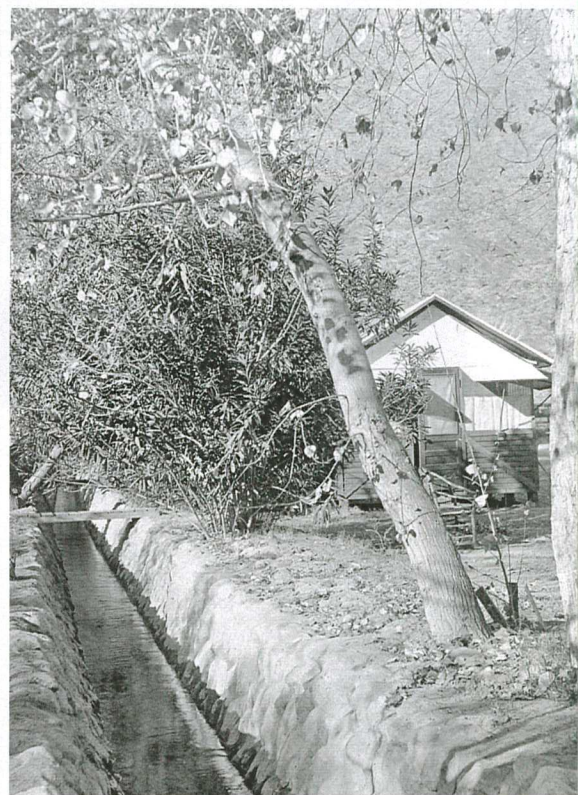
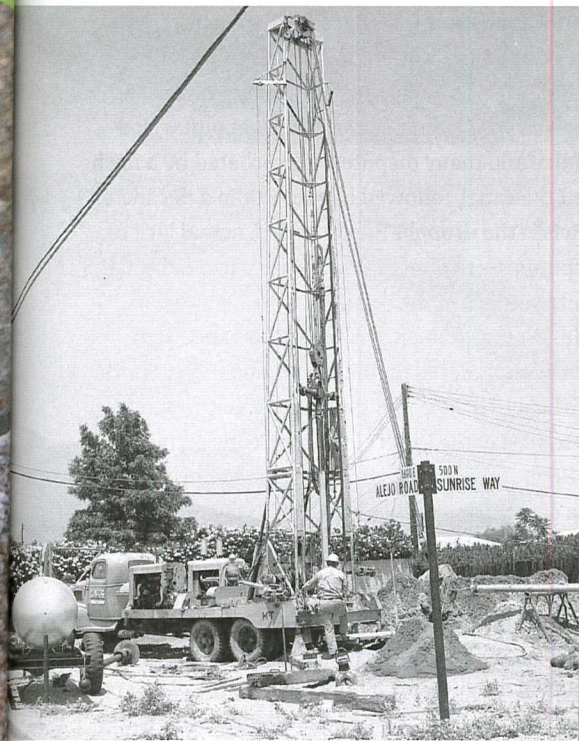


◀ Yesterday

# Water in the desert



**TOP ROW:** The Palm Springs Water Company drills in January 1954. Dapper Harold Hicks, president of the Palm Springs Water Company, inspects an outpour in 1948.

**BOTTOM ROW:** In June 1952, architect E. Stewart Williams at a water-named location discusses plans for a new building. Deep Well Guest Ranch, likewise referencing water in 1954, is graced by Gale Clarke. In 1911, the Tahquitz ditch ran past the Desert Inn's cottages.

Despite its designation as a desert, the Coachella Valley is blessed with water: The very names associated with the places in the desert, such as The Oasis Hotel, Mineral Springs Hotel, Deep Well, Indian Wells, Palm Springs, Snow Creek and River Estates all conjure up pretty images of water. But the early story of desert water is more utilitarian than picturesque; it literally can be seen as a history of ditches.

More than a century ago a prescient and practical few understood that water was the most precious of all resources in such an arid region. Hydrology was the purview of engineers, and naturally, they moved the precious liquid in ditches. The most famous Southern California water story is that of William Mulholland and his grandiose ditch, the Owens Valley Aqueduct. His scheme to ensure a reliable water supply for burgeoning Los Angeles came at the cost of turning a once fertile pasture surrounding a lake situated 200 miles away into a dust-polluting salt flat the size of San Francisco. But here in the natural desert, there were visionaries thinking about using local water and building their own ditches to deliver it.

PHOTOS/BOTTOM ROW, RIGHT, COURTESY OF PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY; ALL OTHERS, GAIL B. THOMPSON, GAYLE'S STUDIO, COURTESY TRACY CONRAD





Around 1925, Helen, Barbara and Mabel Clatworthy play in water coming from the Tahquitz Ditch, which is fed by the Aqua Caliente Hot Spring that irrigates the Desert Inn's orchard.

As early as 1830, the local Cahuilla people brought water from Tahquitz Creek to their village by simple ditches constructed for irrigation. The flow was seasonal and subject to diversion and clogging. Those at the end of the line seldom got water.

In 1887, early white settler Judge John Guthrie McCallum formed the Palm Valley Water Company and began the construction of a stone-lined irrigation ditch to traverse what is variously reported as 16, 17 or 19 miles of desert between the San Geronimo Pass and Palm Springs to carry the flow of the Whitewater River. (Whatever the actual distance, it was an astonishing accomplishment.)

McCallum also developed the waters of Chino Canyon for irrigation, and hoped to prosper by raising figs, grapes, olives and apricots earlier than coastal farmers. There were unauthorized diversions of the sluice and many disputes, exacerbated by a flash flood that destroyed the canal, followed by more than a decade of drought. By 1905, when the drought finally ended, actual lack of water and legal disputes over water rights left very few Cahuilla and even fewer white settlers in the region.

Bucking the exodus, Nellie Coffman arrived in 1909 and established the Desert Inn, which offered tented accommodations. Shortly thereafter, visitors began to appear in the valley. Wealthy oilman Tom O'Donnell was a guest at the Desert Inn and greatly admired Nellie's hospitality. He decided to help her transform her primitive establishment into a constructed facility designed in the then-popular Spanish-Mediterranean style. O'Donnell offered to loan her the astronomical sum of \$350,000 in exchange for her building him a house in the same style on the hillside above the inn.

Not surprisingly, she complied and he held the mortgage on the inn. When he moved in following a honeymoon stay at the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C., the newlywed found the water pressure to be inadequate. Complaining to the water company proved fruitless, so O'Donnell encouraged local builder Alvah Hicks to buy it and improve conditions for customers, starting with him and his house on the hill.

In 1927, Alvah Hicks acquired the Palm Valley Water Company, with a loan from Mr. O'Donnell, reorganized it and changed its name to the Palm Springs Water Company. Hicks also sourced water from Snow Creek and Falls Creek, each with their own conduits, while presumably improving water pressure up the hill. Alvah's sons Harold and Milton Hicks took over the stewardship of the company from their father, expanding pipelines and supplies. Alvah prided himself on building for future capacity and his sons carried on that forward-thinking practice. Therefore, in addition to the flumes, wells were drilled to tap into the aquifer, the vast lake beneath the valley floor. Ironically, abundant water had been just below the ground for a millennia—a legacy of the 110-mile-long prehistoric Lake Cahuilla that had once inundated much of the valley.

P.T. Stevens, known locally as the builder of the El Mirador Hotel and for subdividing Las Palmas, owned vast tracks of land that came with water rights. Stevens and Alvah Hicks collaborated in building custom homes on 20 prime acres in Las Palmas. In 1927, Stevens formed the Whitewater Mutual Water Company and supplied irrigation water from the Whitewater River for residential and agricultural use. He had

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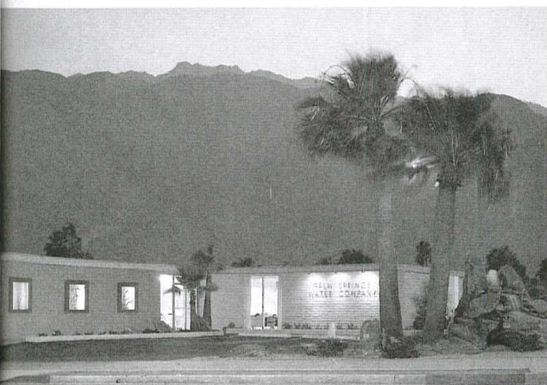
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ABOVE: Palm Springs Water Company workers inspect the deluge from the well at Avenida Caballeros and Alejo Road.

LEFT: The offices of the Palm Springs Water Company in 1961.

his own system of pipes and ditches that would divert the river, while allowing for intermittent flow from the river. Tom O'Donnell owned shares in Whitewater, which irrigated his golf course.

At the south end of the Coachella Valley, there was an even more ambitious ditch-digging project that was rivaled in ambition only by Mulholland's aqueduct. Starting in 1900, the California Development Company constructed hundreds of miles of irrigation ditches and canals to bring water from the Colorado River to the arid desert and create fertile farmland out of the Salton sink. At first the effort worked, but it lasted for only a few years until the silt-laden Colorado water clogged the canal. After a prodigious rainfall in 1905, a breach in the walls of the canal caused the entirety of the river to flow into the sink for two years while workers frantically worked to repair the rent. Thus tinkering with nature gave us the Salton Sea, the fate of which will write a new chapter in the valley's evolving water story.

Of course our valley is just a transit for the 242-mile Colorado River Aqueduct—another of William Mulholland's visions to bring water to Los Angeles. A 13-mile segment is a 16-foot-in-diameter tunnel buried beneath the San Jacinto Mountains between Cabazon and Gilman Springs. Out of our sight, it is yet a different story for another day.

—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.



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