature. Short pants were for boys, not men.

Eventually the short trend caught on when Tony Burke, local publicist, promoter, realtor and proper Englishman, popularized men wearing the style and made shorts acceptable as an essential part of every desert wardrobe.

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