

Yesterday



ABOVE: Christmas in Palm Springs.

BELOW: Lily Pons and Ray Ryan hold court at the 1960 Safari Ball.

# Entertaining

Stepping out in a couture gown after a perfect evening of cocktails at your own fabulous home might seem impossible in a literal desert, but it is amazing how well it was done here back in the day. In fact, Elsa Maxwell would have been proud of Palm Springs.

The most renowned party giver of the 1920s through 1940s, Maxwell was consulted by all in the highest social circles regardless of where they lived in the U.S. or Europe. Those aspiring to be proper hostesses never failed to read her books or emulate her style. Maxwell maxims to be followed slavishly included: Make your guests feel at ease, choose just the right theme and appoint your table with beautiful china, gorgeous crystal and fine linens.

While people cared then about entertaining rather than “partying,” they were no less intoxicated or daring at their gatherings. Even so, from their photos they actually seemed to have enjoyed more real fun, perhaps a reward for being less jaded.

Actually keeping your guests engaged takes some thought and planning. Maxwell, for example, was famously credited with inventing the scavenger hunt as a party game. When was the last time you attended a party that featured any game that wasn’t on TV?

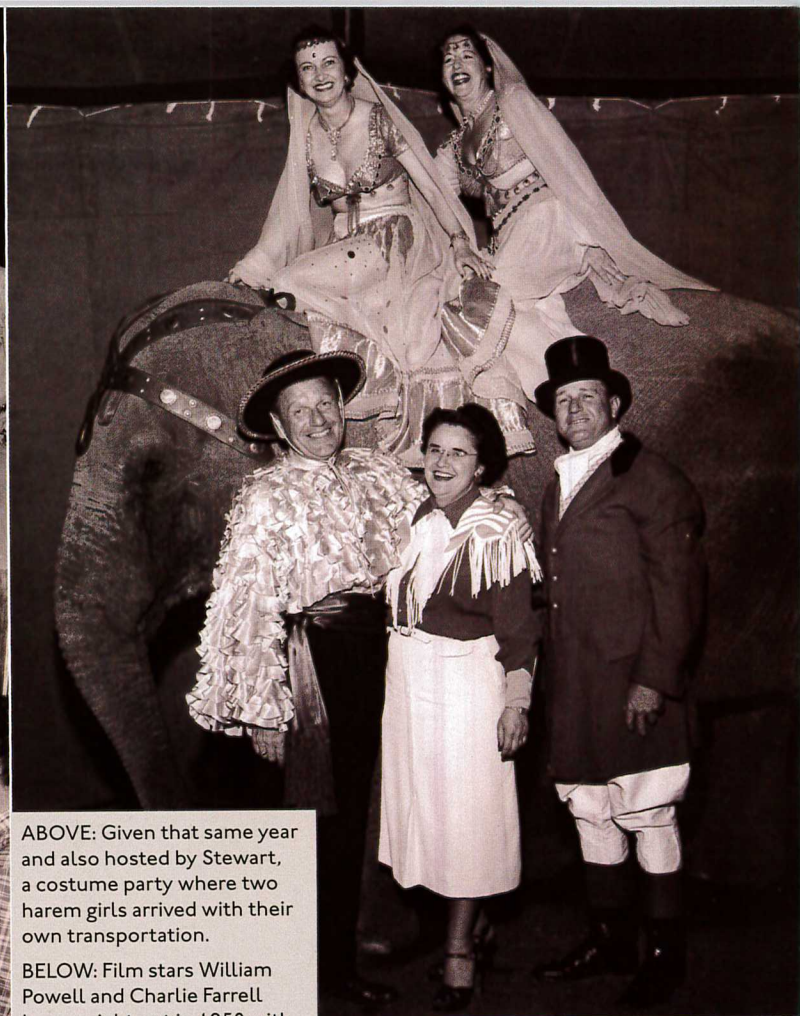






ABOVE: Cowboys and Indians at a 1946 Hopps Stewart cocktail party.

BELOW: At the peak of her meteoric film career in 1948, actress Betty Hutton (in the center) celebrates in plaid at Frank Hunter's casual party.



ABOVE: Given that same year and also hosted by Stewart, a costume party where two harem girls arrived with their own transportation.

BELOW: Film stars William Powell and Charlie Farrell have a night out in 1950 with masquerading Dolly Roszikat.



Elaborate parties were the rule between the wars and the themes and games ran the gamut. Costume parties were a desert favorite as well as a Maxwell signature. For one thing, a costume is certainly a conversation starter. The ubiquitous theme hereabouts was "Cowboys and Indians" but that was by no means the only one. There was exotic Arabia thanks to the local date industry, replete with elephants and harem girls. And who could resist hobo and tramp costumes? They still make an easy Halloween get-up today, with mixed and matched bits, the more disparate the better. Costume themes that encouraged guests to don Bavarian lederhosen, 1890s' burlesque, Polynesian sarongs or space-age mylar were certainly eclectic.

In Palm Springs, elaborate, over-the-top entertaining with elements of fantasy was allowed, if not required. Those indulging this impulse would float a boat in the pool, hold an Elizabethan court, have a circus or stage a safari. Just having the chef create an outrageous cake, or going out in full-length evening gowns and tuxedos to a western bar called by the appropriate sobriquet of the "Mink and Manure Club" could be regarded as pedestrian in the day.

There was always the conundrum of sit-down versus buffet to work out. Buffets frequently prevailed for offering opportunities for informal mixing while providing a lavish display of lobster, oysters, Wellingtons and fine pastries. (Somehow the waistlines didn't reflect the same indulgence they do now.)

But the signature aspect of early desert entertaining was the guest list's diversity. Palm Springs Mayor Frank Bogert famously said that from early on celebrities and captains of industry mixed with the locals, and even included the cowboys, because there weren't enough people to have a party unless everybody was invited. There's a tip for fresh entertaining today.

—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 of the city of Palm Springs.