

HISTORIC CONTEXT

Introduction

This historic context provides an overview of the history of Rancho Mirage and a framework for determining the significance of properties in the City. A “historic context” may be defined as information about historic trends and properties organized by theme, place, and time. By understanding historic contexts, a property can be seen as a product of its time and as an illustration of aspects of heritage that may be unique, representative, or pivotal.¹ Three primary historic contexts have been identified in the history of Rancho Mirage: the Agricultural and Early Residential Period, extending from 1924 when the first subdivisions were recorded, until 1950, when the first country club organized; the Country Club Era, lasting from 1951 until Rancho Mirage incorporated as a city in 1973; and Cityhood, beginning in 1973 and continuing through the present day.

Prelude: Development of the Coachella Valley

The first residents of the Coachella Valley in the vicinity of what is now the City of Rancho Mirage were the Native Americans who became known as the Agua Caliente band of the Cahuilla Indians. Linguistically part of the Shoshonean family, the Agua Caliente developed camps and villages in several canyons, exploiting ample water supplies, natural palm groves, and the hot springs that provided the group with its name. The Agua Caliente hunted native animals, gathered plants and seeds, and cultivated melons, squash, beans, and corn.²

The name “Agua Caliente” actually dates to the Spanish period of California’s history, when an expedition led by Captain Jose Romero through the San Geronimo Pass in search of a route to the Colorado River became the first recorded foray by non-natives into the area. The party stopped at some hot springs, hence the name. It was another twenty years before the next Anglo visit to the area, which took place in 1845. Acting in the name of Pio Pico, the Mexican governor of California, Benjamin “Don Benito” Wilson led a party in search of some “renegade Indians.”³

Three years after California became a state, in 1853, the United States Congress dispatched a topographical survey party to California in search of “the most practicable and economical route from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean.”⁴ Eventually, the American survey of the region resulted in the valley being divided into a grid of one-mile square sections. To provide an incentive for the construction of a railroad, the federal government deeded every other odd-numbered section to the Southern Pacific Railroad

¹ National Park Service, Department of the Interior. *National Register Bulletin 16: Guidelines for Completing National Register of Historic Places Forms*. 1991. Page 4.

² “The Agua Caliente band of Cahuillas.” <http://www.xeri.com/Moapa/cahuilla1.htm>

³ Bogert, Frank. *Palm Springs First Hundred Years*. 1987. Page 55.

⁴ Elmer Wallace Holmes et al. *History of Riverside County California*. 1912. Page 176.

while retaining the even-numbered ones. Eventually, forty-eight sections were given back to the Agua Caliente. The railroad through the Pass was completed in 1876, connecting Los Angeles and Indio, which developed initially as a railroad town and incorporated as a city in 1930. The town of Coachella, too, owed its origins to the railroad stop that was sited there; it incorporated in 1946.⁵

Palm Springs was the closest town to what would become Rancho Mirage to begin its development in the late nineteenth century, and in some respects the trends there would profoundly influence the growth of the younger community. Early residents were attracted to Palm Springs for the perceived health benefits of a warm, dry climate and for the agricultural opportunities afforded by plentiful water and fertile soil. A town was platted in 1887, lots sold, water delivery secured through the construction of ditches, and crops such as alfalfa, grapes, corn, figs, apricots, grapefruit, oranges, and dates raised. By 1915, the Desert Inn and Sanitarium, first opened around 1909, had been converted solely into an inn, setting the pattern for the seasonal resort community that Palm Springs would become as the century passed. By the late 1920s, the area had caught on with the Hollywood crowd, and the desert became a winter playground for movie stars and moguls. Palm Springs incorporated as a city in 1938.

Early Agricultural and Residential Period: 1924-1950

Before and after the railroad was laid through the Coachella Valley, the area was connected to the outside world by stage routes, one of which ran through the Rancho Mirage area. The Bradshaw Stage, dating to the 1860s, linked California with Arizona. By 1915, the route was characterized by a graded road that became the Bradshaw Highway and later Highway 111. Hugging the base of the Santa Rosa Mountains and roughly paralleling the Whitewater River bed, the highway became the spine of the “cove communities,” of which Rancho Mirage was one.⁶

Early interest in the area, as with neighboring Palm Springs, was agricultural, with the DaVall family’s Wonder Palms Date Ranch and the William E. Everett’s Eleven Mile Ranch as two of the two earliest investments. Encouraged by the report of geologist William P. Blake, who had accompanied the 1853 survey party, which extolled the virtues of the desert soil, by the presence of a rich underground aquifer, and by the warm climate, desert farmers saw a market for their produce before crops in other regions had ripened. The area was particularly suited to the cultivation of dates, and with the federal government promoting date farming in the area by offering free date seeds, the distinctive groves began to dot the landscape. In 1912, Everett DaVall, a southern California rancher originally from Pennsylvania, saw an opportunity and purchased a half section from the railroad at \$7.50 an acre.⁷ He planted 250 free seeds and eventually developed several of his own varieties, including the popular “honey date” that remains a specialty

⁵ Laflin, Patricia B. *Coachella Valley California: A Pictorial History*. 1998. Pages-43-64.

⁶ The others are La Quinta, Indian Wells, Palm Desert, and Cathedral City.

⁷ Avery, Laura. “Oh, No, It’s Happening Again!” <http://www.smmirror.com/volume3/issue51/>

of the DaVall family growers elsewhere in the Coachella Valley to this day.⁸ Agriculture persisted in the Rancho Mirage through the 1940s, with Johnny and Ruth Warburton, who raised grapes, dates, and onions on eighty acres until their Red Roof Ranch was purchased around 1950 for the proposed Thunderbird Country Club.⁹

In 1924, Los Angeles developers R. P. Davie of Santa Monica and E. E. McIntyre purchased several hundred acres of land in the Magnesia Falls area from the railroad with the intention of subdividing it into ten-acre farms geared towards “gentlemen farmers.” To make the area accessible, Davie laid out a road connecting Magnesia Falls with the Eleven Mile Ranch and the Bradshaw Highway, lined it with palm trees, and named it the “Rio del Sol.” Many of Davie’s Santa Monica friends became the first residents of the “Rancho del Sol Estates,” later known as Clancy Lane. L. M. and Helen Clancy of Los Angeles built the first Rancho del Sol ranch in 1932. In the tradition of the earliest settlers in the Palm Springs area, the Clancy’s built an adobe home on their property and planted grapefruit, dates, and grapes.¹⁰ Water was supplied to the area by wells and delivered via pipes provided by Santa Monica plumbing shop proprietor, E. P. Nittinger, who also purchased property in the development.

Another early investor who had ambitious plans for development of Rancho Mirage as a second home community in the desert was Pasadenan Louis Blankenhorn. Blankenhorn, the developer of the Smoke Tree Ranch, a western style guest ranch and enclave of rustic vacation homes in Palm Springs, purchased property in the Magnesia Falls area in 1934 and began selling lots.¹¹ In 1937, he, along with sales director Laurence Macomber, offered “modern attractive small homes” of four to six rooms on 100 by 100 foot lots in the subdivision. Described as “Early American” in style in a February 27, 1937 advertisement in the *Pasadena Star-News*, the homes were credited to the Pasadena architecture firm of Van Pelt and Lind. The Palm Springs office of this firm was staffed by local designers John Porter Clark and Albert Frey, although Frey was mostly in New York at the time, leading to the conclusion that Clark was the actual designer of the three models on sale at the time. The advertisement and accompanying article boasted that Rancho Mirage offered “one hour more sunshine” than Palm Springs and that it possessed “the finest water system in the valley.” It was also reported six houses had already been constructed and several lots had been purchased. In a less attractive aspect of the period, the advertisement also noted that the development was “restricted,” an attitude that may have persisted in the area for at least another generation, when membership in the first two country clubs in Rancho Mirage was divided along religious lines.¹²

One of the earliest attractions of the desert was the health benefit of the warm, dry climate for sufferers from respiratory ailments. Sanitariums and other facilities were established throughout the southwest, including the Coachella Valley. Backed by

⁸ “Winning Converts to Dates.” <http://www.seasonalchef.com/dates.htm>

⁹ Windeler, Robert. *Thunderbird Country Club 50th: From Desert to Oasis*. 2002. Page 5.

¹⁰ City of Rancho Mirage. *A Look Back In Time*. 1993, reprinted 1997. Pages 4-5.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pages 6-7.

¹² “Model Home Open In Desert Area.” *Pasadena Star-News*, February 27, 1937.

entertainer Will Rogers, a Los Angeles pediatrician, Dr. Earl Tarr, planned to move his school for asthmatic children to Eleven Mile Ranch in Rancho Mirage in 1934. In the wake of Rogers' untimely death, several of his Hollywood friends raised the necessary capital.¹³

In addition to the handful of year round residents that settled in Rancho Mirage and the seasonal homeowners, visitors were drawn to the area for dude ranch vacations. Horseback riding and other equestrian pursuits were the primary outdoor sport enjoyed by desert inhabitants through the 1940s.¹⁴ Dude ranches were popular throughout the southwest in the 1920s and 1930s, offering city dwellers the chance to not only ride but also try their hand at roping and bronco busting. Guests lived in rustic cabins, taking their meals communally in lodges or on chuck wagon expeditions. Swimming was offered as an alternative to riding.¹⁵ In 1946, Eleven Mile Ranch was converted, with great success, into the White Sun Guest Ranch by New York businessman Jack Dengler.¹⁶ On December 15, 1946 Frank Bogert, with several corporate magnates as backers, opened the Thunderbird Ranch on land in Section 11 that he had purchased for \$34,000 earlier in the year. Thunderbird featured ranch style cabins and a clubhouse designed by Pasadena architect Gordon Kaufmann and arranged around a large pool.¹⁷

Rancho Mirage boasted an unusual attraction during this period.¹⁸ In 1946, Henry "Hank" Gogerty, a Los Angeles architect known for Art Deco styled buildings in Hollywood designed with former partner Jules Weyl, purchased 320 acres. He graded the land, installed an airstrip, and moved surplus Army barracks from Beaumont onto the site.¹⁹ Over the next few years, Gogerty built the Desert Air Hotel and a polo field next to the runway. Now the site of the Rancho Las Palmas Country Club, the facility was popular with Hollywood celebrities and was even used for filming the Bob Cummings television show in the 1950s.²⁰

Hollywood connections in Rancho Mirage dated back almost to the beginnings of the community. Actor Frank Morgan (1890-1949), who would achieve lasting fame for his portrayal of the wizard in the 1939 *Wizard of Oz*, built one of the original Rancho Mirage homes on Sahara Road. Actress Greta Garbo, perhaps in her quest to "be alone," is also said to have purchased a bungalow on Clancy Lane.²¹ The Warburtons at Red Roof Ranch were part of the Hollywood crowd, he as an actor at MGM, she as the widow

¹³ City of Rancho Mirage, pages 6-7.

¹⁴ Bogert, page 245.

¹⁵ Hess, Alan and Danish, Andrew. *Palm Springs Weekend: The Architecture and Design of a Midcentury Oasis*. 2001. Pages 60-63.

¹⁶ City of Rancho Mirage, pages 10-11.

¹⁷ Windeler, page 5.

¹⁸ Apparently, the concept was not unique to Rancho Mirage. A Desert Air Hotel and airstrip utilizing surplus army barracks from Fallon is located in Carson City, Nevada.

(<http://www.leg.state.nv.us/68th/minutes/ATX509.txt>)

¹⁹ Holland, David R. "Rancho Las Palmas."

<http://www.travelgolf.com/departments/resortfeatures/california/rancho-las-palmas.htm>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ City of Rancho Mirage, pages 5 and 6.

of producer-director Edward Selwyn.²² Both the White Sun Guest Ranch and Thunderbird Ranch were popular with Hollywood personalities, and in fact a feature film, *Two Guys From Texas*, was filmed at Thunderbird in 1947.²³

Although the stock market crash of 1929 and ensuing Depression had had a dampening effect on the growth of Rancho Mirage, there were enough residents in 1934 to form the Rancho Mirage Community Association. A salesman for the Blankenhorn organization, Don Cameron, successfully campaigned for a Rancho Mirage postal stop on the highway. The two tiers of boxes, shaded by a shingled overhang, and adjoining signpost listing resident box holders, became community meeting place.²⁴

Property types associated with the agricultural and early residential period may include single family homes in the Spanish, ranch, and early modern styles; ranch houses and associated date palm groves; stables, dude ranches, and early equestrian trails; early homes associated with celebrities; and surviving improvements from the first subdivisions in the Magnesia Falls and Clancy Lane areas.

Country Club Era: 1951-1973

The destiny of Rancho Mirage was changed forever when Thunderbird Ranch and the adjacent Red Roof Ranch were spotted by golf promoter Johnny Dawson as the potential site for an 18-hole golf course and country club. With a group of investors that included Texas oilman D. B. McDaniel, Colorado governor Dan Thornton, and Hollywood celebrities Bob Hope, Randolph Scott, Phil Harris, Desi Arnaz, and Ralph Kiner, the property was purchased and the Thunderbird Country Club incorporated in May 1950.²⁵ The Thunderbird Ranch closed in December of that year, with the construction of the Lawrence Hughes designed golf course having begun in July. In an innovative approach to country club development, lots along the fairways were offered for sale to club members, and entertainers Phil Harris, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, songwriter Hoagy Carmichael, and tire company executive (later ambassador to Belgium) Leonard Firestone were among the first buyers.²⁶ The club opened in 1951, becoming the first 18-hole golf course in the larger Palm Springs area, with Jimmy Hines as the golf pro. Local architect William Cody was hired to remodel the guest ranch buildings and to construct fourteen “cottages” which were available to members.²⁷

The same successful formula was followed a year later, when Tamarisk Country Club opened on the former Harry Taylor ranch, purchased from San Francisco real estate and theater magnate Joseph Blumenfeld in 1952. Incorporated in 1951 by a group of 65 investors, including Hollywood notables Jack Benny, George Burns, Danny Kaye, Sol Lesser, and the Marx Brothers, Tamarisk attracted many members from the Hillcrest

²² Windeler, page 5.

²³ Bogert, page 181.

²⁴ City of Rancho Mirage, pages 8-9.

²⁵ Windeler, pages 10-15.

²⁶ Bogert, pages 246-249.

²⁷ Windeler, pages 15-17.

Country Club in Los Angeles. It also offered home sites along the fairways as a means of financing club improvements.²⁸ The club opened in 1952, with a golf course designed by William Bell and renowned golfer Ben Hogan as the golf pro.²⁹

With these beginnings, Rancho Mirage became the leader in the development of the Coachella Valley as the “golf capital of the world.” Attracting attention initially because of their well-heeled membership from the corporate and entertainment spheres, Thunderbird and Tamarisk focused the limelight by hosting tournaments such as the Women’s Invitational, the Ryder Cup, and the first Bob Hope Classic. High profile visitors, including President Dwight D. Eisenhower, brought additional publicity. Innovations such as the invention of the golf cart at Thunderbird and the popularization of the alpaca golf cardigan by Thunderbird member Perry Como on his national television show added to the luster of the Rancho Mirage clubs.

The construction of the country clubs and the associated residences coincided with another development that had profound implications for the character of the Rancho Mirage built environment: the evolution of a “Desert Modern” style of architecture. The Desert Modern style was in many ways a domestication and refinement of the avant garde International Style of the 1920s and 1930s, and grew out of local architects’ desire to adapt modern materials, techniques, and floor plans to the unique requirements of desert living. Characteristics include large expanses of floor-to-ceiling glass sheltered by deep overhangs extending from flat roofs and flowing interior floor plans that merged imperceptibly with the outdoors. Oriented to the rear, Desert Modern houses in Rancho Mirage embrace desert, swimming pool, and golf course views and outdoor access while front elevations are often shielded for privacy, with only clerestories and obscured glass panels adjacent to the entries providing light. Desert Modern houses appear light, with roofs floating above the glass walls and clerestories, and ceilings supported by thin steel or wood posts. In addition to glass, exterior materials include stucco, wood, slumpstone, and natural rock.

Several architects contributed to the development of the Desert Modern style, but one, William F. Cody, was the most influential in Rancho Mirage. William F. Cody FAIA (1916-1978) was born in Dayton, Ohio and raised in Los Angeles. While attending architecture school at the University of Southern California in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Cody was also working for architect Cliff May, gaining experience in the adaptation of ranch and hacienda style houses to modern floor plans and construction techniques.³⁰ Suffering from asthma, and believing that the Palm Springs area offered opportunity and prominent clients, Cody moved to Palm Springs in 1942 and set up practice.³¹ One of his first projects, the Del Marcos Hotel of 1946, won an American Institute of Architects “creditable mention” award as an example of new resort hotel architecture for its “ingenious plan, which appears complicated but is actually orderly and

²⁸ Galen, Helene V. *Tamarisk Country Club: The First 50 Years*. 2002. Pages 5, 15, and 17.

²⁹ Bogert, page 249.

³⁰ Hess, page 92.

³¹ Adele Cygelman (*Palm Springs Modern*, 1999, page 102) puts the date of Cody’s move as 1944-1945.

thoughtful.”³² Author and critic Alan Hess writes, “Greater thinness and more striking elegance became the single-minded focus of his ongoing design.”³³ Despite a reputation for carousing, Cody was exceptionally focused on the details of his designs and pushing the boundaries of his materials. His well-known and innovative early buildings, along with friendships with influential members of the Thunderbird, Tamarisk, and Eldorado Country Clubs, resulted in commissions to design (or in the case of Thunderbird, remodel) the clubhouses of all three locations.³⁴ In addition, Cody designed a large number of residences in the country club areas, many along the fairways of the new resort concept of golf course living, a concept that Cody himself helped devise.

Author Adele Cygelman writes, “Joints and door frames seemingly disappeared into walls . . . He merged living rooms into terraces and gardens. Roofs jutted out twelve feet to shield the walls of glass. Pattern and texture came from tile floors, carved wood panels, and concrete-block screens with geometric motifs, all of which were meticulously designed by Cody to match each other precisely at the seams and angles where the planes met.”³⁵ Like other Coachella Valley architects, Cody designed churches, gas stations, motels, restaurants, offices, a mobile home park, shopping centers, even a carwash. “Yet a distinct character can be seen in all of them,” says Hess. “It is a restless energy that brings a liveliness to his plans, elevations and details. The radical thinness of Cody roofs or the daring reach of a cantilever are clearly the result of a wrestling match between the architect and the materials and the laws of physics; that energy and striving remains in the building.” Hess concludes, “The fact that Cody could take an established vocabulary and style and reinterpret it so vividly ranks him among the best of mid-century California designers.”³⁶

Also a Modernist who used the International Style as a starting point for his desert designs, architect Emerson Stewart Williams came to Palm Springs in 1946 to work with his father, Harry Williams, and brother, Roger Williams, in their architectural office. Harry Williams had come to Palm Springs from Dayton, Ohio in 1934 to design the Palm Springs Plaza. Stewart had studied architecture at Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania, taught for a few years at Columbia University, and then worked for designer Raymond Loewy prior to arriving in the desert. He was greatly influenced by the Scandinavian Modernists Alvar Aalto and E.G. Asplund, particularly their use of wood and other natural materials in the creation of a more humanistic Modernism.³⁷ Williams’ first Palm Springs commission was for the 1947 Frank Sinatra residence, a modern building of glass, natural stone, redwood siding, and an upswept roof that, according to author and critic Alan Hess, “set a tone for postwar glamour as Hollywood stars continued to move to Palm Springs – to large homes, often on country clubs, favoring a sleek but warm Modernism rather than cool minimalism.”³⁸

³² Cygelman, Adele. *Palm Springs Modern*. 1999. Page 102.

³³ Hess, page 92.

³⁴ The Eldorado clubhouse was designed in association with San Francisco architect Ernest Kump.

³⁵ Cygelman, page 106.

³⁶ Hess, page 94.

³⁷ Hess, page 79.

³⁸ Hess, pages 81-82.

Stewart Williams' own home in Palm Springs, featured in Adele Cygelman's 1999 *Palm Springs Modern*, was built in 1956. Says Williams, "The house is essentially a roof over the garden so the desert can flow through. It was designed to be a shelter in a very hard climate."³⁹ Williams' career was long and varied, and included custom homes, offices, banks, civic buildings, Palm Springs' upper tramway station, and many schools throughout the Coachella Valley and high desert. Of his later work, Williams is most proud of his 1968-1970 design for the Desert Museum, a concrete building lifted above the street, surrounded by a sunken sculpture garden, and sheathed in volcanic cinder. In Rancho Mirage, Williams designed four houses in the Thunderbird Country Club: the Kiner Residence (1951), Bligh Residence (1952), Christie Residence (1955), and Scott Residence (1957). The Roderick W. Kenaston Residence just outside of Thunderbird was built in 1956.

Palm Springs architects Palmer and Krisel also contributed to the modern landscape of Rancho Mirage. Both University of Southern California School of Architecture graduates, partners Dan Palmer and William Krisel designed some of the first tract homes in the Coachella Valley. Starting in 1956, Palmer and Krisel became associated with developers George and Robert Alexander. Their first tract of 39 homes was built in the Twin Palms section of Palm Springs, south of Highway 111. Says author and critic Alan Hess, "Krisel used post-and-beam construction methods as he oversaw the Palm Springs projects. Butterfly roofs, natural stone walls, patterned concrete block, clerestory windows, carports – these designs showed that Modern could be a successful commodity in the housing market."⁴⁰ Because of air-conditioning, a standard feature of each tract, "Alexander homes helped to usher in the era of year-round desert living," says Hess. Although the floor plans were essentially identical, the 1,600 square foot houses were available in a range of rooflines and facades, which gave each neighborhood a varied street appearance. Other desert projects included the residential subdivisions of Vista Las Palmas, Racquet Club Estates, Kings Point at Canyon Country Club, and Sandpiper in Palm Desert. In Rancho Mirage, for developers Maus and Holstein, Palmer and Krisel used their Twin Palms floor plan, slightly enlarged, and three roof configurations in the construction of sixteen houses on adjacent cul-de-sacs. Hess concludes, the Palmer and Krisel tracts "display the hopefulness and easy lifestyle of Modernism in the 1950s as it spread to a general audience."⁴¹

Howard Lapham, a registered designer, arrived in the Coachella Valley from Stamford, Connecticut in 1954 at age 40. Initially intending to become a builder in his new desert home, Lapham soon was designing residences for wealthy and influential members of the Thunderbird Country Club along the Club's fairways and up the slopes of what became known as Thunderbird Heights. A number of Lapham's buildings appeared in *Architectural Digest*, including the Hyatt von Dehn Residence (1960, Thunderbird Heights), the Kiewit Residence (1960, Thunderbird Country Club), the Clarke Swanson Residence (1961, Thunderbird Country Club), the Morrow Residence (1961, Silver Spur Ranch, Palm Desert), and the 1961 remodel of the Thunderbird Country Club clubhouse.

³⁹ Cygelman, page 94.

⁴⁰ Hess, page 69.

⁴¹ Hess, page 73.

He remodeled the famous Chi Chi nightclub in 1959, giving it an ultra-modern new façade. Lapham also designed Lord Fletcher's English Pub in 1966 on what became known as 'restaurant row' on Highway 111 in Rancho Mirage. One of Lapham's largest residential projects was the Mayan-themed Cook House, known as Ichpa Mayapan, built atop Thunderbird Heights in 1970. Lapham also drew the initial plans for the Eisenhower Medical Center, although Edward D. Stone obtained the commission. Lapham officially retired in the 1980s, although he continues to maintain an office in Palm Springs.⁴²

Because of their affluence, several of the Rancho Mirage property owners were able to commission architects of regional, national, and even international prominence to design their vacation homes. In many cases, the architects had designed residential, industrial, or commercial projects for their clients in their home cities. The architects included Welton Becket (McCulloch Residence, 1955), A. Quincy Jones and Frederick Emmons (Sunnylands, 1963), Richard Neutra (Maslon Residence, 1963), William Pereira (Firestone Residence, 1958), and Paul Williams (Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Residence (1954). In many cases, these commissions were rare examples of an architect's work in the desert or in a residential mode.

By sheer size alone, Sunnylands, the over 200-acre estate of Ambassador and Mrs. Walter H. Annenberg stands out. Located at the corner of Wonder Palms Road and Rio del Sol, now renamed Frank Sinatra and Bob Hope Drives, the compound includes a 32,000 square foot main house, guest quarters, a system of twelve manmade lakes, a nine-green, eighteen-tee golf course, and extensive landscaping. Architects A. Quincy Jones and Frederick Emmons designed a vast home reflecting Japanese and Mayan influences that is dominated by a monitor roof. Famed interior designers Billy Haines and Ted Graber were retained to furnish the home.⁴³ Walter Annenberg (1908-2002) came to national prominence as the publisher of newspapers and magazines, including *TV Guide*, which he founded in 1953. An avid art collector, generous philanthropist, and important player in the Republican Party, Annenberg was appointed Ambassador to the Court of St. James by President Nixon. Leonore Annenberg served President and Mrs. Reagan as White House chief of protocol. While maintaining their primary residence in Pennsylvania, the Annenbergs have hosted United States presidents and British royalty as well as other luminaries at their Rancho Mirage home.⁴⁴

In addition to constructing buildings of outstanding architectural merit, Rancho Mirage's high profile residents from the entertainment and industrial worlds contributed in many other ways to the growth of the community. Bing Crosby, one of the first members of Thunderbird Country Club, developed an upscale mobile home park that he called Blue Skies Village after the Irving Berlin song of the same name. William Cody was retained to design some of the permanent buildings of the development, and 140 palm trees were installed to provide the proper desert ambiance. Strict design controls were enforced on the golf cart-sized streets named after Crosby's celebrity friends and

⁴² Interview with Howard Lapham, October 4, 2002.

⁴³ Cygelman, pages 180-186.

⁴⁴ Walter Annenberg obituary (www.cnn.com/2002/US/Northeast/10/01/obit.annenberg.ap/)

fellow investors. Like all other matters related to the doings of the Hollywood elite, the opening of Blue Skies in 1953 and subsequent social functions that occurred there were avidly reported by the press.⁴⁵

In 1961, Bob Hope purchased 300 acres from Hank Gogerty and in 1966 donated 80 acres for the development of a medical center to serve the desert area. Named after the former president who had enjoyed vacationing in Rancho Mirage, the Eisenhower Medical Center was constructed with substantial support from the community. Dedicated in 1971, the initial building was designed by internationally renowned architect Edward Durrell Stone. Subsequent additions reflected the generous endowments of many residents and included the Probst, Kiewit, and Wright Professional Buildings, the Annenberg Center, the Betty Ford Center, the Hal B. Wallis Research Facility, the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center, and the Dolores Hope Outpatient Center, among others.⁴⁶

Several property types are associated with the Country Club Era in Rancho Mirage. Most are single family homes in the Modern and Desert Modern styles, either built in conjunction with the development of the country clubs or on properties purchased elsewhere in the community. Other property types include improvements associated with the country clubs themselves, higher density housing such as apartments, condominiums, or hotels, and a development type peculiar to Rancho Mirage: clusters of single family residences grouped around cooperatively owned landscape and recreational amenities such as swimming pools. One category of property type, improvements associated with celebrities, spans most building types and runs the gamut from the country club to the Blue Skies Village mobile home park.

Cityhood: 1973 to Present

In the late 1960s, Rancho Mirage had a year-round population of approximately 500 and a seasonal residency of a least 1,500.⁴⁷ It had experienced two decades of steady growth, with the erection of country clubs and golf courses, homes, commercial improvements along Highway 111, an elementary school, infrastructure improvements, a first class post office, and a hospital under construction. When the neighboring communities of Cathedral City and Palm Desert began to show interest in expanding their spheres of influence to encompass the new medical center, a movement to incorporate Rancho Mirage as a city was initiated. An election was held in which 85 percent of the voters favored incorporation, and on August 3, 1973, Rancho Mirage became the sixteenth city in Riverside County.⁴⁸

The mid-1970s witnessed a building boom, with 5,000 dwelling units reported in progress in 1974.⁴⁹ Several municipal improvements were undertaken, including the

⁴⁵ Hess, pages 146-157.

⁴⁶ City of Rancho Mirage, pages 19-20.

⁴⁷ City of Rancho Mirage, page 19.

⁴⁸ City of Rancho Mirage, page 21.

⁴⁹ "History." <http://www.ci.rancho-mirage.ca.us/residents/history.html>

construction of Fire Station #1 on Highway 111 in 1976, the opening of Whitewater Park in 1981, and the creation of the Bighorn Sheep Preserve in the hills. The development of country clubs, initiated with Thunderbird and Tamarisk, continued unabated, with the groundbreaking for the Sunrise and Rancho Las Palmas clubs. Commercial growth accelerated along Highway 111, with the construction of the distinctive Organic Modern styled Chart House, designed by Kendrick Kellogg, in 1978 as a the most notable architectural milestone. By 1979, the population of Rancho Mirage had reached 7,379.⁵⁰

Cementing a tradition that had seen every U.S. president beginning with Harry Truman visiting the desert, President and Mrs. Gerald Ford decided to retire to Rancho Mirage where they had enjoyed Easter vacations for several years. Leonard Firestone offered them a property adjoining his at Thunderbird, and in 1978 the Fords moved into their newly constructed home. Since their arrival, the Fords have continued the tradition of contributing to the community, with the well-known Betty Ford Center for alcohol and drug dependency, established in 1982, very much in the public eye.⁵¹

Property types associated with the Cityhood period of Rancho Mirage may include municipal improvements as well as private residential and commercial improvements. Because resources constructed during this period are substantially less than forty-five to fifty years old, the usually accepted threshold for historic resources, and are not examples of the mid-century modern style that characterized Rancho Mirage during the Country Club era, evaluation of their historic significance in most cases will await further passage of time.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Windeler, page 107.