PHOTOS/GAIL B. THOMPSON, GAYLE'S STUDIO, COURTESY TRACY CONRAD.

Home of Virginia Valli and Charlie Farrell on Tachevah in 1957, with his and hers automobiles parked at the front door.

Via Miraleste guest house patio, home of Gail and Vi Thompson, June 1954.

Interior of the Miraleste guest house with bamboo furniture, ubiquitous in Palm Springs in the 1950s, June 1954.

A Tale of Two Houses

At the corner of Tachevah and Via Miraleste in Palm Springs sits an unusual arrangement of houses. Straddling the corner is a pair of low-slung buildings that alternately face the park and what is now Desert Hospital. Arranged in a convenient L-shape, the compound shelters the pool and lawn nestled within.

The elegant Spanish-style dwelling was built for a wealthy Beverly Hills investment broker named Alexander Henry. The main house fronted on Tachevah while the guest house had its own address on Via Miraleste, this separate address allowing for an eventual separation of ownership. The house on Tachevah became the residence of movie-star, TV personality, mayor, World Wars I and II veteran, and hotel and nightclub owner Charlie Farrell. The guest house came to be occupied by photographer, businessman and historian Gail B. Thompson. Unlikely neighbors, the two became fast friends and represent between them an interesting slice of Palm Springs history.

TOP: Bob Hope and Charlie Farrell ride in the Desert Circus parade.

ABOVE: Gayle's Studio store front in 1945.

RIGHT: Charlie and Virginia Valli Farrell dance during another elegant evening at the Racquet Club.

COMMUNITY FRONT MAN

The story of the Racquet Club is legendary. Purchased in 1934 by Farrell with friend Ralph Bellamy so they could play unlimited tennis, the Racquet Club turned into the ultimate hangout for Hollywood elites when they were interested in a lost weekend away from it all. Farrell was said to have single-handedly "invented" Palm Springs because of the popularity of the Racquet Club.

"I'm not just the owner of the Racquet Club. I'm host, too. Front man, as we say. That meant entertaining my friends and guests...." Farrell pointed out to the Los Angeles Examiner on Aug. 2, 1953. Indeed, he was the front man for the whole town.

Farrell's interest in Palm Springs went well beyond being the owner and host extraordinaire of the Racquet Club. Included among the founders of the Desert Riders, the Polo Club, and Los Vaqueros Del Desierto, he was also a member of the Owen Coffman American Legion Post, the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club, a director of the Desert Circus and mayor of Palm Springs.

IN RESIDENCE

Farrell amassed an impressive collection of homes in Palm Springs, starting in 1936 with the purchase of a house on North Mission in Las Palmas. By 1937, he also owned a house west of Cahuilla on Chino and then another on Granvia Valmonte. In 1952, Farrell settled down on Tachevah, across from the park, in the main house of the compound that straddled the corner.

Farrell and his starlet wife, Virginia Valli, moved in and commissioned a remodel by prominent local architects John Porter Clark and Albert Frey while also adding Charlie's initials in wrought-iron above the entrance door. The house was gracious and easy with a shared courtyard and large backyard. Both the main house and the guest house were afforded spectacular views of the mountain.

PICTURE THIS

By 1954, the guest house on Via Miraleste was the residence of local photographer

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

Gail (right) pictured in 1961 with Hoagy Carmichael, pianist and composer of "Heart and Soul," with the signature wrought-iron gate featuring "G" for Gail.

PHOTO/GAIL B. THOMPSON, GAYLE'S STUDIO, COURTESY TRACY CONRAD

Gail B. Thompson and his wife, Violet. Just as Charlie Farrell had installed his initials above the graceful archway entrance to the main house on Tachevah, a large "G" soon adorned the wrought-iron gate of the Thompson's Via Miraleste home.

The couple had first arrived in Palm Springs in 1945 whereupon Thompson stopped into the local photography shop owned by O.M. Ward to pick up a few supplies and ended up buying the place. Included in the deal where the filing cabinets where Ward stored the images he had taken of the early town along with those of his predecessor, photographer M. I. Hannah.

Quickly returning home to Los Angeles following the fortuitous purchase of the shop, Thompson packed up and hurried back to embark on a long career as chronicler of all things Palm Springs. The local real estate agents used him for creating brochures. If you needed a passport photo, he was your man. Nightclub openings, birthday parties, parades, crime scenes, weddings and insurance claims were all documented by the town's photographer.

Wanting a name for his burgeoning business commensurate with his glamorous status, Thompson came up with Gayle's Studio, altering the spelling of his first name to accommodate his preference for the visual symmetry created by the "y." Thompson went on to establish other businesses and invest in real estate. His mixed-use building on East Palm Canyon, now home to El Mirasol restaurant, once housed a beauty salon, laundromat and offices. A devoted member of the Palm Springs Historical Society, many of Thompson's photographic images ended up in their collection.

—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.

The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation will open the recently renovated property on November 16 for an afternoon garden party and a glimpse into the lives of the movie star and the photographer who lived side by side on this particular corner of Palm Springs. For more information and tickets, see their website at pspreservationfoundation.org.