

Mother Nellie Coffman and Her Beloved Desert Inn Nellie Norton Coffman

was born on October 1, 1867. A native of Indiana, Nellie moved with her family to Texas where, at seventeen, she married George Ball Roberson. The couple soon moved to Los Angeles to start their new life together and opened a used furniture store. Tragedy struck when George died on January 22, 1887. Married only four months Nellie was a widow at the age of 19, pregnant and alone.

Nellie moved in with her father, James Orr, who was manager of one of Santa Monica's premier hotels and gave birth to her first son George B. Roberson. In Santa Monica, Nellie met and married her second husband, Harry Coffman. Nellie's second son Owen Earl Coffman soon followed.

Harry left for medical school while Nellie stayed behind with their sons. After graduating from Philadelphia's Jefferson Medical College in 1900 he set-up his medical practice in Santa Monica.

While vacationing in Idyllwild, Nellie heard of the benefits of the healthy desert climate. She read an article about Palm Springs in the February 1903 issue of *Sunset* magazine and after experiencing the wonders of the desert in Palm Springs, she knew it was to be her home.

On October 11, 1909, the Coffmans purchased a 1 3/4 acre parcel in downtown Palm Springs and became the owners of a six-room cottage and tent house. The Desert Inn officially opened on December 1, 1909.

At the time, Palm Springs was comprised of less than 20 structures, consisting of homes and small businesses. The roads were not paved, not even oiled, just dirt. Domestic and irrigation water was fed to the village via the Tahquitz and Whitewater ditches, but neither was a reliable source. Nellie was not deterred.



Courtesy Palm Springs Historical Society



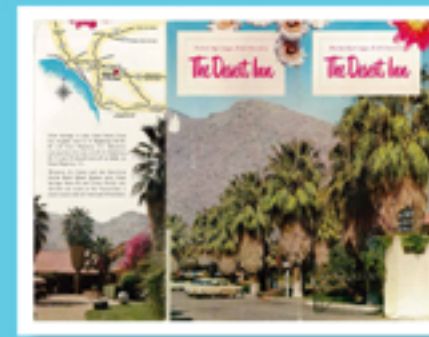
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The Desert Inn Sanitorium-Hotel opened to treat individuals suffering from respiratory ailments, kidney conditions, insomnia, neuritis and rheumatism. The business grew, so did the number of tent houses. Nellie continued to acquire adjoining properties as they became available and her budget would allow. At the peak of her operation she owned 35 acres of downtown Palm Springs.

Later, the Desert Inn introduced private, individual cottages and bungalows. These accommodations were simple but elegant and Nellie was soon "discovered" by people of means who would stay for months.

All was going well when in 1923 Pearl McManus, daughter of Judge John McCallum (founder of Palm Springs), hired Lloyd Wright to design the Oasis Hotel. It was to be the most modern building in the city, and it gave Nellie pause. The cottages and bungalows were extremely popular with her clientele, but she knew she needed to expand and grow. She sought and received a substantial loan from one of her regular guests, millionaire oilman Thomas O'Donnell. They struck a deal.

O'Donnell loaned Nellie \$350,000 for her hotel expansion under the condition that Nellie build a hillside home for him and his new bride. The residence, called Ojo del Desierto (Eye of the Desert), was completed by January of 1925.



Photos by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio Collection, Courtesy Tracy Conrad



Aerial of The Desert Inn by Noel Frederick Jr. Courtesy Palm Springs Historical Society



Postcards and brochure courtesy Ron & Betsy Marshall Collection

William Charles Tanner was commissioned to design both the new Desert Inn and Ojo del Desierto. Tanner was not a registered architect, but an impressionist painter, art teacher and illustrator who received training in the Hollywood architectural offices of G. Vincent Palmer.

The new Desert Inn's buildings were beautifully designed and constructed. The grounds were a combination of green manicured lawns, desert cactus and colorful flowering plants. Nellie had created a world-class desert resort.

Nellie had over 200 employees at her hotel every day and the DeAnza Dining Room could easily seat more than 200 dinner guests. Recreation provided to guests included tennis, badminton, croquet, swimming and golf. In the early years Nellie offered horseback riding but later bikes were made available for leisurely rides around town.

Nellie, with her two sons, George B. Roberson and Earl Coffman, jointly managed and operated the Desert Inn. Their combined energy, skill and vision ensured the inn's success for decades.

Nellie Coffman died in Banning on June 10, 1950. The Desert Inn continued under the competent hands of Nellie's sons George and Earl until the property was sold to Marion Davies in 1955. Davies announced that she intended to demolish all of the Desert Inn and build two larger buildings on the site. However, the Desert Inn operated in its original configuration for many years thereafter. Later development schemes sealed the inn's fate and it was demolished in June of 1966.

Nellie Coffman was instrumental in growing and promoting Palm Springs. She was a woman of incredible strength and character. Her efforts were always for others, whether for her hotel guests or her fellow citizens. Nellie's self-proclaimed goal was "to make and keep Palm Springs attractive to attractive people."

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Text courtesy Will Kleindienst

Modernism Week CAMP is located on the site of the former Desert Inn.