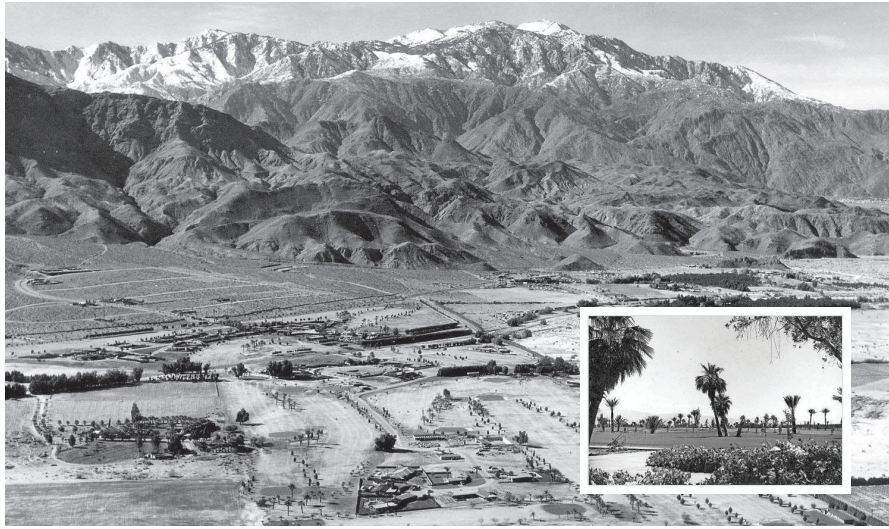


THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Palm Springs history: Bogert's Thunderbird



This aerial shot shows the Thunderbird Country Club golf course construction. Inset: Newly-planted trees grace the landscape. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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"Dreams do come true," read the newspaper article in January 1947. "And if you don't believe that 663 acres of beautiful panoramic desert and mountains can fit into a dream, just ask Frank Bogert and Raymond Cree, pioneer realtor. As their memory of what is now Thunderbird Ranch goes back to as far as 17 years ago, the romance of the desert hereabouts weaves in and out of the story like the many-colored hues of a rainbow and its end — the proverbial pot of gold, for them, Thunderbird!"

Only serious dreamers would have tried something as unlikely as conjuring a dude ranch from the desolate sands in the middle of nowhere, a bit east of Palm Springs and a bit west of Indio.

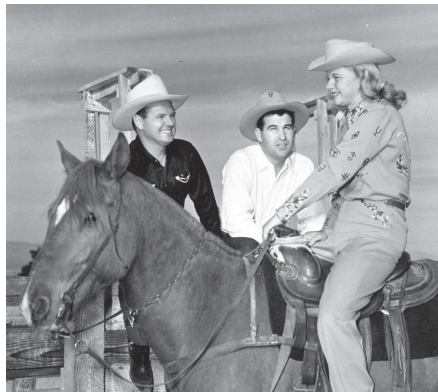
After Cree bought the property from the Southern Pacific Railroad in the 1920s, he tried unsuccessfully to interest local investors. His dreams were also dashed by New York financiers thanks to the Crash of 1929.

The newspaper continued: "Meanwhile, Bogert came to Palm Springs and for a time managed the stables at the Deep Well Ranch. Later he moved to Smoke Tree and in 1931 took over the operation of Norman's Stables. During the years of 1933 and 1934 Bogert became the publicity director of the El Mirador and really learned the art of ballyhoo and picture taking. Then in succession he managed Trav Roger's Stables, became secretary of the Chamber of Commerce in 1938 and during the summer of 1939 and 1941 managed the Circus Club at Alhambra, near San Francisco.

"Along came Pearl Harbor and in 1942 Bogert was in the navy. This business occupied his full attention until 1945. He emerged from the service as a lieutenant-commander." Bogert was 32 years old, married with two daughters, but he volunteered and spent four years in the Navy, serving with distinction in the Pacific. He dreamed of having his own desert hotel should he survive the war.

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder the saying goes, and distance made the desert even more enchanting. Bogert made friends in the service. He met other people in his travels and he talked about the desert and Palm Springs. He also remembered that tract of land which Cree had set his heart on as the site of a guest ranch. ... While still in uniform Lieutenant Bogert brought some friends down for a visit and showed them the present site of Thunderbird. The group talked to Cree. ..."

Cree's dream deferred, he agreed to sell the 663-acre section to Bogert and



Barney Hinkle, Frank Bogert and Babs Neel are photographed at Thunderbird in 1947.

his backers for \$34,000. Bogert and company bought the entirety of Section 11, bisected by the highway, after a satisfactory water survey assured enough underground supply for a town of 8,000 people.

Bogert had assembled an impressive array of investors, including Bill Gilmore of the Gilmore Steel Company; Bill and Katherine Jason of Jason Paper Company; Joe Edy, the owner of Edy's Candy Company; and Paul and Aloha Brown.

Architect Gordon B. Kaufmann was hired to design the ranch buildings in a distinctly western style. Kaufmann was already famous locally for the La Quinta Hotel and in Southern California for the Los Angeles Times building and Santa Anita Racetrack.

The ranch buildings were low-slung and thoroughly western. The clubhouse boasted a lobby, a rambling informal lounge with huge stone fireplace, a dining room and a kitchen. One-story cabins fanned out from the main building containing 22 bedrooms with baths sprinkled around a large swimming pool. Importantly, there were stables and corrals.

The war caused severe shortages of materials and labor. Working only on weekends plumbers, electricians and plasterers charged double time, causing investors and Bogert to do a lot of work themselves.

Katherine Jason "was very wealthy in her own right," Bogert recalled for the 50th anniversary celebration book written by Robert Wendeler, "and she put up the money herself. ... While we were building the ranch, she was president of our corporation. She went with me to Barker Bros. and we bought all the furniture for the rooms and decorated the rooms. She stayed on the ranch and worked her tail off. Then when she got through Paul Brown took over as president and then Bill Jason finally took over. He was the only one of the whole group that was a golfer. ..."

The ranch opened on Dec. 15, 1946, immediately attracting a Hollywood crowd and "offering all the expected dude ranch activities such as horse back riding and chuckwagon breakfasts."

The Warner Bros. movie "Two Guys From Texas" was filmed at Thunderbird Ranch in 1947 because it was so authentically western it made for a ready movie set. The "riotous round-up of rhythm and romance" starred "Dead Eye" Dennis Morgan and "Cactus" Jack Carson along with Dorothy Malone and Penny Edwards. Bogert had a role in the picture along with locals Babs Neel and Barney Hinkle.

Bogert ran the ranch from December 1946 to December 1950. He recalled: "We closed up in the summers — and I would go all over the United States trying to

promote my dude ranch and every place I'd go, people would say to me 'we love Palm Springs area, but you only have one nine-hole golf course.'"

Having lost some \$136,000 since inception, the answer seemed to be in the building of an 18-hole golf course. Johnny Dawson had developed Mission Valley Country Club near San Diego in 1947 and he was interested. His wife, Velma Dawson, remembered, "We had been playing in tournaments at O'Donnell with Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and all the big shots, in the 1940s. Johnny always said there should be an 18-hole golf course in the desert." In 1949 he began to look for land.

With help of realtor Barney Hinkle, Dawson approached Bogert about buying the dude ranch. Considering the mounting losses, Bogert agreed to sell. They asked Bogert to stay on to manage.

Thunderbird Ranch and Country Club was incorporated in May 1950 after Hinkle and Dawson again confirmed the water supply. Ben Hogan told Dawson he was crazy to build in the desert. Comedian and band leader Phil Harris, a friend of Dawson's from Lakeside Country Club in Los Angeles, was also skeptical but loved the desert.

When D.B. McDaniel, a Texas oilman, put up \$100,000 to complete the Thunderbird deal, raising the rest of the money was a cinch. The first in investors included Bob Hope and Randolph Scott, Ralph Kiner, Phil Harris, Desi Arnaz and Colorado Governor Dan Thornton pitched in. Each investor had to put up at least \$5,000, giving them the option to buy a golf course lot for \$2,000. The notion of living on a golf course was a Thunderbird innovation. Locals George Streb and Albert Frey, along with Cree, had lots.

The dreamscape was planted with 3,000 trees, including date palms, tamarisks, carobs, Arizona cypress and Washingtonia palms. To raise more money, tree sponsorships were sold to Leonard Firestone and Edgar Bergen, among others.

William Cody redesigned and added to the ranch buildings, retaining Kaufmann's original style while expanding the dining room and lounge. Cody added 14 three-room golf course cottages. "And as Cree watches Bogert bustling about getting 'things' ready for the opening he is satisfied that (they) will see that guest ranch raise up from the desert ... no longer a mirage" but instead a long-yearned-for dream come true.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at psstracy@gmail.com.