

# Pearl McCallum McManus

Although a century has passed since her father first planted fruit trees at the foot of Mount San Jacinto, Pearl McCallum McManus' influence in the Coachella Valley continues to enhance our quality of life today.

Among the first to understand and imagine the possibilities of a gracious life in our desert setting, Pearl's father was visionary. But he would not survive to see the valley's transformation into the dreamy irrigated landscape he imagined. He did, however, firmly inculcate that vision into his daughter Pearl, and she spent the remainder of her long life bringing it to fruition.

## SETTING THE TONE

With lush green golf courses and world-class resorts situated today from one end of the valley to the other, it's difficult to imagine in their place endless dunes and scrub. Yet it was in this sand-swept setting that Pearl and her husband Austin McManus took the fearless step of commissioning Lloyd Wright, the son of Frank Lloyd Wright, to build the Oasis Hotel.



TOP: A devoted equestrienne all her life, valley pioneer Pearl McCallum McManus rides through the desert scrub with towering Mount San Jacinto in the background.

ABOVE: On November 26, 1953, opening night at the Tennis Club that she built, McManus shows her softer side in tulle and lace. Fancy dresses were said to be her only extravagance.

Situated at the corner of what is now Tahquitz Canyon and Palm Canyon Way in Palm Springs, the couple's project was built of slip form concrete, which ensured a continuous, cast-in-place structure. When completed, the Oasis was the first architecturally designed building in the desert.

Suddenly, the adjacent Desert Inn's tent and clapboard housing looked inferior. It was a situation that spurred Nellie Coffman, the inn's owner, into a massive building project in order to compete. Thereafter, the standard for hotels in the desert was forever lifted from rough camping grounds to proper hotels.

#### A COMMITMENT TO QUALITY

From the onset, Pearl understood that the transformation she sought was difficult: she wanted nothing less than to literally change desert desolation into hospitable housing supported by civic institutions and the trappings of life in real cities. Accordingly, she continued to bring talented professionals to work on her projects.

Among the McCallum holdings was an area now known as the Tahquitz River Estates neighborhood, but originally called Palos Verdes Estates. After facing challenges developing this tract of land, which was prone to flooding along the channel, Pearl collaborated with famed Southern California builder Paul Trousdale—who not only developed Beverly Hills' fashionable Trousdale Estates, but in his lifetime built more than 25,000 Southern California homes—and architect Allen Sipe.

With stabilization of the river's course, the collaborators built affordable, attractive and thoroughly modern houses on both sides of the banks. The houses featured a lanai, a breezeway and a "crystal clear wall of glass" in the living room. Paul Trousdale's own house in Smoke Tree Ranch survives today and has the same architectural features on a slightly grander scale.

To build the Tennis Club in Palm Springs, Pearl hired architect-to-the-stars Paul R. Williams to build an iconic, modern entertaining pavilion. Opening in 1937, the Tennis Club featured an elegant oval-shape pool with two palm trees, a setting that became the scene of many memorable dinner parties. Celebrities and socialites flocked to the unusual new building.

#### BUSINESS SAVVY

Owning thousands of acres and adhering to her vision, Pearl retained architectural control over her land by writing into the deeds her right of reversion for architectural reasons. It was tested when she gave 30 acres in the middle of Palm Springs to the city for a desert preserve and equestrian center.

Pearl had ridden since childhood and remained an avid horsewoman her entire life. However, the city decided that the land would be better used as a golf course even though the gift provided that if the city did not use the land as directed, it would revert to the ownership of the Living Desert Reserve. The difficult transaction ultimately resulted in litigation between Palm Springs and the Living Desert, finally resulting in the creation of Tahquitz Creek Golf Course.

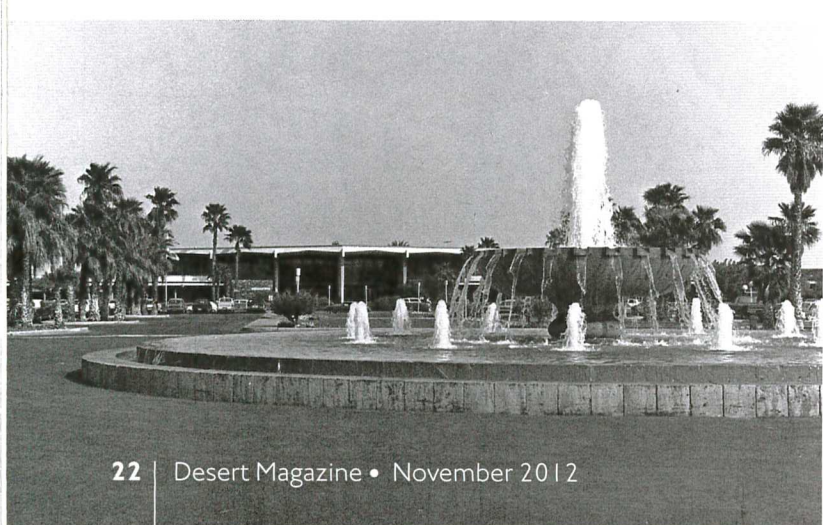
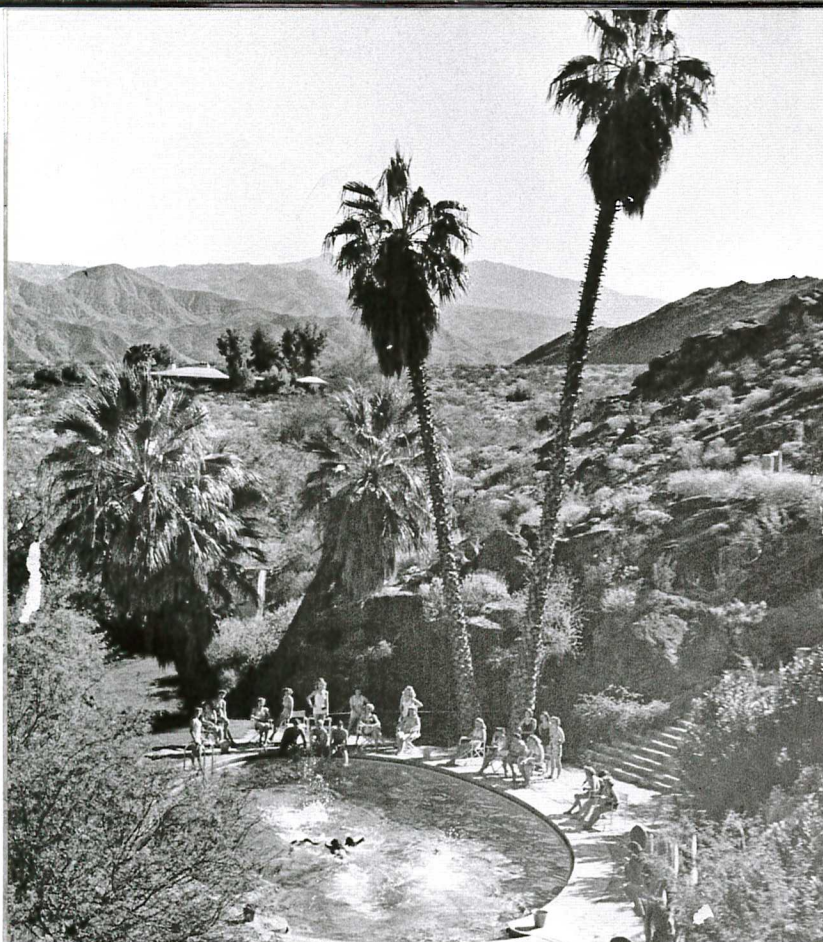


TOP: "Auntie Pearl's" Pink Palace, an early California mansion, featured a large covered porch.

ABOVE: McManus with Palm Springs' dapper mayor Frank Bogert and Los Angeles socialite Paquita Machris (Mrs. Maurice Machris) at the season opening of the El Mirador 1960. BELOW: A rare view of the Lloyd Wright Oasis Hotel courtyard in the 1930s; photo courtesy the Palm Springs Historical Society.







When Palm Springs Mayor Frank Bogert befriended noted Mexican architect Julio de la Pena, founder of Guadalajara's school of architecture, they decided to add a fountain to the desert landscape in the tradition of the great cities in Mexico. Bogert asked McManus for \$10,000 to fund the project. She famously agreed, but to a larger sum of \$25,000, because, as she observed from experience, "everything one tries to build usually ends up costing double the estimate."

Her philanthropy during her lifetime and after her death through her foundation is too prodigious to recount.

McManus' posthumous contribution to the efforts of Palm Desert resulted in the McCallum Theatre, a major focus of artistic and cultural life in the desert today. Her philanthropy during her lifetime and after her death through her foundation is too prodigious to recount—including the donation of the land under the Palm Springs Women's Club and the Living Desert, as well as gifts to the Campfire Girls and the Boys & Girls Club of Palm Springs. Her generous endowment of the Palm Springs Historical Society ensured continuation of the work of preserving the precious history of which she and her father were so much a part. McManus' portrait hangs in the Historical Society. Painted by Gordon Coutts, she is adorned in a frilly floral dress; such sartorial indulgence was said to be her only extravagance. Her persistence and steadfast devotion to her father's vision of the valley has truly enriched our experience.

—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.

TOP: The landmark pair of palm trees at the Tennis Club pool, which in the 1950s was one of the most photographed pools in the world. MIDDLE: A rare image of construction of the Paul R. Williams addition to the Tennis Club.

BOTTOM: The Palm Springs Airport fountain by Julio de la Pena after completion in the early 1960s; photo courtesy the Palm Springs Historical Society.