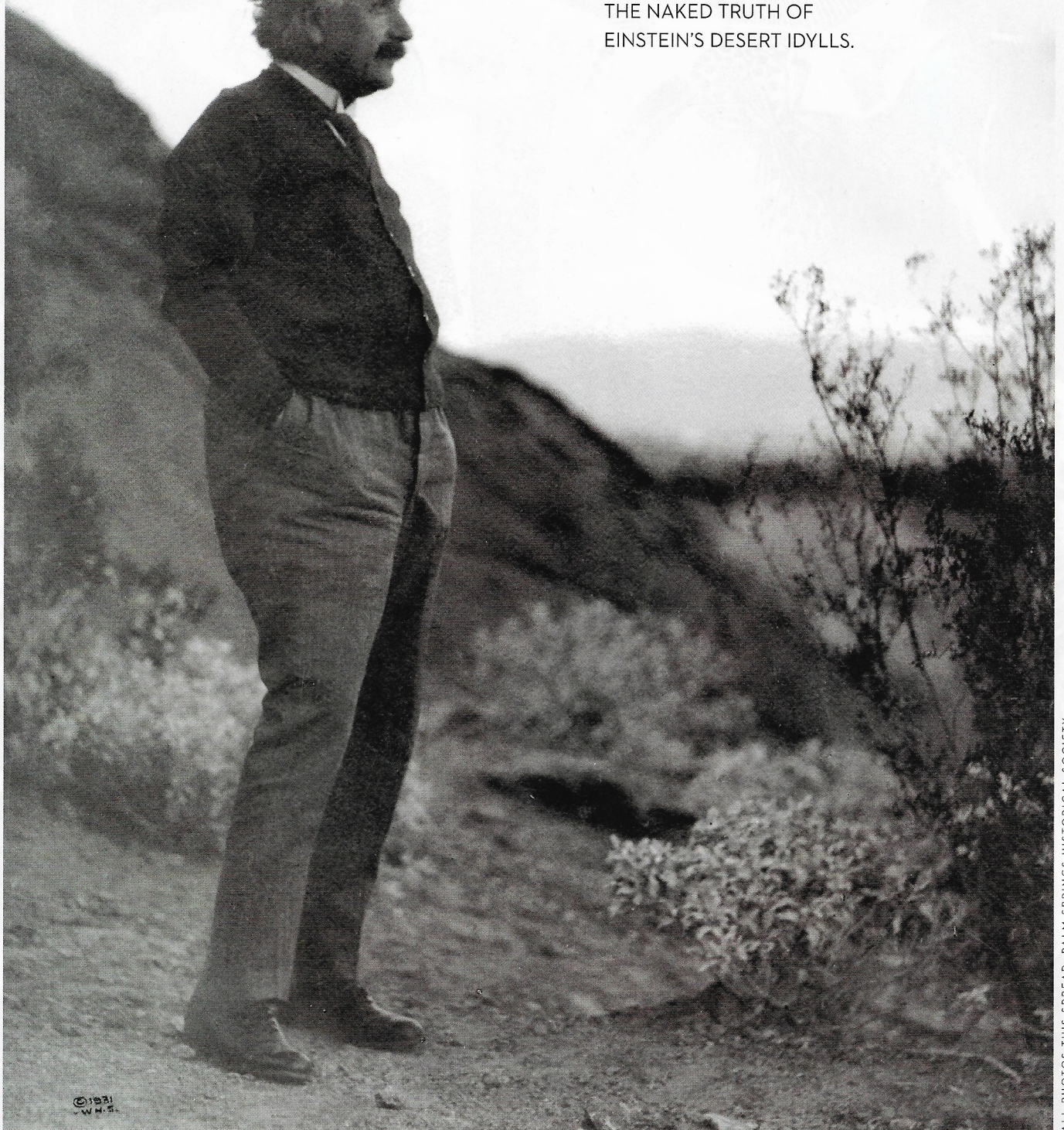


Genius at Play

A NEW BOOK EXPOSES
THE NAKED TRUTH OF
EINSTEIN'S DESERT IDYLLS.



ALL PHOTOS THIS SPREAD: PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

OPPOSITE: Dr. Einstein in January 1931, contemplating the desert expanse. BELOW LEFT: A luncheon at The Willows, in March 1933. BELOW RIGHT: Einstein and his wife, Elsa, pose at the inn's entrance.



Not so many years ago, writer and architectural historian Steve Vaught stalked The Willows, the historic Palm Springs hotel. Lodging nearby, he wandered the back streets to stare through its gates and ponder what stories must live behind them. In 2012, Vaught struck up an online conversation about Southern California architecture with Tracy Conrad, co-owner of The Willows. Inspired by their shared obsession for local history and early structures, Conrad invited Vaught to spend the summer on the other side of those gates.

"He can help me write that book," Conrad reasoned at the time. For years, Conrad's guests had prodded her to compile a historical scrapbook of The Willows' history, a little something for them to read on the patio beside the waterfall or while lounging around the pool. Her curiosity for unearthing the history of the home and its lineage of notable guests gnawed at her, too. The co-authors dove into Conrad's 20-year collection of vintage photos of the property and got to work.

Three years later, *Einstein Dreamt Here* is appearing as the Willows turns 90. Filled with rare images from the archives of generous sources, the hefty tome tells an approachable tale with a very human element. Its inviting pages recount the estate's entertaining past, from private home to full restoration, recalling each era by breathing life into those who lived, loved, sunbathed, swam, drank, dined, and dreamt there.

"These are people you don't have to apologize for. People who were ahead of their time and deserve to be remembered," says Vaught, author of several books and numerous articles for *Architectural Digest*. "In the book, we go back to meet them. And we give them their due."

"It's remarkable that this amazing nexus of people were in this podunk town on the edge of the desert," adds Conrad, who is on the Board of the Historical Society and the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. She has also served as a member of the Historic Site Preservation Board for the City of Palm Springs. "And they all stood up well in history."

None stood up and stood out quite as much as Albert Einstein. Famous men and women have laid their heads many places, for as many reasons. Those places then enjoy eternal distinction from those figures who whiled away [or spent] a night or two beneath their roofs. Yet the esteemed professor did more than catch 40 winks at The Willows, home of his close friend Samuel Untermyer, the high-profile New York attorney. On the grounds of the Mediterranean villa named for the trees that lined the banks of the seasonal stream to its south, Einstein escaped his fears of an uncertain future for Germany and the pressures and rigors of his career. He soaked in long "sun baths" on the terrace. He climbed the rocky hillside for sunrise reflection and evening pipe smoking over three winters, from 1931 to 1933. >>



The Willows today. A private residence when it began life in 1925, it was saved 70 years later by Tracy Conrad and her husband, Paul Marut.

“His life was chaotic and his schedule was so ridiculously crazed, yet he always made time to come here,” Vaught says. “The Willows was a haven of peace and rest for him in those rough times. He needed that. Newspapers, magazines, and even biographies often skipped over details about his trips to the desert. It was a chapter of his life that was crucial for him, but the press missed this interlude.”

The co-authors dug as deep as archaeologists and uncovered a side of the Nobel Prize winner unknown to most before the book's release this month. Their findings bring a fresh angle to the study of Einstein.

Indeed, his personal life was not always as private as he, or others, might have wished. While these days “going native” in Palm Springs might refer to a greased-to-tan man riding a bicycle in only an orange thong down Palm Canyon Drive in the heat of summer, Einstein did one better. The book paints the picture of a birthday-suited physicist shocking one reporter who had followed a mountain trail in search of an impromptu interview. (She did not get it.) On another occasion, Einstein pulled a prank on a photographer by

posing as a woman. The man now synonymous with genius wholly relaxed in Palm Springs, a destination where his spirit unwound enough to play practical jokes and run around naked.

“He had a whimsical side, and it was on full display here,” Conrad laughs. “Approaching the Einstein chapter was intimidating, but I discovered what a fun, interesting guy he was. He loved life beyond sitting in the lab.” Among the home's string of colorful characters, Einstein gave real cachet to this small western village. “It was the first time Palm Springs was appearing in media outlets around the world,” Conrad says. “It was international recognition that lives on to this day.”

As does The Willows. Restored more than 20 years ago to its original quiet glamour by Conrad and her husband, Paul Marut, its rooms, terraces, and grounds have the look and feel of living history. And here's the book to prove it. — *Lisa Marie Hart*

Einstein Dreamt Here, by Steve Vaught and Tracy Conrad, is available through *The Willows*; 760-320-0771, www.thewillowspalmsprings.com.