

Pools in paradise



While public baths have figured prominently since ancient times in civilization—providing both cleanliness and socializing—the widespread presence of private swimming pools for leisure and entertainment in one's own backyard is truly a 20th-century phenomenon. And nowhere is it more evident than here in the desert where the swimming pool is the very definition of leisurely resort living.

One of the first in-ground, concrete pools in the United States was the Deep Eddy pool in Austin, Texas. It was a Works Progress Administration project that started with a bathhouse, much later than our own Agua Caliente bathhouse, built at the site to service a pre-existing swimming hole. It later evolved into a resort, now on the National Register of Historic Places. Also listed is the first above-ground pool in the U.S. built in 1907 at the Philadelphia Racquet Club by then-famed Brooklyn Bridge-contractor Roebling Construction Company.

The Agua Caliente bathhouse dates to the 1880s, and had multiple incarnations notably in 1910, 1930 and finally in the William Cody-Donald Wexler version that dates to the 1960s. Throughout the eight decades, visitors came to plunge into the waters for the health benefits to be enjoyed by soaking.

After World War II, swimming pools flourished in the warmer parts of America, made even more popular by their appearance in movies. Buying a house and building a pool was a sure mark of success and living the American Dream. In the Coachella Valley, the backyard pool completed the picture of relaxation sought in the warmth of the desert.

In 1943, two-piece swimming suits were introduced; wartime shortages prompted a reduction in the amount of fabric allowed. This further popularized swimming. Swimming champions were regular visitors on the desert scene. Silver screen water nymph Esther Williams came here to promote pool construction through her own company, and American competitive swimmer and "Tarzan" star Johnny Weissmuller was a regular.

El Mirador Hotel boasted an underwater viewing window in its commodious pool, promoting the novelty of swimming and diving, as well as the underwater photography the window made possible.

In the 1940s and 50s, the desert boasted one of the highest per capita number of swimming pools in the world.



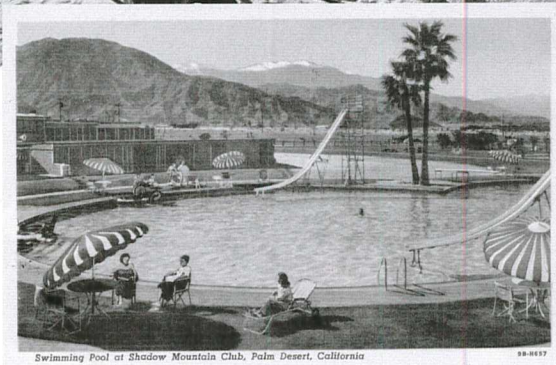
TOP: Mr. and Mrs. Johnny Weissmuller enjoy the pool at The Four-Hundred, one of the midcentury hotels along Arenas in Palm Springs.

LEFT: Bob Howard, proprietor of Howard Manor and whose father, Charles, owned the racing wonder Seabiscuit, keeps track of how many pools exist in the Palm Springs area.



TOP: Still in use today, the expansive pool of the Shadow Mountain Club is under construction.

INSET, LEFT, a postcard of the club's pool, after completion. INSET, RIGHT: An early image of the El Mirador pool reflects the building before the encircling cabanas were built.



Swimming Pool at Shadow Mountain Club, Palm Desert, California



A commemorative stamp was issued in the mid 1960s to mark the occasion of surpassing 3,000 pools in Palm Springs alone.

Of notable exception was Smoke Tree Ranch, where private backyard pools were against the development rules. Neighbors were supposed to congregate at the large community ranch pool, thereby promoting congeniality among residents. The prohibition against individual pools was broken in 1946, however, by noted midcentury builder and developer Paul Trousdale, when he installed a backyard swimming pool for himself during the quiet, deserted summer months. The ensuing debate resulted in the lifting of the rule, when neighbors decided actually requiring him to remove the pool was excessive. Even at traditional Smoke Tree, one's own backyard pool was now allowed.

The City of Palm Springs passed a bond measure in the late 1960s to build a municipal aquatic center. And the city's high school had its own pool for years.

Large and small, public and private, pools became a prominent part of the desert landscape, and moved down the valley with the wave of incoming residents. Lounging poolside took its rightful place next to horseback riding, playing tennis and golf, as a cherished desert pastime.

—TRACY CONRAD

» DETAILS

Tracy Conrad is a board member of the Palm Springs Historical Society, and also of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. She has served on the Historic Site Preservation Board and the Planning Commission for the City of Palm Springs.



ABOVE: An aquacade for fun and exercise at Howard Manor long before anyone heard of synchronized swimming.

RIGHT: Palm Springs' 3000th swimming pool commemorative stamp.

