

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Lucy and Desi made great publicity for desert living

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The inaugural issue of the national version of TV Guide published in April 1953 featured a photograph of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz's newborn son emblazoned with a headline: "Lucy's \$50,000,000 baby." Sixty years later in 2013 when the grown-up baby boy, Desi Arnaz Jr., was interviewed, he mused that the headline was likely hyperbole. "A \$50 million baby? Really?... I can't imagine anyone thought I was worth that much. It's a lot of money, especially in 1953!"

The national version of the digest-sized guide bearing his baby picture launched the magazine. TV Guide was eventually distributed to some 20 million American households and was valued at more than \$3 billion dollars. The diminutive magazine made a fortune for its creator Walter Annenberg, who would find his way to the desert and build his iconic Sunnylands home in Rancho Mirage in the early 1960s.

But Lucille Ball was already here. From her first arrival, she was a constant presence here. She'd come at first as an aspiring actress in the early 1930s and was photographed at the El Mirador Hotel where a young and exceedingly handsome Frank Bogert was the publicity man. (Lucy and Frank became good friends and would remain so for the rest of her life.)

Publicity also came naturally to both Lucy and Desi, who together built an unlikely empire, the story of which has been recreated in a Hollywood movie and recounted in several documentaries of late.

Twenty years after her first trip to the desert, Lucy was a household name, thanks to her groundbreaking television show. The interest in the arrival of the TV stork was impossible to exaggerate. The whole of the country was in love with Lucy and thrilled with the addition to the family. The real-world birth of Desi Jr. on Jan. 19, 1953, was timed to coincide by cesarean with that of the character of Little Ricky on the show, which was an unprecedented publicity success with 44 million fans tuning in, equivalent to 72% of all American households at the time.

The 2013 article explained further: "Up to that point, no character was allowed to be pregnant on TV — even the word 'pregnant' was banned — so interest in Lucy's groundbreaking mommyhood was huge. It triggered an avalanche of merchandise that included dolls, games, books and nursery sets, as well as Lucy maternity wear ... replicas of the Ricardos' bedroom and living-room furniture also hit stores just as (Desi's) recording of 'There's a Brand New Baby in Our House' was zooming up the charts..." The story suggested that Little Desi might actually have been closer to a \$100 million baby.

But the cover photo had been priceless. "And it came with quite a backstory. In a TV Guide Magazine piece that ran on (in the) 20th-anniversary edition, then-Hollywood bureau chief Dwight Whitney re-



Lucille Ball and Frank Bogert in 1957.

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vealed that the coveted pics of baby Desi had instead been promised to those juggernaut publications Life and Look. How did we, the new kid in town, score the coup? The elder Arnaz took a meeting with TV Guide, during which he had the photos stacked on his desk. At one point, wrote Whitney, Arnaz 'excused himself to go to the men's room, making it clear that if several pictures were missing when he got back, he would not notice.'"

The publicity made TV Guide an instant success and fueled the fervor over the television show. The day following the record-breaking broadcast of Little Ricky's arrival, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who would also become a big part of life in the desert, took the oath of office for president of the United States. A mere 29 million viewers tuned in for that, prompting people to say they "like Ike, but they love Lucy."

Palm Springs certainly loved Lucy. A bronze statue of her seated on a bench is located at Palm Canyon Drive and Tahquitz Canyon Way, and the open spot next to her is constantly occupied by an admiring tourist taking a picture.

She and Arnaz eloped in 1940, and during the early years of their marriage, they frequented Palm Springs, usually staying at the Racquet Club. In 1951, Arnaz was the headliner for the grand opening of the Starlite Room at the Chi Chi.

In 1954, they commissioned architect Paul R. Williams, who designed their ranch home in Chatsworth, to create a home for their family, including their two children, Lucie and Desi Jr., in the newly established Thunderbird Country Club, Frank Bogert's latest project.

Also in 1954, Lucy and Desi made the feature film,

"The Long, Long Trailer." The hijinks of the ridiculously long, bright-yellow trailer trying to negotiate the impossibly steep, winding mountain road were filmed on Highway 74 above Palm Desert.

By 1954, after more than 100 TV episodes set in New York, the show was ostensibly moved to Hollywood, California, the actual location of the production. The storyline chronicled the cross-country move and provided opportunities for guest appearances by leading screen stars, many of whom were also hanging out in the desert.

One episode was even set in Palm Springs. In the plot, Lucy and Vivian Vance's Ethel were vacationing away from their husbands and bumped into Rock Hudson, who plausibly could easily have been found poolside in real life in Palm Springs. The episode was actually filmed on a sound stage in front of a live audience in Hollywood but was great publicity for the desert resort town.

Jess Oppenheimer, the head writer and producer of the show, had connections to, and wrote sketch comedy for, Jack Benny, Rudy Valee, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Bing Crosby, Judy Garland, Bob Hope and Ginger Rogers — all desert regulars.

Ball and Arnaz were active participants in the desert community, including the Desert Circus, over which Ball reigned as queen in 1964. Both Arnaz and Ball were fixtures at the Bob Hope Classic Golf Tournament. Arnaz created the Western Hills Hotel in Indian Wells and appeared there with his band also entertaining for the Palm Springs Police Shows. In later years, Lucy could be found regularly at the Ingleside Inn playing backgammon.

The couple's collaboration produced a television empire valued at countless millions. But even more precious, their creativity rated a 60th-anniversary exhibition at the Library of Congress exploring the history of the "I Love Lucy" show through the Ball and Arnaz family scrapbooks as well as photographs, scripts, printed and manuscript music from the nation's library.

In 2017, the Palm Springs Historical Society mounted its own exhibit about Ball and Arnaz's tenure in the desert. Their daughter, Lucie, graciously supported the show and noted of her parents, "In the peak period of their life together, Palm Springs was their safe haven, their Shangri-La, their escape from the ever-increasing stresses of their unexpected success, a green grass, majestic mountain happy place they could take refuge in and remember why they gambled so much just to be able to stay together and remind themselves they wanted more than anything to have a family."

That family most definitely included the desert community.

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