

# THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES



Frank Bogert breaks ground for the new St. Theresa Church. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Community fetes St. Theresa's 75th anniversary with style

Tracy Conrad Special to The Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

"When a dude ranch goes Hawaiian, something is bound to happen, and it did during the benefit luau for St. Theresa's Parochial School. The event held at Thunderbird Ranch showed those in the spirit of the occasion sans their Western garb and attired in Hawaiian fashion," reads the caption of a photograph that captured the unusual happening for The Desert Sun in December 1949.

- "Dyed-in-the-wool Westerners went native Tuesday night at Thunderbird Ranch for the Hawaiian Luau, which was staged for the benefit of St. Theresa school. The cream of village, at least all that could obtain one of the hard-to-get \$10 ducats, crowded into the dining room of the ranch. There, they beheld a lavish spread of food arrayed in true luau fashion set on low tables."

"The diners endured the doubled up knee-sitting position much unlike the long leg stretch of a stirrup on a Western saddle, and partook of the provender displayed in a lush setting of tropical splendor."

"The entire event was for a good cause, it was announced, with all net proceeds going into the coffers of St. Theresa's Parochial school...the list of those in attendance would fill the society blue books of the communities from which they hail and Palm Springs itself."

The whole desert community has been celebrating St. Theresa School ever since.

It all started after WWII with the population and building boom in the desert. In order to better serve the faithful, Bishop Charles F. Buddy of the San Diego Diocese established multiple new parishes using the abandoned temporary barracks and buildings from Torney General Hospital, moving them from the grounds of the El Mirador Hotel. He appointed Reverend William Clavin, who tramped around the sand dunes on the outskirts of the village to find a site one quarter mile east of the high school at what would become 2800 E. Ramon.

Of the multiple new parishes, St. Theresa was selected as the site of the first parochial school in the valley. The school opened in September 1948 with capacity of 200 grade school children and 33 kindergartners. The chapel from the hospital was repurposed as the sanctuary, which opened one month later, now 75 years ago.

The greater community sprang to action to support the school where generations of local children would study. The "St. Theresa's Mother's Club" was immediately formed to foster a close relationship between parents, guardians and teachers. It also provided much-needed funding for the school.

The Mother's Club was a force in the community. It produced not just the luau at Thunderbird, but fashion shows, house parties, musical concerts, high teas, card parties, costume balls and celebrity appearances to financially support the school. Everybody joyously joined in.

The Desert Sun noted in February 1949, "Another highly successful Western Dance was given by the St. Theresa's Mothers' Club at the school hall on Friday evening. Frank Bogert and Trav Rogers got everyone into the spirit with Paul Jones, lemon dances and squares. Mary Jane Hicks, aided by several glamor gals, sold tickets on the raffle prize."

"Connie Barleau, from the Dunes and Kiki Ochart from the Del Tah-quitz gave several entertaining numbers for the floor show. Refreshments were served by the mothers in the school cafeteria. Credit goes to Joan's Personalized Gift Shop for donating the door prize and to Emelie Lazer, interior decorator, The Florshiem Shoe Store, El Paseo Pharmacy, Palm Springs Sporting Goods and an anonymous donor of six pairs of nylons, for furnishing prizes for the raffle."

Through the years, St. Theresa has benefited from the dedicated group's imagination and creativity. The St. Theresa events were embraced by all of Palm Springs, and then by the rest of the Coachella Valley as their acclaim spread with the growth of the parish.

That growth necessitated expansion. In 1965, Bob and Dolores Hope generously donated a new convent for the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart who served the school designed by William F. Cody and a new parish building also designed by Cody was dedicated on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 28, 1968.

The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation notes, "St. Theresa Catholic Church is considered one of architect Cody's masterworks. Cody was an enthusiastic parishioner of the church and reportedly expended much time and creative effort on the commission. The church is remarkably original condition and many of the interior elements designed by Cody remain intact."

Curved walls of cement erupt from the ground surmounted by the upswept center of the church topped with a Celtic cross. The interior mas-



The re-used barracks from Torney General Hospital housed the first St. Theresa School.



Upswept concrete of William Cody's design of St. Theresa Church.

sive beams of the roof float above a sacred space that can accommodate 900 people. Clerestory windows bring shafts of desert sunlight into the room. Cody carefully appointed the stained glass, statues, pews, altars and baptismal font in a symphony of modern aesthetic.

Writing in 2009 for Palm Springs Life, Janice Kleinschmidt noted that at the dedication in 1968, Bishop Francis Furey remarked that the building was modern because St. Theresa herself was a modern saint, having only been canonized in 1925, and he had attended the ceremony.

The space is spiritually elevating and had immediate appeal. It attracted high-profile worshippers including Bob and Dolores Hope, Loretta Young and Jane Wyman. Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz sent their children to St. Theresa School. The nationally televised funeral of Sonny Bono took place at St. Theresa on Jan. 8, 1998, as a huge crowd jammed the space to pay tribute. Cody's funeral also took place in the church he designed.

In 2018, Palm Springs Mayor Rob Moon proclaimed November to be St. Theresa Church and School Appreciation Month to celebrate the significant contributions of the parish and school to the desert community on its 70th anniversary. He enthusiastically commended "the journey to 75," which has now arrived.

The 75th year celebration this October doesn't include a luau, but it carries on the venerable tradition featuring a whole lineup of events including St. Theresa Conference on Oct. 14, Choir Concert Night on Oct. 18, 75th Anniversary Dinner Celebration on Oct. 28 and the Parish Family Festival on Oct. 29. Call 760-323-2669 for more information on how to participate.

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