

YESTERDAY



Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh  
poolside at The Racquet Club.

## THE RACQUET CLUB

Born out of frustration, The Racquet Club became the hippest spot for Hollywood's elite, simply because it was a place where they could be themselves.



# THE RACQUET CLUB



1. Dinah Shore with husband George Montgomery at the club's entrance. 2. Charlie Farrell looks stumped by Clark Gable at outsized chess. 3. Jackie Cooper visits with honeymooners Lana Turner and Artie Shaw in 1940. 4. Debbie Reynolds. 5. Movie star-handsome Les Stoefin, pro at The Racquet Club.

Although they're worshipped these days like deities, in the 1920s and '30s "show people" weren't welcomed lavishly at the established hotels in Palm Springs. But then, the world was indeed a different place.

## NO RED CARPET

The Desert Inn was ambivalent, to put it kindly, about people in the movie business, although they made a major exception for child star Shirley Temple, who was the world's No. 1 box-office attraction in the mid-1930s.

The El Mirador Hotel was more tolerant, but not particularly of local film people like Ralph Bellamy and Charlie Farrell, leading men of the era who both maintained places in town. The two were avid tennis players and the story goes that they couldn't get sufficient time on the hotel's court. Unfortunately, it was one of only two courts in Palm Springs; the other belonged to the even-less-welcoming Desert Inn.

When Bellamy and Farrell got tired of constantly getting kicked off in favor of paying guests, they reacted by buying some windswept land north of town and starting their own place.

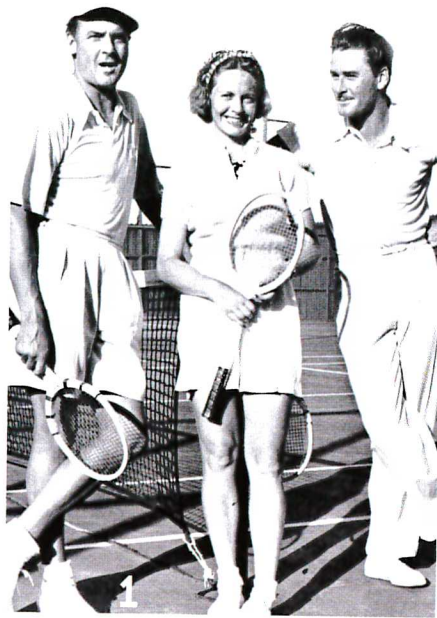
Farrell, who had first come to the desert in 1933 on a recommendation from his friend and frequent co-star Janet Gaynor, reflected years later on this impetuous action that launched the legendary getaway he ran for decades. He was famously quoted in a 1964 Los Angeles Times piece saying, "Places like The Racquet Club are not planned. They just happen."

## OUT IN THE SAND

Farrell and Bellamy's heated indignation fired them to acquire 200 acres at \$30 per acre on what is today the 2700 block of North Palm Canyon Drive. Subsequently, they paid the then-astronomical sum of \$7,000 each for



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construction of two new tennis courts amid the sagebrush-dotted dunes. But they made this move only after consulting realtor Harold Hicks, Alvah's son.

Alvah Hicks, a prolific local builder, had, according to Farrell, "great faith in Palm Springs' future. He helped put together a mutual water company, ran open ditches through the desert and bought up hundreds and hundreds of acres of 'worthless' railroad land." Farrell quipped that two hundred of those worthless acres had his name on them thanks to Harold Hicks.

## FIRST EFFORTS

Bellamy and Farrell's initial approach to attracting tennis aficionados to their new enterprise by charging a dollar a day flopped. So next, they decided to sell memberships for unlimited use of the two courts and as-

1. Charlie Farrell; tennis great, Alice Marble; and Errol Flynn. 2. Palm Springs Mayor Frank and Janice Bogert celebrating in 1939. 3. Marilyn Monroe and William Powell (right) among friends in the Bamboo Bar. 4. Doris Day and Kirk Douglas. 5. Aerial view of The Racquet Club in 1935. 6. Hy Averbach, radio announcer for The Bob Hope Show, and Hope relaxing on the club's diving board.

sociated small dressing room and bathroom. The original buy in was \$50 and they sold a few. But as they raised the price, they sold a bunch. Suddenly everybody wanted to be at The Racquet Club.

The resulting demand for overnight accommodations, a proper bar, full restaurant, pool and additional courts grew the club over the next few years and soon there were fashion shows, charity luncheons, dances, birthday parties and full-time, live-in guests.

## SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION

At one point Farrell counted some 40 or 50 players in town from the "picture business." It seemed the whole of Hollywood had been transplanted: Marlene Dietrich, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Warner Baxter, Carol Lombard, Gilbert Roland, Jack Warner, Ginger Rogers, Frank Morgan, Will Rogers, Greta Garbo and Mervyn LeRoy in the first years.

Within a decade it would include Judy Garland and Bing Crosby doing an impromptu duet in the bar, William and Mousie Powell at every party, Jimmy Stewart, Kirk Douglas, Dinah Shore, George Montgomery and Rudy Vallee on the dance floor.

The era's tennis stars congregated, as well, including legends like Jack Kramer, Don Budge and Alice Marble.

You'd find Spencer Tracy or Clark Gable playing out-sized chess with Farrell on the lawn. In the club's Bamboo Bar, an unknown starlet, Marilyn Monroe, straddled a stool, and was known to sit on a few laps in the wee hours.

Debbie Reynolds, Tab Hunter, Jane Wyman and Jack Benny were regulars poolside. And Natalie Wood and Robert Wagner were famously photographed strolling the grounds, as well. Even Desi and Lucy stopped there before building their home at Thunderbird.

The club had become a place for movie folk, built by movie folk, where they could relax and be themselves, free from their star personae. Even better, the locals ignored them and let them be. In all, it was idyllic, a far cry from the frenzy of celebrity today.

## FADE OUT

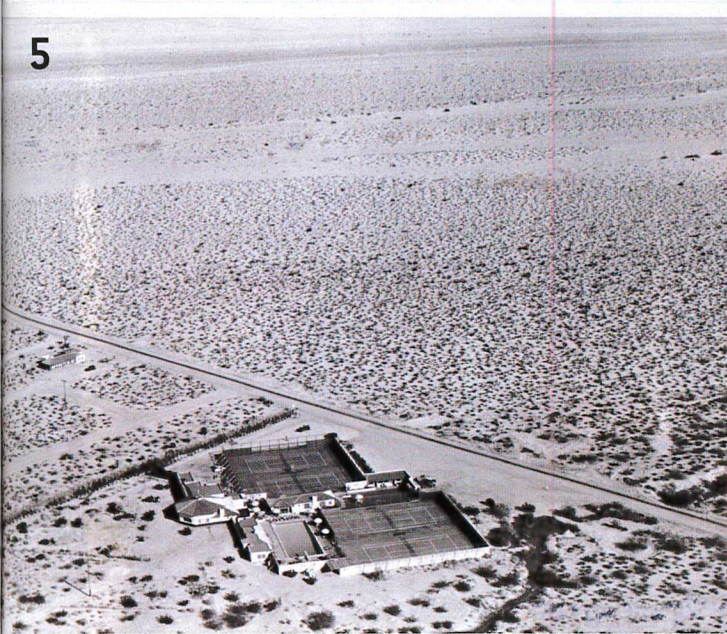
But as The Racquet Club became more and more famous and attracted wealthy outsiders, the stars became reluctant to participate. Where they had once spontaneously burst into song with their fellow performers, it was awkward with more and more strangers around, watching.

Charlie Farrell noted that some of the "big stars had taken to the hills, buying their own places in town." Presciently, he noted in the same Los Angeles Times article that, "Palm Springs has grown and grown. People who have retired want it to stay as it is, and those who are in business want it to continue the climb." That same argument persists today. Farrell, who went on to become a Palm Springs mayor, came down decidedly on the side of growth: "After all, had I been satisfied with Palm Springs being a two-tennis-court town, there would have never been a Racquet Club."

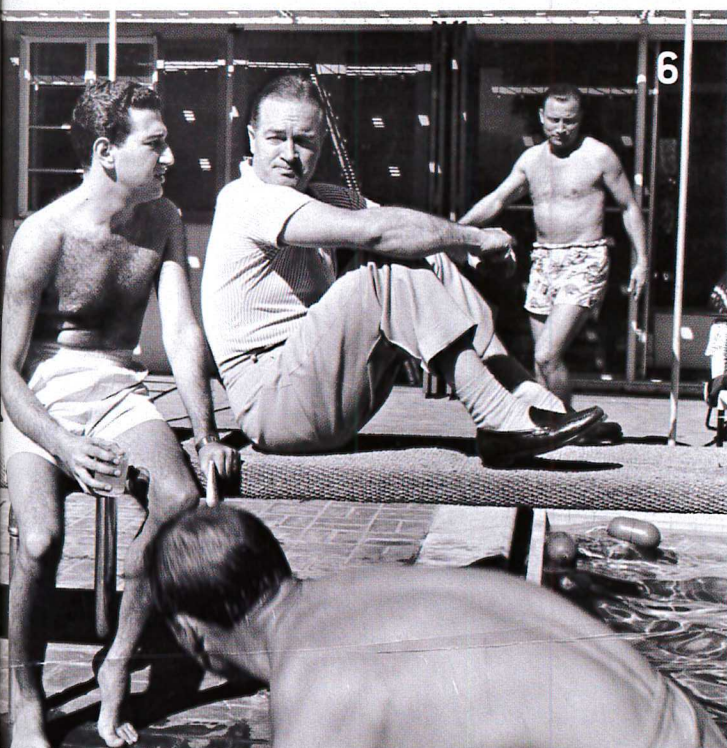
—BY TRACY CONRAD

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.





PHOTOS/1. AND 2. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY. 3. AND 4. BILL ANDERSON @PALM SPRINGS ART MUSEUM. 5. GAIL B. THOMPSON, GAYLE'S STUDIO, COURTESY OF TRACY CONRAD AND THE WILLOWS HISTORIC PALM SPRINGS INN. 6. BERNARD OF HOLLYWOOD, RIGHTS OF BILL ANDERSON @PALM SPRINGS ART MUSEUM.



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## FEATURED HOMES OF THE WEEK

### 54018 Riviera

PGA PALMER

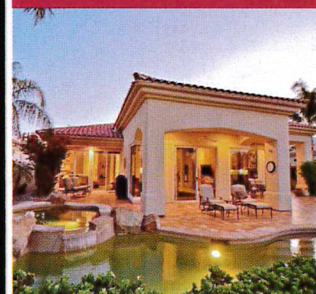


Exquisite taste is evident in this model-like newer home with stunning views of the night lit mountains. Located on the 6th hole of the Palmer Course featuring approx. 2,271 sq ft, 3 bedrooms and 3.5 baths.

Offered Furnished at  
**\$659,000**

### 55496 Southern Hills

PGA STADIUM

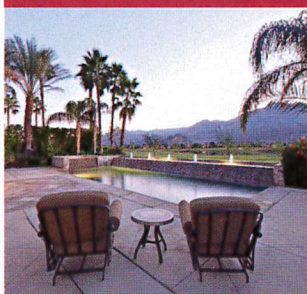


Enjoy this stunning lake & mountain premier setting on the 8th green of the Jack Nicklaus Tournament Course. This Heritage 2 beauty features 2,872 sq. ft, 3 Bdrms, 3 Baths and amenities include rich travertine floors on the diagonal, granite chef's kitchen, built-ins, and a luxurious master suite.

Offered at **\$749,000**

### 80395 Weiskopf

PGA WEISKOPF

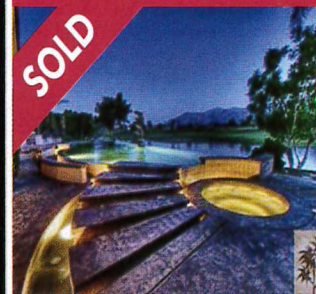


This spectacular Masters 4 home provides the ultimate in desert resort living with amazing sweeping forever views of the Southern Santa Rosa Mountains. Located on the 1st hole of the Private Weiskopf course, this is an entertainer's dream home! Its 4,621 sq ft of living space offers 3 bdrms, 4.5 baths plus a media room and separate office.

Offered at **\$2,095,000**

### 80735 Weiskopf

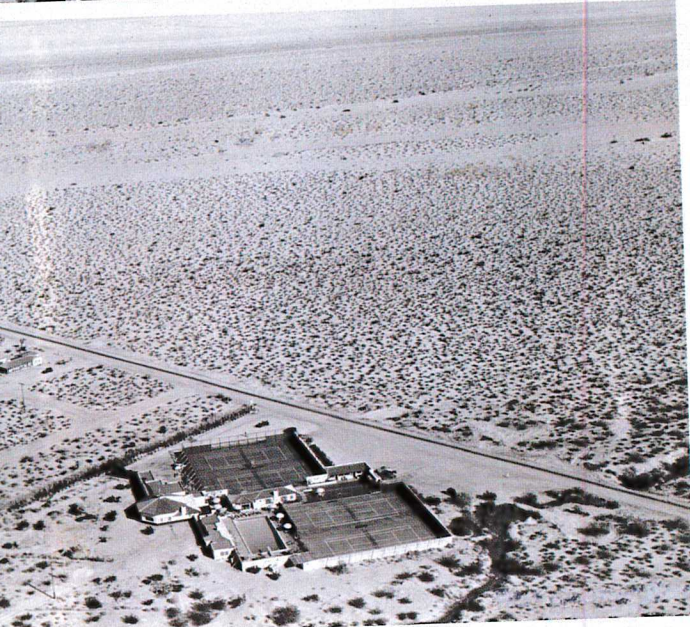
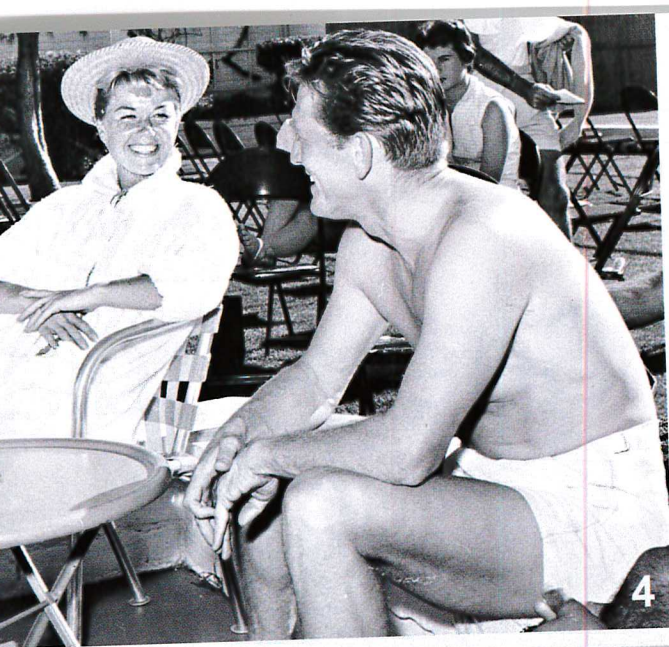
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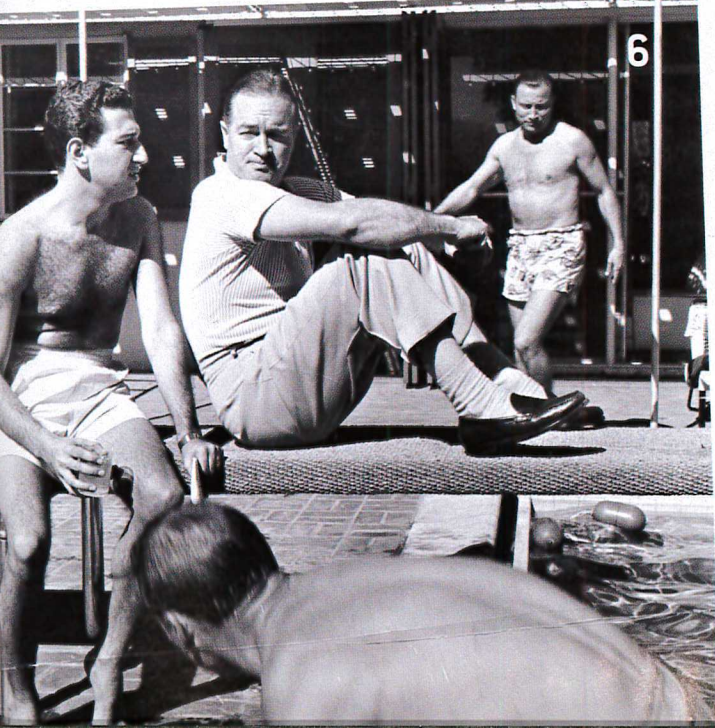
Perfect 10! Magnificent southern views of lake, mountains and the 2nd hole. Luxurious home features 4,621 sq ft, 3 bedrooms, 4.5 baths including a private casita. Resort style back yard with infinity pool, outdoor kitchen and putting green.

Sold at **\$2,195,000**





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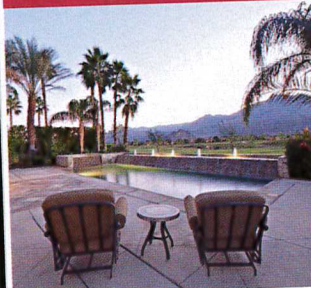


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