

## YESTERDAY

# PAST PERFECT



With Lana Turner-like glamour, a model shows a satin embroidered evening gown at a Palm Springs boutique. Photo: Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio, courtesy of Tracy Conrad

Beauty, fashion and health are long-established desert concerns, intimately entwined with the many reasons to visit or live here. Not surprisingly, the desert has set styles and established beauty-enhancing and health-giving practices from its earliest days, all contributing to its reputation as "America's foremost desert resort."

### SHORT STORY

One local trend that swept the nation was the invention of culottes, or shorts, for women. Wanting to show off the exceptionally beautiful young starlets lounging poolside at the El Mirador Hotel, it is said that Tony Burke, the property's publicity man, shopped Lykken's Department Store in Palm Springs for men's cotton underwear, as there were no "shorts" to be had at any of the proper clothiers. He then posed the young, fabulous and scantily clad Hollywood set in that same underwear for newsreels, turning the girls slightly askew from the camera to hide the functional buttons at the front. Soon everybody was wearing the comfortable and cool fashion.

### NO NEED FOR NEW YORK

By day, with the delightful climate and poolside lifestyle, the desert could rival the shore as a relaxing place to show off one's tan and figure. Beauty pageants were a natural and soon became as ubiquitous as the fashionable swimwear worn by contestants and sun seekers alike.

But for those occasions held after the sun set behind the San Jacinto Mountains, high fashion stores that offered traditional or formal wear were in abundance in the 1930s and '40s. All the fine hotels sold ladies fashions, not just the western wear so typical of the cowboy set at the time. The Desert Inn housed an outpost of Los Angeles





Fashion shows poolside at The Racquet Club featured everything from snappy cocktail attire, like this two-piece evening ensemble that could still be worn today, to bathing suits. Photo: Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio, courtesy of Tracy Conrad



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Glamorous locals Mr. and Mrs. Harold Hicks dressed for an evening out on the town.  
Photo: Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio, courtesy of Tracy Conrad

department store J. W. Robinson Co. and even boasted a furrier. Robinson's, along with Bullock's, another successful Los Angeles department store chain, would later have their own impressive establishments on Palm Canyon to rival those around the state.

Boutiques offered the latest styles. Fashion shows were regularly scheduled events poolside at The Racquet Club and the Palm Springs Tennis Club, rendering the shopping trip to New York or Paris for the season's fashions unnecessary.

At the valley's top nightclubs, women were as gorgeously attired as if they were frequenting New York's or Los Angeles' most glamorous watering holes like 21 Club, the Stork Club or the Cocomat Grove. Gowned in satins, organza and silk, the ladies were beautifully primped and coiffed to go out on the town. Handsome couples would have their picture made at dinner by professional photographers employed at all the hot spots.

### THE SUN AND THE WATERS

From the earliest days of the 20th century, the desert's profound natural beauty provided an ideal setting for enhancing





In what is today called "upselling," a Palm Springs boutique artfully displays not only the afternoon dress, but also an array of accessories to go with it. Photo: Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio, courtesy of Tracy Conrad


physical beauty and wellness. The area's original health regimen was the taking of the waters at Agua Caliente bathhouse, where healthy radiance was the result of a dip and float. Later, spas of all sorts popped up anywhere the water bubbled in the Coachella Valley, promising beauty, health and longevity.

The cover of the August 1932 edition of *Physical Culture Magazine* rallied readers "To the Desert for Sun and Air!" The issue included articles on "How to Be Hale and Hearty at 80" and "Fashions for Beauty and Health." Not considered frivolous concerns at the time, the topics covered in the issue were illustrated by photos of George Gershwin, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jr. and Albert Einstein all enjoying and extolling our desert's timeless health and beauty benefits.


—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 for the city of Palm Springs and is currently a Palm Springs Planning Commissioner.

  
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