

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Visionary developer Bill Bone pioneered local housing

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Special to The Desert Sun

A degree from Harvard Business School is generally a ticket to success, as countless leaders of the free world, business moguls and prominent persons having tread that well-worn path. But William "Bill" Bone had a different idea when he went to the prestigious institution. Quoted in 2012 in the Los Angeles Times by Alejandro Lazo, Bone explained "Harvard Business School was finishing school for corporate executives and not for entrepreneurs."

Bone was the picture of self-determined entrepreneurship. As a teen he'd worked in his father's material salvage business, attended Stanford as an undergraduate and interned for a home builder. After graduating he bought a piece of land in Bakersfield, his hometown, and developed an apartment building, working as a laborer for his subcontractors.

Next, he found a job with a Beverly Hills real estate developer, which brought him into contact with Kemmons Wilson, the founder of Holiday Inn hotels. According to Lazo, "Bone helped find and develop hotel sites for Wilson and then began putting up his own smaller-scale commercial properties around those hotels. Wilson helped finance those developments. Bone then began developing homes."

Wilson built the first Holiday Inn in California in Palm Springs at a cost of \$1.5 million with Milt Hicks and his partners at 4200 Palm Canyon Drive. The Desert Sun reported on its opening in 1961, "One of the nation's largest and fastest-growing motor hotel chains makes its entry into the booming California travel industry this month with the opening of the 200th Holiday Inn of America in Palm Springs today."

Wilson owned another large tract of land in Palm Springs. Bone liked the idea of a small residential project, gated with tennis courts and swimming pools. Bone told the Times, "There was really nobody down there (in the desert) doing much of anything like that. I didn't do any market research, I just drove around and looked at what was there ... We developed it and we struggled through it. I learned a lot and I got a lot of experience. I didn't make a lot of money on it, but at least it got me started down there."

"He fared better with his second project, selling 239 homes in nine months. The key difference was that I ... started to utilize market research. This was probably the most important critical step in my success. Up until then, I was a struggling young real estate developer trying to get ahead, and we would do any kind of project that would make sense."

Bone had found an entrepreneurial recipe for success. His projects were focused on quality. He cared about the details and was sure he was selling a lifestyle, not just a house.

The next year, according to the Times, he sold 1,000 homes. Soon, he was replicating the same homes around golf courses. He recalled to the Times, "They were very, very profitable. We had no real competition. Because we were the only ones in the market with a product like ours at a price like ours, we owned the market. You have to have a better location, better architecture, better landscaping, better amenities. I am a product guy. I believe the product is very, very important, and the product isn't just the houses, it's also the services ... A lot of people are financial guys and not product guys."

Years later in 1985, Bone was being honored for his perspicacity. The Desert Sun noted, "He has been in the forefront of developing both commercial and residential properties here in the Coachella Valley, and his foresight and myriad contributions have greatly enhanced the growth of the entire area. Bone entered the real estate industry in the early 1960s as a residential builder, but soon turned to commercial development. In association with several major companies, he became a specialist in the development of office buildings, shopping centers, hotels and other commercial properties."

"In the late 60s (Bone) became aware of the impending slowdown in commercial development and anticipated the resurgence of a strong housing market. The rapid increase in interest being shown by second-home buyers in resort-oriented housing led the company to build large, luxury condominium projects in the Palm Springs area as well as in Northern California, Arizona and Nevada. The company's first large recre-



Aerials of Marriott Desert Springs showing developer Bill Bone's filling in the desert floor.
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

ational resort country club project was Sunrise Country Club in Rancho Mirage. Each succeeding project here in the Coachella Valley has increased both in size and scope of amenities."

Indeed, Bone went on to develop Rancho Las Palmas Country Club, Monterey Country Club, The Lakes Country Club, Palm Valley Country Club, PGA West, Indian Ridge Country Club, Red Rock Country Club, Rancho Las Palmas Marriott Resort, Desert Springs Marriott Resort and Toscana. His imprimatur is on thousands of homes in the valley and has had an outsized impact on land use in the desert.

Often designed with architect Robert Altevers, these projects were massively ambitious, like Bone's next project near Santa Barbara. He purchased 2,700 acres on the edge of the Los Padres National Forest in 1981 and named it Sycamore Valley Ranch. He and Altevers worked designing the principal buildings on the ranch.

The main house was completed in 1982, based on a design by Altevers with formal gardens, a stone bridge, and a four-acre lake with a five-foot waterfall. Bone was later quoted as saying he had "a desire to express everything I had learned in 15 years of home building ... I achieved here all the things I wanted to do in my business but could not." He reportedly considered converting the property to a country club development.

Instead, Bone sold the property in 1988 to pop star Michael Jackson who renamed it Neverland Ranch. And in 2020, after Jackson's personal and financial troubles and subsequent death, the ranch was purchased and restored by billionaire-businessman Ron Burkle who also owns the iconic Bob Hope house in Southridge in Palm Springs.



Bill and Uta Bones. PALMSPRINGS