

YESTERDAY



Desert pioneer Cornelia White's summertime retreat up in Idyllwild was a spacious cabin that she built in 1918, complete with a massive stone fireplace. Photo courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society.

## SUMMER RESPITES

Palm Springs was advertised in the first half of the 20th century as having the best winter weather in the continental United States. Not much mention was made of the summers.

Die-hard desert rats endured the scorching temperatures of the Coachella Valley's summers in the earliest years—pre-air conditioning. Those who stayed, managed by seeking precious shade and wrapping themselves in wet sheets out on enclosed sleeping porches at night.

However, summertime migrations to leave behind the valley's heat also have been a ritual for desert dwellers since the beginning. The Desert Inn received guests from October 1 through June 1. But during the intervening months, the inn's founding proprietress Nellie Coffman would relocate her family northward to "Lazy Acres," a getaway

that she purchased in 1928. Set on the Banning Shelf some 2,300 feet above sea level at the base of the San Bernardino Mountains, the summer home at 55 Lombardy Lane in Banning kept the Coffman clan cool during their summers for more than 20 years afterward.

The house was a pleasant place with giant pepper trees and cottonwoods creating shade. Beautifully, but modestly appointed, it was kept immaculately clean. The retreat represented a rest during the time away from the hectic life of the "season."

Ever the dedicated businesswoman, Coffman would regularly return to Palm Springs, braving the punishing heat to supervise maintenance and summer work at the inn, making the 25-mile trek by car with trusted employee Segundo Rigonan at the wheel.

### RECIPROCAL RESORTS

From the onset, the mountains seemed a logical choice for escape. Some desert dwellers sought respite during the summer on the cool shores of Lake Arrowhead, which was first developed in the San Bernardino Mountains as a tourist destination in 1920. Others, like pioneer Cornelia White, went up the San Jacinto Mountains to Idyllwild, which likewise began attracting summer visitors in the same years. But even Catalina Island, 26 miles off the coast of Los Angeles and cooled by Pacific breezes, was an option during that time. These were "reciprocal resorts" in that their busy tourist seasons and related need for additional workers were opposite the valley's. Resort towns enjoying booming summer seasons thanks to their cooler climes could



accommodate the part-time workers from the desert. For some years, Nellie Coffman, along with her two sons, George Roberson and Earl Coffman, managed hotels at Lake Arrowhead. These included the Village Inn and North Shore Tavern, among others. At the same time, the family also relocated many of their experienced wintertime employees from the desert up to the lake resort.

Other workers made an annual trek all the way to Yosemite or other then-nascent national parks to work at the lodges, returning to the desert when fall's cold temperatures set in and visitors evaporated with the summer sunshine. There was a special relationship between Palm Springs and Yosemite through Nellie Coffman and Jenny Curry, the operator with her husband of Camp Curry in Yosemite. The women were close friends. Additionally, Nellie sent son Earl to the park's Ahwahnee Hotel to get some training and experience.



Above, Tom Kieley Jr., who would later marry a granddaughter of pioneer Nellie Coffman, shares a repast in the summer of 1936 with Jane Lykken, daughter of the Palm Springs hardware store purveyor and artist. Left, summering in the 1930s in Lake Arrowhead. Photos courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society.



Personnel also moved between these resorts for better opportunities. Tony Burke, the famous publicity man for the El Mirador, first managed the Arrowhead resort and then found his way to Palm Springs.

Other favored summer destinations included the shore at Santa Monica or Laguna. But Southern California's beach towns weren't the epicenter of massive summer influxes that they are today. Instead, they were quiet destinations for the Eastern-bred denizens of Pasadena or Flintridge, as well as migrants from Palm Springs.



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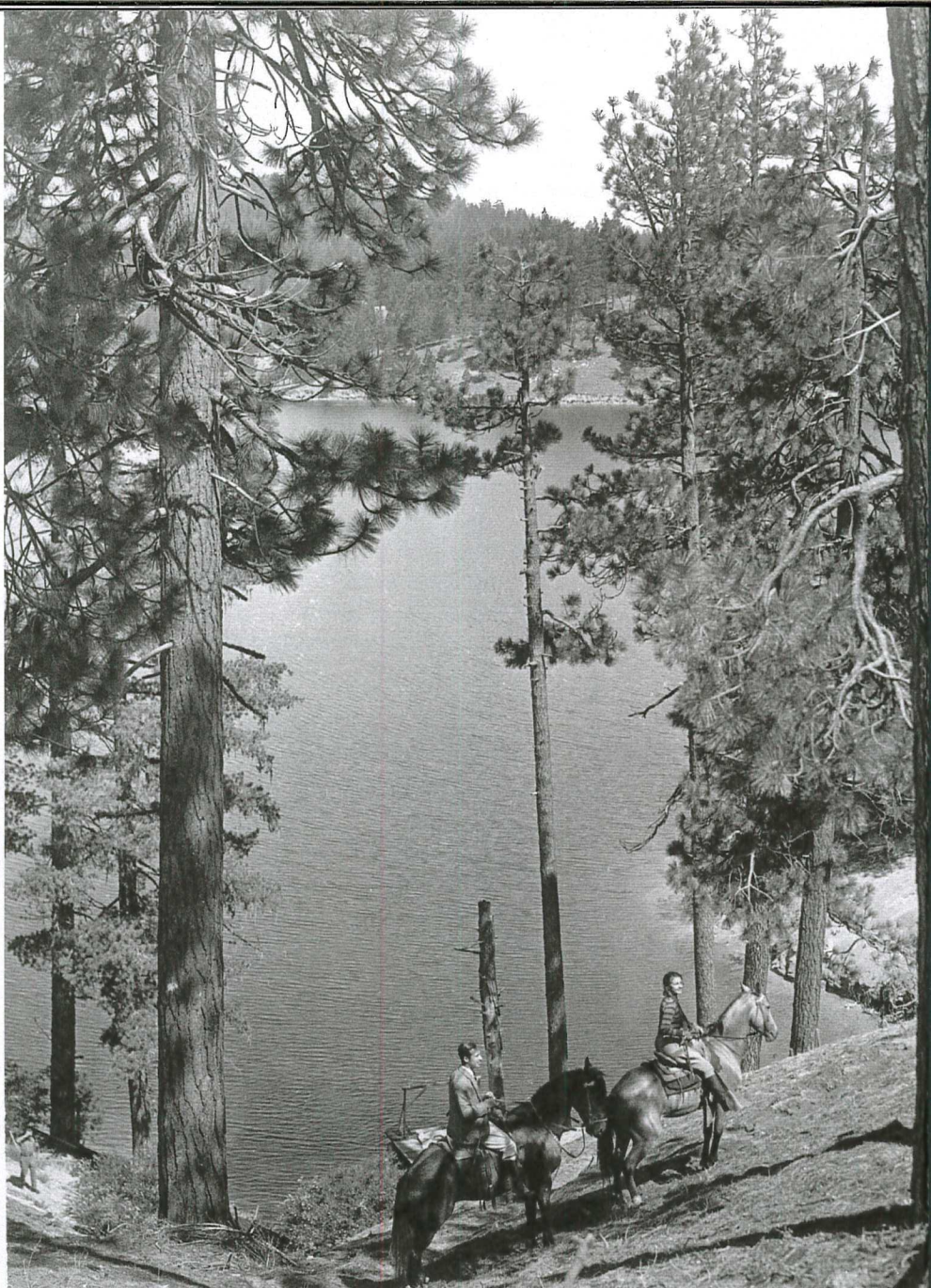
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Horseback riding under the pines along Lake Arrowhead's shores. Photo courtesy of the Palm Springs Historical Society.

Many desert dwellers would eventually maintain another home at the beach or in cosmopolitan west coast centers. Then as now, the warm winters beckoned just when the summer faded elsewhere. Eventually, it was hard to know which locale was the vacation home.

The seasonality of the desert has diminished over the years, and the Coachella Valley now boasts a majority of full-time residents. European tourists flock here like never before during the summer months. But back in the day, the enviable life was one enjoyed away from the desert during summer's peak.

—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.