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SPA CITY
THE MIDCENTURY SPA-TELS OF DESERT HOT SPRINGS

by

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Acknowledgments

I first went to Desert Hot Springs in the early 1990s shortly after I moved to Los Angeles. In our early ventures there, my husband and I stayed at the Ma-Ha-Yah Lodge. Through the years we tried to make an annual trip to Desert Hot Springs. Before our son was born, my husband and I spent our last out-of-town vacation at Miracle Manor Retreat. Desert Hot Springs was always a place of instant relaxation and contemplation for me. As a young toddler, our son loved to swim in the pools. We were devastated when it was sold and remodeled into a snazzier place, then became a recovery center.



Willa Seidenberg, seven months pregnant, at Miracle Manor Retreat. April 1998. Photo by William Short.

This thesis was made possible by so many people who shared their time, thoughts, and enthusiasm for my work. My biggest and most heartfelt thanks go to my Committee Chair Trudi Sandmeier, who is always the smartest person in the room and has a heart that matches her brain. Special thanks to my thesis committee members Katie Horak and Mary Ringhoff who had to bear with me, especially as I struggled with the policy sections of the thesis. They were patient and had insightful edits. I also thank my classmates who offered encouragement and feedback all along the way.

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I wrote this thesis while finishing my last year of a twenty-three-year teaching career at the University of Southern California's School of Journalism. I am grateful to my colleagues and administrators who cheered me on, as did my friends, but especially my best friend Ellen Schneider, and my son, Sam Short, who support me in ways I cannot count. Finally, my deepest love and appreciation goes to my husband Bill Short who cheerfully supported me along the way to this degree. He accompanied me to Desert Hot Springs on many occasions, photographed properties, drove me around town endlessly, and made me delicious dinners so I could keep working. Thank you for sharing this journey.

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Abstract

Desert Hot Springs is a town of almost 33,000 people in the Coachella Valley, surrounded by two mountain ranges. The town is situated atop two aquifers: one cold, the other hot. The hot mineral waters have been enjoyed for centuries, first by the Cahuilla Indians who occupied the area, then by homesteaders who arrived in the early twentieth century, and later by tourists, beginning in the mid-twentieth century.

In the 1950s, Desert Hot Springs became a spa destination for middle and working-class families with more than one hundred simple mid-century motel spas (spa-tels) that featured hot mineral water pools. By the 1980s, the number of lodgings had dwindled, and many had seen better days. The city went through a period of high crime, bankruptcy, and blight. By the mid to late 1990s, the rundown motel/hotels became attractive to architects and developers as an alternative to the trendy and more expensive Palm Springs area. A handful of the surviving 1950s-era motels were given makeovers and re-opened as expensive boutique resorts. As the spas began attracting visitors, the town leadership concentrated on restoring its financial health, bringing down crime, and attempting to develop the downtown area. Yet, the median household income in 2021 was just under \$38,000, and spa owners struggled to stay solvent.¹

This thesis documents the history of Desert Hot Springs and the factors that led to the development of motel/spas in the 1950s, known as spa-tels, that served a modest class of health and wellness tourists and seasonal visitors. Additionally, the thesis explores the current status of the town and its surviving collection of mid-century spa-

¹ Desert Hot Springs Quick Facts, U.S. Census Bureau, 2017-2021.

tels, and looks at possible preservation tools to help the spa-tels and the city survive and thrive.

Introduction

Desert Hot Springs is a city of almost 33,000 people in the Coachella Valley; a city that came to life as a place of relaxation and healing in the years after World War II. Desert Hot Springs' unique geography gives it abundant hot mineral water, long thought to have healing properties. The water spawned the town's plentiful motel spa resorts, known as spa-tels, between 1940 and 1970 that catered to a working- and middle-class clientele. The spas and the modest mom-and-pop motels were established first, and the town grew up around them. Promoters of the town took to calling it "Spa City."

Desert Hot Springs never achieved the success or fame of well-known resort cities like nearby Palm Springs, but it has loyal fans who describe it as:

"a funky little desert town that hasn't been all L.A.-a-fied like Palm Springs"

"the old desert"

"quirky, but relaxing"

"truly diverse"

"neutral ground"

"a place where you "could sit for hours ... and see the great wonders, the optical illusions of the winds blowing through, sand coming up, clouds dropping down, and then sunlight doing all kinds of incredible things."

"a social experiment that works"²

² Quotes taken from interviews with the author, including Jeff and Judy Bowman, Loretta Ayeroff, Emory Lesco, M.J. Outcault, and Michael Rotondi.

“If Palm Springs is women in heels buying Brie at Jensen’s Finest Foods, Desert Hot Springs is women in fuzzy bedroom slippers buying Chips Ahoy at Stater Bros.”³

More than one-hundred motels dotted the town in its heyday of the 1950s-1970s. [Figure 0.1] It had a vibrant community engaged in civic-minded activities; it welcomed people of all religious backgrounds (though not necessarily people of color) and economic statuses and respected the people who came there because they just wanted to be left alone. By the 1980s Desert Hot Springs fell into hard times and many of the motels were adaptively reused as apartments or recovery centers for substance abuse; some were abandoned and demolished. Some hung on and continued to operate as spas, or temporarily as apartments and were later turned back into spa-tels. The city’s fall into bankruptcy, crime, drugs, and gangs caused it to gain the moniker “Desperate Hot Springs.”⁴



Figure 0.1. Postcard of David's Spa. Year unknown.

³ Bender, “Seaweed in Desert Hot Springs’ sand,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 2003.

⁴ Steven Greenhut, “Desperate Hot Springs,” *City Journal*, December 5, 2013.

In the early 2000s, Desert Hot Springs began seeing restoration and revival of its remaining spa-tels, some reborn as boutique hotel/spas catering to well-heeled health and wellness seekers who liked the off-beat ambiance of the town. The city was the first in Southern California to jump full swing into the burgeoning cannabis industry, and it is now marrying “cannatourism” with spa treatments.⁵ Crime in the city has decreased dramatically and its population has become more diverse, with Latinos and whites making up the lion’s share of its residents. Housing construction is booming and big mobile home parks on the edges of town attract the RV crowd and the 55+ demographic. But the town is still struggling: the median income is less than \$38,000, there is not a vibrant restaurant or shopping scene, nor many attractions beyond the motel spas, and it still suffers from a negative image problem.

Desert Hot Springs and much of the desert surrounding it are ripe for historic preservation. In fact, during the 2023 writing of this thesis, five historic motel properties were demolished, highlighting the need for preservation to save the extant properties. This thesis provides a rationale for why Desert Hot Springs’ spa-tels should be protected. The first three chapters document the town’s development and how it connects with the larger social and cultural landscape of the United States, and more specifically California, after World War II. Chapters four and five look at historic designation and economic incentive tools that are available to the motels and the city and provide recommendations for strategies that could help the city and its residents protect the properties.

⁵ According to the website Green State, “cannatourism” is defined as “any excursion, destination, or lodging facility where cannabis use is encouraged.” Accessed July 8, 2023. <https://www.greenstate.com/food-drink/what-is-cannatourism-heres-everything-you-should-know-about-the-newest-travel-trend/>.

I have visited the spa-tels of Desert Hot Springs over the course of thirty years. In researching this thesis, I went there half a dozen times to become more familiar with the streets and the properties. I spent hours driving around town identifying current and former spa-tels and photographing them. I interviewed the following sources:

Loretta Ayeroff, frequent visitor to Desert Hot Springs from childhood on, and photographer whose Motel Series featured the spa-tels of the town.

Mike Bickford, owner of Miracle Springs Resort & Spa and Desert Hot Springs Spa Hotel.

Jeff and Judy Bowman, former owners of the Kismet Lodge and current residents of Desert Hot Springs and active in the Desert Hot Springs Historical Society.

Suchi Branfman, Desert Hot Springs homeowner with long family history in Desert Hot Springs.

Gary Gardner, Desert Hot Springs City Council member.

Scott Harner, now former owner of Sagewater Spa & Resort.

Stacy Ingber, frequent visitor to Desert Hot Springs as a child.

Emory Lesco, frequent visitor to Desert Hot Springs and now an employee of Miracle Springs Resort & Spa.

Luke Rainey, Desert Hot Springs City Manager (former).

Irene Rodriguez, director of the Cabot Pueblo Museum.

Michael Rotondi, Los Angeles architect and former co-owner of Miracle Manor Retreat.

Sean Smith, Desert Hot Springs Director of Economic Development.

Marge Snell, Desert Hot Springs resident and archivist for the Historical Society.

Christopher Tandon, former co-owner of Hope Springs.

I also examined some primary sources by visiting the following archives:

a) **Isaac Bloch Papers**, University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

Archives of the rabbi who helped the town's Jewish residents build a temple.

b) **John F. Outcault Architectural Drawings**, Architecture and Design Collection, Art, Design & Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara. Drawing of the Coachella Valley architect who designed at least two of the prominent spa-tels.

c) **Desert Hot Springs Historical Society's archives**, Desert Hot Springs. Ephemera of the town. [Figure 0.2]



Figure 0.2. Archives of Desert Hot Springs Historical Society. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

In addition to books that have been written about Desert Hot Springs and the entire Coachella Valley, I relied substantially on newspaper articles from the period when Desert Hot Springs was established and growing. These sources and the research convinced me that the spa-tel district of Desert Hot Springs is a candidate for designation on the National Register of Historic Places and/or the California Register of Historical Resources, and that the city should make special efforts to protect its spa-tels.

CHAPTER 1: Evolution of Desert Hot Springs

Geography of the Coachella Valley

July 12, 1941, when the Desert Hot Springs Mineral Baths opened its doors, is considered the birth of the town of Desert Hot Springs in Southern California's Coachella Valley, shown in the map in figure 1.1.⁶ It was the first of many spas, resorts, and lodges that came to dot the town, but its history began many centuries before.

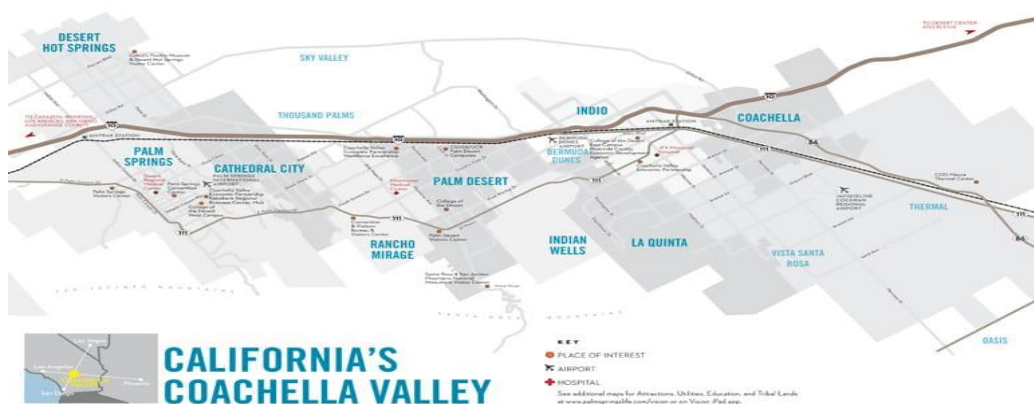


Figure 1.1. Map of Coachella Valley. From Palm Springs Life Magazine.

Ten million years ago, the area now known as the Coachella Valley was covered in water flowing from the Colorado River. The largest of these bodies was Lake Cahuilla which gave early inhabitants a source of fresh water.⁷ Over time, the water dried up leaving a hard-packed desert floor with sparse vegetation.⁸

⁶ Hunt, *The Waters of Comfort*, p.101.

⁷ Singer, "Geology of the Imperial Valley California: A Monograph." 1998. p. 36; An instructive StoryMap of the Imperial Valley over time can be found at "Water is King – Here is its Kingdom" by Ivan G. Soto, UCHRI, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/15c5149c1252414da3bcfa628fea38e7>.

⁸ Mendenhall, "Ground waters of the Indio region, California." U.S. Geological Survey Water Supply Paper 225, 1910. p. 15.

Desert Hot Springs sits in the San Gorgonio Pass between two mountain ranges: San Bernardino and San Jacinto, part of the Peninsular Ranges Province which is one of the largest geological areas in North America.⁹ A strand of the San Andreas Fault, represented by the red line in figure 1.2, called the Mission Creek strand, runs through Desert Hot Springs. To the west of the fault lies an aquifer with cold water that gives the town its award-winning tap water.¹⁰ Runoff from Mount San Gorgonio in the San Bernardino Mountains falls through cracks in the rock and with the help of geothermal pressure, creates a natural hot aquifer with water temperatures ranging from 140 to 180 degrees Fahrenheit.¹¹

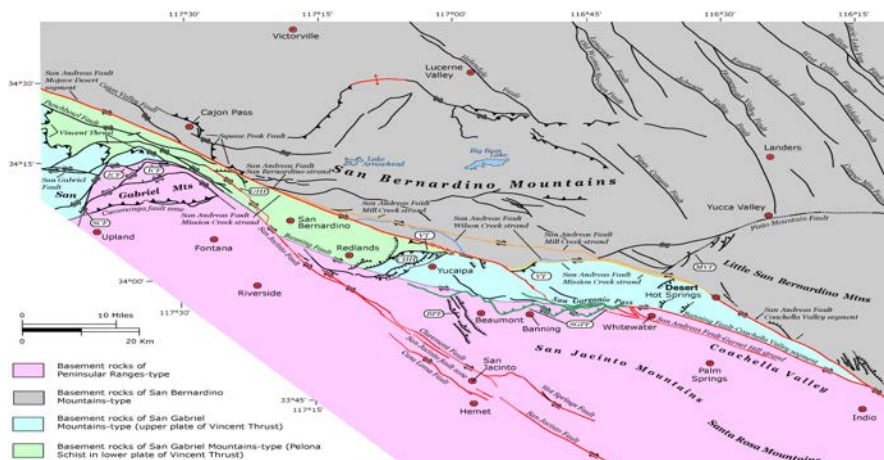


Figure 1.2. Map of fault lines. From Whitewater Canyon Earth & Biological Sciences, <http://whitewatercanyon.org/san-andreas-fault/>.

⁹ California Geological Survey, "150 Geologic Facts about California" Fact 32, accessed March 4, 2023. [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.conservation.ca.gov/cgs/Documents/Melange/Geologic-Facts-about-California.pdf](https://www.conservation.ca.gov/cgs/Documents/Melange/Geologic-Facts-about-California.pdf); Geological areas are defined as areas that have similar rock masses and sedimentary basins. Electronic Code of Federal Regulation, 30 CFR § 57.2. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/30/57.2>.

¹⁰ Desert Hot Springs' water has been a winner multiple times in the International Water Tasting Competition held in Berkley Springs, West Virginia. Accessed March 4, 2023. <https://berkeleyspringswatertasting.com/winners/>.

¹¹ Weather Spark, "Winter 2022 Weather History in Desert Hot Springs." Accessed January 30, 2023. <https://weatherspark.com/h/s/2105/2022/3/Historical-Weather-Winter-2022-in-Desert-Hot-Springs-California-United-States#Figures-WindSpeed>.

The mountains offer visitors stunning views and provide Desert Hot Springs with its signature water; but the desert sun and the mountains also create windy conditions, known as the Venturi effect.¹² The strong sun heats up the desert floor, and as the heat rises it creates low-pressure conditions on the surface. When high-pressure air from the coastal areas of the west drift into the Coachella Valley, the high and low pressures collide to create gusts that average between five and ten miles per hour but can get up to fifty miles per hour. Visitors, and even some residents, complain about the winds which are far stronger than in nearby Palm Springs. Desert Hot Springs' average temperatures in the summer reach well above 95 degrees and in the low 70s during winter months.¹³ The heat wave during July 2023 saw temperatures regularly hitting 110 degrees.

Early History

Archeologists believe that the Cahuilla people migrated to the Southern California region anywhere from two to five thousand years ago. Over time, the Cahuilla people evolved into tribal groups that inhabited different areas of the Coachella Valley: The Desert Cahuilla tribe lived in the lower part of the valley and near the Salton Sea; the Pass Cahuilla settled in the San Geronio Pass; and the Mountain Cahuilla

¹² Coachella Valley Water District, 4.5 Biological Resources, April 6, 2016, p. 4.5-5. Accessed January 30, 2023. <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://cvwd.org/DocumentCenter/View/3005/45-Biological-Resources?bidId=>.

¹³ Weather Spark, "Winter 2022 Weather History in Desert Hot Springs," Accessed January 30, 2023. <https://weatherspark.com/y/2105/Average-Weather-in-Desert-Hot-Springs-California-United-States-Year-Round>.

inhabited the San Jacinto Mountains.¹⁴ Today there are nine federally recognized Cahuilla tribes in Imperial, Riverside, and San Diego Counties.¹⁵

The Cahuilla are a Takic-speaking people of hunter-gatherers who made ample use of the natural vegetation. Yucca, agave, creosote, ocotillo, indigo bush, fan palm trees, cholla, and saguaro cacti provided them with the resources for medicines, basket weaving, constructing homes, food, hunting, and cooking instruments. They also had access to a variety of rodents, lizards, and insects.

The Cahuilla lived a semi-nomadic existence. They did not have permanent settlements in what is now Desert Hot Springs, but they are known to have passed through the area regularly as evidenced by pottery shards and the knowledge of water sources passed down over time. In the lore of the town, it is said that the Cahuilla enjoyed the healing powers of the natural mineral springs that centuries later would be central to the town's identity.¹⁶ That claim may be more than just folklore because Indigenous people all over North America valued hot springs as sacred places, and used mineral waters for rituals and ceremonies as evidenced by artifacts.¹⁷ While Desert Hot Springs was within the territory of the Cahuilla, it does not appear that the early inhabitants lived in the area.

¹⁴ Caudell, "A People's Journey," Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians website. Accessed May 8, 2023. <https://aguacaliente.org/documents/OurStory-10.pdf>.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Indian Health Service, List of Federally-Recognized Tribes in CA, Vol. 87, No. 19.

¹⁶ Bonner, "Desert Hot Springs California's Spa City." *Desert USA*. Accessed March 22, 2023. <https://www.desertusa.com/desert-california/desert-hot-springs.html>.

¹⁷ Erfurt-Cooper and Cooper, *Health and Wellness Tourism*, p. 112.

Coachella Valley History

The Cahuilla had the Coachella Valley to themselves for centuries until Spanish explorers Captain José Romero, José Maria Estudillo, and Romualdo Pacheco led a series of expeditions through the area in the 1820s.¹⁸ When gold was discovered in the neighboring territory of Arizona in the mid-nineteenth century, adventurers began searching for a direct route from Los Angeles to the gold fields. In 1862, William David Bradshaw stumbled upon an ancient indigenous trading route that is today loosely followed by the route of Highway 111, the highway that branches off Interstate 10, south to Palm Springs.¹⁹ It became known as the Bradshaw Trail, seen in figure 1.3, and served as a key route between the Pacific Ocean and the Colorado River.

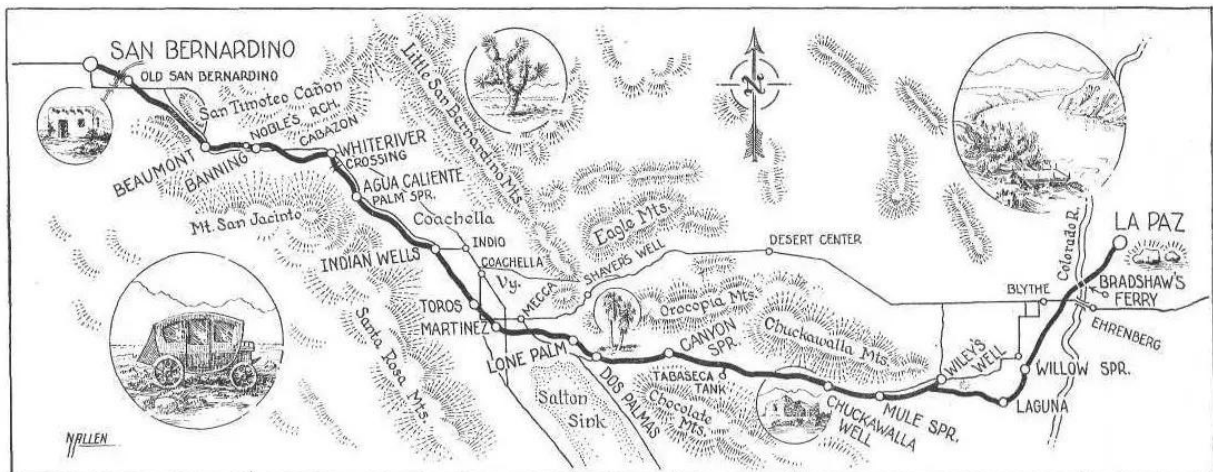


Figure 1.3. Bradshaw Trail route. Illustration by Norton Allen, Mojave Gold Mining website, <https://mojavegoldmining.com/the-bradshaw-trail/>.

¹⁸ Johnston, "The Bradshaw Trail." p. 92-95.

¹⁹ Hunt, *The Waters of Comfort*, p. 33.

Indigenous people had successfully lived in the area for centuries, but for newly arrived explorers it was inhospitable terrain. As Walter C. Mendenhall wrote for the U.S. Geological Survey, “Water is the first requisite to the existence of all life; hence everywhere in the arid West the question of water supply is of paramount importance.”²⁰ The Coachella Valley has hundreds of artesian wells, and as a journalist in the early 1900s wrote, “...here we have the first dots of vivid green strung along the railway like ganglia on a nerve fiber – Mecca, Thermal, Coachella, Indio, four oases in the wilderness.”²¹

The arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad, completed in 1877, had a dramatic effect on the Coachella Valley. As Mendenhall notes, the building of the railroad reduced “desert tragedies” but it led to a “greater influx of inexperienced travelers.”²² The route from Los Angeles to Indio was nicknamed *The Sidewinder*, and the “little desert local.”²³ In the 1860s, the federal government gave the railroad ten miles of land, chopped up into odd-numbered square mile plots on each side of the railroad tracks as an incentive to finish the rail lines. The rail company sold off land to the early settlers of Palm Springs, including Judge John Guthrie McCallum who built an aqueduct, and the government retained the even-numbered sections. When President Ulysses S. Grant established a reservation for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians in 1876, the tribe was given rights to the government’s share of the parcels which created a checkerboard pattern as seen in figure 1.4.

²⁰ Mendenhall, p. 5.

²¹ *The Story of the Coachella Valley Water District*, p. 10.

²² Ibid.

²³ Shumway, *Your Desert and Mine*. p. 2.

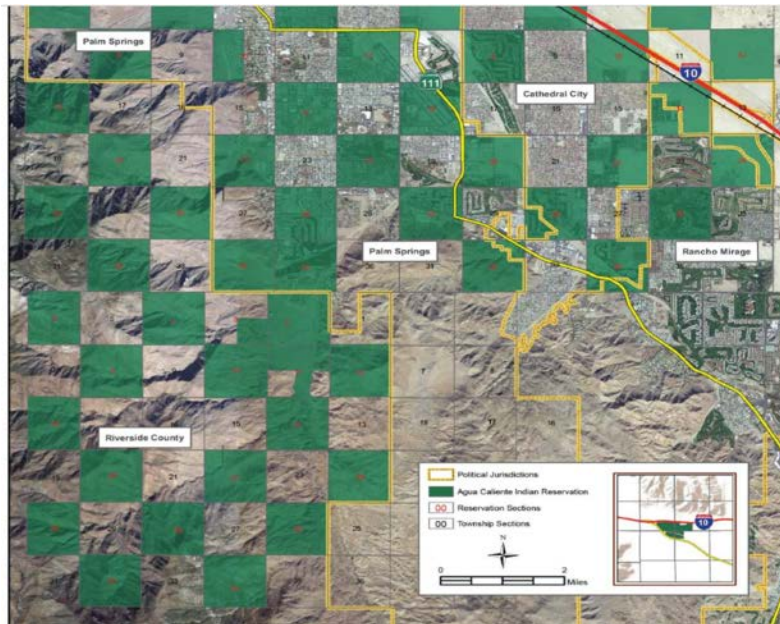


Figure 1.4. Map of Cahuilla land. From “Cahuilla Territory” by Mona De Crinis, me yah whao, Fall/Winter 2021-2022. p. 67.
https://aguacaliente.org/documents/Cahuilla_Territory.pdf.

The plots gave the tribe just a fraction of its traditional territory, and none of it in Desert Hot Springs proper. The railroad hired Cahuilla laborers to build the tracks which did not stop in Desert Hot Springs but did in nearby Indio and Palm Springs.²⁴

The homestead gates open

Until the early twentieth century, most of the travelers along the Bradshaw Trail and the railroad’s route were just passing through with no thought of settling in the severe territory. As author Marc Reisner writes about the desert, “One does not really conquer a place like this. One inhabits it like an occupying army and makes, at best, an uneasy truce with it.”²⁵ Eventual settlement in the area was sparked by laws enacted by

²⁴ Goolsby, “Southern Pacific Railroad made path through the wild.” *Desert Sun*. August 23, 2014. Accessed January 23, 2023. <https://www.desertsun.com/story/life/2014/08/24/southern-pacific-railroad-history-coachella-valley/14446763/>.

²⁵ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, p. 4.

Congress to encourage growth in the American West. One was the Homestead Act of 1862, which offered 160 acres of surveyed government land for anyone who would live on and cultivate their plot of land.²⁶ The other was the Desert Land Act passed in 1877 in which people could “apply for a desert-land entry to reclaim, irrigate, and cultivate arid and semiarid public lands.”²⁷ The first documented homesteader to live in Desert Hot Springs was Hilda M. Gray, who in 1912 set up a homestead about a mile from Two Bunch Palms, where the hot mineral water naturally seeped above ground. A government survey team in 1858 identified Two Bunch as a site of water, but the team never completed its work because the surveyors concluded the environment was too forbidding to stay.²⁸

In those early days of the area’s development, settlers would trudge to the muddy water hole at Two Bunch to fill their jugs and canteens with water. Hilda Gray didn’t last long in the desert, and in 1916 she sold her plot to Cabot Yerxa who holds a prominent and revered place in the history of Desert Hot Springs. He described the Two Bunch Palms water hole this way:

The source of the water was tiny dribblets of water oozing out of a five-foot clay bank. A dilapidated, rickety ladder stood there, and by going down a half-dozen rungs it was possible to fill a canteen where the slightly moving water kept the scum from forming too thickly. It was here we obtained our water.²⁹

²⁶ The United States Senate, “Landmark Legislation: The Homestead Act of 1862,” Accessed February 13, 2023. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/civil_war/Homestead_Act.htm#:~:text=To%20help%20develop%20the%20American,western%20land%20to%20individual%20settlers and National Archives, Homestead Act (1862), Accessed February 13, 2023. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/homestead-act>.

²⁷ Bureau of Land Management, “Desert Land Entries.” Accessed February 13, 2023. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/<https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/Desert%20Land%20Entries.pdf>.

²⁸ Coffee, “Desert Hot Springs Why?” p. 7.

²⁹ Yerxa, *On the Desert Since 1913*. (Cabot’s Museum Foundation, 2011) p. 29.

Other than Two Bunch, the only other watering hole was in Seven Palms five miles away – a “fer piece” when traveling by burro or on foot.

Cabot Yerxa and the “discovery” of water

Cabot Yerxa is often called “the Father of Desert Hot Springs” and he is credited with “discovering” the aquifers that would make the town a spa destination.³⁰ Yerxa, who is almost always referred to by his given name Cabot, was an eccentric fellow -- a “Renaissance” man, and an entrepreneur who was born on a Sioux reservation where his parents ran a trading post.³¹ Those early beginnings led him to a lifelong interest in, and connection with, Indigenous cultures. Before he landed in the Coachella Valley in 1913, he had traversed Mexico, Alaska, Cuba, and Florida. In 1893, when he was a child, he briefly stopped in the California desert during a train trip between Yuma, Arizona, and Los Angeles. Years later he was lured to that part of the desert by a friend who enticed him with claims of “free land.”³²

After traipsing around the area, Cabot discovered broken bits of pottery on a hill about a mile north of Two Bunch Palms. He deduced that Native peoples had been there and had found access to water, so he put his stake in the ground, and under the Homestead Act, Cabot claimed his 160 acres. He built himself a cabin in 1913 that he called Eagle’s Nest, seen in figure.1.5. A chance conversation with an old Cahuilla man

³⁰ Summons, “Trevor’s Travels: Story behind Cabot’s Pueblo Museum includes a donkey named Merry Christmas.” *Daily Bulletin*. May 22, 2019. Accessed February 13, 2023. <https://www.dailybulletin.com/2019/05/22/trevors-travels-story-behind-cabots-pueblo-museum-includes-a-donkey-named-merry-christmas/>.

³¹ Cabot’s Museum Foundation, “The Story of Cabot Yerxa & His Pueblo.” (2016) p. 4; Cabot Yerxa is always referred to by his first name Cabot, and even his house that is now a museum is called Cabot’s Pueblo Museum.

³² Hunt, *The Waters of Comfort*. p. 72.

led Cabot to the underground water beds not far from his rustic domicile. He used a divining rod and found two water sources where he dug wells – a hot one outside his cabin and a cold one just 600 yards away. Thinking it was a miracle, he named the hill Miracle Hill.³³



Figure 1.5. Cabot Yerxa's first cabin, Eagle Nest. Date unknown. From Images of America: Desert Hot Springs.

Coffee and Spas

Cabot Yerxa is described as an “itinerant adventurer” and when not in residence in Desert Hot Springs he traveled around, including a stint in the U.S. Army during World War I and operating general stores in Blythe and Moorpark, California.³⁴ In 1932, he had a visit from L.W. Coffee at his Moorpark store. While Cabot is known as the *father* of Desert Hot Springs, Coffee is called the *founder* of the town.³⁵ Coffee was a

³³ Cabot's Museum Foundation, “The Story of Cabot Yerxa & His Pueblo.” (2016) p. 12.

³⁴ National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Cabot's Pueblo Museum, 2011. p. 8.

³⁵ Hunt, *The Waters of Comfort*. p. 88.

land developer who migrated to Los Angeles from Denmark by way of Northern California. He was intrigued by Cabot's description of the hot mineral waters, so Cabot gave him an introduction to a fellow homesteader and Coffee ventured out to the desert. Almost immediately he had a vision of a town devoted to health and wellness. He set about drilling wells with Bill Anderson, an acquaintance of Cabot. Coffee was intrigued by the geology of the area and wanted to find the sources of the hot water. He wrote, "I became more and more interested every minute and, after a few days of rest, taking hot baths and sweats and drinking plenty of the hot mineral water, I began to feel like I wanted to tramp every part of the area."³⁶

Coffee connected with other homesteaders in the area to pitch his idea of developing a town devoted to health. He developed a property trust for the land and decided to subdivide it into acre lots, which he later described as a mistake.³⁷ A survey of the area was completed in 1933 and Coffee began selling plots of land for two-to-four hundred dollars each.³⁸ His financial dealings were fraught from the start and during most of the 1930s, his trust was tied up in litigation. In 1939 Coffee was contacted by William "Aubrey" Wardman, a Whittier, California land developer who got rich in the oil and telephone industries, because he wanted to join Coffee's trust. Wardman obtained 160 acres of land in what would become the center of the town. He went on to fund many projects in Desert Hot Springs, including a recreational park and the installation of a telephone exchange. He became one of the town's biggest advocates. Wardman later fell out with Coffee, like so many others did, and filed a lawsuit against Coffee.

³⁶ Coffee, "Desert Hot Springs Why?" p. 6.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

Meanwhile, Coffee installed a pump in the first well he found -- which he dubbed the "Discovery Well" -- and he set up some hot tubs in the sand, and began building his bath house.³⁹ In 1941, he opened the Desert Hot Springs Mineral Baths seen in figure 1.6, where more than two thousand visitors reportedly showed up for the grand opening, even though there were no lodging services, only hot mineral baths and changing rooms. Coffee and his wife Lillian served foot-long hot dogs, ice cream, and soft drinks,



Figure 1.6. L.W. Coffee's first bath house. Date unknown. From *Images of America: Desert Hot Springs*.

and an orchestra played as the guests danced and swam in the pools. He even had a licensed chiropractor on hand who ran the so-called Rubbing Room and gave massages and chiropractic treatments to the guests.⁴⁰ With no lodgings in town, people slept in their cars or pitched tents out in the open desert, all for the chance to soak in the hot mineral water.⁴¹

³⁹ The Waters of Comfort, p. 97.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴¹ Coffee's bathhouse went through trials and tribulations, including fires and the ravages of time. -It was finally demolished in 1991.

In the twenty years that followed the opening of Coffee's bath house, dozens of new spas opened with lodging. Most were small mom-and-pop operations: one-story, vernacular motels in a Mid-Century Modern style, but with solid building construction. Some had catchy neon signs popular in the era. Many of those early lodgings were located near Coffee's bath house, which was on Eighth Street and Palm Drive, the main drag that took visitors from the highway into the center of town.

As figure 1.7 shows, some of the hottest water from the natural aquifer was on Miracle Hill, Cabot's old stomping grounds. One of the first motels to appear there was Miracle Manor, built in 1950, just across the street from where Cabot was building his home.⁴² Miracle Manor had just seven rooms grouped around a garden courtyard with a

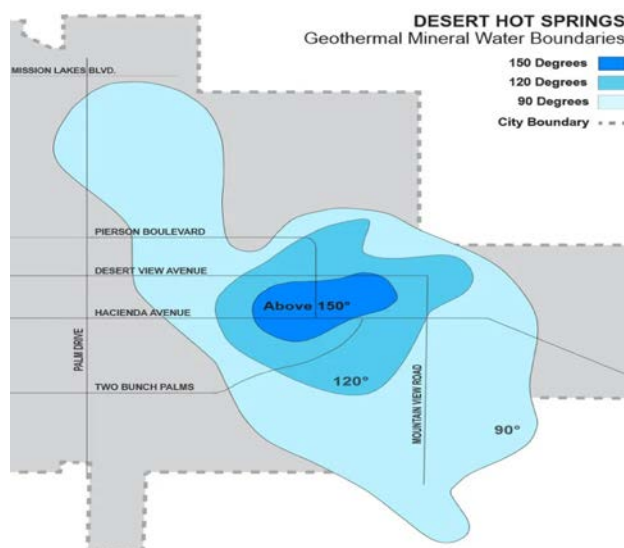


Figure 1.7. Map Desert Hot Springs mineral water.

From Palm Springs Hot Springs website
[<https://www.palmspringshotsprings.com/hot-springs-water-maps>]

⁴² The first permit record for Miracle Manor is 1948, however, it was not until December of 1955 that *The Desert Sentinel* announced that it was open to guests. It's unclear whether guests stayed there in the first half of the 1950s.

kidney-shaped swimming pool, an enclosed hot mineral water pool, and a dazzling view of the San Jacinto Mountains. [Figure 1.8] This was a somewhat typical size for the spa-tels of the era in Desert Hot Springs. Ironically, it was the rehabilitation of Miracle Manor almost fifty years later by a Los Angeles-based architect/designer that sparked a new round of interest in these modest spa-tels.



Figure 1.8. Miracle Manor postcard. Date unknown. Courtesy of Desert Hot Springs Historical Society.

Most of the motel spas were unremarkable in their design, but one notable exception is the Desert Hot Springs Motel, aka the Lautner Hotel (or the Lautner Compound as its current owners call it). It was commissioned in 1947 by Hollywood director Lucien Hubbard who tapped Los Angeles architect (and Frank Lloyd Wright mentee) John Lautner for the design.⁴³ This property is unusual in the city for being

⁴³ Merkel, "John Lautner - The Lautner Compound, Desert Hot Springs, CA (1947)" May 3, 2022. <https://www.midcenturymichigan.com>. Accessed March 22, 2023.

designed by a well-known architect, but also because it sits in the lowlands of Desert Hot Springs, south of the main area of the town. [Figure 1.9]



Figure 1.9. Desert Hot Springs Motel.

© J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10)

Lucien Hubbard was also responsible for a Desert Hot Springs “dude” ranch. Hubbard and his son-in-law Charles Bender bought 240 acres of land from the Southern Pacific Land Company and opened the B-Bar-H Guest Ranch (derived from Bender and Hubbard) in 1927, initially an invite-only resort. It opened to the public in 1937 and attracted Bing Crosby, Joan Crawford, Gary Cooper, and a host of other Hollywood luminaries. The ranch was advertised as located in Palm Springs, but that was most likely because Desert Hot Springs wasn’t known as such until the early 1940s.⁴⁴ One of

<https://midcenturymichigan.com/2020/05/03/john-lautner-the-lautner-compound-desert-hot-springs-ca-1947/>.

⁴⁴ *Images in America: Desert Hot Springs*. P. 84.

the regular columns in *The Desert Sentinel* in the 1950s was called “Eavesdropping on B-Bar-H” and featured news about who was staying at the ranch and what was happening at the complex. B-Bar-H closed in 1950, and in 2005 the lots around it were sold off.⁴⁵ The only surviving building today is a clubhouse that was donated to the VFW, seen in figure 1.10, in 1972 by actress Mary Pickford. Other guest ranches of the era were The Circle K Ranch and the T Cross K Ranch.



Figure 1.10. VFW Post 1534. Photo By Willa Seidenberg.

The residential part of the town grew up around the hotels. The population rose from twenty residents in 1941 to 2,738 in 1970.⁴⁶ The U.S. Census Bureau does not track seasonal residents, and neither does the city.⁴⁷ It is impossible to say how many of

⁴⁵ Pacific Sotheby's International Realty, "Stepped in Celebrity History, the Historic B-Bar-H Guest Ranch Outside of Palm Springs Hits the Market. July 31, 2020. Accessed March 25, 2023. https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8zc8827/entire_text/.

⁴⁶ Riverside County Center for Demographic Research. 2008. Accessed January 31, 2023. https://rctlma.org/portals/0/rcd/content/progress_reports/pr_2008/12_Desert_Hot_Springs.pdf; see population chart later in this chapter.

⁴⁷ Citizens filling out census forms are asked to document the residences where "they live and sleep most of the time." "2020 Census Residence Criteria and Residence Situations," Accessed July 1, 2023. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/memo-series/2020-memo-2018_04-appendix.pdf; A Riverside County Local Agency Formation Commission report says the Western Coachella Valley has a

the residents were seasonal then or now, but several Desert Hot Springs residents told me it's a given that the town has a number of snowbirds, and many live in the mobile home parks.⁴⁸ After reviewing newspaper articles from the era, it appears that most residents were transplants from the Southern California region, but it's difficult to ascertain how much the population changed over the course of a year. As table 1.1 documents, Desert Hot Springs has been steadily growing since those early decades.

Table 1.1. U.S. Census population figures for Desert Hot Springs

Historical population figures from U.S. Census ⁴⁹	
1941	Unknown
1950	Unknown
1960	1,472
1970	2,738
1980	5,941
1990	11,549
2000	16,582
2010	25,938

"considerable influx" of seasonal residents, but no documentation to back up the claim. Riverside County Local Agency Formation Commission, Section 2.0 "Regional Population and Growth." February 2007. P. 2-5. Accessed July 1, 2023.

⁴⁸ *Snowbird* is defined as "one who travels to warm climes for the the winter," *Miriam-Webster Dictionary*.

⁴⁹ Desert Hot Springs was not incorporated as a town until 1963. Therefore, census figures for 1940 and 1950 only document the townships. It appears Desert Hot Springs was in the San Gorgonio Township. Sources vary on Desert Hot Springs' population in 1940, listing anywhere from 22-41 people.

2020	32,510
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Since Desert Hot Springs did not incorporate until 1963, the U.S. Census Bureau did not count the number of residents until the 1960 census, and even then, it would have been counting the enumeration district of San Geronio Township and not Desert Hot Springs specifically. Additionally, there is no reliable demographic information about the make-up of the population. However, in reviewing historic photos and newspaper articles, the town was overwhelmingly white, but with a diversity of religious denominations (including Methodists, Catholics, Baptists, and Jews), there were some foreign-born residents, and it appears that many of the original residents were middle-aged or early retirement age.

Emory Lesco, who visited his aunt and uncle in Desert Hot Springs in the 1960s, remembers many World War II veterans living in town, as well as people of Hungarian and German descent.⁵⁰ -Author John Hunt notes that early residents of the town told him some Black families lived in town in the 1950s but left fairly quickly because of racist threats.⁵¹ L.W. Coffee reached out to the Japanese community in Los Angeles, hoping to interest someone in purchasing one of his lots in Desert Hot Springs, but he dropped that idea immediately when the Japanese Imperial Army bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941.⁵²

⁵⁰ Interview with author, May 11, 2023.

⁵¹ Hunt, *The Waters of Comfort*, p. 244.

⁵² Ibid., p. 104.

The first restaurant in town was the Idle Hour Café, seen in figure 1.11, which opened in 1940 by Leonora Dodd, known as “Mom.” It quickly became a central place for townspeople to gather. Dodd told the *Desert Sun* in 1965, “There was no gas or electricity here. We made juice with a Kohler plant so anyone who didn’t want to sit at home by lamp light came to the café.”⁵³

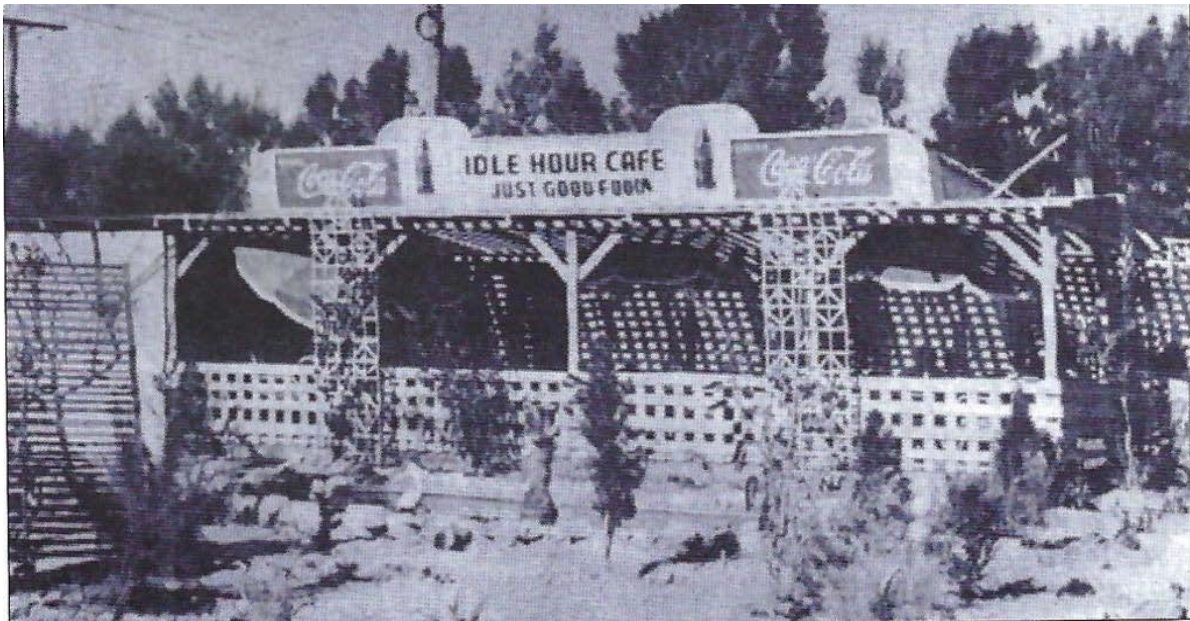


Figure 1.11. Idle Café. Date unknown. *Images of America: Desert Hot Springs*.

There were several markets in town in the early 1940s, including Morgan’s Market and Delicatessen, El Pueblo Market, and Haidet’s Hardware.⁵⁴ Los Angeles resident Loretta Ayeroff remembers visiting the Kingdom of the Dolls, a museum run by Betty Hamilton who used discarded materials to construct miniature replicas of scenes and events throughout history.⁵⁵

⁵³ Saunders, *Desert Sun*, April 23, 1965. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&d=DS19650423.2.67&e=-en--20--1--txt-txIN----->.

⁵⁴ *Images of America: Desert Hot Springs*, p. 117-118.

⁵⁵ More on Hamilton’s work can be found at Kingdom of the Dolls by Sean Dockray. <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/kingdom-of-the-dolls>; A KABC Channel 7 Eyewitness News series called

The heyday of the Desert Hot Springs motels was in the 1950s and 1960s when spa-tels dotted the desert landscape with names like Ambassador, Blue Water, Caliente Springs, Mona Lisa, Lido, The Moors, and others that were named after their owners: Bertram's, David's, Doty's, and McLaughlin's.⁵⁶ In addition, there were a number of small apartment complexes that did not have spas or pools but catered to snowbirds and regional visitors who would stay at the apartments and buy day passes to enjoy the mineral waters at spas like Coffee's, Hacienda Spa, and Desert Highland Hot Springs. Figure 1.12 shows the chemical analysis of the mineral water in Desert Hot Springs, that spas would use as a selling point to tourists.

WATER—No. 2 Well		116° F.
ANALYSIS OF DISSOLVED SOLIDS		Parts Per Million
Silica.....	(SiO ₂).....	20.7
Aluminum Oxide.....	(Al ₂ O ₃).....	Trace
Iron Oxide.....	(Fe ₂ O ₃).....	Trace
Calcium.....	(Ca).....	21.6
Magnesium.....	(Mg).....	4.9
Sodium.....	(Na).....	238.7
Sulphate.....	(So ₄).....	392.6
Chlorine.....	(Cl).....	102.0
Carbonate.....	(CO ₃).....	4.5
Bicarbonate.....	(HCO ₃).....	39.6
Total Solids.....		824.6
Total Non-Volatile Solids.....		804.1

Figure 1.12. Desert Hot Springs water content chart. From a Desert Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce brochure. Date unknown, but most likely before 1960 based on information contained in the publication. Courtesy Desert Hot Springs Historical Society.

Some spas catered directly to the health and wellness trend, such as The Swiss Health Resort, the We Care Health Center, and Healing Waters. There are still claims

"The Travels of Fred and Elmer to Desert Hot Springs" in 1980 has a short profile of Kingdom of the Dolls from :42 to 1:40. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYtcY9HQSYY>.

⁵⁶ *Images in America: Desert Hot Springs*. p. 101.

today that hot springs, particularly water with high concentrations of sulfur, are healing – for the mind, for pain and circulation, and skin.⁵⁷

As the town developed, its newspaper *The Desert Sentinel* documented its growth, its inhabitants, and its visitors. One feature of the newspaper called “Who’s Where in DHS,” gave a roundup of which visitors were in town and where they were staying. Figure 1.13 is one of those columns from the 1950s showing that visitors came from all over the United States and Canada, and many were yearly visitors. The Rental Owners Association, Improvement Association, and Chamber of Commerce acted as the town’s de facto governing body until 1963 when the town was incorporated. Fifty-eight percent of voters approved the incorporation initiative and elected a city council, and Councilmember Stone Wright, Jr. became the first mayor.⁵⁸



Figure 1.13. Column from *The Desert Sentinel*, 1957.

⁵⁷ “SCL Health, “Do Hot Springs Really Have Healing Powers?” Accessed March 25, 2023. <https://www.sclhealth.org/blog/2020/02/do-hot-springs-really-have-healing-powers/>.

⁵⁸ Hunt, *The Waters of Comfort*. p. 138 and 143.

Palm Springs

It is impossible to talk about Desert Hot Springs without also looking at the history of its more famous neighbor – Palm Springs. The rise of Palm Springs as a resort city can be traced back to a small oasis of palm trees in Tahquitz Canyon that featured a hot spring. Palm Springs grew from there, initially as an agricultural venue and a place for recovering from respiratory diseases. As far back as the 1870s, the Agua Caliente people were charging a fee to visitors who wanted to enter its small bathhouse that had a hot spring.⁵⁹ Palm Springs' first white homesteader was John Guthrie McCallum whose son suffered from tuberculosis. McCallum was appointed the Indian agent for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, and his attempts to divert water from sources guaranteed to the tribe were only the first of many efforts by white settlers to deprive the original residents of their land and water.⁶⁰

Soon, date cultivation came to the Coachella Valley, largely through the work of William L. Paul.⁶¹ The date palm has a revered place in history, as Paul's daughter Nina Shumway writes in her memoir, *Your Desert and Mine*, especially to Muslims and Hebrews, to whom it was a symbol of immortality.⁶² The dates became a tourism selling point.

Nellie Coffman, known as the “mother of Palm Springs,” is credited as the person most responsible for the city's eventual reputation as a tourist destination.⁶³ [Figure 1.14] Coffman, who suffered from respiratory problems, went to Palm Springs in 1908 in

⁵⁹ Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure*, p. 150.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁶¹ Conrad, *Desert Sun*. Accessed March 20, 2023.

<https://www.desertsun.com/story/life/history/2023/01/15/palm-springs-history-nina-paul-shumway-discovered-recorded-elfin-forests-above-desert/69806290007/>.

⁶² Shumway, *Your Desert and Mine*, p. 51.

⁶³ Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure*, p 152.

search of relief, and she opened the Desert Inn a year later. At first, it served as a sanatorium for guests with tuberculosis. Her husband Dr. Harry Coffman was a doctor and used his medical skills to treat the guests, while Nellie provided nourishing food and nurturing care. But as Lawrence Culver writes, there were worries that Southern California was becoming too much of a haven for consumptives, and Coffman, always the shrewd businesswoman, decided to promote her hotel to tourists instead.⁶⁴ That led Coffman and her husband to divorce, and with the help of her two sons, she expanded The Desert Inn which eventually spread over thirty-five acres. Coffman astutely promoted her inn to the Hollywood crowd. She helped organize the business community

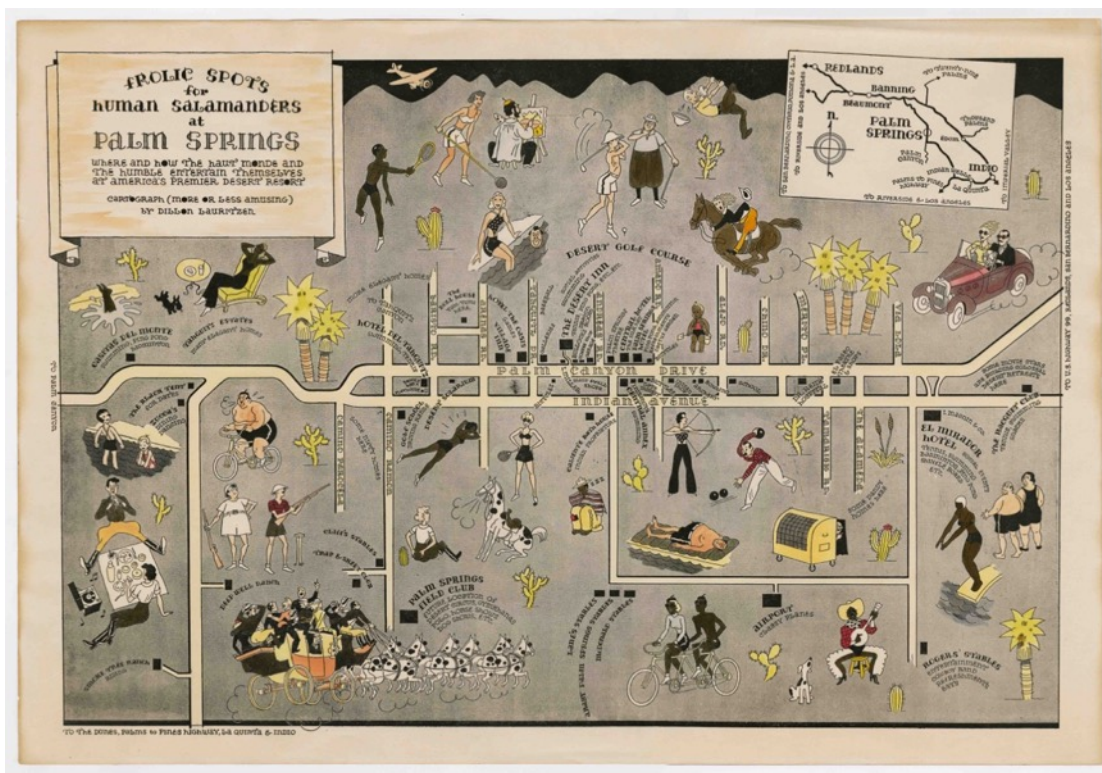


Figure 1.14. Palm Springs map. February 1936. *Westways Magazine*. Courtesy of AAA archives.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 153.

promoted her inn to the Hollywood crowd. She helped organize the business community and worked for the incorporation of Palm Springs, which was approved in 1938.⁶⁵

Between the world wars, Palm Springs became a place for the affluent, a destination for the burgeoning Hollywood community and the “national elite.”⁶⁶ As Lawrence Culver writes, this set up an inevitable conflict between white tourists and the Agua Caliente -- as well as other non-white residents -- and paved the way for restrictions on who could own homes in the city. Racial restrictions were baked into property sales in wealthy neighborhoods, and the Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people providing labor to the tourist industry were confined to living on land owned by the Agua Caliente, known as Section 14, which did not have restrictions.⁶⁷

After World War II Palm Springs became more urbanized *and* suburbanized, complete with racial tensions and discriminatory practices. The white leadership wanted to control the city’s “picturesque resort” image and working-class people of color didn’t fit that vision.⁶⁸ -The post-war growth included huge residential golf complexes and a collection of stunning modernist architecture by titans of the profession such as Richard Neutra, Albert Frey, William Krisel, John Lautner, E. Stewart Williams, Donald Wexler, and others. They designed homes for the rich and famous such as Frank Sinatra, Bob and Dolores Hope, Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball, and department store magnate Edgar Kaufmann. [Figure 1.15]

⁶⁵ Brown, “Nellie Coffman’s hospitality helped Palm Springs grow,” *Desert Sun*. March 28, 2015. Accessed July 8, 2023. “<https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/2015/03/28/palm-springs-nellie-coffman-history/70563318/>.”

⁶⁶ Culver, *Frontier of Leisure*, p. 139.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 172.



Figure 1.15. Edgar Kaufmann Residence. © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10)

As Palm Springs grew in population and affluence in post-war California, it is perhaps not surprising that Desert Hot Springs carved out a place in the world of leisure among working and middle-class visitors. The spa-tels and residences were modest and utilitarian – there was little notable architecture -- and the restaurants and shops provided basic necessities, unlike the expensive shops and department stores in Palm Springs. Loretta Ayeroff regularly visited Desert Hot Springs with her mother as a child, and occasionally her family would take a trip to Palm Springs where “you had to dress up,” unlike Desert Hot Springs where “you could just wear your shorts and your sandals.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Interview with author, April 18, 2023.

Post-heyday

In the 1970s, the country reeled from some of the highest inflation rates in years.⁷⁰ -When the number of visitors started dropping off in Desert Hot Springs, some of the spas were converted into apartment buildings, others maintained their resort business, and still others languished. [Figure 1.16]



Figure 1.16. Site of former Pleasant View Lodge. Demolished April 2023. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

Amid the downturn in tourism, more people started making the town their home and the population doubled each decade. (See table 1.1.) The early 1980s saw two severe economic recessions, and in Desert Hot Springs the hard times included a significant increase in poverty and crime and a full-blown problem with gangs that were spreading throughout Riverside County. The “Spa City” was now referred to by another nickname: “Desperate Hot Springs.”⁷¹ [Figure 1.17]

⁷⁰ Kramer, “How the Great Inflation of the 1970s Happened.” Investopedia. Accessed February 17, 2023. <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/09/1970s-great-inflation.asp#:~:text=The%201970s%20saw%20some%20of,contributed%20to%20the%20high%20inflation;~:text=The%201970s%20saw%20some%20of,contributed%20to%20the%20high%20inflation>

⁷¹ The Hotelier's Association uses the moniker "Spa City," though it's unclear when it was done; Greenhut, "Desperate Hot Springs," *City Journal*. December 5, 2013. Accessed February 17, 2023. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Vvdz-LYzuA6sdmnu5RfObvJP3-qpcslGK1EgO_i-NWqFebruary/edit.



Figure 1.17. Part of the Sahara Hotel complex. February 2022. demolished in April 2023. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

By the early 2000s, the city had the highest level of crime per capita of any of the cities in the Coachella Valley. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that by 2009, seven gangs were based in Desert Hot Springs and parolees were moving to the town because of its low housing prices and understaffed police department.⁷² Desert Hot Springs was reported to have sixty-five percent of the Coachella Valley parolees, yet the town was only five percent of the total population of the Valley.⁷³ Before 1997, the year

⁷² [Before 1997, the year Desert Hot Springs got its own police force, law enforcement services were provided by the Riverside County's Sheriff's Department.](https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-aug-25-me-desert-hot-springs25-story.html) Kelly, "Desert Hot Springs is fighting for its life." *Los Angeles Times*. August 23, 2009. Accessed February 17, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-aug-25-me-desert-hot-springs25-story.html>.

⁷³ Balchan, "In a gritty, gusty city with image issues, sense of safety," *CVReporter*, November 28, 2022. Accessed February 17, 2023. <https://cvreporter.com/in-a-gritty-gusty-city-with-image-issues-positive-growth-brings-sense-of-safety/>

Desert Hot Springs got its own police force, law enforcement services were provided by the Riverside County's Sheriff's Department.⁷⁴

Adding to the city's woes, a jury in Los Angeles found Desert Hot Springs in violation of the Federal Fair Housing Act in a case brought by Silver Sage, Inc., a company that purchased and developed low-income housing at a mobile park home. The city was ordered to pay more than \$3 million dollars in damages, plus millions more in interest and lawyers' fees.⁷⁵ That led to the city filing for Chapter 9 bankruptcy in 2001, from which it emerged in 2004.

Meanwhile, another trend was brewing, but this one more positive. In the 1990s, architects and investors from Los Angeles and beyond were capitalizing on the depressed property values in Desert Hot Springs and the growing interest in Mid-Century Modern aesthetics and purchased and rehabilitated some of the iconic spa-tels, such as the Miracle Manor and Cactus Springs (formerly La Bella Sari and now Hope Springs).⁷⁶ [Figure 1.18] In 2000, there were forty-seven hotels still operating in the city.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Kelly, "Desert Hot Springs is fighting for its life." *Los Angeles Times*.

⁷⁵ Silver Sage Partners, Ltd. v. City of Desert Hot Springs, Opinion Argued and Submitted October 7, 2003. Posted on Casetext. Accessed February 17, 2023. <https://casetext.com/case/silver-sage-partners-ltd-v-city-of-desert-hot-springs>.

⁷⁶ Fenton, "Why the world is obsessed with midcentury modern design." *Longform*. April 8, 2015. Accessed February 18, 2023. <https://archive.curbed.com/2017/11/22/16690454/midcentury-modern-design-mad-men-eames>.

⁷⁷ City of Desert Hot Springs, "City of Desert Hot Springs comprehensive general plan." (Published by Terra Nova Planning & Research, Inc. 2000.) Accessed February 17, 2023. <https://cdm16255.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p266301ccp2/id/715>



Figure 1.18. Hope Springs Resort. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

The newly refurbished motels catered to a growing interest in wellness and spa tourism by branding themselves as “boutique” hotels and offering an array of spa services, such as massage, hot pools, saunas, quiet, and relaxation. Many of the boutique hotels became adult-only; it was often easier to find a spa-tel that would accept pets than children. Desert Hot Springs was reclaiming its old moniker “Spa City” and despite continued city budget problems, poverty, and gang and drug activity, the next few decades saw the numbers steadily heading in a better direction.

Author and anarchist Paul Krassner and his wife moved to Desert Hot Springs just after 2000. He wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2005 that they “observed the evolution of a small town into a burgeoning city.”⁷⁸ What brought them to Desert Hot Springs from Venice, California was the same thing that motivated others to move to the

⁷⁸ Krassner, “It’s not hip, but it’s heaven,” *Los Angeles Times*. February 10, 2005.

desert town – cheaper housing. -In 2000, the median home price in Desert Hot Springs was \$81,400 compared with \$221,600 in the City of Los Angeles.⁷⁹

In 2014, as Desert Hot Springs was having yet more budget woes, it took the bold step of becoming the first city in Southern California to embrace the cannabis trade by legalizing large-scale cultivation for medical marijuana. Four years later, when California legalized recreational marijuana, Desert Hot Springs was in the perfect position to promote “cannatourism.” Cannabis cultivation added to city coffers and helped Desert Hot Springs weather the COVID pandemic. Desert Hot Springs city councilman Gary Gardner said he doesn’t want the city dependent on one source of revenue:

The bulk of our city revenue comes from cannabis taxes, almost 39%, in my book too much to have in one bucket. I have been working diligently ... to grow our tourism factor; what we also need a bigger retail factor. And we need to have that three-legged stool to have that to have a nice balanced municipal city.⁸⁰

The city’s main sources of revenue are sales taxes and a Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) paid by the spa-tels. And while Desert Hot Springs’ fortunes have improved, it is still a relatively impoverished town, as table 1.2 shows.

Table 1.2. 2022 U.S. Census demographic information for Desert Hot Springs

Median Household Income	\$37,924	2021 dollars
Total Population	33,091	2022 estimate
Demographics	Latino/Hispanic: 59.1% White (alone): 26.4% African American: 8.4%	

⁷⁹ “California: 2000: Summary of Social, Economic, and Housing Characteristics. 2000 Census of Population and Housing, March 2003. Pp. 441 and 445.

⁸⁰ Interview with the author, January 31, 2023.

	Asian: 3.1%*	
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Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/deserthotspringscitycalifornia>.

Even many Southern California residents have not visited Desert Hot Springs or even know about it, and those who are familiar with it still associate it with blight and crime. The city is working to change that image by trying to attract more retail and restaurants, and its 2020 General Plan proposes the creation of an Arts and Culture District.⁸¹ During its prime, Desert Hot Springs attracted middle- and working-class visitors, and today its funky and off-beat vibe is what attracts new residents and visitors and distinguishes it from its glitzier neighbor. That has made Desert Hot Springs an attractive place for celebrities who wanted to be off the radar and away from prying eyes. The book *Celebrities in Hiding* dedicates more than 200 pages of stories about celebs who have visited the town. Over the years, Two Bunch Palms, arguably the town's most well-known and exclusive spa resort since it was remodeled in 1978, has hosted celebrities like Robert Altman, Ozzy Osborne, Goldie Hawn, and Bruce Springsteen.⁸²

Energy Vortex

Palm Springs resident Roger Sunpath insists that Desert Hot Springs is an “energy vortex” which are sacred and spiritual spots where different strands of energy are leaving and entering the Earth, places like The Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt or Sedona, Arizona. Sunpath writes that in Desert Hot Springs “there is a convergence of five energies. Earthquake faults, geothermal underground water, mountain peak

⁸¹ Desert Hot Springs General Plan, May 26, 2020, p. LU-6.

⁸² The enduring legend that Al Capone used it as a hideaway in the 1930s has largely been debunked. See Hunt, *Waters of Comfort*, p. 168.

alignments, wind, and Sun energies.”⁸³ In his book *The Vortex made me do it*, Bill Effinger suggests the Vortex could be responsible for the “colored” history of its governmental leaders and economic woes, and the “strange behavior of the city’s inhabitants.” But resident and former spa owner Judy Bowman explains the town this way:

People don’t come to Desert Hot Springs for a typical corporate spiffed up regulated environment. This is not quite the Wild West, but when we came here there wasn’t a whole lot of regulation. People could do what they wanted to do. You leave me alone; I’ll leave you alone. -But we’re growing up, you know, now we’ve gotten through our teenage years and we’re into adulthood. And there’s people who don’t like that there’s got to be regulations – and I’m not a real fan of regulations either – but you need to have order. -So, for me, it’s gone from the end of the Wild West era to more of a modern era.⁸⁴

⁸³ Sunpath, “Editorial: Is Desert Hot Springs an Energy Vortex?” March 12, 1997. Accessed February 20, 2023. <http://energyvortex.net>.

⁸⁴ Interview with the author January 31, 2023.

CHAPTER 2: Leisure, Mobility, Health Seekers, and the People of Desert Hot Springs

The rise of leisure time

The end of World War II brought a period of optimism, prosperity, and stability to the United States, and more specifically to California. Americans had more money in their pockets, more leisure time, and more mobility. This chapter explores the trends and forces that led to the success of Desert Hot Springs as a “spa town.”

The U.S. and the world were still recovering from the effects of the Great Depression, and unemployment was high heading into World War II. But when the United States fully jumped into the war after Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor, the wartime economy ramped up. Some seventeen-million civilian jobs were created nationwide during World War II.⁸⁵ Millions of men and women joined the military and others were employed in war-related manufacturing, such as aircraft and munition production. -Many women joined the workforce for the first time to fill in for labor shortages caused by men joining the armed forces. [Figure 2.1] California became a center of round-the-clock ship and aircraft manufacturing, and workers flooded into the state to fill those jobs. Between 1939 and 1944, employment in aircraft factories rose from 20,000 to 280,000 in California.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Library of Congress, “World War II” Accessed March 29, 2023. <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/world-war-ii/>.

⁸⁶ California State Archives, “Home Front: California During World War II” Accessed March 29, 2023. <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/home-front-california-state-archives/3wURpwnUy6rKKg?hl=en>.



Figure 2.1. Women ship fitters working onboard the USS Nereus at the U.S. Navy Yard in Mare Island, California, circa 1943. Department of Defense photo.

When the war ended in 1945, many returning service men and women, and wartime manufacturing workers decided to settle in California prompting the population to increase by two million people between 1940 and 1945.⁸⁷ People had more money to spend: veterans collected the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, and workers had accumulated savings during their wartime employment.⁸⁸ Many former GIs were able to buy homes with loans from the Veterans Administration. [Figure 2.2] And, Americans were working less: the average number of hours in the

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ John A. Jakle, *The Tourist*, p. 185.

work week went from 44 hours in 1940 to 40 hours after the war, and by the early 1950s, union labor contracts were providing more paid vacation time.⁸⁹

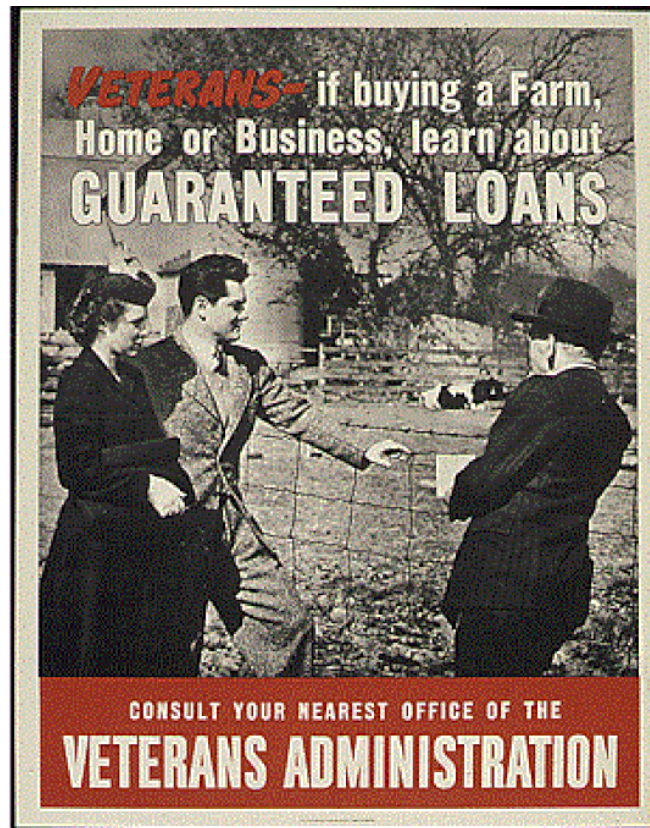


Figure 2.2. Veterans Administration flyer. National Archives photo.

Americans were becoming more inclined to spend their hard-earned capital on leisure activities. No longer was travel and tourism solely for the wealthy, but average Americans could partake in vacation adventures. The war opened new worlds to many Americans, especially members of the military who had traveled overseas or to different parts of the United States, giving them a taste of other cultures and locales, and in some cases, relief from cold winters in the East and Midwest. Southern California was

⁸⁹ Pomeroy, *In Search of the Golden West*, p. 216.

especially well-positioned to take advantage of the growing interest in travel and tourism with its temperate climate, sunny skies, and wide-open spaces – a region that offered beaches, mountains, desert, and a “bright streak of promise.”⁹⁰

Car ownership

The end of World War II also led to an increase in mobility. Americans had been primed for automobile ownership since the 1920s, but the allure of owning a car diminished during World War II because gasoline and tires were rationed by the government, and raw materials like rubber were needed for military manufacturing.⁹¹ When the government lifted restrictions after the war, it took auto manufacturers a few years to catch up with enough stock, and by 1949, as table 2.1 shows, car sales had soared to five-point-one million and kept going up from there.

Table 2.1. Car sales in the United States

1946	2.1 million
1949	5.1 million
1955	7.9 million
1965	9.3 million

Source: Walsh, “Gender and the Automobile in the United States.” *Automobile in American Life and Society* website. Accessed April 1, 2023.
http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Gender/Walsh/G_Overview3.htm.

The automobile represented freedom to average middle-class Americans. Cars were viewed as a “democratic, efficient, and frugal alternative to existing

⁹⁰ Kilston, *Sun Seekers: The cure of California*, p. 9.

⁹¹ Walsh, “Gender and the Automobile in the United States.” *Automobile in American Life and Society* website.

transportation.”⁹² Now that Americans were well on their way to a love affair with automobiles, the infrastructure had to catch up. The development of the federal interstate system had profound effects on the nation, leading to slum clearance projects in older city centers and enabling more Americans to buy cheaper land in the growing suburbs to escape the congestion of urban life. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 authorized the Public Roads Administration (PRA) to designate a 40,000-mile network of highway routes. But it was President Dwight Eisenhower’s signature on the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, popularly known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, that spurred the system of highways that we now take for granted.⁹³ In addition to federal legislation, funding from the State of California spawned the construction of Interstate 10 (I-10), a cross-country highway that cuts across Southern California, starting at its westernmost point in Santa Monica, skirting Downtown Los Angeles on its way through the Inland Empire and the desert communities of the Coachella Valley, before continuing on its way through Arizona and the rest of the country.

Before the I-10 was assigned its number, the freeway through the San Geronio Pass was US 60-70-99 and Legislative Route 26.⁹⁴ In the 1940s, travelers from Los Angeles to the Coachella Valley had to drive through Ramsey Street in Banning, which could become quite congested with weekend visitors heading to the desert. Work started in 1954 on a four-lane divided freeway that paralleled the old Southern Pacific

⁹² Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945*. p. 42.

⁹³ U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration. -Accessed April 1, 2023. <https://highways.dot.gov/public-roads/septoct-2000/genie-bottle-interstate-system-and-urban-problems-1939-1957>.

⁹⁴ California Department of Public Works, *California Highways and Public Works*, September-October 1956, p. 33.

Railroad route. -The final sections of the roadway were completed in the summer of 1956, and the *California Highways and Public Works* publication declared, “Motorists driving between the Los Angeles metropolitan area and Palm Springs and other desert resorts this winter should find traffic conditions greatly improved.”⁹⁵ [Figure 2.3]



Figure 2.3. 1953 view of US 60/70/99 and State Route 111 junction. Photo from Caltrans.

Photographer and archivist Loretta Ayeroff went to Desert Hot Springs when she was a child growing up in Los Angeles. She still clearly remembers the drive to the desert:

We had a Buick station wagon and would make this arduous, long drive to the desert. There was no superhighway, there wasn't any freeway going out there at that time. This is the 50s and I remember it as just a straight road all the way to the desert. [Later] when I used to go up with Polly [her daughter] I used to drive my Karmann Ghia. And before we would go to the desert, we would go see Steve and he would put bags of cement in

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 47.

the front of the Karmann Ghia to keep our nose down on the freeway. It's such a small car and so light that it would shift around [in the wind]. So, the trips up to the desert were in and of themselves always kind of an adventure.⁹⁶

Ayeroff, like many visitors to the desert, remembers landmarks along the way such as the Hadley Fruit Orchard which is famous for its date shakes and shelves of dried fruit and nuts. Hadley started in 1931 and has been in its location on Morongo Trail, visible from I-10, since the 1960s.⁹⁷ In 1999, the Morongo Band of Mission Indians bought Hadley and built a new and bigger store, while the old building still sits vacant and abandoned right next to it.⁹⁸ [Figure 2.4]



Figure 2.4. The old Hadley Fruit Orchard store on Morongo Trail. April 2023. The new store is seen on the right. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

Vernacular Mo-Tels

As Americans embraced the automobile and the freedom to hit the road, the need for affordable, clean places to stay became an opportunity for small entrepreneurs. The term “motel” wasn’t used until 1926 when Arthur Heineman opened

⁹⁶ Interview with the author, April 19, 2023.

⁹⁷ Harris, “Hadley, your date shake desert oasis, has moved,” *Los Angeles Times*. March 3, 2016. Accessed April 1, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/food/dailydish/la-dd-hadley-date-shake-new-store-20160302-story.html>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

the Milestone Mo-tel in San Luis Obispo.⁹⁹ As seen in figure 2.5, Heineman's motel may seem grand compared to our impressions of motels today.



Figure 2.5. Milestone Mo-Tel. San Luis Obispo. Date unknown. Photo from *SAH Archipedia*.

Automobile travelers also stayed in hotels, but they were often located in congested, urban areas, or resort hotels in vacation areas along the coast or in the mountains, and that made hotels less accessible and/or less affordable.¹⁰⁰ As the number of cars increased, other accommodations popped up to service auto travelers, among them: auto camps, tourist homes in private houses, cabin camps, cottage courts (which often included kitchenettes), and motor courts, which were distinguished as having all the units under a single roofline.¹⁰¹ [Figure 2.6]

⁹⁹ Mo-tel is a contraction of motor and hotel. *The Motel in America*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

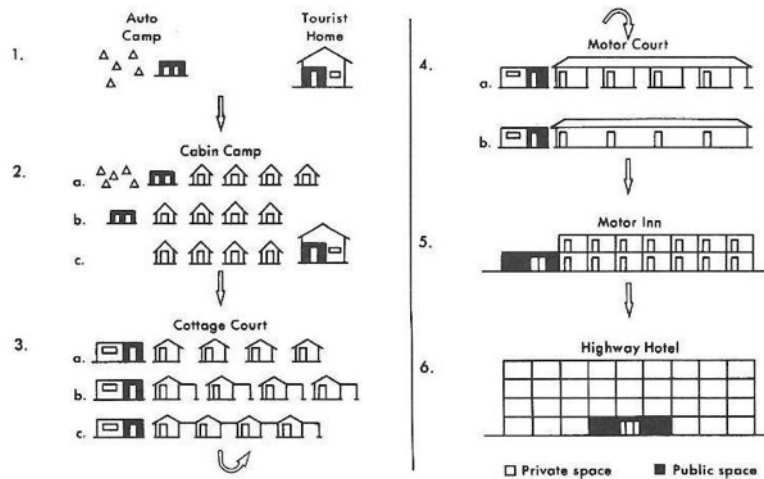


FIGURE 2.18 The evolution of the American motel as a building type.

Figure 2.6. Drawings of motel configurations. *The Motel in America*.

After World War II, the word *motel* became ubiquitous as a term for motor courts, and in their early days, they were largely mom-and-pop businesses.¹⁰² By the 1960s, some of those small motels gave way to chains like Howard Johnsons and Holiday Inn. The spa-tels that appeared in Desert Hot Springs in the 1950s and early 1960s were often hybrids of the cottage and motor courts. Most had rooms under a single roofline that surrounded or were adjacent to the hot mineral and swimming pools. They also featured small kitchens or kitchenettes to accommodate snowbirds who put down roots for the winter months or even weekend visitors from Los Angeles and other parts of Southern California. [Figure 2.7]

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 49.



Figure 2.7. Kitchenette at Kismet Lodge.
Courtesy of Jeff Bowman.

Health and Wellness Spas

Hydrothermal bathing is a global practice that is documented throughout history. It has been tied to cleanliness, spirituality, religion, and general well-being. The healing power of mineral waters has been – and still is – thought to address ailments like skin irritations, gout, arthritis, and various muscle aches and pains. The term “take the waters” came to mean a person who went to a “spa with healing thermal waters.”¹⁰³

Historians generally pinpoint the first place to use the term *spa* as Spa, Belgium where mineral springs were discovered in the fourteenth century.¹⁰⁴ But humans have been dipping in hot and cold mineral waters for centuries. As noted in Chapter 1, the

¹⁰³ WordSense Dictionary definition. Accessed April 15, 2023.

https://www.wordsense.eu/take_the_waters/.

¹⁰⁴ Erfurt-Cooper and Cooper, *Health and Wellness Tourism: Spas and Hot Springs*, p. 15.

Cahuilla were said to often visit the mineral springs of Desert Hot Springs, mirroring other North American Indigenous peoples who considered hot springs as sacred places where they held important ceremonies.¹⁰⁵ The ancient Greeks used baths primarily as a way of getting clean, but they were also viewed as a tonic for unwinding from stress and addressing afflictions.¹⁰⁶ The Romans expanded Greek bathing rituals by constructing elaborate bath complexes in cities they conquered. The Roman baths in the city of Bath, England, built about 70 AD, are some of the best-preserved Roman ruins in the world. [Figure 2.8] Even today, the ancient site in Bath is filled with spring water that reaches temperatures of 114 degrees Fahrenheit.¹⁰⁷



Figure 2.8. Bath, England. Photo from www.romanbaths.co.uk.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁰⁶ Nathe, "Bathing Beauties," Accessed April 9, 2023. <https://endeavors.unc.edu/win2007/truemper.php>.

¹⁰⁷ Visit Bath website. Accessed April 9, 2023. <https://visitbath.co.uk/things-to-do/the-roman-baths-p2588863>.

In Muslim and Jewish cultures, bathing rituals were often key to religious practices of purification as in the *hammams* and *mikvahs*.¹⁰⁸ The Japanese too have bathing customs at thermal hot springs, known as *onsen*. By law, an *onsen* must be 77 degrees Fahrenheit or more, and contain at least one of nineteen substances proscribed in laws that govern them.¹⁰⁹ And, Koreans enjoy *jimjilbangs* that feature hot and cold pools, saunas, and massage.¹¹⁰

Health tourism is one of the fastest-growing tourist sectors in the world, especially among the baby boomer generation.¹¹¹ The term *wellness* was first popularized in 1959 when Dr. Halbert L. Dunn wrote, “Good health can exist as a relatively passive state of freedom from illness in which the individual is at peace with his environment – a condition of relative homeostasis.”¹¹²

As Desert Hot Springs was developing in the 1950s, it was well-positioned to take advantage of the interest in health and wellness. *The Desert Sentinel* reported on Dr. Broue who came to town to analyze the curative power of the water.¹¹³ He is quoted as saying the water in Desert Hot Springs was unlike any he had found in “any country I have explored.” He went on to say, “What has impressed me is the mineral content of

¹⁰⁸ Pollock, *Without the Banya We Would Perish*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ Japanese Onsen Association, “What is onsen?” Accessed April 9, 2023. <https://www.spa.or.jp/en/onsen/>.

¹¹⁰ “Starting as early as the Neolithic Age, the tradition of the public bath has changed over the years to adapt to evolving cultures and social norms.” Accessed April 14, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20121129-the-origins-of-bathhouse-culture-around-the-world#:~:text=Turkish%20baths%2C%20called%20hammams%2C%20were,hand%20with%20purifying%20the%20soul.>

¹¹¹ Patterson & Balderas-Cejudo (2022), “Baby boomers and their growing interest in spa and wellness tourism.” p. 238.

¹¹² Dunn, “What High-Level Wellness Means,” *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, November 1959. P. 447. Accessed April 14, 2023.

¹¹³ The *Sentinel* article calls him an English scientist, but an April 2009 article in the *Inland Empire Business Journal* says he was Austrian. Broue is quoted in the *Sentinel* in 1950 as saying his headquarters was located in London. Citation: p. 32.

the water and their suspension in solution and RADIO ACTIVITY being generated.” The article headline in figure 2.9 calls Desert Hot Springs the “Baden Baden of America,” but it should be noted that quite a few spa areas in the United States claim that nickname.



Figure 2.9. *Desert Sentinel* front page. From microfilm.

Regardless of the veracity of the health claims, they became a selling point in drawing people to Desert Hot Springs. The town’s newspaper, *The Desert Sentinel*, ran a photo in 1957, shown in figure 2.10, of a billboard on Highway 99 touting it as the “Home of Natural Hot Curative Waters.”

One of the early developers of the town, businessman John “Aubrey” Wardman, who joined L.W. Coffee’s land trust (and who donated the land and money to start Angel View Crippled Children’s Foundation), scolded the city in 1960 saying, “We should be

telling the world, not just a little area around the Southland ... We have something here in Desert Hot Springs I have never experienced any other place in the world.”¹¹⁴



Figure 2.10. Billboard reproduced in *The Desert Sentinel*, December 13, 1957. From microfilm.

The People of Desert Hot Springs

A 1966 article in the *Desert Sun* remarked on the extensive development of Desert Hot Springs in the 1950s and 1960s, writing, “The development was based chiefly on the community’s desirability as a place for lovers of the desert. The mineral baths are a pleasant bonus.”¹¹⁵ The desert is not for everyone, but some people who love the climate and atmosphere find the low-key vibe and mineral-filled water in Desert Hot Springs an ideal place for rest and relaxation. Because the Cahuilla did not have reservation land in Desert Hot Springs, the white founding inhabitants were at liberty to

¹¹⁴ Hunt, *The Waters of Comfort*, p. 139.

¹¹⁵ “First White Settler Finds Precious Mineral Water in Desert Hot Springs,” *Desert Sun*, November 17, 1966. Accessed April 5, 2023. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=DS19661117.2.170&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN----->.

put down stakes in whatever part of town they wanted. People of color would most likely not have received a warm welcome in those early years, but it has always had religious diversity, including Baptists, Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Jews, Church of the Latter-Day Saints, and Protestant congregations. -Emory Lesco, who grew up in San Francisco but frequently visited his aunt and uncle in Desert Hot Springs in the early 1960s, said there were always a lot of different kinds of people in town – Hungarians, Germans, Armenians, and later Asians.”¹¹⁶

Women Pioneers in Desert Hot Springs

Women figured prominently in the development of the town. It was not uncommon for the spa-tels to be owned and run by married couples, and many were owned by divorced, widowed, or single women. [Figure 2.11] *The Desert Sentinel*, which at times had women editors, featured articles about the women living and visiting the town, and it had regular columns such as “Feminine Reflections” that presented women’s voices, though largely in a stereotypical way as many newspapers did in that era.

¹¹⁶ Interview with author, May 9, 2023.



Figure 2.11. Ads congratulating the Jewish Temple show the prominent place women had in motel ownership. *The Desert Sentinel*, October 30, 1958. From microfilm.

The first documented homesteader in Desert Hot Springs was Hilda M. Gray. She was living in the Los Angeles area and working as a legal secretary when she learned about the Homestead Act. During a visit to Palm Springs, she took a hike up the mountain, and on the other side of the railroad tracks she saw "... a small oasis of two bunches of palms – stuck alone in the midst of much nothingness..."¹¹⁷ She quit her job and in 1911 filed a claim for 160 acres of land about a mile from the Two Bunch Palms oasis she had seen from the mountains nearby.¹¹⁸

With the help of other desert adventurers, she managed to enlarge the only watering hole there for washing, and she acquired a small dog named Trixie, a couple of burros, chickens, and a small two-room cabin. [Figure 2.12] She also started the first

¹¹⁷ Effinger and Betts. *Taming the California High Desert*, p. 23.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 24.

general store in what would become Desert Hot Springs.¹¹⁹ By 1918, Gray had enough of the challenging conditions in the desert, and she pulled up stakes for Arcadia, California. She passed away in 1953, and in the year before she died spent most of her time in Desert Hot Springs.



Figure 2.12. Hilda M. Gray. Photo from Cabot's Pueblo Museum.

Another female pioneer came along in 1933. Viola DeWitt Dinsmore happened to pitch a tent for her and her daughter on the corner of Palm Drive and Eighth Street – directly across the street from where L.W. Coffee had tapped into hot wells. Dinsmore, who became known as “The Little Lady in White of the Desert,” was scrappy and self-sufficient. She hauled materials to the site and built a home, then added onto it to host travelers who came to town to visit Coffee’s bath house. She eventually dug a well on

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 27-28.

her property and opened the Blue Heaven Rancho which offered a bed, meals, and, of course, the waters.¹²⁰ [Figure 2.13]



Figure 2.13. Blue Heaven Rancho ad in *The Desert Sentinel*. From microfilm.

According to *The Desert Sentinel*, Dinsmore was the first to join the Chamber of Commerce and the town's Improvement Association held its first meeting at her Rancho, as well as many other gatherings, such as the Women's Republican Club and a Christian Scientist group.¹²¹ She died on New Year's Day of 1966.

Jewish Community

As Desert Hot Springs was growing in the 1950s, a sizable Jewish community found its way to the town; many came from Los Angeles where the Jewish population rose steadily throughout the twentieth century. During the early part of the century, many Jewish migrants who settled in Los Angeles, especially those of Eastern

¹²⁰ In *The Waters of Comfort*, John Hunt writes that it was the first motel with hot mineral water, p. 98.

¹²¹ *The Desert Sentinel*, January 6, 1966; Hunt, *The Waters of Comfort*, p. 147.

European descent, suffered from tuberculosis. Some had worked in industrial factories in cities on the East Coast, such as garment and meat packing, and lived in crowded tenements where tuberculosis spread quickly.¹²² The renowned City of Hope was formed in 1912 as The Jewish Consumptive Relief Association. Rose Bertram, an immigrant from Romania, who with her husband Nathaniel, built and ran Bertram's Ma-Ha-Yah Lodge in Desert Hot Springs, was a fundraiser for City of Hope for many years. She suffered from painful arthritis, which is how she found Desert Hot Springs and its "curative" waters.¹²³ (See Chapter 3 for more on Rose Bertram.)

Jews may have been attracted to Desert Hot Springs, in part, because they were essentially locked out of Palm Springs. Though Palm Springs' deed covenants did not officially ban Jews from owning property, Lawrence Culver asserts that discrimination effectively prevented them from owning commercial real estate, businesses, or other property.¹²⁴ Even Hollywood celebrities like Jack Benny were prevented from joining country clubs like the Thunderbird.¹²⁵ Desert Hot Springs may have been considered a more open and affordable destination. Many of the early Jewish visitors and residents were middle-aged and older and the mineral waters were a draw for those suffering from arthritis and other ailments. [Figure 2.14]

¹²² Luce, "The White Plague in the City of Angels," Accessed April 30, 2023.

<https://scalar.usc.edu/hc/tuberculosis-exhibit/thejewishconsumptivereliefassociation>.

¹²³ "Groundbreaking Held for New Ma-Ha-Yah Lodge Here" *The Desert Sentinel*, April 14, 1960.

¹²⁴ Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure*, p. 165.

¹²⁵ Kotkin, "Palm Springs: A Rich Haven for The Fords." *The Washington Post*. January 17, 1977. Accessed July 28, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1977/01/17/palm-springs-a-rich-haven-for-the-fords/1b9d2174-8708-457f-a88d-f2acb2e9003f/>.



Figure 2.14. Star Light Lodge add in *The Desert Sentinel*. From microfilm.

Early issues of *The Desert Sentinel* list church services and featured articles about the Baptists, Methodists, and Roman Catholic congregations, but in January 1954, an ad for Kosher food is a hint of the presence of a Jewish community. [Figure 2.15] By 1955 there were frequent listings of services for weekly Shabbat observances, and Jewish holidays, such as Passover, Yom Kippur, and Chanukah, as well as social, recreational, and educational programs held in private homes or rented facilities. The newspaper frequently featured articles about social, religious, and cultural events being held by Jews living in or visiting Desert Hot Springs.

In articles written by and about the “Jewish Community Group,” and later the Sisterhood of Temple Nove Sholom, it was estimated that the community of Jewish residents had grown to about seventy-five people by 1960, and some owned motels in

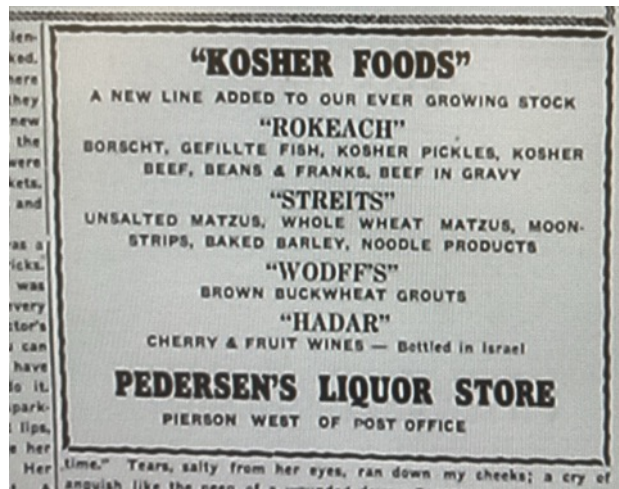


Figure 2.15. Ad in *The Desert Sentinel*. 1954. From microfilm.

town.¹²⁶ From reviewing issues of *The Desert Sentinel* from the 1950s and early '60s, those motel owners were the driving force behind establishing the Jewish community in Desert Hot Springs. Ads for motels regularly appeared in Jewish newspapers such as the *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, which served the Southern California Jewish community. [Figure 2.16]

¹²⁶ "Village Visitor Eyes Growth of Jewish Community," *Desert Sun*. February 24, 1960.



Figure 2.16. Classified page from *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, January 14, 1955.

Table 2.2 lists the Jewish motel owners I have been able to identify from reviewing newspaper articles and other sources from the early years of Desert Hot Springs, though it is likely there were more:

Table 2.2. Jewish owners of Desert Hot Springs motels

Furmans	El Reposo Motel
Greens	Dos Palmas Resort Motel
Dorsks	Dorsk House
Lees	Granada Apartments

Bertrams	Bertrams Ma-Ha-Yah Lodge
Nettie Zide and Lillian Rose	La Bella Sari (now Hope Springs)

By the mid-1950s, Rabbi Isaac E. Bloch became the “spiritual leader” of this community in the desert. Bloch served in the Jewish Legion in the Middle East during World War I and for a time was part of the first civil government of what was then Palestine. He came to California in 1949 and worked as a circuit rabbi for the Southern California-Arizona desert region. When he connected with the Jewish residents of Desert Hot Springs, he decided to resign his position and devote himself full-time to helping the community build a temple. By 1957, the congregation had raised enough money to start construction at 66777 E. Pierson Boulevard of the Temple Nove Sholom, a Conservative Jewish congregation. [Fig. 2.17]



Figure 2.17. Jewish leaders posing temple site. Isaac E. Bloch Archives. University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

The temple was dedicated on November 2, 1958, with the American Legion providing the color guard as rabbis from around the country toting Torahs paraded through town. [Figure 2.18] Rabbis and dignitaries from around Southern California were on hand for the celebration, including Congressman Dalip S. Saund, and others sent well-wishes, including the Governor of California.¹²⁷ [Figure. 2.19] A 1961 editorial in *The Desert Sentinel* proclaimed, “We are very proud of the relationship which exists between our religious groups in Desert Hot Springs. As far as we can see, Brotherwood [sic] Week is not necessary in this community, since the brotherly spirit exists thruout [sic] the entire year.”¹²⁸



Figure 2.18. Temple dedication. Isaac E. Bloch Archive, Bancroft Library.

¹²⁷ Saund, an Indian-American, was the first member of the House of Representatives of Asian descent. Accessed May 2, 2023. <https://history.house.gov/People/Detail/21228>.

¹²⁸ “The Manifestation of Brotherhood,” *The Desert Sentinel* editorial, February 24, 1961.

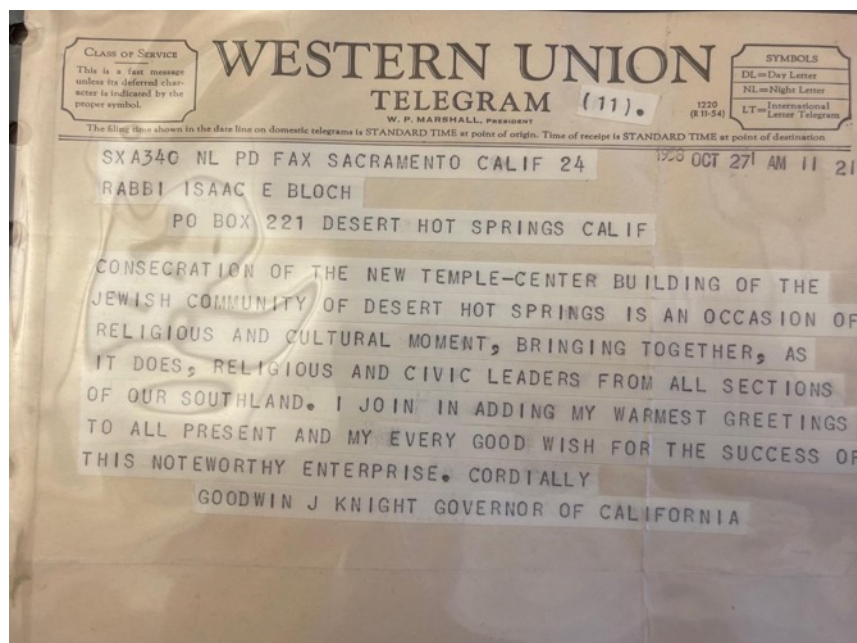


Figure 2.19. Congratulatory telegram. Archives of Rabbi Isaac Bloch, University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

Many of the Jewish visitors came from Los Angeles where the Jewish community was established in Boyle Heights. After World War II they began moving westward, settling in the Fairfax area and the San Fernando Valley. Stacy Ingber grew up in the 1960s and 1970s attending the Mogen David Temple in the Pico-Robertson area of Los Angeles. She and others from her temple frequently spent weekends in Desert Hot Springs which she described as the Catskills for Westside Jews:

When I would go to Hebrew school on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school, my peers would talk about going to Desert Hot Springs with their grandparents. There was something about many of the Jews of my grandparents' generation, and of their friends, who were very hard-working blue-collar families, and it was a place to unwind and relax and spend time with their daughters and sons and their grandchildren.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Interview with the author, February 2023.

That experience is echoed by Suchi Branfman, a Los Angeles artist and activist. Her grandmother Margaret Stromberg was a Russian Jewish immigrant who lived in Boyle Heights and was drawn to the Coachella Valley in the 1920s, even working for a time as a secretary for Nellie Coffman.¹³⁰ While hiking in the mountains, Stromberg discovered the hot mineral waters of Desert Hot Springs. Branfman remembers visiting town with her grandparents and mother, staying in small motels with kitchenettes. Her mother later bought a house that Branfman now owns and uses as a second home and an artist retreat.

Temple Nove Sholom had a succession of rabbis over the next few decades, and, in a bizarre twist, the last one was a Christian minister (Steve A. Mesarch) turned Messianic rabbi (Rabbi Alon Barak). Barak offered to sell the temple to the city of Desert Hot Springs, which eventually did purchase it in 2008 for \$1.4 million, which was more than the value of the land.¹³¹ There were plans to turn it into a health clinic, then a fire station, but a building inspection recommended demolition. It was taken down in 2010.

[Figure 2.20]

¹³⁰ Suchi Branfman, "Catalpa Residency History."

¹³¹ Effinger, *The Vortex Made Me Do It*, p. 337.



Figure 2.20. Demolition of Jewish Temple. July 2010. Photo from *Downtown DHS Flickr*.

Korean Spas

The Los Angeles area has been home to Korean immigrants since 1904, but it was the Immigration Act of 1965 that bolstered the Korean presence, and by 1979, Los Angeles had the largest number of Koreans outside of Korea.¹³² They established grocery stores, banks, restaurants, shopping malls, and spas in the Koreatown section of Los Angeles, as well as other areas. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Koreans have their own bathing rituals so it's no surprise that they found their way to Desert Hot Springs. [Figure 2.21]

In 1991 investor Chong Lee built the Miracle Springs Hotel, and he proposed an initiative to legalize gambling and card rooms in Desert Hot Springs.¹³³ In 1976, the city

¹³² Survey LA, "Korean American Context Statement" p. 43. Accessed April 29, 2023. [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://planning.lacity.org/odocument/ef26fda2-f0d7-488c-9766-5a3491d0a6f7/SurveyLA_KoreanAmericanContextandResources_Aug2018.pdf](https://planning.lacity.org/odocument/ef26fda2-f0d7-488c-9766-5a3491d0a6f7/SurveyLA_KoreanAmericanContextandResources_Aug2018.pdf).

¹³³ Hunt, *The Waters of Comfort*, p. 249.

council passed a bill allowing bingo games for “nonprofit, charitable purposes,” which benefited the churches, the Moose Lodge, and other non-profit organizations in town.¹³⁴ But an expansion of gambling never took off in Desert Hot Springs, especially after local Indigenous tribes began to dominate the gaming world and today visitors traveling on I-10 from the metro Los Angeles area to the Coachella Valley pass the enormous Morongo Casino Resort & Spa on the north side of the freeway.



Figure 2.21. Sign from the Sahara Hotel, February 2022. Demolished in April 2023. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

The Korean spa presence in Desert Hot Springs appears to have dwindled. The city revoked the operating license of Hyundai Resort and Spa on Palm Drive in 2021 because of a variety of violations, including public safety problems, fire hazards, and substandard conditions. [Figure 2.22] The property was sold, and a receiver was appointed by the court to manage the oversight and rehabilitation of the property.¹³⁵ The

¹³⁴ Desert Hot Springs Municipal Code, Chapter 9.04.100 “Bingo Games-Licensing Provisions.” Accessed May 15, 2023. [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/http://www.cgcc.ca.gov/documents/enabling/2011/CITY_OF_DESERT_HOT_SPRINGS.pdf](http://www.cgcc.ca.gov/documents/enabling/2011/CITY_OF_DESERT_HOT_SPRINGS.pdf).

¹³⁵ Gasparyan, “Desert Hot Springs demolishing abandoned Sahara Hotel & Spa and nearby buildings,” *Desert Sun*. Updated May 3, 2023, accessed July 8, 2023.

Desert Rain Spa Hotel and The Sahara, in its later years, catered to Korean guests and are now closed and a Korean restaurant in town, Palm Korea, now operates as a sushi restaurant.



Figure 2.22. Vacant Hyundae Hotel, Palm Drive. May 2023. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

<https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/local/desert-hot-springs/2023/03/24/desert-hot-springs-works-to-demolish-abandoned-and-derelict-properties/70047490007/>.

Celebrities

When it comes to famous people, Desert Hot Springs cannot compete with Palm Springs which is often called “Hollywood’s playground.”¹³⁶ But Desert Hot Springs resident Audrey Moe was intrigued when she started noticing celebrities like Barbra Streisand and Martha Stewart in town. Moe wondered why they would come to a town with no upscale restaurants or pricey shops, but as she writes in her book *Celebrities in Hiding*, “...I realized the attraction is precisely because it ‘is’ an unlikely place for celebrities and therefore it serves as a hideaway for those seeking privacy.”¹³⁷ Many of those rich and famous paid visits to the town, especially in the early years of Hollywood when celebrities visited the B-Bar-H, as noted in Chapter 1. In more recent decades, Two Bunch Palms Resort and Spa (see Chapter 3 for more) was a magnet for famous people like Ozzy Osborne, Robert Altman, Julia Roberts, Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, and Meryl Streep.¹³⁸

Some well-known people of note had homes and retreats in town, such as silent film star Janet Gaynor and her second husband, producer Paul Gregory, who committed suicide in his Desert Hot Springs apartment at the age of 95 in 2015. Poet Robert McAlmon lived his final days in Desert Hot Springs, and, in 1967, singer/actor Pat Boone was an investor in the Vista del Valle recreational development on the

¹³⁶ Visit Palm Springs website, “Hollywood’s Playground,” Accessed May 15, 2023. <https://visitpalmsprings.com/hollywoods-playground/>.

¹³⁷ Moe, *Celebrities in Hiding*, p. 11.

¹³⁸ Ibid.; *The New York Times*, “Winter in the Sun; Unwinding the California Way,” Oct. 31, 1993. Accessed May 15, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/31/travel/winter-in-the-sun-unwinding-the-california-way.html#:~:text=Privacy%20and%20informality%20are%20the,as%20ordinary%20mortals%20show%20upce.>

northern edge of town. [Figure 2.23] And, as noted in Chapter 1, Paul Krassner, a founder of the Yippies, was a Desert Hot Springs resident until he died in 2019.

Pat Boone Invites You to view division 2 of Vista del Valle

(A view of the Valley)

AT DESERT HOT SPRINGS



*A luxurious
recreational community
priced for the modest budget...*



Terms as low as \$35 per month

Vista del Valle — Division I — was a huge success and sold completely out within three months! — Now we offer 409 individual homesites—all considered view lots — **TO USE NOW FOR YOUR FAMILY HOME, FOR VACATIONS, FOR RECREATION, FOR RETIREMENT, FOR INVESTMENT SAVINGS.**

The master planning includes fully improved palm-lined, fully-paved streets with cement curbing... plus water, electricity and telephone line to each lot. At summer-cool elevations of 1,300 to 1,500 feet, Vista del Valle homesites give property owners breathtaking views of Desert Hot Springs and Palm Springs, the vast expanse of the Coachella Valley below, and the surrounding snow-capped mountains high above.

Roadwork and installation of utilities are bonded and underway now. Property owners with charter membership will have full use of the beautiful Vista del Valle Country Club.

Under construction now is the magnificent \$250,000 air conditioned clubhouse — which will feature an Olympic-sized, heated swimming pool, two therapy pools, a hydrotherapy swirl pool, sauna rooms, putting greens, and children's recreational areas.

Now is the time to invest in a Vista del Valle homesite. Prices are still at pre-development levels but will rise sharply when improvements are completed. This means your investment may rise dramatically. Fully improved residential and income lots from \$3900 are ready for you now. For a limited time only, you may start your real estate investment at Vista del Valle for as little as **\$35 per month** after a small initial payment.

**Greetings
to all our Friends in
Desert Hot Springs**

FREE — FREE

ATTENTION!!! Mr. and Mrs.

Bring this coupon to our office for an escorted tour of Vista del Valle.

You may select a lot of your choice at preliminary construction prices and terms which are subject to substantial increase upon completion of improvements. (Special for Desert Hot Springs residents).

After your first escorted tour of Vista del Valle you will be presented with an LP PAT BOONE RECORD ABSOLUTELY FREE!

Please! You must be over 21. Offer valid only through Grand Opening Celebration period. Come now for best selection.



Vista del Valle Sales Office

A Wendell-West Development

Vista del Valle
9985 Palm Drive
P.O. Box 308
Desert Hot Springs, California
(714) 329-2895
Office Hours 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. — Seven days a week



Vista del Valle Country Club

Figure 2.23. Ad in *The Desert Sentinel*, February 2, 1967.

Less famous, but notable residents have gravitated to Desert Hot Springs, including entertainers, sports figures, and writers. One of them was editorial cartoonist George “Buzz” Gambill. During a stint in the Navy during World War II he created a comic strip called “Salty the Seaman.” He drew illustrations for *The Desert Sentinel*, and when it closed in 2000 leaving the town without its own newspaper, he began publishing *The Valley Breeze*. Gambil died in 2009 but left behind a trove of drawings.

Another resident who spent his last days in the city was Knute Hill, a former congressman from Washington, as well as USC football coach Gus Henderson. And there were a few lesser-known actors who lived in the city, such as Joan Woodbury and Rick Zumwalt.

CHAPTER 3: Significant Property Profiles

This chapter will describe some of the most important properties and motels/spas in Desert Hot Springs. All of them, except one, are extant. Figure 3.1 below is a Google Earth map showing the locations of the properties described in this chapter. Though there are other properties in Desert Hot Springs that date back to the town's period of significance, these resources have interesting stories behind them and enough information to provide a meaningful profile.



Figure 3.1. Google Earth map of properties in Chapter 3.

Coffee's Desert Hot Springs Mineral Baths

The granddaddy of all the spas in Desert Hot Springs was the now-demolished bathhouse built by L.W. Coffee on the southwest corner of Palm Drive and Eighth Street, as referenced in Chapter 1. The first Coffee spa was built in 1941 at a time when it wasn't easy to travel the dusty roads of the desert. One side of the bathhouse catered to women and the other was for men, each with four tubs, a swimming room, a playground, and changing rooms -- but no rooms for lodging.

The original bathhouse burned down on January 20, 1947. Within months Coffee began construction on a new and improved bathhouse seen in figure 3.2 made from materials like stucco and clay that were less flammable. By July 1947 the new facility was opened and ready for business, featuring a 24x78 foot swimming pool (seen in figure 3.3), children's pool, men's and women's bathhouses, massage tables, and a lounge area.



Figure 3.2. Coffee's newly constructed bath house.1947. From *Images of America*.



Figure 3.3. Pool at Coffee's Natural Mineral Baths. Photo from Desert Hot Springs Historical Society.

After Coffee died in 1957, the bathhouse was leased and kept operating for a few years. But for most of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s it was vacant. In 1976, Hollywood director Robert Altman used Coffee's to film parts of *3 Women* about a woman working in a health spa for elderly clients in a California desert town. The building was completely demolished in January 1991 and the location is now an empty lot as seen in figure 3.4.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ *Images of America: Desert Hot Springs*, p. 55.



Figure 3.4. Vacant lot where Coffee's once stood, Palm Drive and Eighth Street. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

Desert Hot Springs Motel (Lautner Compound)

Well-known architect John Lautner designed a motel for Hollywood director Lucien Hubbard in 1947. It was originally called “Lautner Living Units for Bubbling Wells Subdivision” and the master plan called for a compound that would include living quarters, shops, and pools for Hubbard to entertain his prestigious guests.¹⁴⁰ Only four rooms were ever constructed on the 600-acre property, and though each unit is separate, they interlock and feature signature Lautner materials -- concrete-block walls, steel, redwood, and large plate-glass windows that reveal each unit’s garden.

¹⁴⁰ “John Lautner – The Lautner Compound, Desert Hot Springs, CA (1947). Accessed May 15, 2023. <https://midcenturymichigan.com/2020/05/03/john-lautner-the-lautner-compound-desert-hot-springs-ca-1947/>.

By the early 1960s, the property was largely vacant, and when Hubbard died in 1972, most of the original six-hundred acres were subdivided and sold off for homes. At one point, an owner converted the Lautner units into apartments.¹⁴¹ Hotelier and Lautner aficionado Steven Lowe bought it in 2000 to restore it and return it to a hotel. When Lowe died in 2007, designers Tracy Beckmann and Ryan Trowbridge purchased the property and spent three years on renovations, attempting to stay true to Lautner's design aesthetic, and using mid-century styling.¹⁴² [Figure 3.5]

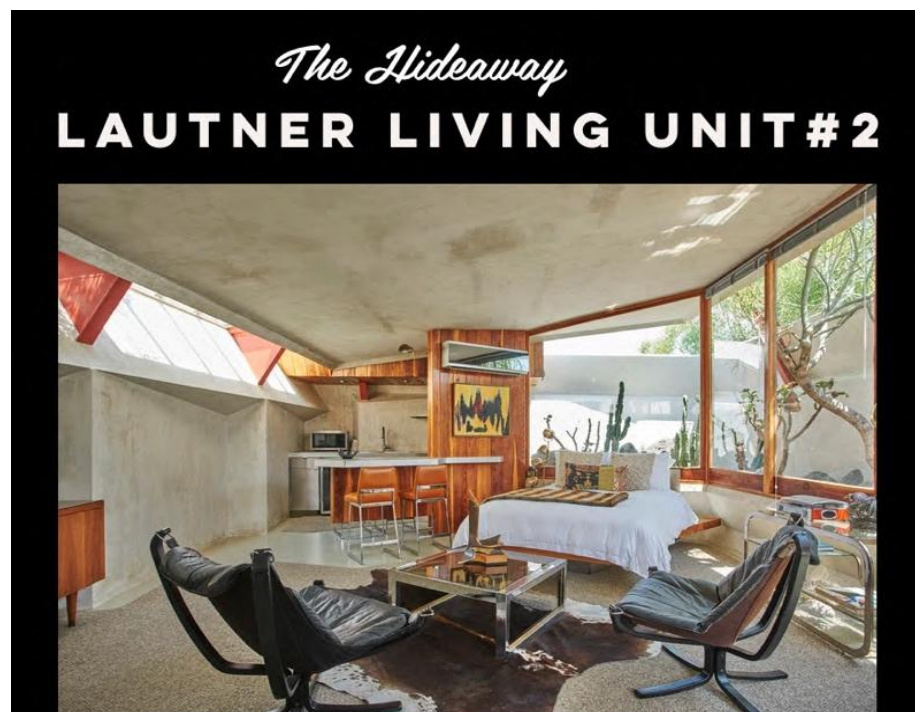


Figure 3.5. Room at the Lautner Compound. From the Lautner Compound website.

Today it is available for vacation rentals, wedding parties, and other special events, and it is a big attraction on the annual Modernism Week circuit.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

The Desert Spa (Two Bunch Palms)

Two Bunch Palms was the spot with mineral waters that led early homesteaders and founders to locate and dig more wells. Tom Lipps, a hotelier in Palm Springs, acquired Two Bunch Palms and the surrounding 1,800 acres in 1937, and the resort opened in 1940, originally called The Desert Spa. Loretta Ayeroff's mother started going to Two Bunch Palms in the 1950s and would bring Loretta and her brother along:

I know she loved being in the water, and found it very helpful and soothing... It was just so much fun. My brother and I roamed all over. It was very beyond rustic. It was like a ranch kind of, although ranches are much nicer than what Two Bunch Palms was originally. Mostly it was swimming. And when we were little, my brother and I were running wild over the desert-scapes and playing games and pretending we were in Ramar of the Jungle. And we would go to Cabot's and see the old Indian Pueblo. We knew Cabot when he was alive and grew up learning about his Alaska connections and how he used to walk three miles to get water for his donkey and the donkey was there. I mean, it was just fascinating.¹⁴³ [Figure 3.6]



Figure 3.6. Loretta Ayeroff at Two Bunch Palms, circa 1950s. Photo from Loretta Ayeroff.

¹⁴³ Interview with the author April 18, 2023. Edited for clarity; Ramar of the Jungle was an American TV series that aired from 1952-54.

Two Bunch Palms was a modest property, “almost a bargain, with its cozy, funky overstuffed rooms furnished in lurid period antiques and cooled with ceiling fans.”¹⁴⁴ But like other properties in Desert Hot Springs, it began to decline. In 1978 it underwent a multi-million-dollar renovation and “went total Hollywood ... and it became untouchable for the normal human being. It was just a slick place; it had lost all its magic,” said Ayeroff.¹⁴⁵ It appeared in a Hollywood movie – Robert Altman’s 1992 film *The Player*, in which Tim Robbins plays a movie executive hiding out in the resort’s mud baths.

Two Bunch Palms underwent several more renovations, including one in 2014 that added a yoga dome, a fitness center, and a redone grotto, and another two-million-dollar update in 2018. [Figure 3.7] The property also has a restaurant, and it attracts Hollywood celebrities, such as Julia Roberts, Jeff Bridges, Madonna, and Bette Midler. In fact, it is the one place in Desert Hot Springs that people in Southern California seem to know of, but at prices from \$300-\$500 a night, it is “untouchable” for many travelers.

¹⁴⁴ Hubler, “Weekend Escape: Desert Hot Springs: Two Bunch Palms: The Famous Mogul Hideaway Lives Up to Its Script: Pricey, Private and Profoundly Relaxing,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1994.

¹⁴⁵ Author’s interview with Loretta Ayeroff, April 18, 2023.



Figure 3.7. Two Bunch Palms pool. Image from *Visit Greater Palm Springs* website.

Miracle Manor Boutique Hotel & Spa

About a mile northeast of Two Bunch Palms on a quiet corner of Miracle Hill, across the street from Cabot's Pueblo Museum, sits the Miracle Manor. The six-unit Miracle Manor Retreat was built by Jim and Florence Martin of Los Angeles. Most accounts say that it was built in 1949 and there are references to "Jim Martin, Miracle Manor" in articles throughout the 1950s. But it wasn't until December 1955 that the Certificate of Business appeared in the newspaper and *The Desert Sentinel* ran an article seen in figure 3.8 saying it opened for guests.

In 1960, Benjamin and Pauline Hudson bought the motel from the Martins. It was later sold to Aurelia Krygier and made headlines in 1977 when guests found Krygier

strangled in her apartment on the property. A young one-time resident of the motel was arrested for her murder.¹⁴⁶



Figure 3.8. Miracle Manor article from *The Desert Sentinel*, December 1955.

Like other motels in Desert Hot Springs, Miracle Manor limped along throughout the 1980s and early 1990s until designer April Greiman took her architect partner Michael Rotondi there for a romantic getaway. It was Rotondi's first time in Desert Hot Springs when he remembers it being known as the "methamphetamine capital of the United States."¹⁴⁷ Rotondi says both the town and the motel had seen better days:

It had all 1960s and '70s furniture. It had polyester sheets and twin beds that you roll together, and then in the middle of the night your beds would be sliding apart, and you'd be lying in a hammock in between the beds. There were no windows to the outside and the windows were filled with air conditioners... People were out there for the climate and the

¹⁴⁶ *Desert Sun*, April 7, 1977.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with author, March 28, 2023.

water, and all of the motels were trying to look like they were in the city.¹⁴⁸

Greiman and Rotondi, whom *Sunset* magazine described as a Buddhist architect, bought the motel in 1997 from Lois Blackhill and her sister, and the new owners did a make-over, taking off outer walls to “let sunlight bathe the whole place.”¹⁴⁹ They re-opened it as a boutique hotel with no kids or shoes allowed and no phones, clocks, or TVs in the units. [Figure 3.9] I stayed at Miracle Manor in April of 1998, not long after its re-opening. The rooms were minimalist and nicely designed with inviting light, low platform beds with fluffy duvets, and comfy robes to wear out to the courtyard where you could dip in 100+-degree pools and enjoy jaw-dropping views of the San Jacinto Mountains.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ *Sunset*, April 14, 2012. Accessed May 22, 2023. <https://www.sunset.com/travel/insider-guides/miracle-manor-retreat-desert-hot-springs>.

¹⁵⁰ The author stayed at Miracle Manor in April of 1998.



Figure 3.9. Miracle Manor, 2023. Photo by William Short.

The purchase and renovation of the property by a high-powered Los Angeles couple in the design and architecture world created a buzz and soon articles were appearing in the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, design and style magazine *Wallpaper*, and others. Rotondi said the couple did not do any advertising and relied on word-of-mouth. But, as he said, “it was hard work keeping the hotel going” and after twenty-two years, Greiman and Rotondi decided to call it quits and they sold the property in 2018.¹⁵¹ It is now owned by an LLC called the Francis Hotel Group.

Bertram’s Ma-Ha-Yah Lodge

Nathaniel and Rose Bertram built the Ma-Ha-Yah Lodge at the top of Hacienda Boulevard in 1960. The Bertrams’ granddaughter wrote an article in which she describes the origin of the name: “...as guests lowered themselves into any of the three hot

¹⁵¹ Interview with author. March 28, 2023.

mineral pools, they would invariably exclaim, ‘Ahhh, it’s a mahayah!’” which means “blessing” or “joy” in Yiddish.¹⁵² The lodge had three pools which Rose Bertram named the Pool of Everlasting Love, the Pool of Everlasting Wisdom, and the Pool of Joy and Laughter.¹⁵³ [Figure 3.10]

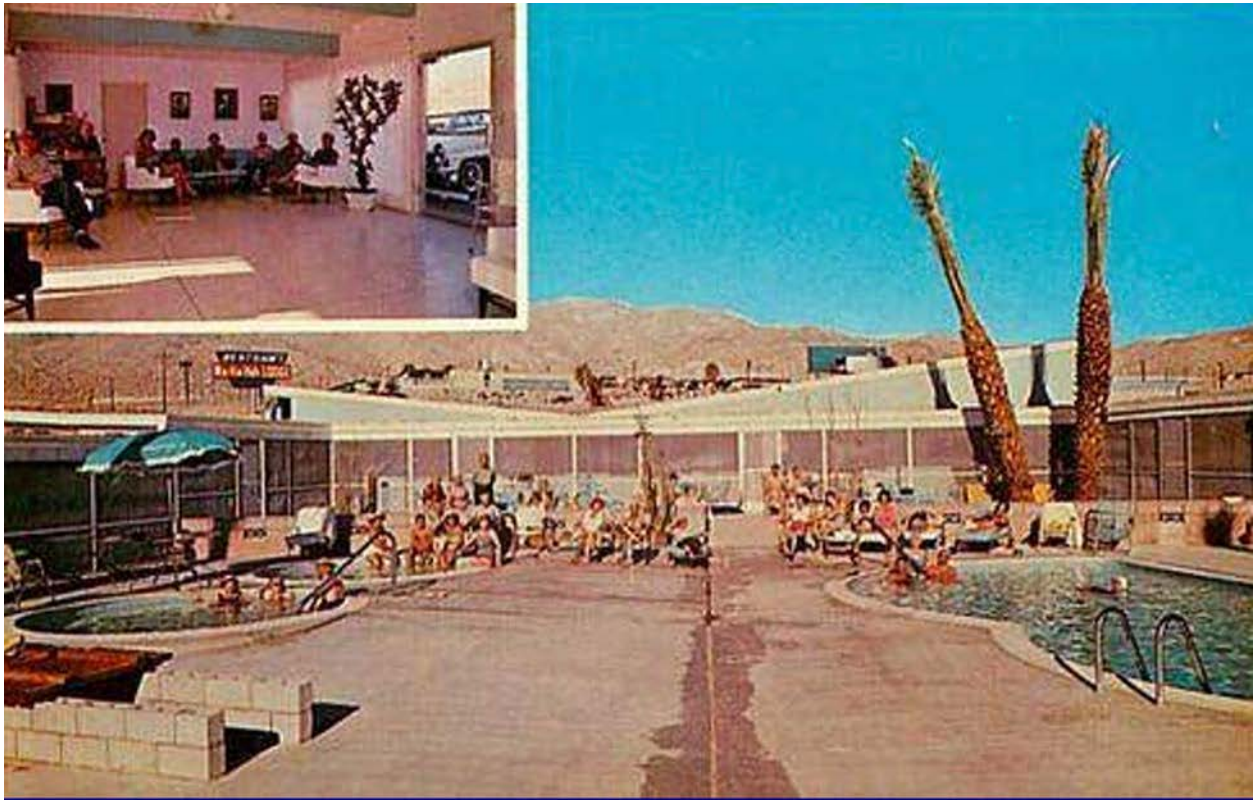


Figure 3.0.10. Ma-Ha-Yah Lodge postcard. Year unknown. Photo from Desert Hot Springs Historical Society.

Rose Bertram, or RGB as she was known, was a dynamic figure. She was born into a well-off Jewish family in Romania, who despite their wealth experienced discrimination and antisemitism. When Rose was twelve, her father moved the family to

¹⁵² J. Correspondent, *The Jewish News of Northern California*, May 16, 1997. Accessed March 15, 2023. <https://jweekly.com/1997/05/16/in-first-person-joys-of-ma-ha-yah-lodge-mineral-pools-yiddishkeit/>

¹⁵³ Ibid.

California.¹⁵⁴ She eventually met and married Nathaniel Bertram and they settled their family of four children in Venice, California. Their daughter Mandy describes her father as a “shy and private person” who worshipped Rose. Mandy’s memories of her mother are as a whirlwind of activity -- always entertaining and campaigning for liberal causes. Rose was involved in the Women’s City Club, the PTA, B’nai B’rith, and City of Hope, and earned her law degree.

Rose Bertram started volunteering with City of Hope in 1921 and in 1933, the executive director convinced her to leave her nascent legal career and be hired as a fundraiser for the organization, which was originally established in 1914 as the Jewish Consumptive Relief Society.¹⁵⁵ City of Hope ran a tuberculosis sanatorium and wanted to build a medical center in Duarte where it was based. Bertram became City of Hope’s National Director of Auxiliaries, a network of local chapters that raised money for the institution. She reportedly increased the number of auxiliaries from 33 to 300, which earned her the nickname “Mother of Auxiliaries.”¹⁵⁶ One chapter even named itself R.G.B. Aides.¹⁵⁷ Rose Bertram retired from City of Hope in 1958, around the time that she began suffering from painful arthritis.¹⁵⁸

Rose and Nat, now in their sixties, decided to relocate to Desert Hot Springs, first building a motel with five rentals and an owner’s apartment in 1960, and a year later building what they called the New Ma-Ha-Yah Lani, with twenty-four units and three

¹⁵⁴ Much of the information on Rose Bertram comes from a letter written by her daughter Mandy to her children in 1987, provided courtesy of Christopher Tandon.

¹⁵⁵ The Jewish Consumptive Relief Society was renamed City of Hope – A Jewish National Medical Center in 1949. Today, City of Hope is a world-famous research and treatment center for cancer and other life-threatening diseases.

¹⁵⁶ Selber, *A Tribute: Rose G. Bertram*, 1958.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Letter from Mandy Bertram to her children, 1987.

pools. The Lani was designed by Palm Desert-based architect John F. Outcault and built by the Eliot Construction Company, owned by Zelda and Charles Eliot. [Figure 3.11].

Like Rose Bertram, Charles Eliot was born in Romania and his family moved to

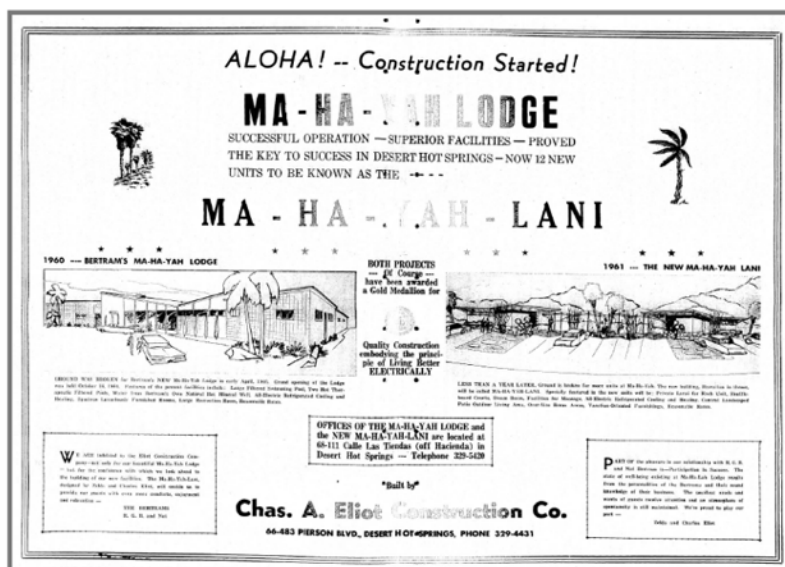


Figure 3.11. Ad from *The Desert Sentinel*, March 31, 1961. From microfilm.

Los Angeles in the 1920s. Zelda and Charles Eliot had a lucrative business in Los Angeles before moving to Desert Hot Springs in the 1950s.¹⁵⁹ After her husband's death in 1964, Zelda Eliot was one of the few women in the desert area to qualify for a general contractor's license.¹⁶⁰ Ma-Ha-Yah was often the site of parties, for holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, and prominent visitors to Desert Hot Springs. It's unclear when the Bertrams sold the property but in 2009 it was pretty much gutted, rebuilt and opened

¹⁵⁹ State of California historic nomination application for Maggio/Davis Residence. P. 9. Accessed May 23, 2023. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://sandiego.cfwebtools.com/images/files/3757%20Via%20Flores%20HRRR%20and%20Attachments_01_05_2022_rfs.pdf.

¹⁶⁰ "Zelda Eliot Has A License As A Contractor," *Desert Sun*, September 8, 1964.

as the Bella Monte Hot Springs Resort Spa.¹⁶¹ Today it is the Bella Monte Recovery Center.

Hope Springs (formerly La Bella Sari)

La Bella Sari was built in 1963 and was owned and operated by two women: Lillian R. Rose and Nettie H. Zide, both of Los Angeles. [Figure 3.12] The motel was built in an area of Miracle Hill where the streets were laid out in a circular fashion. As the *Desert Sun* reported, Rose and Zide were introduced to Desert Hot Springs by It's quite possible that the Bertrams met Nettie Zide, and possibly Lillian Rose, through B'nai B'rith circles in Los Angeles.¹⁶²



Figure 3.12. Article from *Desert Sun*, May 10, 1963.

Unsurprisingly, John F. Outcault and the Charles Eliot Construction Co. also

¹⁶¹ Riverside County Assessor records show that the property was sold in 1982 for \$540,000; information about its sale in 2009 comes from Zillow. Accessed May 23, 2023. https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/68111-Calle-Las-Tiendas-Desert-Hot-Springs-CA-92240/2127904127_zpid/.

¹⁶² A November 7, 1948 article in the *Los Angeles Times* lists Nat Bertram and Nettie Zide among the Los Angeles residents at a B'nai B'rith event in San Francisco.

designed and built La Bella Sari. [Figure 3.13]. Outcault's involvement is an interesting side note: he is not mentioned in any newspaper articles or other writings about Ma-Ha-Yah or La Bella Sari. When Christopher Tandon and four partners bought what is now Hope Springs in 2005, he was convinced that it had been designed by an architect.

Tandon described the design in an email to a friend:



Figure 3.13. Article about La Bella Sari in *Desert Sun*, November 1, 1963

Terrazzo floor, sunken fire pit with a custom split flue chimney, a dramatic engineered roof to cover it, all part of a “wing” that is an “s” shape. Clearly, it was not the work of general contractor. The rooms themselves were intelligently designed, with large overhangs, shared kitchens, and bathrooms that had direct access to the pools and courtyard. Very smart and very modern with a very Wrightian influence that I assumed to be of the period, but it was the design of the lobby and the attached owner’s apartment that said “architecture.”¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Letter from Christopher Tandon to Peter.

Tandon combed through county permits and spoke with Nettie Zide's daughter, then in her eighties, and former owners Jack and Renate Merzenrich, who bought the motel from Lillian Rose. He reluctantly concluded no architect was involved, and that Charles Eliot was the sole designer/builder. When I began my research, an internet search using the terms "Desert Hot Springs" and "Charles Eliot" yielded one promising clue, as both were mentioned in archive listings for architect John F. Outcalt. I visited his archive and discovered architectural drawings of Ma-Ha-Yah Lani and La Bella Sari. The drawing in figure 3.14 shows the signature fireplace in the lobby of La Bella Sari.

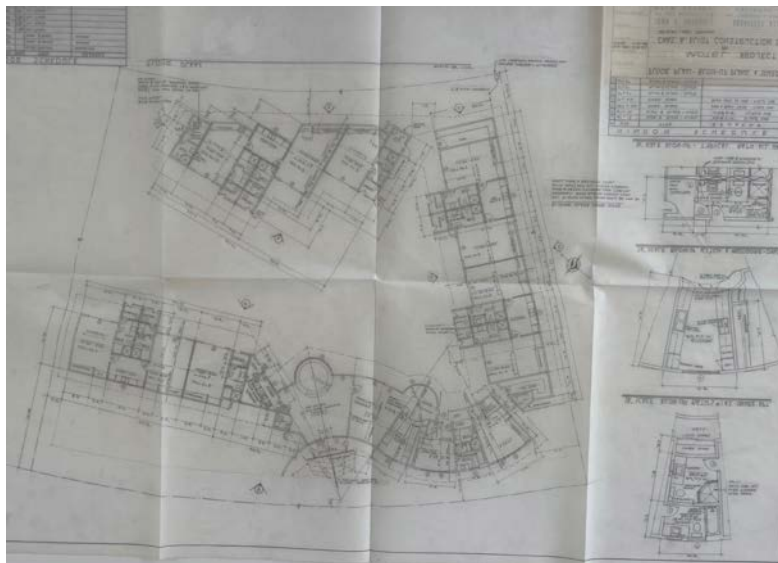


Figure 3.14. Architectural drawing of La Bella Sari. From the John F. Outcalt archive, Architecture and Design Collection, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Tandon also tried to track down the origin of the name "La Bella Sari." Nettie Zide's daughter told him she thought it came from a relative named Sara.¹⁶⁴ But the

¹⁶⁴ Sara is a name of Hebrew origin derived from the biblical name Sarah. It means "princess" or "noblewoman."; "What Does Sara Mean?" from VeryWell Family website. Accessed July 8, 2023. <https://www.verywellfamily.com/sara-name-meaning-origin-popularity->

Merzenrichs said “that Lillian Rose told them that it was a reference to/shortening of Sahara.” Tandon wasn’t convinced by either explanation, but regardless of where the name came from, the motel featured an outdoor “therapeutic” pool, a swimming pool, an enclosed hydro-jet pool, and a “sunken wood burning fireplace in the lobby...”¹⁶⁵

[Figure 3.15] Some units had kitchens, and those that did not, had built-in refrigerators in the bathrooms.¹⁶⁶ One of its most distinctive features was a Googie-like sign in front of the property.



Figure 3.15. Old postcard of La Bella Sari, circa early 1960s.- Desert Hot Springs Historical Society.

In 1969, Nettie Zide pulled out of the partnership (she died in 1970) and Lillian Rose owned it for another two years before selling it. It had a succession of other

5179300#:~:text=The%20name%20Sara%20is%20of,translated%20to%20mean%20%22noblewoman.%22.

¹⁶⁵ “La Bella Sari Lodge Has Formal Opening,” *Desert Sun*, November 1, 1963.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

owners, one of whom changed the name to Cactus Springs Resort sometime in the late 1970s. For a time, the hotel served as low-income housing, until it was purchased in 1999 by Steve Samiof, founder and editor of the alternative magazine *Slash*, and his business partner Mick Haggerty, a graphic designer. They undertook what Samiof called an “arduous and difficult” renovation and reopened it with the name Hope Springs Resort.¹⁶⁷ Like Miracle Manor, the rooms are sparsely decorated (they even took out the closets) and the entire property is adorned with mid-century hues. As one travel website described it “Hope Springs references two aspects of classic Californiana at once — on the one hand, the mid-century modernist roadside motel (whose resurgence we just can’t get enough of), and on the other, the natural hot springs that are the hotel’s main attraction.”¹⁶⁸ [Figure 3.16]

¹⁶⁷ Stephen Bridges, “Keeping “Hope” Alive” *Palm Springs Life*, May 20, 2018. Accessed May 22, 2023. <https://www.palmspringslife.com/hope-springs-resort/>.

¹⁶⁸ Explorra website. Accessed May 27, 2023. https://www.explorra.com/hotels/hope-springs-resort_10301.



Figure 3.16. Hope Springs exterior with curvilinear lines. Photo by William Short, 2022.

Sagewater Spa

The Sagewater Spa is about a block from Miracle Manor. It began life as the Mona Lisa Motel when it was built in 1954 perched on Miracle Hill overlooking the valley below. It was given a makeover and re-opened in 2002 by owners Rhoni Epstein and Cristina Pestana who kept the renovation looking close to the original. It has seven rooms that could be described as minimalist: bright white exterior with sharp angles, and an open courtyard with a pool and grilling space. [Figure 3.17] Reminiscent of the original mom-and-pop motel owners, Pestana and Epstein would serve their guests coffee cake in the morning, and drinks in the late afternoon.¹⁶⁹ Scott Harner bought it in 2022 and sold it a year later.

¹⁶⁹ Bender, *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 2003.

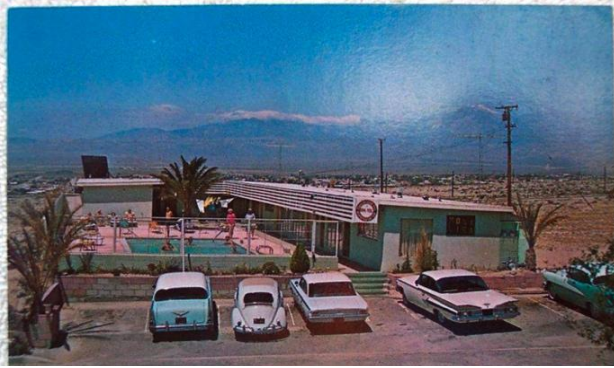


Figure 3.17. (L) Mona Lisa, date unknown; (R) Sagewater, 2022. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

Kismet Lodge

Kismet Lodge, on Mountain View Road, was originally built by Eddie and Rose Deovlet. The name *kismet* derives from the Arabic word “qisma.” The English language adopted the word kismet in the 1800s from Turkish term meaning *fate*.¹⁷⁰ The Deovlets named their retirement property after the musical “Kismet,” which was first produced on Broadway in 1953.¹⁷¹ [Figure 3.18].



Figure 3.18. Kismet Lodge Postcard. Year unknown. Courtesy Desert Hot Springs Historical Society.

The property, which sports another iconic mid-century sign, was sold a few times, and by the 1980s, the owners, Lise and Frederick Dellagatta, featured it as a “Health and Beauty Spa and Art Center.” A 40x8 foot mural called “Seven Steps to The Center of

¹⁷⁰ Merriam-Webster Dictionary. -Accessed May 24, 2023. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kismet>.

¹⁷¹ Broadway Musical Home, Accessed May 24, 2023. <https://broadwaymusicalhome.com/shows/kismet.htm#gsc.tab=0>; information from Jeff Bowman, former owner of the Kismet.

the Earth Very Near the Sky" was painted on its parking lot wall by an artist named Sue Merho.¹⁷²

Like other spas, Kismet fell into disrepair and was, for a time, used as apartments until Jeff and Judy Bowman bought it in 2003, renovated it, and turned it back into a spa. They added the name Living Waters Spa and offered a "clothing optional" stay. [Figure 3.19] Jeff Bowman estimates they had 13,000 unique guests during the sixteen years that they owned the spa from all fifty states, Europe, and other parts of the world, and many were loyal guests who came back multiple times. Bowman recounted one story about a guest who wrote to him after she had surgery:

She was really nervous about the surgery and the physician was pretty smart. He said, "well, in your mind, can you go to your happy place." And she said, "my happy place was floating in the waters at Living Waters Spa, looking up at night stars."¹⁷³

¹⁷² Ibid.; Sue K Murho. Accessed May 24, 2023. <https://suemerho.com/about>.

¹⁷³ Interview by author with Jeff and Judy Bowman.



Figure 3.19. Kismet Lodge/Living Waters, February 2022. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

The Bowmans sold Living Waters in 2019 and it is now a recovery facility.

Desert Hot Springs Inn

The Desert Hot Springs Inn was opened in 1957 as the Monte Carlo on Hacienda Avenue, one of the east/west main streets that intersect Palm Drive. [Figure 3.20] It was owned by Anna and Harry Berkenblitt.



Figure 3.20. Monte Carlo Motel. Date unknown. Desert Hot Springs Historical Society.

During the 1980s and '90s when motels were experiencing extreme drop-off, the property was pretty much closed until 2000 when Steven Lowe, who at the time also owned the Lautner hotel, refurbished it to its mid-century roots and opened it as the Beat Hotel. Lowe was a friend and collaborator of William Burroughs, the well-known Beat Generation author, and the hotel became a memorial to Burroughs and the Beats by featuring memorabilia, artwork, photographs, and even a draft of a Burroughs' manuscript.¹⁷⁴ As one guest wrote on Yelp in 2007: "Incredible library of Beat authors and a real Mugwump from *Naked Lunch* that you can dine with in [*sic*] the morning."¹⁷⁵ Steve Lowe died of a heart attack in January 2007.

John Thatcher bought it in 2017 and it became the first motel in Desert Hot Springs to offer "cannabis-friendly lodging."¹⁷⁶ [Figure 3.21] Thatcher says business improved up to fifty percent and that many of the guests were baby boomers with money.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴"Good-Bye to Steve Lowe, Cultural Preservationist." January 24, 2007. Accessed May 27, 2023. <http://palmspringscoralsands.blogspot.com/2007/01/good-bye-to-steven-lowe-cultural.html>.

¹⁷⁵ Yelp review. Accessed May 28, 2023. <https://www.yelp.com/biz/beat-hotel-desert-hot-springs>; a "mugwump" is a creature featured in Burroughs' most famous novel, *Naked Lunch*. They are alien-looking monsters with long black tongues, thick purple-blue lips and sharp beaks, who get nourishment from sweets.

¹⁷⁶ "Desert Hot Springs wants to be the Napa Valley of weed" by Matt Guilhern, KCRW, March 23, 2021. Accessed May 27, 2023. <https://www.kcrw.com/news/shows/greater-la/weed-economy-mining-death-valley-coronavirus-memorabilia/cannabis-tourism-desert-hot-springs>.

¹⁷⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, Accessed May 27, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-pot-friendly-hotels-20180622-story.html>.



Figure 3.21. Desert Hot Springs Inn. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

Desert Hot Springs Spa Hotel

If you drive north on Palm Drive through Desert Hot Springs, you can't help but notice the Desert Hot Springs Spa Hotel. It's huge compared to the spa-tels on Miracle Hill. It was initially built in 1963 with only day spa services, an Olympic-size swimming pool, five therapeutic mineral pools, sauna rooms, and poolside cabanas.¹⁷⁸ The contractor on the project was Ernest W. Hahn who was one of the inventors of the modern suburban shopping mall, and who envisioned malls as community centers with daycare centers, skating rinks, and other activities along with retail business.¹⁷⁹

In 1970, a family of three brothers bought it and added fifty guest rooms that surround a large courtyard with eight hot mineral water pools. John, Tony, and Kermit

¹⁷⁸ "Desert Hot Springs Spa Work Finished," *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 1964.

¹⁷⁹ "Ernest Hahn, Pioneer of the Modern Shopping Mall, Dies," *Los Angeles Times*. December 29, 1992. Accessed May 27, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-12-29-mn-2752-story.html>.

Arnds were the sons of the Sparkletts Water founder. The Arnds were big game hunters, and they decorated the hotel's bar with stuffed bears, an elephant head, and stuffed tigers and lions. [Figure 3.22]



Figure 3.22. International Lounge interior from Desert Hot Springs Spa Hotel. From Facebook page. Date unknown.

The Arnds sold the hotel to John Jacobs in the late 1970's, and Mike Bickford bought it in 1979. Bickford still owns it as well as the Miracle Springs Resort & Spa.

Pil-O-Rox Rock House

This property is not a motel, but rather a single-family residence. This rock house was built in 1946 in one of the first subdivisions in town, west of Palm Drive, at 66050 Third Street. It was reportedly one of the first homes built in the town, and it is one of several rock or stone houses built in the Coachella Valley, including the Araby rock

houses in Palm Springs and in the nearby Whitewater Preserve.¹⁸⁰ The Third Street rock house was designed and built by Lee Watkins for his wife Lenora. Watkins was in his eighties when he and Lenora collected local rocks, and working without a blueprint, began construction on the house.¹⁸¹ He had help from others, including Les Morgan who initiated the establishment of Angel View, and who called the Watkins “very grand people.”¹⁸² Watkins himself dubbed it Pil-O-Rox in a 1947 postcard of the house.

[Figure 3.23]



Figure 3.23. Pil-O-Rox photo from the Steve Lech Collection. On California Desert Art website. (<https://www.californiadesertart.com/lomaland-pil-o-rox-diego-rivera-transcendental-painting-group-and-more-news/>).

¹⁸⁰ *Desert Sun*, April 21, 2023. Accessed May 5, 2023.

<https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/local/desert-hot-springs/2023/04/21/historic-home-desert-hot-springs-museum-city-council/70129063007/>.

¹⁸¹ Sidna? Fairweather, “The Rock Castle: A Hand-Wrought Desert Miracle.” Article source unknown; provided by the Desert Hot Springs Historical Society archives.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

The Desert Hot Springs Historical Society bought the rock house in 2019 and solicited donations to renovate it. In April 2023, the Desert Hot Springs City Council approved \$25,000 to help the Historical Society finish renovations, especially to make it compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. In addition, it has been listed as a historic property in Riverside County.¹⁸³ It will be used as a visitor center and museum, and for events, and organizers hope to open it in Fall 2023. [Figure 3.24]



Figure 3.24. Rock House. Photos courtesy of the Desert Springs Historical Society.

Angel View

Another facility prominent in the history of Desert Hot Springs is the Angel View Crippled Children's Foundation, which is still in operation and is now called Angel View. It was founded in 1954 on a natural hot spring – at the height of the polio epidemic -- by parents whose children suffered from polio. Angel View is not a spa-tel, but its main

¹⁸³ Typically, county designations are not used for historic resources in an incorporated city. However, Riverside County (RIVCO) does designate properties in the un- and incorporated areas of the county. RIVCO's Office of Preservation says the county is not excluded from listing historic resources, as long as the city does not have planning and zoning laws that restrict the properties; email to author from Bridget Lawlor, Riverside County Historic Preservation Officer, August 10, 2023.

facility was built right in the heart of the spa zone on Miracle Hill Road and was an outgrowth of the search for healing from the mineral hot springs. The driving force behind its establishment was Leslie and Ferne Morgan, whose son Michael fully recovered from the disease by the time he was 15. Morgan came up with the name to reflect a white granite formation on Mount San Jacinto that some people likened to the wings of an angel.¹⁸⁴ [Figure 3.25] A groundbreaking was held in -1955 on Miracle Hill Road on 9.13 acres of land deeded by Aubrey Wardman, the businessman from Whittier, California who worked with L.W. Coffee to develop subdivisions in Desert Hot Springs.

Dr. Robert Bingham became the facility's first medical director. He was an orthopedic surgeon and a founder of the Sister Kenny Polio Hospital in El Monte, California.¹⁸⁵ Fundraising and support for Angel View became an important part of the civic and social life of Desert Hot Springs. There were carnivals, booths at the Riverside County Fair and the date festival held in Indio, celebrity endorsements, auxiliary groups that formed to spread the word, and other promotional campaigns to fund the rehabilitation hospital. [Figure 3.26]

¹⁸⁴ *Images of America: Desert Hot Springs*. p. 67.

¹⁸⁵ "Angel View Auxiliary to Hear Dr. Bingham," *The Desert Sentinel*. March 3, 1955.

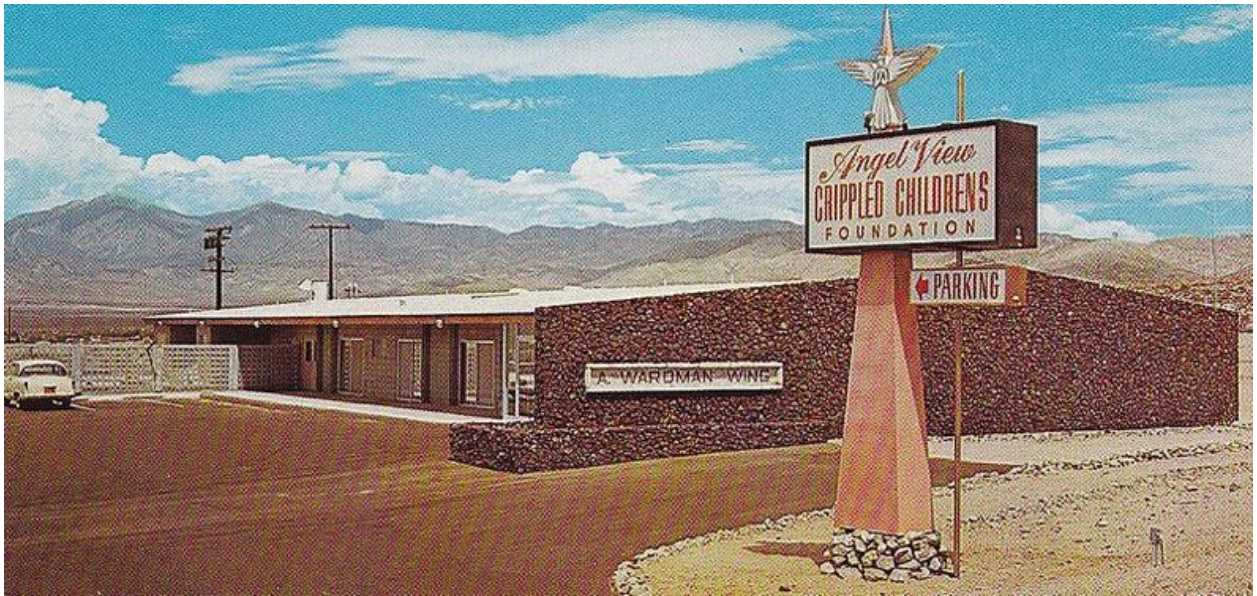


Figure 3.26. Historic photo from the Angel View website, date unknown.

After the polio vaccine eradicated the disease, Angel View transitioned to treating children and adults with intellectual and physical disabilities.¹⁸⁶ Today the facility operates residential group homes and therapeutic day programs and has a network of resale stores in Riverside and San Bernardino counties.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ From the Angel View website's "About" page. Accessed March 22, 2023. <https://angelview.org/about-angel-view/>.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4: Historic Designation Options

This chapter will look at historic designation tools that are available to protect the historic fabric of Desert Hot Springs and Chapter 5 will present recommendations that would aid the town and its residents. Generally, there are three options for historic designation: federal, state, and local (either county or city). Typically, local designation provides the most protection because it is embedded in local land use codes.

The National Register of Historic Places has recognized the historic and cultural value of sites associated with hot springs in the United States. The map in figure 4.1 shows the location of hot springs in the United States and there is a notable concentration in California and other parts of the West. These natural geothermal waters were significant to Indigenous peoples in ancient times, to settlers and residents who came in the last three-hundred years, and to health and wellness seekers.

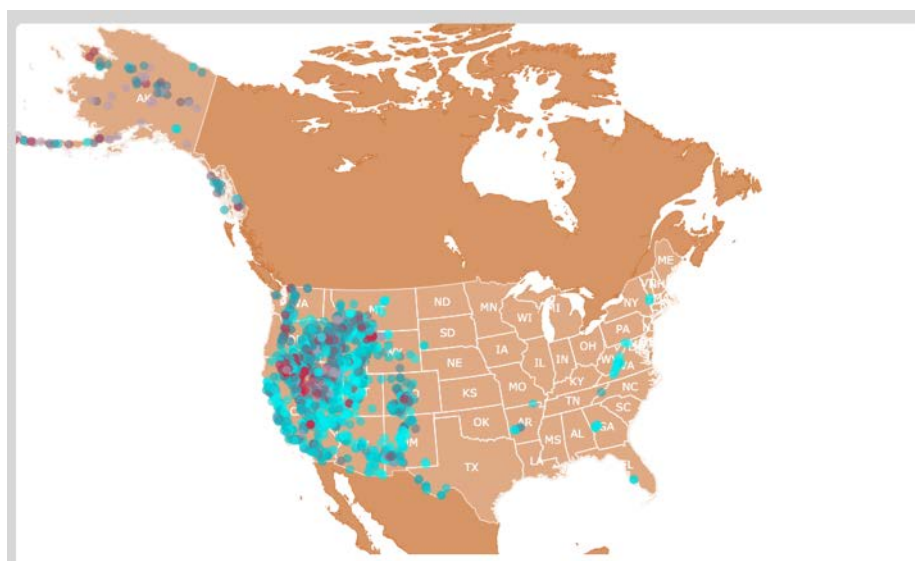


Figure 4.1. Map of hot springs locations. From databayou.com.

National Register of Historic Places

National Register of Historic Places Criteria

The National Register of Historic Places was established by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 to be an official list of “historic places worthy of preservation.”¹⁸⁸ The program is administered by the National Park Service and uses criteria established by the Secretary of the Interior, to determine the: a) significance of historic resources; b) the historic integrity of the resources (location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association); and c) the historic context.¹⁸⁹ The National Register criteria for listing are used to evaluate the potential significance of properties:

- A. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. That are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
- C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- D. That have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Additionally, the criteria mandates that in most cases, properties must be more than fifty years old to qualify, and must have “integrity,” insofar as they still convey their historic

¹⁸⁸ “What is the National Register of Historic Places?” National Park Service website. Accessed July 25, 2023. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/what-is-the-national-register.htm>.

¹⁸⁹ “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation,” National Register Bulletin 15, 1990. P. 2.

significance as regards to the location, design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association.¹⁹⁰ Although properties do not need to retain all seven aspects of integrity to be eligible for listing, they must retain sufficient integrity to convey the reasons for significance.

Under federal law, privately owned property cannot be listed in the National Register if an owner objects. However, if the State Historical Resources Commission (SHRC) formally determines that it is eligible for listing, it will still be listed in the California Register of Historical Resources and given the same protection as listed properties in any state or federal environmental review process, though it won't be eligible for federal tax benefits.¹⁹¹

Federal designation does not prevent demolition or in any way limit what can be done with the historic resources, but it is a mark of distinction that recognizes the property's significance and can be useful in promoting heritage tourism (see Chapter 5) and in the planning process.¹⁹² Additionally, federal designation can provide benefits, such as a twenty percent federal historic rehabilitation tax credit that can finance the rehabilitation of historic buildings, and there may be tax deductions for preservation easements, and federal listing ensures that federal agencies consider how building federally funded projects impacts the historic site(s).¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ "How to Support or Object to National Register Listing." Office of Historic Preservation, California Department of Parks and Recreation. February 1999.

¹⁹² Cassity, "Maintaining Community Character: How to Establish a Local Historic District." National Trust Publication. 1992. p. 7.

¹⁹³ National Register of Historic Places Fact Sheet. March 5, 2019. P. 1.

Desert Hot Springs Eligibility

Based on the research provided herein, the period of significance for the spa-tels in Desert Hot Springs is from 1940 to 1965. Its collection of spa-tels appear to meet Criterion A (associated with events) for its association with mid-century development in Southern California and the health and wellness trend in the United States.

Additionally, the spa-tels may also meet the requirements of Criterion C (embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction ... or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction) for embodying the distinctive characteristics of the spa-tel property type of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁹⁴

Historic District vs. Multiple Property Submission

The National Register allows for the listing of more than one property simultaneously under a single historic context, which the National Register classifies as “multiple property submissions.” The nomination requires, “historic contexts, selection of related property types, and the identification and documentation of related significant properties.”¹⁹⁵ The significance is explained in a “historic context statement,” which documents the “patterns or trends in history” that show whether the properties have “relevance and importance in illustrating the historic context,” and *how* they illustrate that relevance.¹⁹⁶ Historic context standards include three elements: historical theme, geographical area, and chronological period.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ “Guidelines For Local Surveys: A Basis For Preservation Planning,” *National Bulletin Register* 24. 1985. p. 2.

¹⁹⁶ How to Complete the National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form” National Register Bulletin 16B. p. 1.

Historic District Definition

Historic Districts are a classification on the National Register that apply to areas that “constitute a unified whole that can be categorized as a district,” and “convey a visual sense of the overall historic environment or be an arrangement of historically or functionally related properties.”¹⁹⁷ For instance, a residential neighborhood with a distinct style of architecture, or a historic ranch or industrial site would be candidates for a historic district. Most properties within a district must be a contiguous grouping of buildings or structures, and within the designated area most structures should be “contributing” properties that retain a historical connection to the development patterns of the district.¹⁹⁸ However, a district can include some “non-contributing” properties, such as those that have been altered or built after the period of significance. Riverside County has eighteen historic districts on the National Register, including the Grand Boulevard Historic District in Corona. As figure 4.2 shows, it is a circular district with historic homes, streetlights, pocket parks, and many contributing properties in its three-mile zone that are connected and in close proximity of each other. The district was recognized not only for its historic structures, but for its association with early twentieth-century road races. It has 158 contributing and 89 non-contributing properties.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 11; p. 5.

¹⁹⁸ About Historic Districts,” Los Angeles Conservancy. Accessed July 29, 2023. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclcfefindmkaj/https://www.laconservancy.org/sites/default/files/files/resources/About%20Historic%20Districts.pdf.

¹⁹⁹ National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Grand Boulevard. 2011. Accessed July 29, 2023. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclcfefindmkaj/https://s3.amazonaws.com/NARAprdstorage/lz/electronic-records/rg-079/NPS_CA/11000432.pdf.

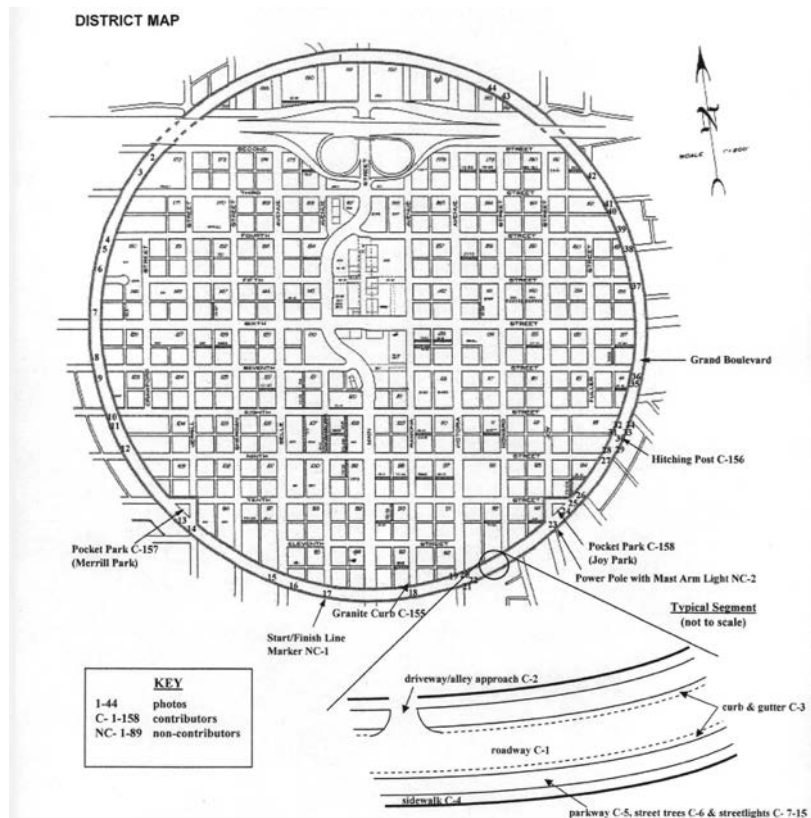


Figure 4.2. Grand Boulevard Historic District, Corona, California. Map from National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.

Multiple Property Submission Definition

Multiple property submission streamlines the process of nominating “groups of related significant properties.”²⁰⁰ It uses the same criteria for evaluation as any historic property, and its “thematically” related properties are arranged by associated historic contexts and property types. The Virginia Beach Oceanfront Resort Motels and Hotels (1955-1970) is an example of Multiple Property Listing. Virginia Beach, Virginia had a

²⁰⁰ “How to Complete the National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form,” National Register Bulletin 16B. 1999.

collection of some seventy motels and hotels on the city's beach frontage.²⁰¹ [Figure 4.3] Many are now owned by national chains, but as of 2021, it was estimated that twenty motels and hotels are extant in the city's beach area.²⁰² Some of its historic contexts mirror those of Desert Hot Springs, such as "Early Twentieth Century Vacation Accommodations" and "Emergence of the Postwar Motel."²⁰³ But unlike Desert Hot Springs, the area features both vernacular motels and architecturally designed hotel properties.



Figure 4.3. Oceanfront, Virginia Beach, Virginia. Image from GPSMYCITY.co

The same principles for owner objections apply to historic districts. Each owner or partial owner has one vote "regardless of what part of the property that person owns."²⁰⁴ However, if an owner objects to a multiple property submission, their property

²⁰¹ Virginia Beach Oceanfront Resort Motels and Hotels (1955-1970) Multiple Property Nomination Form, 2021. p. 3.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁰⁴ "How to Support or Object to National Register Listing." Office of Historic Preservation, California Department of Parks and Recreation. February 1999.

will not be listed in the National Register but, if determined eligible by the SHRC, will be listed in the California Register.

The Hotelier's Association in Desert Hot Springs has unofficially designated much of Miracle Hill as a "Spa Zone," however, its boundaries are not contiguous, as there are numerous non-contributing properties, mostly homes, that have built up around and in between the spa-tels. There are also relevant properties on the east and west side of Palm Drive, the town's main artery, about two miles from the Miracle Hill concentration. For this reason, the multiple property documentation approach is more appropriate in terms of National Register designation than nominating the properties as a historic district. Figure 4.4 is a static Google Earth map that indicates the location of extant properties in Desert Hot Springs and shows the areas where they are concentrated.²⁰⁵ A survey would be needed to identify all of the potentially significant resources and to assess the integrity of the extant properties.

²⁰⁵ The map can also be accessed with this link:
https://earth.google.com/earth/d/1Bff40IWzj_SaQ8NfEa1-hzpJT9vrFhVd?usp=sharing.

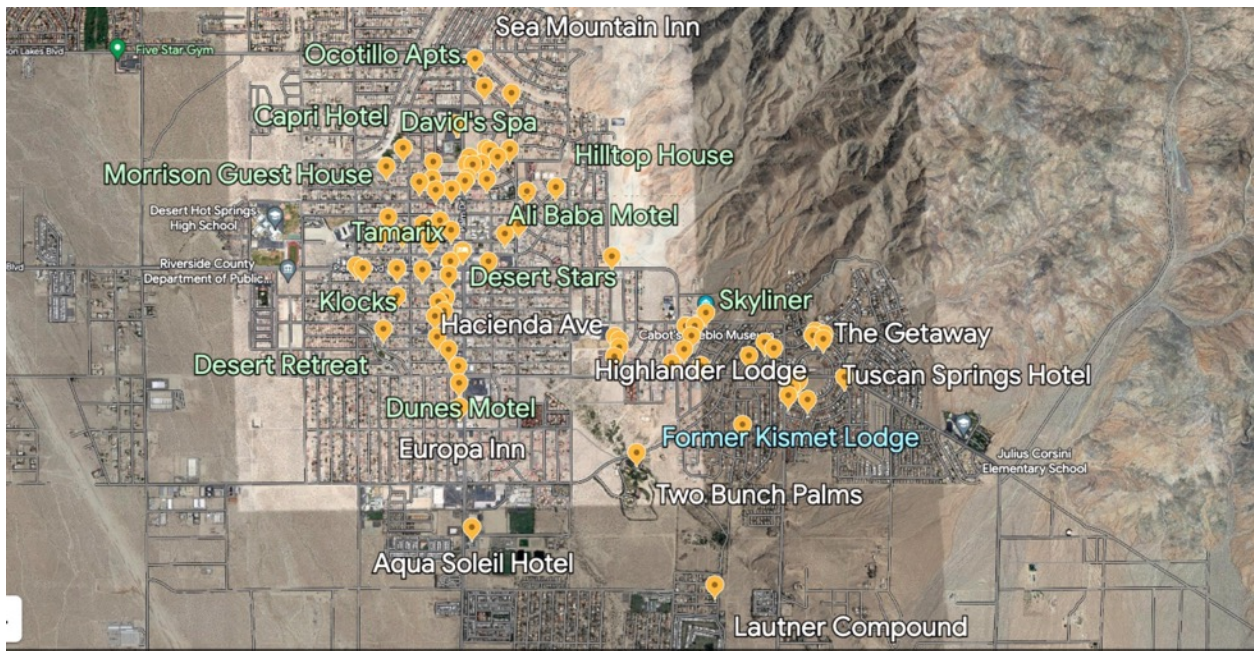


Figure 4.4. Google Earth map of historic resources.

California Register of Historical Resources

The National Historic Preservation Act established the State Preservation Office program, which is required by law to be consistent with the federal program and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. Resources in California that are listed in or formally determined eligible for the National Register are automatically listed on the California Register of Historical Resources.²⁰⁶ The California Register is administered by the State Historical Resources Commission within the Office of Historic Preservation and the Department of Parks and Recreation. It seeks to "identify, evaluate, register, and protect California's historical resources."²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ "California Historical Landmarks Registration," Office of Historic Preservation website. https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=21747.

²⁰⁷ "California Register of Historical Resources," Office of Historic Preservation website. https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=21238.

California Register of Historic Resources Criteria

Properties eligible for listing in the California Register must meet at least one of the following criteria, which are modeled after those on the National Register:

1. Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of local or regional history or the cultural heritage of California or the United States.
2. Associated with the lives of persons important to local, California or national history.
3. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, region, or method of construction or represents the work of a master or possesses high artistic values.
4. Has yielded, or has the potential to yield, information important to the prehistory or history of the local area, California, or the nation.²⁰⁸

State designation offers “limited protection” by requiring environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) if a property is threatened by a discretionary project that is under consideration.²⁰⁹ Properties might also be eligible for tax reductions under the Mills Act (see below), and owners of historic properties can use the more flexible State Historic Building Code rather than the Uniform Building Code. That might also lead to cost savings. As noted elsewhere, historical designation can result in higher property values, and as the Office of Historic Preservation writes, “listing alerts local government officials, property owners, and interested citizens to ‘stop, look,

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

and listen' before making decisions that may cause irreparable damage to a non-renewable and irreplaceable aspect of California's cultural and historical heritage."²¹⁰

Some properties may be eligible for listing in the California Register even if they are not eligible for listing in the National Register. The primary differences between the two programs are the fifty-year age requirement and the integrity thresholds. Properties that are not yet fifty years of age may be eligible for listing in the California Register even if they are not eligible for federal listing. Similarly, properties that may not retain sufficient integrity for listing in the National Register may still be eligible for state listing.

Desert Hot Springs Eligibility

Desert Hot Springs' spa-tels would be eligible under Criterion 1, and Criterion 3, both for similar reasons as those mentioned above under National Register criteria. As with federal nomination, eligible resources in California must also retain enough of their "historic character or appearance to be recognizable as historical resources and to convey the reason for their significance."²¹¹ Sometimes, properties that have not maintained sufficient integrity under national criteria can still be eligible for listing in the California Register.²¹²

²¹⁰ "Technical Assistance Series #3," California Office of Historic Preservation, Department of Parks and Recreation," September 4, 2002. p. 4.

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 11.

²¹² Ibid.

Local Preservation Ordinances

The California Office of Historic Preservation estimates that more than 250 city governments in California have enacted historic preservation ordinances.²¹³ Desert Hot Springs does *not* have a local preservation ordinance, and according to City Councilman Gary Gardner, has never considered one. Local ordinances are often based on the criteria used by the National and California Registers, but they vary because they can be tailored to the needs of the community and allow a local government to decide which types of historical resources it wants to cover.”²¹⁴ Usually, sites deemed historic are placed on a local listing of historic resources and “provide a level of protection through a design process review.”²¹⁵

The important questions for a city to ask itself when considering a historic preservation ordinance are:

- Purpose (protect historic resources, stabilize troubled neighborhoods, economic incentives)
- Which resources should be protected.
- What is the best way to protect historic resources.
- How will the city administer and enforce the ordinance.²¹⁶

California’s Office of Historic Preservation advises that a local ordinance stands a better chance of surviving legal challenges if the local government can show that it has made preservation a part of its “overall effort to foster and promote the general welfare and well being of the community as a whole...”²¹⁷

²¹³ “Drafting Effective Historic Preservation Ordinances” p. 1. Accessed June 8, 2023. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/pages/1069/files/14_hp_ordinances.pdf.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ “Historic Preservation Ordinance,” Los Angeles Conservancy website. Accessed July 5, 2023. <https://www.laconservancy.org/node/1464>.

²¹⁶ “Drafting Effective Historic Preservation Ordinances,” Office of Historic Preservation, State of California. p. 2-3.

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

Advantages of Local Ordinances

Property owners sometimes balk at the idea of historic preservation ordinances, perceiving them as a threat to their autonomy to make decisions about their property as they see warranted. Preservation efforts can get caught up in anti-regulation sentiment, especially in a place like Desert Hot Springs where the mindset can be described as libertarian. Certainly, ordinances should not be written so restrictively as to infringe on the rights of property owners, but local governments have been given the responsibility and power to regulate land use in their jurisdictions, and indeed, the United States Supreme Court has continually affirmed the constitutionality of historic preservation ordinances to “enhance the quality of life by preserving the character and desirable aesthetic features of a city.”²¹⁸

One area under local control is what level of protection a city ordinance will provide against demolition. The National Trust for Historic Preservation (National Trust) has identified a scenario called “Demolition by Neglect” wherein a property owner intentionally allows a historic property to suffer such severe decline that it is beyond repair or rehabilitation.²¹⁹ -This tactic is sometimes used as a way to get around preservation laws or by owners and developers who want to replace older, decaying structures with higher-priced buildings.²²⁰ -As the National Trust writes, “The most important tool for controlling demolition by neglect is a carefully drafted provision in the

²¹⁸ National Trust for Historic Preservation, “A Citizen’s Guide to Protecting Historic Places: Local Preservation Ordinances.” 2002. p. 1. Accessed June 13, 2023. <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://mrsc.org/getmedia/0E24E2FB-023D-45E0-A611-96B94FF43F35/toolkit.aspx>.

²¹⁹ “Demolition by Neglect,” National Trust for Historic Preservation. 2009. p. 1. Accessed July 5, 2023. <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://historicharvard.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/demolition-by-neglect-national-trust-for-historic-preservation.pdf>.

²²⁰ “Demolition of neglected properties,” Local Housing Solutions website.

local preservation ordinance requiring affirmative maintenance and ensuring that the local commission is equipped with adequate remedies for enforcement authority.”²²¹ San Francisco and other cities, as well as a few states, have precise and specific language in their preservation ordinances to address this scenario.²²²

Preservation efforts offer a variety of benefits for cities, such as bringing vitality to downtowns, creating housing, increasing tourism, and promoting and managing growth.²²³ A number of jurisdictions have set up direct grant programs for rehabilitation or assistance in obtaining private funding for either rehabilitation, finding prospective buyers for historic properties, or flexible zoning laws.²²⁴ California’s Office of Historic Preservation recognizes that direct economic assistance may be difficult for smaller cities, but the “idea is to make preservation easy for owners of historical resources.”²²⁵

Jurisdictions throughout the United States have created historic districts around resort and motel areas. The Wildwoods Shore Resort Historic District in New Jersey, popularly known as the Doo Wop Motel District, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was home to more than three-hundred motels in the 1950s and 1960s, many in Googie style and with flashy neon signs. Listing on the National Register has not stopped the loss of historic resources in the district and in past years, The National Trust for Historic Preservation has included the Doo Wop motels on its “11

²²¹ “Demolition by Neglect,” National Trust for Historic Preservation. 2009. p. 1. Accessed July 5, 2023. <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://historicharvard.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/demolition-by-neglect-national-trust-for-historic-preservation.pdf>.

²²² Ibid., p. 3-4.

²²³ California Preservation Foundation Webinar. Megan Brown, CLG Coordinator, National Park Service. 2022. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21LYU1xz-3s>.

²²⁴ “Drafting Effective Historic Preservation Ordinances,” Office of Historic Preservation, State of California. p. 6-7.

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 69.

Most Endangered List” as development pressures have resulted in several hundred motels being demolished.²²⁶ Local preservationists are frustrated that national listing doesn’t offer properties much protection and they would like to see the City of Wildwood adopt a historic preservation ordinance to strengthen its protection of these old motels. Just last year a hotel company announced plans to restore the Ocean View, a property that was in danger of demolition.²²⁷

Economic Incentives and Historic Preservation

This section will look at the major economic tools and tax incentives at the federal and state level available to encourage the rehabilitation and re-use of historic structures owned by homeowners and the private sector.

Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives

The Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit offers a twenty percent tax credit for expenses associated with *substantially* rehabilitating buildings used for income-generation or for business. A tax credit lowers the amount of tax that an owner owes by one dollar for each dollar of tax credit. The program requires owners to comply with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and credits cannot be used for properties that are exclusively used as an owner’s private residence.²²⁸ To be eligible for the credit, the owner must submit a Historic Preservation Certification Application to

²²⁶ Tobia, ““Preservationist Hopes Doo Wop Motel Restoration Will Lead to Historic District in the Wildwoods.” *Jersey Digs*, September 29, 2022. Accessed June 8, 2023. <https://jerseydigs.com/doo-wop-motel-restoration-wildwood/>.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ “Historic Preservation Tax Incentives,” National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. 2012. p. 4.

the State Historic Preservation Office which makes its recommendation on whether to approve the credit to the National Park Service.

An eligible property must also meet basic requirements of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), i.e. it must be depreciable because it is used for income generation, and the rehabilitation must be substantial, and it must be put “back in service” at the end of its reconstruction.²²⁹ In addition, the owner must keep the building for five years after the improvements are made or they have to pay back the tax credit.²³⁰ A number of expenses qualify for the tax credit, including architectural and engineering services, legal fees, and construction-related costs.²³¹

Over the forty-seven years that the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives have been in place, there have been more than 48,000 projects completed in all fifty states, the majority of them in economically disadvantaged areas.²³² The National Park Service reported in 2021 that it created almost three million jobs since it was established in 1976 and that it has generated \$38.1 billion in federal tax revenue from \$32.9 billion in tax credits.²³³

California Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit

The success of the federal tax incentives has prompted 39 states to implement their own tax credits for preservation and development.²³⁴ In 2019, California passed a

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 9,10.

²³⁰ Ibid., p.13.

²³¹ Ibid. p. 10.

²³² Jay Landers, “California’s new tax credit will boost historic preservation efforts,” *Civil Engineering Source*. September 13, 2021.

²³³ Daniel Thomas Mollenkamp, “Rehabilitation Credit (Historic Preservation). *Investopedia*, May 24, 2023.

²³⁴ Landers, “California’s new tax credit will boost historic preservation efforts,” *Civil Engineering Source*. September 13, 2021.

historic tax credit that provides up to fifty-million dollars in tax credits annually, and fully funded it through 2025. The program allocates eight million dollars for qualifying projects that cost less than one million dollars, and two million dollars are available for the rehabilitation of historic residences.²³⁵ Additionally, California offers a five percent bonus for the following projects:²³⁶

- Structures on government surplus property or land
- Structures that include affordable housing for low-income households
- Structures in a designated census tract where unemployment and poverty rates are within the top twenty-five percent in California
- Structures within a military base reuse authority
- Structures that are part of transit-oriented developments

Two of these bonus requirements could apply to Desert Hot Springs, including historic spa-tels that are now available for low-income housing, and for census tracts with high rates of unemployment and poverty. Desert Hot Springs is one of the poorest cities in California. The most recent U.S. Census figures list the poverty rate at 26.3 percent, though in 2019 it was 31.1 percent.²³⁷

Mills Act Property Tax Abatement Program

Private property owners in California may also be eligible for tax reductions under the Mills Act, a tax incentive statute that supports the rehabilitation of qualified historic property. Cities and counties can enter into ten-year contracts with property owners to reduce property taxes as long as the owners use the savings for the “rehabilitation,

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ QuickFacts, Desert Hot Springs, U.S. Census Bureau. July 1, 2022.

restoration, and maintenance” of historic resources.²³⁸ The Mills Act is administered and implemented by local governments. The California Office of Historic Preservation says the Mills Act is the “single most important economic incentive for the restoration and preservation” of historic resources, a 2022 assessment of the City of Los Angeles Mills Act Program found that in California, “administration of Mills Act programs generally requires more resources than municipalities can typically provide.”²³⁹ Additionally, in Los Angeles, the study found that commercial properties only accounted for five percent of the program.²⁴⁰

City Planning Considerations

As Phillips and Stein point out, there is not necessarily a link between historic buildings and quality of life, and residents may not be able to “access, enjoy or use historic resources.”²⁴¹ The restored spa-tels in Desert Hot Springs, which now refer to themselves as boutique hotels, are out of reach financially for most people who reside in the town. However, the city’s coffers benefit from the Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT); the more guests the hotels attract, the more taxes they generate.

The intent of preservation efforts is not to prohibit change but to manage it so cities do not lose their “unique identity.”²⁴² Local governments are confronting a variety

²³⁸ Gallegos, “An Outcome Analysis of the Mills Act in Three Exemplar Cities,” master’s thesis. P. 11-12.

²³⁹ “Mills Act Program” Office of Historic Preservation website. https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=21412; “City of Los Angeles Mill Act Program Assessment and Equity Analysis,” City of Los Angeles Department of City Planning and Office of Historic Resources. June 2022. P. 12.

²⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 5.

²⁴¹ Phillips and Stein, “An Indicator Framework for Linking Historic Preservation and Community Economic Development” in *Social Indicators Research*, p. 4. Accessed June 13, 2023. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24719399>.

²⁴² Oberg, “How Urban Conservation Can Preserve the Heritage of a City.” [Urbanplanningdegree.com](http://urbanplanningdegree.com). March 23, 2021. Accessed June 13, 2023. <https://urbanplanningdegree.com/how-urban-conservation-can-preserve-the-heritage-of-a-city/>.

of challenges and preservation may not be considered a high priority, -however, when preservation is incorporated into city planning, it can provide a road map for “directing future growth and development.”²⁴³ Desert Hot Springs has been steadily gaining population, unlike many other small cities in America. It was the fastest-growing city in the Coachella Valley in the 2020 census, with a population gain of 25.3 percent.²⁴⁴ However, with a median household income of just under \$38,000 and a poverty rate of 26.3 percent it is important that the tourism sector benefit residents.²⁴⁵

Desert Hot Springs Economic Incentives

Desert Hot Springs director of economic development, Sean Smith, says the city acknowledges the balance it must strike between both constituencies:

It's a fine line between what's going to attract people to come visit and what the residents want and what they need. So, what's good for tourism is not always good for residents, but the converse is true. What's good for residents is almost always good for tourism. If we focus on what their initial needs are, and I think we will get to the point where we'll have to go, Okay, let's timeout, let's really think about the next wave of development and what it looks like because now, we don't want to be overwhelmed by it.²⁴⁶

The relationship between the city and the hotels is one that city leaders recognize as crucial to Desert Hot Springs' identity and survival.²⁴⁷ -In 2021, the city

²⁴³ “An Indicator Framework for Linking Historic Preservation and Community Economic Development” in *Social Indicators Research*, p. 1.

²⁴⁴ “Census 2020: Coachella Valley is growing and diversifying – but not as fast as the rest of the country,” *Desert Sun*, August 15, 2021. Accessed June 14, 2023. <https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/2021/08/15/census-2020-coachella-valley-growing-slowly-and-diversifying/8118911002/>.

²⁴⁵ US Census Bureau. Accessed June 15, 2023. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/deserthotspringscitycalifornia>.

²⁴⁶ Author interview with Sean Smith, January 31, 2023.

²⁴⁷ Based on conversations with Desert Hot Springs City Manager, City Council member and Economic Development Director, and the Desert Hot Springs General Plan, May 26, 2020. <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://storage.googleapis.com/proudcity/deserthotspringsca/uploads/2021/11/Desert-Hot-Springs-General-Plan-Adopted-07-2020-Small.pdf>.

council approved an economic incentive agreement to give owners who want to buy a non-operational hotel and restore it, a one-hundred percent waiver on its transit occupancy tax for two years. Azure Palms Hot Springs Resort and Day Spa Oasis (Azure) on Hacienda Boulevard took advantage of the program. Azure had been an abandoned hotel property when Maria Lease bought it just before the COVID pandemic shut down travel. She moved forward with renovations and was allowed to keep Azure's revenues that otherwise would have gone toward paying the transient occupancy tax for two years to subsidize the extensive renovation and allow Lease to build an extra day spa facility. According to city councilman Gary Gardner, the property wasn't producing any TOT before Lease bought it, so the city was banking on the hope that the agreement would ultimately increase future transit occupancy taxes, property taxes, and sales revenues, and lead to more jobs for residents.²⁴⁸ Day spa passes are between \$56 and \$72, and overnight stays can be well upwards of \$300/night. [Figure 4.5] Azure Palms is now a rival to the more well-known Two Bunch Palms as a luxury, all-encompassing facility, each offering dining, massage, and spa treatments, gift shops, yoga, and other classes. treatments, gift shops, yoga, and other classes.

²⁴⁸ Rode, "Desert Hot Springs TOT agreement with local resort could be model for wider program." *Desert Sun*, July 7, 2021. Accessed June 15, 2023. <https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/local/desert-hot-springs/2021/07/07/desert-hot-springs-oks-tot-revenue-sharing-agreement-azure-palm/7884484002/>.



Figure 4.5.. Azure Palms Hot Springs Resort, Hacienda Boulevard. Photos by Willa Seidenberg.



Two Bunch Palms and Azure are on Miracle Hill. Two counterparts on Palm Drive, near the original Coffee's Bathhouse, are Desert Hot Springs Spa Hotel and Miracle Springs Resort and Spa, both owned by Mike Bickford. They are also large, all-encompassing properties but far more modest in their accommodations and less expensive; you can find a room for under \$100. [Figure 4.6] Those large properties bring visitors and tourist dollars to Desert Hot Springs, but they are not representative of the mom-and-pop ventures – like Miracle Manor, Hope Springs, and Sagewater – that marked the unique mid-century character of the town during the 1950s and 1960s.

The town has unofficially practiced adaptive reuse since the late 1970s, when many of the spa-tels were repurposed as apartment complexes as seen in figure 4.7.



Figure 4.6. Desert Hot Springs Spa, Palm Drive. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

However, other properties are in danger of disappearing. In March of 2023, the city



Figure 4.7. Former Smile Inn. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

demolished an entire block that included four motels: the Sahara Hotel & Spa, The White House, the Stardust, and Las Primavera. Figure. 4.8 shows some of the area as it was being demolished, and figure 4.9 shows the large empty lot that was left after

demolition. The city took action after a fire left a woman dead at the abandoned property. City officials say unhoused people had been squatting at the property and posed a “public safety concern. In addition, another abandoned property on Club Circle Drive (seen on page 31) was also demolished.



Figure 4.8. Sahara and other spa-tels being demolished March 28, 2023. Photo from *The Desert Sun*.



Figure 4.9. Site of former Sahara, White House, Primavera, and Star Dust motels. June 21, 2023.
Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

CHAPTER 5: Recommendations

The community of Desert Hot Springs has grown and changed in the decades since it was incorporated in 1963. It has now been a city long enough to have historic properties that need to be factored into its planning efforts. This chapter will look at six recommendations for the preservation of the spa-tels in Desert Hot Springs:

1. Conduct a historic resource survey.
2. Apply for a National Register designation using the Multiple Property Submission form.
3. Enact a historic preservation ordinance.
4. Become a Certified Local Government.
5. Enact a Business Legacy program.
6. Take advantage of Heritage Tourism.

Historic Resources Survey

A historic resources survey is a critical effort for the city to undertake as it plans for the management and protection of its historic resources. Also, because it will identify eligible historic resources, it is an important first step in the process of nominating properties to federal and state registers. Surveys documenting the archaeological, architectural, and historical significance and their condition “enable planning decisions to be made against a preservation background.”²⁴⁹ In addition, they give town leaders concrete information to provide a rationale and structure for important land-use and preservation decisions.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p.24.

Surveys systematically document historic properties in a defined geographic area, such as a city or neighborhood, or a thematic one, such as sites along the Underground Railroad. The National Register lists three considerations that should be kept in mind while conducting a local survey:

1. Stages and patterns of area settlement and development, important events, and significant persons.
2. Aesthetic and artistic values embodied in architecture, art, craftsmanship, construction technology, or the style and work of a master.
3. Research values or problems related to the area's prehistory and history, social and physical sciences and humanities, and local cultural interests.²⁵⁰

A survey would fully document significant historic contexts and themes, properties that relate to those themes, and whether those properties meet eligibility criteria and retain sufficient integrity to convey significance. Surveys often include a community outreach component, which can be an important engagement tool for residents, or even high school classes, to learn about the town's history, and become involved in the civic life of their community. The town of Alexandria, Virginia was able to get funding through the Certified Local Government program (see below) for a Digital Collection app for its architectural survey of four-thousand buildings.²⁵¹ One benefit of surveys is they can provide an endangered properties list to guide the city's work in preventing the demolition of cherished properties and be useful after a disaster to direct funds and effort to important damaged properties.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁵¹ City of Alexandria, Virginia website. Accessed June 13, 2023. <https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic-preservation/digital-architectural-survey-of-the-old-and-historic-alexandria-district>.

The work of the Desert Hot Springs Historical Society and the spreadsheet of historic motel/spas in the appendix of this thesis could provide an initial roadmap for such a survey.

National Register Designation

Designation on the National Register of Historic Places provides tangible and intangible benefits, including access to funding, government tax relief, and other economic incentives, as well as technical expertise, greater visibility, and new opportunities for promoting the town to outsiders. As noted in Chapter 4, the Multiple Property Submission would allow properties within the city to be included in the designation. The submission could be organized as following:

Name: Desert Hot Springs Historic Spa-Tels

Associated Historic Contexts: Development of mid-twentieth century motel spas, historical uses of natural hot mineral water, development of post-World War II motel and health and wellness leisure travel, development of Southern California desert areas, Jewish immigration and leisure in post-war Coachella Valley.

Associated Property Types: Vernacular small motel construction, relationship to hot water aquifers.

Geographical Data: City of Desert Hot Springs, Riverside County.

If a National Register designation is obtained, the spa-tels would automatically result in a listing on the California Register, thereby making more tax credits available to owners.

Historic Preservation Ordinance

Enacting a historic preservation ordinance is the best way to protect the town's character and give it the ability to integrate preservation into its long-range economic planning. The loss of five spa-tels demolished in March 2023 is a devastating erosion of properties that are important to the fabric of Desert Hot Springs. There is no time to waste in saving the remaining resources. The city council is already grappling with how to protect its signature spa-tels while promoting growth and development. The advantage of an ordinance would be to systematically consider how these two paths intersect and diverge and allow city planners to chart a long-range plan to pursue both tracks. This is especially important in the Miracle Hill section of town where the iconic spa-tels still retain their allure.

City Councilman Gary Gardner says the city values its history.²⁵² He doesn't think the council would oppose the concept of an ordinance, but he points out that it depends how an ordinance is written and framed as to whether it would be approved. The city has a core group of actively engaged residents who are part of the Desert Springs Historical Society, and some are also part of the broader Coachella Valley Preservation Society. These groups could be instrumental in crafting a local ordinance.

Certified Local Government

The Certified Local Government (CLG) program was established as part of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. It facilitates cooperation between State and local governments and federal partners, such as the National Park Service, to promote

²⁵² Email to Willa Seidenberg from Gary Gardner, July 29, 2023.

preservation initiatives.²⁵³ Certification provides legal protection, funding from the Historic Preservation Fund (HPF) for technical help, and other benefits to local communities working to preserve their historic resources. Cities must first create an ordinance and a historic preservation commission.

There are sixty-six CLGs in the state of California, including Palm Springs. -No city is too small to be a CLG, and it can provide sources of funding to help with activities such as funding a survey, creating design guidelines, conducting feasibility studies, or establishing preservation plans. National Park Service CLG Coordinator Megan Brown says cities can be innovative in what they ask for. Some cities have created heritage tourism plans or produced walking tour maps and brochures.²⁵⁴ As a CLG, cities have more access to technical help from state and federal historic preservation offices.

Legacy Business Program

Legacy Business Programs are a relatively new tool that is used to help support and sustain beloved independent businesses which are increasingly facing pressures from high rents, development, and competition from chain stores. These programs are “designed to preserve longtime businesses that contribute to a neighborhood’s history, identity, and character.”²⁵⁵ The first legacy business program in the United States was established in San Francisco in 2015 with the passage of Proposition J by voters. The City of Los Angeles is currently implementing a new program. Legacy business

²⁵³ National Park Service website. Accessed June 12, 2023. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/clg/index.htm>.

²⁵⁴ California Preservation Foundation Webinar. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21LYU1xz-3s>.

²⁵⁵ “Legacy Business Programs,” Small Business Anti-Displacement Network website. Accessed July 8, 2023. <https://antidisplacement.org/tool/legacy-business-programs/#:~:text=Legacy%20business%20programs%20are%20designed,%2C%20or%20community%2Dbased%20organizations>.

programs vary, but common to most of them are financial grants, technical assistance, and marketing and promotional guidance.

Each program sets its own criteria; the minimum age of qualifying businesses varies from ten years (Seattle, Washington) to fifty years (San Francisco, California). Usually, they are small operations of less than ten all the way up to one-hundred employees. The central idea is that the business makes some kind of contribution to the historic fabric of the city or neighborhood, that the business is a longstanding service, and that it risks displacement or closure. Some programs require that the business be owned by the same family or have operated under the same name for its period of eligibility.

Existing historic preservation ordinances haven't always provided the help that small businesses need. As part of her thesis research, USC student Xiaoling Fang found that the legacy businesses in immigrant neighborhoods in Los Angeles that she studied needed economic development tools, including marketing assistance and help with business operations provided by a legacy business program.²⁵⁶ Owners told her they had explored historic preservation tools, but they had problems documenting the historic aspects of their businesses.²⁵⁷ Legacy business program could be established in conjunction with a historic ordinance and landmarking efforts.

Beck's Motor Lodge in the Castro section of San Francisco was awarded legacy business status in 2017. It is a family-owned motel that has operated since 1958, and it

²⁵⁶ Xiaoling Fang, "Legacy Businesses in Immigrant Neighborhoods," interview by Willa Seidenberg, *SaveAs: NextGen Heritage Conservation* podcast, March 9, 2023. Audio, 24:41, <https://sites.usc.edu/saveas/2023/03/08/season-3-episode-9/>

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

is now woman-owned.²⁵⁸ It is unlikely that there are any family-owned historic spa-tels in Desert Hot Springs. In the 1950s and 1960s, they were mom-and-pop operations, run by owners who lived on the property or in the town. The properties were often sold and resold as owners aged or burned out. Today's owners are often investors from out of town who form LLCs. However, the businesses still exist and could be protected under a Legacy Business program that doesn't restrict ownership to the same family. The spa-tels on Miracle Hill that are still operating as hotels include:

- Hope Springs
- Kismet Lodge (now operating as a recovery center)
- Lido Palms
- Miracle Manor,
- Nuturing Nest
- Onsen
- O Spa
- Sagewater Resort,
- Sandpiper Inn
- The Spring Resort
- Tuscan Springs Hotel

Many of the properties need significant diligence to maintain the units and the mineral water pools. Scott Harner was part of a partnership that bought, and recently sold, Sagewater Resort on Club Circle Drive on Miracle Hill. He had to delay our first conversation to take care of a problem in the motel's pool. Maintenance to keep the swimming and mineral pools in working condition is a constant task, in addition to other maintenance needs. Additionally, Harner found that Sagewater's bookings were seasonal because the summer months are too hot to attract visitors.- Harner says he

²⁵⁸ "Beck's Motor Lodge," Legacy Business Registry Staff Report, San Francisco Office of Small Business. Hearing Date December 11, 2017.

had trouble getting any private financing, and there wasn't enough help from the city in terms of meaningful tax breaks or grants.²⁵⁹

Couples like Jeff and Judy Bowman, who formerly owned the Kismet Lodge, or Michael Rotondi and April Greiman who owned Miracle Manor, are representative of the type of owners that harken back to the glory days of the spa-tels when they tended to be mom-and-pop ventures. The Bowmans described how they put their hearts and souls into running their business, creating a relaxing sanctuary (clothing optional!) where visitors could unwind by soaking in the hot water, getting a therapeutic massage, and joining the Bowmans and other visitors for wine and cheese in the late afternoon. Jeff Bowman says that during the sixteen years they owned Kismet/Living Waters, they had loyal customers -- a seventy percent repeat rate:

We created what we wanted to have for ourselves... Because of the location with the mineral water, it provided a context for us to have something very unique. Our water was 105 degrees. We pumped it up from the earth eighteen hours a day, twenty gallons a minute. You might say, how come only eighteen hours a day, and that's because it could come in faster than it could leave. So, the water level of our pool would rise up and then it would go off for an hour. And it kept both pools pristine, clear, beautiful, amazing water.²⁶⁰

That doesn't mean investors aren't committed to preserving the character and historic representation of the spa-tels. The group of investors who owned Hope Springs until 2022 wholeheartedly embraced the values and associations of the Desert Hot Springs spa-tel character, though it was not a big money-making venture.²⁶¹ Economic incentive programs and historic designation might also provide an opportunity to diversify ownership of the motels. The city already

²⁵⁹ Interview with author. January 24, 2023.

²⁶⁰ Interview with author. Edited for clarity.

²⁶¹ Based on conversation with former Hope Springs owner Christopher Tandon, August 6, 2023.

has a large Latino population and a growing percentage of Black residents.

Opening investment opportunities and job creation to these populations would benefit everyone in the town.

Heritage Tourism

Heritage is considered “one of the most significant and fastest growing components of tourism” overall.²⁶² The National Trust for Historic Preservation defines heritage tourism as “traveling to experience the places, artifacts, and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present” and it asserts that a “high percentage of domestic and international travelers participate in cultural and/or heritage activities while traveling, and those that do stay longer, spend more, and travel more often,” creating jobs and improving the quality of life for local residents.²⁶³ It is also found to play a “positive role in shaping community identities.”²⁶⁴

Desert Hot Springs is perfectly poised to take advantage of the interest in heritage tourism across all age groups. The so-called Baby Boomer generation, those born between 1946 and 1964, are a natural target audience. It is estimated that by 2050, sixteen percent of the world’s population will be age 65 and older.²⁶⁵ Studies show that this age group, particularly those living in Western countries, have discretionary money and time, and, unlike previous generations, are more inclined to

²⁶² Ariana Çela, Sam Lankford & Jill Knowles-Lankford (2009) “Visitor spending and economic impacts of heritage tourism: a case study of the Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Area,” *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 4:3, 245-256, DOI: [10.1080/17438730802139269](https://doi.org/10.1080/17438730802139269).

²⁶³ “Heritage Tourism.” *Advisory Council on Historic Preservation* website. Accessed June 25, 2023. https://www.achp.gov/heritage_tourism.

²⁶⁴ Ariana Çela, Sam Lankford & Jill Knowles-Lankford (2009) Visitor spending and economic impacts of heritage tourism: a case study of the Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Area, *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 4:3, 245-256, DOI: [10.1080/17438730802139269](https://doi.org/10.1080/17438730802139269).

²⁶⁵ “Tourism preferences of seniors and their impact on healthy ageing,” *Anatolia*. P. 553.

participate in overseas travel.²⁶⁶ In fact, Desert Hot Springs already attracts a number of foreign visitors, but being on the heritage radar could bring in more. Boomers are also interested in non-traditional forms of treatments to keep them healthy, and senior travelers are looking for educational, light adventure, heritage, and wellness tourism.²⁶⁷

Desert Hot Springs offers opportunities for older travelers to engage in all types of tourism. It could attract twenty-first century snowbirds by promoting short-term residency during the winter months when travelers would have access to nearby hiking in Joshua Tree National Park and other natural protected areas, in addition to cultural, artistic, and educational opportunities throughout the Coachella Valley, all while being able to soak their weary joints in hot mineral water at the end of the day.

Millennials are another generation of opportunity for Desert Hot Springs. A 2017 study of the Millennial Generation by the National Trust for Historic Preservation found that 97 percent of that generation “appreciate the value of historic preservation,” and 54 percent say historic preservation can “save the places that define us as Americans.”²⁶⁸

Millennials, who constitute those born between 1981 and 1996, are a group that value health and wellness, and work-life balance.²⁶⁹ Additionally, Millennials take more advantage of leisure time than previous generations at their age.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 554.

²⁶⁷ “Baby Boomers and their growing interest in spa and wellness tourism,” *International Journal of Spa and Wellness*. P. 238; “Tourism preferences of seniors and their impact on healthy ageing,” *Anatolia*. P. 554.

²⁶⁸ “Millennials and Historic Preservation: A Deep Dive Into Attitudes and Values,” Online survey for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The survey sample was 636 U.S.-based respondents and study authors say the sample was balanced to be representative of gender, age, and race.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ “Leisure, and Family: From the Silent Generation to Millennials.” George-Levi Gayle, Mariana Odio-Zuniga, and Prasanthi Ramakrishnan. *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review*, Fourth Quarter 2021, 103(4), pp. 385-424. Accessed June 5, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.20955/r.103.385-424>.

City leaders and motel owners have told me that their visitors represent all age ranges and geographic areas, including foreign tourists. Heritage tourists have a better chance of discovering the town's benefits if it was associated with heritage and preservation efforts. Desert Hot Springs has a colorful story to tell as a town – from its Indigenous roots to the founding leaders and business owners, as a haven for snowbirds escaping the harsh winters back east, and as a refuge for quirky, talented, and publicity-averse visitors and residents.

Finally, the annual Palm Springs Modernism Week is an ongoing opportunity to increase familiarity with the spa-tels in Desert Hot Springs. The eleven-day festival held in February attracts more than 100,000 thousand people and features some 350 events, including walking, biking and bus tours of iconic modernism architecture, educational talks, parties, and displays of products.²⁷¹ As mentioned earlier, the Lautner Compound is a popular stop on the tour circuit, and some attendees stay in Desert Hot Springs spa-tels while participating in Modernism Week.²⁷² Desert Hot Springs could capitalize more on this economically successful event, perhaps adding Hope Springs on the tour. The Desert Hot Springs Historical Society could host a gathering at its historic rock house as a way to inform attendees of the existence and importance of the spa-tels. The city could promote its motels as lodging for guests attending the festival and provide shuttles from Desert Hot Springs to Palm Springs.

Using heritage tourism to attract visitors would necessitate that the city deploys new tools to give visitors easy access to information. The city could produce a physical

²⁷¹ "About Us," *Modernism Week*. Accessed August 7, 2023. <https://modernismweek.com/pages/about-us>.

²⁷² While the author was staying in Hope Springs during Modernism Week 2022, she met several guests from elsewhere in the country who were attending Modernism Week.

map marking the location of the spa-tels in the early 1960s and which ones are still operating as resorts, plus other significant points of interest, such as Cabot's and the Rock House. Digital, interactive maps could also appeal to younger visitors. Cannabis-related sites could also be added to such a map. For the boutique spas still operating, owners could be encouraged to have a short history of their propriety and any interesting stories and quotes that go along with their spa. Studies show that our brains are wired for stories, and Desert Hot Springs can take advantage of its colorful past to engage visitors.²⁷³

QR codes are a good way to reach visitors. QR codes are designed to be scanned using the camera on a smartphone, which can then open a webpage that could lead to short descriptions of notable places or stories of the town and its properties. QR codes could even be printed on restaurant menus in town, and on stickers placed on telephone poles or in store windows.

²⁷³ Paul J. Zak, "Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling." *Harvard Business Review*, October 28, 2014. <https://hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling>.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

Desert Hot Springs is like many small cities in America, yet also distinctive in how the hot mineral water and the subsequent spa-tels overcame a hot, windy, and punishing landscape and spawned a spirited town that conveyed the optimism of the post-World War II era in America. The spa-tels are key to that distinctive identity and without them, Desert Hot Springs could become a run-of-the-mill desert town with some big resort hotels.

Desert Hot Springs' civic leaders recognize that the beneficial mineral water and its ubiquitous spa-tels are key to the town's economic growth and the city's rhetoric and planning documents reflect that commitment. However, the city has also approved plans for a mixed-use project to be built near Interstate 10 that would include a big hotel, retail shops and a one-million-square-foot warehouse and distribution center owned by Amazon.²⁷⁴ The city has isolated its industrial cannabis operations to acres of open land on the periphery of the town. These moves will bring in more revenue that will benefit the city, but as housing pressures mount with the increase in population, there is a real danger that the city could get swept up in development fervor and lose its historic character. Additionally, it is no guarantee that businesses like Amazon or cannabis manufacturing will always be viable businesses in Desert Hot Springs. But, as long as the water is there, people will come.

²⁷⁴ Ani Gasparyan, "Desert Hot Springs Oks plan for hotels and warehouse off Interstate 10." *Desert Sun*, December 9, 2022. Accessed June 19, 2023. <https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/local/desert-hot-springs/2022/12/09/desert-hot-springs-oks-hotels-warehouse-logistics-off-interstate-10/69703565007/>.

By adopting a preservation mindset, the city of Desert Hot Springs would have a better chance of balancing the needed development with smart growth principles that protect the small desert town ambiance and ensure that the needs of tourists and residents alike are met.

Future Research

This thesis is a first step in identifying programs that could help Desert Hot Springs, and small towns that have a paucity of notable architecture but a rich history, in managing growth in a sustainable way to protect its historic resources. But much more study, including a full-blown historic resource survey, is needed. It also needs to explore new avenues for promotion. If Desert Hot Springs passed a preservation ordinance and became a Certified Local Government, it could apply for funding to create signage and interpretive panels that mark the cultural history of the town. The Hotelier's Association has erected signs on Miracle Hill proclaiming it a "Spa Zone" as seen in figure 6.1 and



Figure 6.1. Spa Zone sign on Miracle Hill. Photo by William Short.

the Cabot Pueblo Museum promotes Cabot Yerxa and his role as the father of the town. Yet there are no markers to indicate where the original Coffee's Bathhouse stood and L.W. Coffee's role in establishing the town as a place of health and wellness. Nor is there an indication of where the Jewish Temple or other demolished properties were located. Markers, such as the one in figure 6.2, or interpretive panels could be placed around town to educate visitors about key locations and how they relate to the area's history.



Figure 6.2. Historic marker in the Sugar Hill neighborhood of Los Angeles. Photo by Willa Seidenberg.

Additionally, there is a wealth of visual documentation about Desert Hot Springs' early years in the form of old postcards, many of which are readily available on the internet, and have been collected by the Desert Hot Springs Historical Society. Using the postcards to create signs, interpretive panels, billboards, or even digital signs could

entice visitors and potential motel owners alike. Another rich avenue would be the collection of oral histories of residents, visitors, and owners. The people who visited the town in its formative days are aging and many have already passed away. Collecting those stories and others from the intervening years would be a valuable contribution to documenting the spirit of the town.

Additionally, little is known about Coachella Valley architect John F. Outcault and scholarship is needed on his work. [Figure 6.3]. He was born in Chicago in 1927, and



Figure 6.3. John F. Outcault and family, circa 1960. Courtesy M.J. Outcault.

his grandfather was the well-known cartoonist R.F. Outcault. John and his family moved to Palm Springs in 1936 to start a hotel business, and after a stint in the Navy, he attended the University of Southern California's School of Architecture from 1946 to

1952. He was an apprentice in the office of John Porter Clark and Albert Frey, two prolific Palm Springs architects, and in 1956, he opened his own architecture firm in Palm Desert where he was active in the development of the town. Outcault left his mark on the Coachella Valley with original designs, as well as additions and remodels. He worked on some six-hundred commercial, public, and residential buildings, including the Palm Desert Library, structures at the Living Desert Museum, and the College of the Desert, Copper Mountain Center. He designed about a dozen projects in Desert Hot Springs, including Ma-Ha-Yah Lodge, La Bella Sari Resort, the Biehgler Apartments, and First Trust Bank. He died in 1998 and aside from his architectural drawings which are housed at the University of California, Santa Barbara, there is practically no information about his work and influence on the built environment of the Coachella Valley.

This thesis is an attempt to start a conversation in the Desert Hot Springs community about using available mechanism to protect the character of the mid-century spa-tels, especially the eleven intact properties on Miracle Hill which still operate as motels (except Kismet which is a recovery facility). If city council members are not inclined to pass a local ordinance, residents should pursue other historic preservation tools, such as listing on the National and/or California Register. At minimum, efforts should be made to conduct a historic resources survey. The spa-tel owners need help to keep their properties producing revenue and providing key tax revenue to the city that will ultimately help its low-income residents and preserve the unique character of the city by allowing it to make sustainable decisions about its development and growth in the years to come.

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Appendix

















Below is a listing of properties that I was able to identify using a variety of methods:

1. Spreadsheet developed by Judy and Jeff Bowman of the Desert Hot Springs Historical Society.
2. Material in the archives of the Desert Hot Springs Historical Society.
3. My own observations, viewing microfilm of *The Desert Sentinel*, property permits, and online research, including real estate websites, many of which listed the year built.













































Many of the photographs are original taken by Willa Seidenberg and William Short. Some were taken from real estate websites, and many of the old photographs are taken from the archives of the Desert Hot Springs Historical Society.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	Extant motel	Column1	Column2					
2	Extant property/non-motel use							
3	Property demolished							
4	Unknown							
5	Extant property/vacant							
6	NAME	Current	Former	Current Use	No.	St.	Other names	Year built
7	Acoma-Spa Therapools			Multi-family	66313	Acoma Ave.	Acoma Health Spa	19
8	Albertina's Alcove			Multi-family	66272	Acoma Ave.		19
9	Ali Baba Motel			Multi-family	66620	5th St.		19
10	Aqua Soleil Hotel & Mineral Water Spa			Motel Spa	14500	Palm Dr.	Royal Fox Inn	19
11	Atlas-Hi Lodge			Multi-family	13336	Avenida Hermosa		Before 1963
12	Azure Palm Hot Springs Resort & Day Spa Oasis			Motel Spa	67589	Hacienda Ave.	CJ Grand Hotel; Sunset Inn	19
14	Be-Be Manor			Multi-family	66445	2nd St.	Greenbriar Inn; Greenbriar Apartments	1965
15	Bella Monte Recovery Center			Rehab	68111	Calle Las Tiendas	Bertram's Ma-Ha-Yah Lodge	1960
16	Big Wagon Guest Ranch			Demolished	65998	Dillon Rd.		
17	Biltmore Desert Hot Springs			Apt.	66456	2nd St.		1980
18	Blue Heaven Rancho			Demolished	66553	8th St.		
19	Broadview Lodge			Apt.	12672	Eliseo Rd.		before 1959
20	Burwood Lodge			Apt.	13181	Calle Amapola	Sun Villa	1965
21	Bubbling Wells Oasis-Hot Springs Ranch			Guest ranch	14250	Yerxa Rd.		






22	Calderone's		Multi-family	66618	Acoma Ave.	Kitchen Motel	1963
23	Capri Hotel		Multi-family	66229	8th St.		1965
24	Caravan Motel		Demolished	66810	8th St.	Empty lot	
25	Casa Azteca		Multi-family	68061	Calle Azteca	Pan-Pan Spa, Little Admiral Inn	1965

31	Da Nee		Demolished	13457	Palm Dr.	vacant lot	
32	Desert Holiday		Multi-family	67221	Pierson Blvd.	Flamingo	1962
33	Desert Home Apts.			66281	4th St.		
34	Desert Hot Springs Spa Hotel		Hotel	10805	Palm Dr.	50 rooms	1963 (spa only) 1970 50 guest rooms added
35	Desert Hot Springs Inn		Hotel	67840	Hacienda Ave.	Monte Carlo, Beat Hotel	1957
36	Desert Retreat		Multi-family	66126	Flora Ave.		1948
41	Dorsk House		Demolished	66705	6th St.	El Myra Lodge; demolished 2023	Before 1957
42	Dorville's Sun and Spa Lodge			66005	Club Circle Dr.	Rebuilt as multi-family housing in 1970	
43	Doty's Lodge			13243	Palm Dr.		
44	Dunes Motel		Apts	13063	Palm Dr.	Gunters Chalet	1966
45	Eagle Rest Motel		Multi-family	66442	Acoma Ave.	Eagle Apartments; may have been demolished and rebuilt	
46	El Encanto Convalescent Home		Single family	13627	Hermano Way		1958
47	El Morocco Inn & Spa Resort		Motel	66810	4th St.		1954
48	El Reposo		Apts.	66334	5th St.	in 1977; may have been demolished and rebuilt or significantly	early 50s?
49	El Siesta Apts.		Multi-family	66173	2nd St.		1953
50	Emerald Springs Resort			68055	Club Circle Dr.	Ilona's Health & Resort; may be being rebuilt	1963

51	Enar Apts.				66282 5th St.	New multi-family housing built in 1980	1962?
52	Europa Inn & Suites			Hotel	13475 Palm Dr.		1955
53	Graben Duplex and Pool			Single family	66375 Flora Ave.		1960
54				Multi-family	66435 Granada Ave.		1962
55	Grand View Court			Demolished	66386 6th St.	Empty lot	
56	Hacienda Courtyard Studios			Demolished and rebuilt	67200 Hacienda Ave.	Formerly Linda Vista Lodge	2018
57	Harmony Health Resort			Motel Spa	66729 8th St.	Blue Water Manor, Swiss Health Resort	1958
58	Hacienda Riviera			C	67375 Hacienda Ave.		1950
59	Hilltop House			Multi-family	66949 Terrace Way		1965
60	Hi There			Multi-family	13475 Cuyamaca Dr.		1965
61	Hope Springs Resort			Hotel	68075 Club Circle Dr.	1. La Bella Sari. 2. Cactus Springs Lodge	1962
62	Keers Motel			Multi-family	66197 Cahuilla Ave.		1965
63	Kismet Lodge			Recovery	13340 Mountain View Rd	Living Waters Spa	1960
64	Klocks			Multi-family	66201 Acoma Ave.	Becky's	1955
65	Hyundea Resort & Spa			Hotel	11000 Palm Dr.	Ponce de Leon Motel, La Toscana, Hotel Shilla	1973
66	La Fiesta			Multi-family	66365 5th St.		1948
67	Las Primaveras			Demolished	66659 6th St.	Rox Motel	1953
68	Lautner Compound			Hotel	67710 San Antonio St.	Desert Hot Springs Hotel	1947
69	Lido Palms			Hotel	12801 Tamar Dr.		1965

70	Little Jay			Multi-family	9251	Vista del Valle		1967
71	Lorane Manor			Demolished	67751	Hacienda Ave.	address doesn't exist	
72	Mansergh's			Multi-family	66396	2nd St.		1940
73	Mary Ann Manor			Recovery	12890	Quinta Way	Ranch Recovery Center	Unknown
74	McLaughlin's Manor			Multi-family	11021	Sunset Ave.		1954
75	Melody Apts.			Multi-family	66386	Desert View		1958
76	Mi Kasa Hot Springs			Hotel	11076	Ocotillo Rd.	Sand and Sage Motel	1954
77	Miracle Manor Boutique Hotel & Spa			Hotel	12589	Reposo Way	Original owners: Martins	1949
78	Miracle Springs Resort & Spa			Hotel		Palm Dr.	Mirage Springs Hotel Resort	
79	Mirage Isle			Demolished and rebuilt as single	10625	Estrella Ave.		1965
80	Morrison Guest House			Single-family	66146	6th St.		1953
81	Mountain View Apts.			Multi-family	66300	5th St.		1948
82	New Hope For You			Assisted Living	13495	Palm Dr.		
83	Nurturing Nest			Hotel	11149	Sunset Ave.	Tramview Lodge	1954
84	Ocotillo Apts.			Multi-family	66610	12th St.		1965
85	Onsen Hotel & Spa			Hotel	12921	Tamar Dr.	Ambassador Arms; Amba	1960
86	Ostrin Lodge			Multi-family	66126	1st St.		1965
87	O Spa + Resort			Hotel	11740	Mesquite Ave.	Mary Karaula Apts., Hillview Motel, Golden Palm	1953
88	Pack Inn			Multi-family	66031	Acoma Ave.		1946
89	Palmer Lodge			Apts.	11171	Ocotillo St.	Stovers Desert Motel	1954
90	Pleasant View Lodge			Demolished April 2023	68165	Club Circle Dr.		1965
91	Pyramid Hotel			Multi-family	66563	5th St.	Desert Tropical Oasis	1957
92	Rainey's Motel and Spa				66830	1st St.	May be gone	
93	Ral-Dys			Multi-family	66425	Cahuilla Ave.		1950
94	Relax Hotel & Spa			Hotel	67485	Hacienda Ave	Desert Palms; Desert Rain Spa Hotel, 40 rooms	1987 (renovated 2021)
95	Sagewater Spa			Hotel	12689	Eliseo Rd.	Mona Lisa Motel; postcard says address is 12697	1957
96	Sahara			Demolished April 2023	66700	5th St.		

97	San Jacinto Motel		Office building	12561 Palm Dr.			1965
98	Sandpiper Inn		Hotel	12800 Foxdale Dr.	Korean-owned?	can't find	
99	Sand Apts. Motel		Multi-family	66455 5th St.			1965
100	Sea Mountain Inn		Hotel	66540 San Marcus Rd.	San Marcus		
101	Silver Sands Apts.		Multi-family	66366 Estrella Ave,			1946
102	Skyliner		Multi-family	12840 Inaja			1965
103	Skys Haven		Mobile Home	14777 Palm Dr.	55+		1973
104	Sky Valley		Vacation/Home	74711 Dillon Rd.	RVs, vacation rental, home sales	1970+	
105	Smile Inn Hotel		Apts	66163 3rd St.			1965
106	Star-Lite Lodge		Demolished	13105 Palm Dr.	vacant land		1956
107	Su Casa Motel Apts.		Multi-family	66351 1st St.			1946
108	Sun Dial Terrace			66649 Pierson Blvd.			
109	Sun Ray Apts.		Demolished	66232 6th St.	doesn't exist		
110	Sunset Apts.		Multi-family	66634 5th St.	(at Ocotillo)		1965
111	Sussie's Guest House		Multi-family	11316 Palm Dr.			1960
112	Tamarix		Multi-family	66185 Acoma Ave.			1957
113	The Getaway		Hotel	68110 Club Circle Dr.	Hillcrest Manor		1961
114	The Good House		Hotel	12885 Eliseo Rd.	The Mecca, Royal Palms, Hacienda Riviera		1957
115	The Spring Resort & Spa		Hotel	12699 Reposo Way	The Moors		1955
116	The Stardust		Demolished	66634 5th St.			
117	The White House		Demolished	11285 Mesquite Ave.			
118	Town House		Multi-family	66540 6th St.	Spa Town House		1965
119	Tradewinds		Multi-family	66725 12th St.	now a single family home		1965
120	Travellers Retreat B&B		Demolished	66920 1st St.			
121	Tropical Palms Court		Demolished	12962 Palm Dr.			
122	Tropics		Multi-family	68510 Hacienda Dr.			1965
123	Tumbleweed Motel		Multi-family	11330 Palm Dr.	Desert Oasis		1958
124	Tuscan Springs Hotel & Spa		Hotel	68187 Club Circle Dr.	Highlander Lodge	circa 1960	

125	Two Bunch Palms		Hotel	67425 Two Bunch Palms	The Desert Spa	Original 1940
126	Unknown			16480 Palm Dr.		1965
127	Vagabond Motel			66670 Pierson		
128	Valle Vista		Demolished	66550 Two Bunch Palms	David's Spa; being rebuilt as of summer 2023	
129	Vista Ventana Spa & Resort		Hotel	11220 Palm Dr.		1966
130	Wagon Wheel Motel			12th and Santa Cruz		
131	Waldorf Health Resort		Multi-family	11190 Mesquite Ave.		1970
132	Whispering Trees Rancho		Single family	66705 4th St.		1935
133	Willeys Motel			66358 Desert View	Furbees home; rebuilt	1972
134	Wrights Apts.		Demolished	66135 2nd St.	Multifamily built in 2005	