

O'Donnell Golf Club landscape is most historic

Tracy Conrad | Special to the Palm Springs Desert Sun | October 20, 2019



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Frank Bogert chose a picture of a parade of palm trees for the cover of his book, “Palm Springs: The First Hundred Years.”

Pictured between each palm was a white or pink oleander creating a gracious rhythm of planting, promenading alongside the driveway of Thomas O'Donnell's mountainside home.

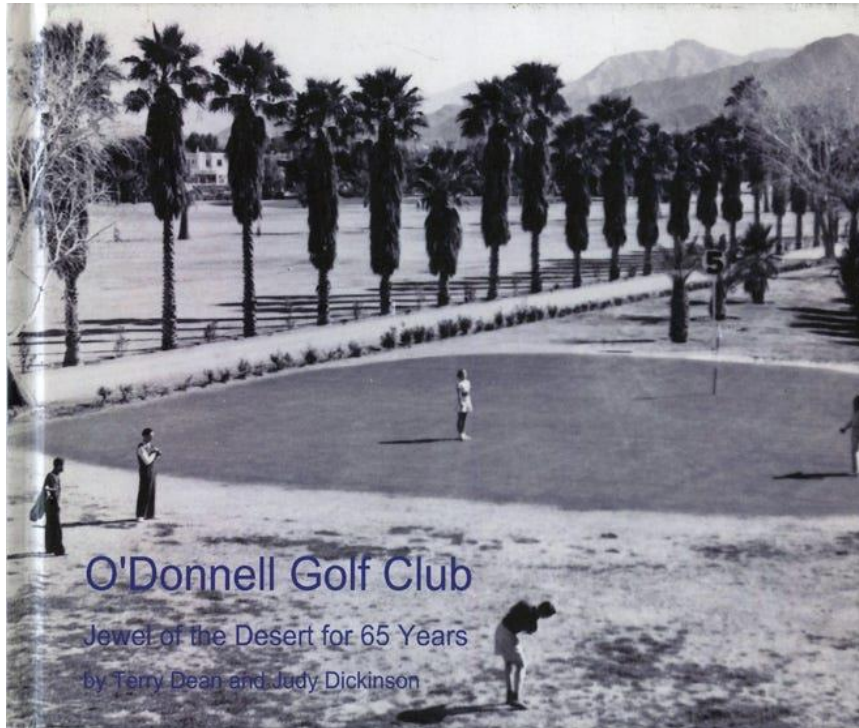
Published in 1928 in *House Beautiful* magazine and now on the National Register of Historic Places, the house is a lovely example of Spanish Mediterranean architecture. But its front yard is truly spectacular.

The picture was taken in O'Donnell's front yard golf course, spilled over the edge of the mountain to the north of the perched house. And Frank deemed it an appropriate emblem for his history chronicling a century of development of the village of Palm Springs. Frank had lived the 20th century along with the town and knew what mattered.

That the O'Donnell Golf Course would symbolize this perfectly made sense. O'Donnell first came the desert as a guest at the Desert Inn. Nellie Coffman came to the desert when the century was single-digits old. The Coachella Valley was so very far off the beaten path, it was the real wild west.

O'Donnell was enchanted with Nellie's hospitality and agreed to loan her an enormous sum of \$350,000 so that she might improve the Desert Inn from clapboard cottages and canvas tents into the predominant style of the day, Spanish Mediterranean Revival. In exchange, she agreed to build him a house on the mountain behind the inn.

O'Donnell set about acquiring the land immediately to the north of the inn and his new home to lay out his front yard, a golf course. The toe of the mountain touched the valley floor along the extent of the course. Tamarisk trees lent much-needed privacy and protection for errant golf balls, demarcating the edge of the fairways.



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Planted along railroad tracks by the Southern Pacific Railroad for their vigor and heartiness as windbreaks, the trees were also already mature at the perimeter of what would become the golf course. Punctuating the interior landscape with tamarisk created landmarks offering direction for golfers, and often signaling the end of long fairways.

The use of the same species of trees added a beautiful consistency and quiet harmony to the design.

O'Donnell added date palms to the plant palette in single specimens or in small clusters. Originally, he planted several groupings of cottonwoods for shade. Surprisingly, cottonwoods dotted the early streets of Palm Springs. Generally found in abundance near water, they were a feature of the valley at the turn of the 19th century.

Finding a grass suitable to carpet the Coachella Valley's first large-scale golf course required research.

After touring many courses around the country, he learned that greens in a desert had to be built up from a Bermuda base, requiring many tons of seed. This was then over-seeded during the winter with rye or fescue.

Unlike much of Palm Springs at the time, O'Donnell never allowed his turf to die off in the summer. A century later no better solution has been found, and golf courses over-seed each October in anticipation of the season.

Working with a good friend and fellow oilman, Captain J. F. Lucey, O'Donnell then proceeded to design his course. Both men had played the best courses around the world for decades, and they knew what constituted a first-class golf course and what they liked. It was a daunting task to grade the hard, arid desert into a verdant golf paradise.



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O'Donnell stood on the plot that was to be the No. 1 tee and drove a ball parallel to the tamarisk tree line. He then picked an iron from his bag and hit in the same direction.

Where the ball landed was where planted the first green. In same manner, O'Donnell and Lucey laid out the remaining eight holes of play.

According to Steven Keylon, landscape historian, O'Donnell understood the maximum distance he could get with every club in his bag, and made the length of the fairways in accordance with his game so as to put all clubs into play at some time during the round.

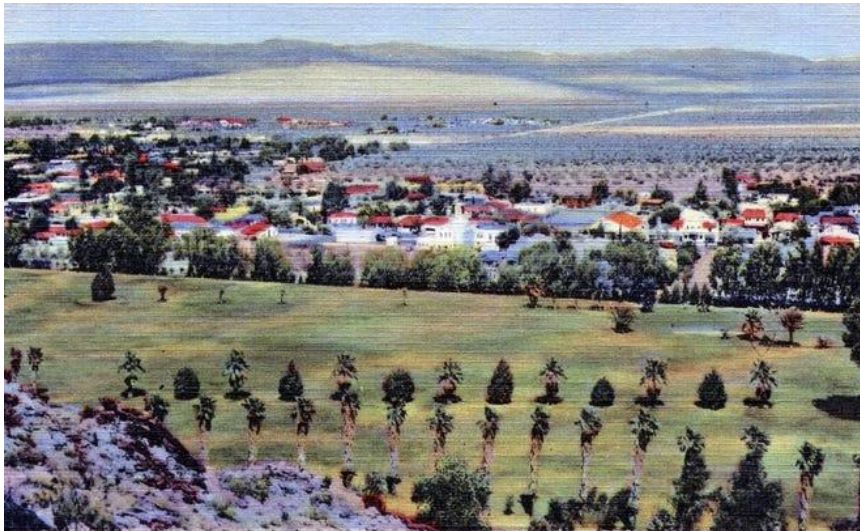
The result was a par-35, nine-hole course, that with the addition of a double set of tee boxes allowed "ambitious players the ability to do a full eighteen holes if desired."

Completed in 1927, the finished course was officially named the Desert Golf Course but almost immediately the course was affectionately dubbed "O'Donnell's."

O'Donnell's magnificent front yard was used by Tom and his closest friends.

But soon he allowed guests of the adjacent Desert Inn access to play and opened the course to the residents of Palm Springs in 1932. Its history in the ensuing years is rich and interesting.

But its beginnings are truly admirable. Keylon writes of O'Donnell's ambitious plan "working with a local nursery, used a limited palette of drought-tolerant trees, appropriate to the Sonoran Desert, as a means of defining the fairways, tees, greens, and holes of the golf course.



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Long rows of a single species—Mexican fan palm, native California fan palm, and Arizona cypress” as lining fairways, and framing vistas. “The line of native California fan palms had a single Arizona cypress specimen planted between each slender tree, the shrubby, conical form contrasting with the tall palms” to spectacular effect.

Keylon recently authored an impressive nomination for historic designation for the buildings and landscape O'Donnell Golf Club that goes before the Palm Springs City Council on Oct. 23.

This seems obvious: there is nothing more historic in Palm Springs than the landscape conceived and brought to fruition by Tom O'Donnell almost a century ago.