

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Palm Springs history: At 90, Vera Prieto defines happiness with gratitude

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The tree still stands at the site of Vera Prieto's childhood home on Section 14 in the center of Palm Springs. What is now Calle Encilia, just south of what is now known as Arenas Road, the towering eucalyptus tree still stands, while the world has changed around it. The tree was there when the streets were merely dirt, hard packed by wear. Not even Indian Canyon was paved, Vera recalls. (That would wait until 1947.)

Vera had her 90th birthday in February and she remembers the tree as already established when she was young. It was big enough to support a swing. She, and the tree, persist. Such longevity isn't all that rare in the desert. The climate is conducive to living long and well for both people and trees.

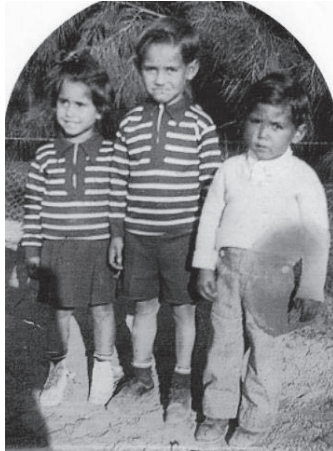
Vera is remarkable in so many ways. Her positive attitude is exceptional and has marked her many decades with true happiness. She recounts her own family's history and that of Palm Springs with amazing clarity and fascinating perspective. Her constant refrain is one of gratitude.

Antonio Prieto Sr., Vera's grandfather, came to Palm Springs with his brother in the early '20s for the building boom. They worked paving Palm Canyon Drive, which was designated a state highway and for that reason got paved decades before any other street or road in the desert would. The Prieto brothers built the many rock walls around town, and then worked at Builder's Supply on Sunny Dunes. Tony, Vera's father, also worked there unloading trucks before school in the morning as a teenager.

The Prieto family lived on a little ranch owned by Edna Pomeroy from Long Beach at the intersection of Indian Canyon and Racquet Club Drive, which were mere tracks in the sand.

When Vera's parents, Tony and Ramona, were married, they moved in with her grandparents as "was the Mexican custom" according to Vera. Ramona quickly said they needed to move.

Pomeroy also owned a little apartment building on Indian Canyon and Ramon, called the MiraMonte. The new-



From left: Vera and Ben Prieto and cousin Oscar. They were early residents of Palm Springs who lived their childhoods in Section 14. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ly-weds moved there in 1930. There was a young mesquite tree that offered some afternoon shade for the apartment.

Tony Prieto, Vera's father was employed in the garage at the El Mirador Hotel. He would pick up cars belonging to wealthy patrons and take them to the garage, gas and polish them up, making ready for the next excursion. He carefully saved his money in hopes of buying or building a house.

It was difficult. Not everyone was as kind, or progressive, as the lady from Long Beach. Ramona discovered she was pregnant with Vera in 1932 and the search for a home became urgent.

Vera suspects it was Frank Bogert, her father's friend and co-worker at the El Mirador, who suggested a visit to Miguel Saturmino, a Cabuilla man who owned property in Section 14. Saturmino agreed to lease a small plot of land to the about-to-expand Prieto family for \$25 a month where they could build a house. Vera was born in the house they built next to the sheltering, eucalyptus tree.

Vera is careful to point out that her house had a wooden floor, not dirt. It

had two bedrooms, a small kitchen, one bathroom and a dining room. After her sister was born, her father added another bedroom, and a porch right under the tree. The new floor was cement. Vera exclaims "you could eat off the floor it was so clean." Her mother Ramona was proud they had running water, electricity and a proper bathroom. Tony bought a small Westinghouse refrigerator, and the family had the very first washing machine and telephone on Section 14.

Vera is deeply and persistently grateful. "We didn't want for one thing thanks to my parents" who were endlessly industrious and always had a good job and nice car. "Papa would drive us to San Bernardino" to shop for new school clothes and shoes. She remembers her friends and neighbors brought up the same way.

On the first of every month, her father would drive to the little office adjacent to the mineral springs and bathroom at what is now Indian and Tahquitz Canyon. There, he would remit his \$25 in rent to the clerk. Vera's brother Ben would never dare question their father, but he always wondered why they didn't pay Mr. Saturmino who owned the land.

Vera, Ben, and their cousin Oscar (who lived next door) would walk across the dirt road that was Calle Encilia and ford the somewhat wider Indian Canyon to Palm Canyon to make the multiple block trip up the paved sidewalk to Frances Stevens school.

At Bank of America, Vera would press her little nose against the window and tell her brother, "When I grow up I am going to work here." Ben was skeptical.

At age 19, Vera was hired by Bank of America branch manager Fred Ingram, breaking the color barrier. Vera would work as hard as her parents, who were as frugal as any banker could recommend. After years of saving, the Prietos moved in the summer of 1951 to 3967 E. Sunny Dunes Road to a three-bedroom, one-bathroom house. There was a lemon tree and grapefruit tree in the backyard.

Vera married Tony Canales from Indio and moved, as was the custom, to Visalia where his family had relocated. Her husband disappeared within a few

years. Her kindly father-in-law thought Vera and her sons, Kenny, just 3 years old, and Anthony 10 months would be happier in Palm Springs. He bought a Greyhound bus ticket and sent Vera and her boys home. Her parents were welcoming.

Vera's parents worked for some of the most prominent people in town. Vera remembers Stephen and Beatrice Willard as among the most favorite of her mother Ramona. At the holidays, Mrs. Willard would deliver huge basket of turkey and all the trimmings with love to the Prieto home. When the Willards would decamp for the summer they would leave the keys to their home with Ramona.

Vera was a single mom and got a job as a police dispatcher. She worked the evening shift from 4 p.m. to midnight. A new, handsome officer walked into the office and Vera was smitten. Jim Wall was from Oklahoma and during World War II he was in the Navy and stationed at San Pedro. He loved California. Divorced with two sons of his own, he and Vera blended their families and as she tells it, "had a wonderful life together."

When Jim passed away in 2001 Vera thought she couldn't live another day, yet here she is some 20 years later. "I have a good life. I thank God." She and her beloved older brother Ben could not believe their good fortune in having been born, "into our generation and to our parents."

Vera worked for years at Union Bank on the corner of Ramon Road and Indian Canyon, the site of the apartments where her parents first lived as a couple. Vera still banks there.

Today when she drives to town, all the streets are paved. She often turns onto Calle Encilia to see the eucalyptus tree that marks her beginning, despite the changed world around it. Vera continues south to Ramon Road and then west to the bank. Now supported by poles, the once-young mesquite tree still grows there, and Vera is most happy to see it.

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