

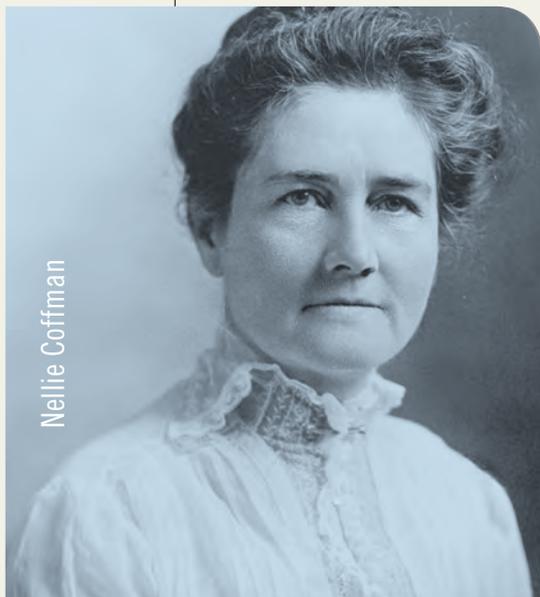
# THIS IS PALM SPRINGS™

Palm Springs  
— a sense of place.™



The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation is leading an effort to name the new Downtown Park after Palm Springs pioneer “Mother” Nellie Coffman, owner of the famous Desert Inn and the city’s pre-eminent civic leader for much of the 20th century.

The proposed park will be sited on the location of Coffman’s now demolished Desert Inn. To make public spaces more relevant and educational, they should be “anchored” to their historical context. Naming the park after Nellie Coffman connects visitors and residents to the storied history of the Desert Inn (1909–1966) which played a pivotal role in making Palm Springs a world-renowned resort destination.



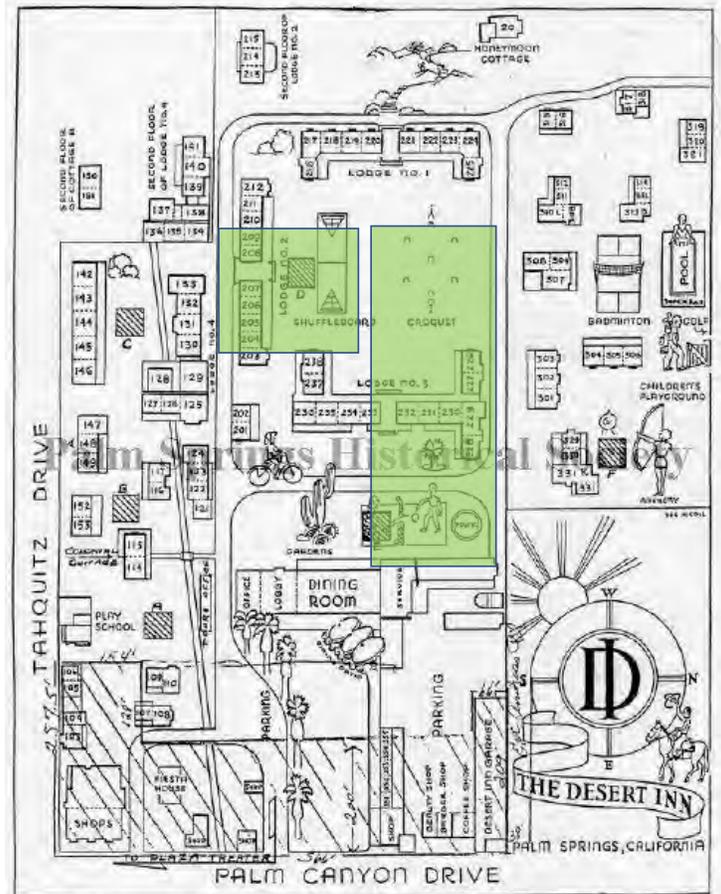
Nellie Coffman

→ The city has historically named its parks after its illustrious female pioneers and it seems fitting to continue that tradition.



**Palm Springs Downtown Park | 50% Design Development Illustrative Site Plan**  
 Palm Springs Downtown Park | 50% Design Development | City Council Presentation | July 11, 2018

**RCH STUDIOS**



# Five reasons for naming the Downtown Park for Nellie Coffman

1

## It was the vision of pioneering and entrepreneurial women like Nellie Coffman that built Palm Springs

Coffman's plan in 1909 for a resort, in the largely undeveloped desert, showed incredible vision. Following through on that vision demonstrated immense fortitude. Nellie Coffman and other women, like the White sisters (Florilla and Cornelia), and Pearl McCallum McManus, were the driving forces behind progress in the city. Coffman's contributions to the city were so numerous and so nurturing that she became affectionately known as "Mother" Nellie Coffman.

2



## Palm Springs has a tradition of naming parks after its women pioneers

Frances Stevens Park, Ruth Hardy Park, and most recently Jackie Lee Houston Plaza, all recognize the critical contributions women have made to the history and success of Palm Springs.

3

## The proposed Downtown Park is physically sited on the location of Coffman's famous Desert Inn

To make public spaces more relevant and educational, they should be "anchored" to their historical context. Naming the proposed Downtown Park after Nellie Coffman connects visitors and residents to the storied history of the Desert Inn (1909–1966).

4

## Nellie Coffman's Desert Inn brought Palm Springs worldwide renown as a resort destination

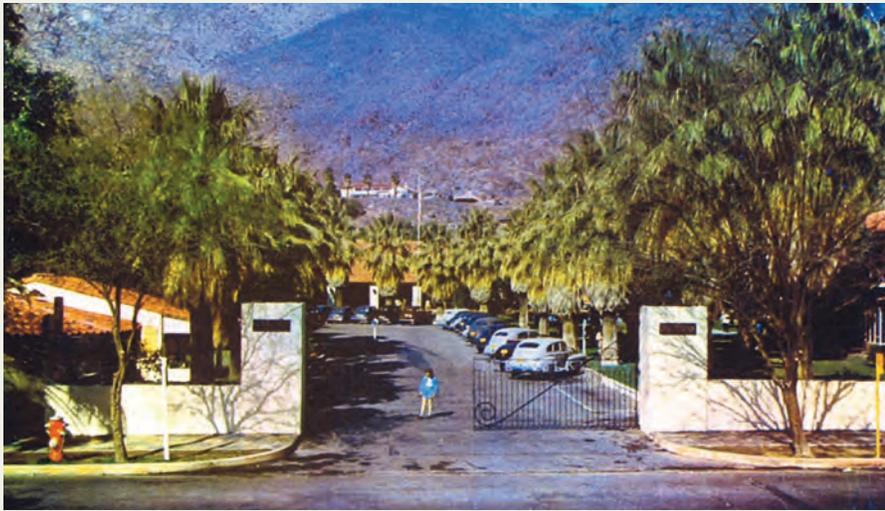
The Desert Inn's guests, including famous actors, artists, writers and captains of industry, did much to publicize Palm Springs to the nation and the world. The Desert Inn pioneered the innovative concept of the "all-inclusive hospitality resort" (i.e., in addition to just lodging there was a restaurant, high-end retail shopping, and recreational and social activities).

5

## Nellie Coffman was the city's pre-eminent civic leader and philanthropist for much of the 20th century

In 1939, in recognition of her many contributions to the city of Palm Springs, the city's Woman's Club named Nellie Coffman its honorary president and on November 1, 1947, the city of Palm Springs celebrated "Nellie Coffman Day." Upon her death, in recognition of her legacy of "charitable and understanding generosity," the Nellie Coffman tribute fund was established under the auspices of the Welfare and Friendly Aid Association. For many years the fund gave significant help "to deserving residents" in need. Former Palm Springs mayor Frank Bogert is quoted as saying, "Nellie practically ran the town by virtue of her strong will and personality. If a patron saint were chosen for the valley, it should be this extraordinary lady pioneer."





VALLEY VOICE

The Desert Sun | September 25, 2017

# Name new park for Nellie Coffman



**Erik Rosenow**



**Nellie Coffman** COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation has applauded the city's public outreach regarding the program for the proposed downtown park.

In December 2012, and in July 2015, The Desert Sun published articles about the historical elements removed in the years leading up to the demolition of the Fashion Plaza (i.e., the Nellie Coffman star and the County of Riverside plaque commemorating the Desert Inn). As reported in those articles, the city manager and Wessman Development principals assured the public that those elements would be reincorporated into the downtown redevelopment scheme.

We ask that those promises be kept.

The city has historically named its parks after its illustrious female pioneers (i.e., Ruth Hardy Park and Frances Stevens Park), and it is fitting to continue that tradition. Accordingly, we strongly suggest that the new park be named after Nellie Coffman, owner of the Desert Inn and one of the city's most philanthropists.

Nellie Coffman can be argued to have been the undisputed matriarch of Palm Springs for over 40 years. Arriving in 1909, she quickly opened the Desert Inn as a sanatorium for those suffering from respiratory ailments. However, within a few years, the focus of the Desert Inn had changed, attracting a more upscale crowd, notably the Hollywood elite.

By the 1920s, thanks to "Mother Coffman," Palm Springs had become a major destination for the wealthy. She was the true originator of Palm Springs tourism.

The Desert Inn was notable for its charming bungalows and beautiful landscaping. The Tahquitz Ditch, an

irrigation channel started by the native Cahuilla Indians, ran through the property. Guests could traverse the soothing running water over several rustic bridges.

In 1939, Coffman was named honorary president of the Palm Springs Woman's Club in the year of its genesis. In appreciation for all she had done for Palm Springs, the club turned out in 1947 to celebrate Nellie Coffman Day.

Following her death in 1950, the Desert Inn changed hands, and eventually was razed and replaced with the Desert Fashion Plaza. Recently, that too was razed to make way for the current downtown redevelopment.

The city park, designed by Rios Clemente Hale Studios, will stand in the center. Additionally, we understand that the gates of the Desert Inn are still extant and hopefully could be a historical element that would connect the proposed park to its historical precedent.

We trust that the city will take advantage of this extraordinary opportunity to connect visitors and residents alike to the storied history of the Desert Inn, which played a pivotal role in making Palm Springs a world-renowned resort destination.

To honor the universally loved and true Palm Springs pioneer, we ask the city to name the park in honor of Nellie Coffman.

Email Erik Rosenow, president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, at [erikrosenow@yahoo.com](mailto:erikrosenow@yahoo.com).



June 9, 2017

Honorable Robert Moon  
Mayor, City of Palm Springs  
3200 E. Tahquitz Canyon Way  
Palm Springs, CA 92262

Dear Mayor Moon,

The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation applauds the city's public outreach regarding the program for the proposed downtown park.

In December of 2012, and in July of 2015, the *Desert Sun* newspaper published articles about the historical elements removed in the years leading up to the demolition of the Fashion Plaza (i.e., the Nellie Coffman star and the County of Riverside plaque commemorating the Desert Inn). As reported in those articles, the city manager and Wessman Development principals assured the public that those elements would be re-incorporated into the downtown redevelopment scheme. We ask you to ensure that those promises be kept.



September 10, 2018

**HAND-DELIVERED**

Dr. David Ready, City Manager  
City of Palm Springs  
3200 E. Tahquitz Canyon Way  
Palm Springs, CA 92262

Dear Dr. Ready,

The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation (PSPF) applauds the city's recent progress on the design of the Downtown Park and Rios Design Studio's (RDS) expert assistance in accomplishing that goal. While previously RDS has included the Desert Inn gates in their design, the latest RDS design has no historic element.

**Therefore, we ask that Rios Design Studio be directed by your office to identify an area for an historic element in the Downtown Park.**

PSPF would like to partner with the city to create this area of the park that pays respect to the Desert Inn and Nellie Coffman. Together, along with the talents of RDS, we can have a lasting and beautiful tribute in the park. Examples abound of similar memorials in parks across the United States. RDS will have no problem designing a fitting memorial.

The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation will commit to providing up to \$10,000 towards costs associated with the physical elements, which may still include the famed Desert Inn gates.

Further, we remain committed to having the park named for "Mother" Nellie Coffman and will be meeting with council members to discuss this in the coming weeks.

If you require any additional information, please contact PSPF board member Steven Keylon at (760) 837-7117 or by email at info@pspreservationfoundation.org.

Sincerely,

Gary Johns  
President, PSPF

Copy to:  
Palm Springs City Council (Room 100)  
Rios Design Studio, LLC  
*Desert Sun* newspaper

(760) 837-7117

historically named its parks after its illustrious female pioneers (e.g., Ruth and Frances Stevens Park) and it seems fitting to continue that tradition. We strongly suggest that the new park be named after Nellie Coffman, owner of the Desert Inn and one of the city's most notable philanthropists. Additionally, we suggest that the gates of the Desert Inn are still extant and could be a historical element to connect the proposed park to its historical precedent.

The city will take advantage of this extraordinary opportunity to connect the new park to the storied history of the Desert Inn which played a pivotal role in making Palm Springs a world-renowned resort destination.

For any additional information, please contact PSPF board member Steven Keylon at (760) 837-7117 or by email at info@pspreservationfoundation.org.

Council members (Foat, Roberts, Kors and Mills)  
City of Palm Springs, CA 92262

5 East Palm Canyon Drive, Suite 110-195, Palm Springs, CA 92264  
• info@pspreservationfoundation.org • www.pspreservationfoundation.org

# Preservationists push for Coffman presence

## Downtown park, event space planned

By Skip Descant  
The Desert Sun

It's not just the Aluminaire House and the gigantic statue of Marilyn Monroe that should be given a spot in the Palm Springs' new downtown park and event space, preservation-

ists say.

The "Mother of Palm Springs" deserves a spot of prominence, too, said Gary Johns, a vice-president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation who also chairs the Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board.

One of the city's most prominent early residents was Nellie Coffman, who opened the Desert Inn in 1909 at the corner of Tahquitz Canyon Way and Palm Canyon Drive. The early California Spanish Mediterranean-style hotel was the epicenter of life in Palm Springs. The hotel was demolished in 1966. Later, a Bank of America building took up residence on the site.

And today, the corner is part of a massive 14-acre redevelopment of downtown, where the former Desert Fashion Plaza mall was located. A giant crane that is being used to construct a new 155-room hotel is sitting about where Coffman's Desert Inn once operated.

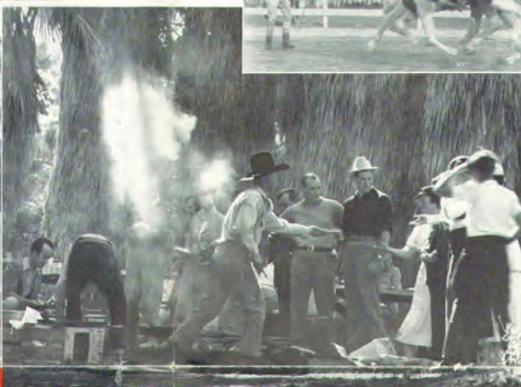
"The Desert Inn hotel ... the

Please see COFFMAN, 6A



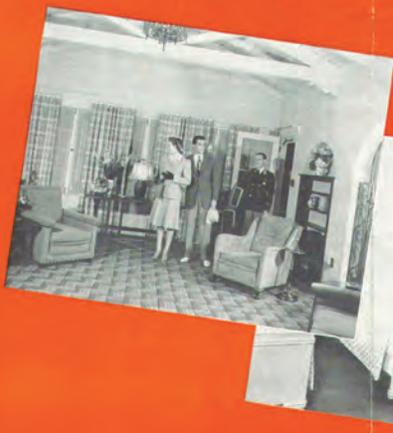
# Life at the **DESERT INN**

33 years under the original ownership and management of Nellie N. Coffman, Earl Coffman and George Roberson



**F**OR 33 YEARS America's foremost desert resort, The Desert Inn provides every facility for rest and recreation. Delightful accommodations . . . delicious food. 35-acre park, including tennis and badminton courts, archery, croquet, outdoor warm-water swimming pool, sun cabinets, outdoor private school for children; nine-hole all-grass golf course adjoins grounds. Miles of scenic bridle paths. Privileges of Palm Springs Skeet Club available to Desert Inn guests.

The colorful outdoor life of picnicking and barbecues plays a major role on the desert. The Desert Inn's outdoor cowboy host arranges outings several times a week to scenic spots on the desert . . . for a delicious luncheon under the palms as cowboys sing . . . or the moonlight magic of a campfire after dark . . . the exhilaration of a breakfast ride through fresh early morning. The Inn owns and operates Camp Carrizo, Sheep Horn Corral and Camp Piñon, all beautifully situated, for the exclusive use of guests at outdoor affairs. Bridge parties, teas, concerts, games, lectures are all part of the interesting program planned by the social director. Weekly dinner dances strike a festive note for the winter colony. You'll enjoy Life, Health and Happiness at The Desert Inn.



# 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 Coffman's purchased a 1¾ 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.

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.

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."

# Your Carefree Holiday... at the Desert Inn

Nowhere in all the world is a vacation — fall, winter or spring — more enjoyable, more carefree than at The Desert Inn in Palm Springs. The crystal air is exhilarating, refreshing to body and spirit. The long hours of sunshine beckon you outdoors. The cool, starlit nights bring restful sleep. Average noonday temperature from October to June is 81 degrees. Average nighttime temperature 45 degrees. There is no fog or smog. The Desert Inn gives you all the privacy of a 35-acre estate with every sport under the sun within walking distance. Swimming, tennis, badminton, archery, croquet and shuffleboard are enjoyed on The Inn grounds. Good saddle horses are available nearby. For golfers, an all-grass 9-hole course adjoins The Inn and two 18-hole courses are less than 15 minutes away. Yet just outside the gates is the center of this famous and picturesque village — fashionable shops; theatres; night clubs. And in every direction is the endless vista of the desert; and fascinating contrast, snow-capped mountains towering in the warm golden sun.



**PALM  
SPRINGS  
PRESERVATION  
FOUNDATION**

**OUR MISSION:** The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation is a non-profit organization whose mission is "to educate and promote public awareness of the importance of preserving the historical resources and architecture of the city of Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley area."

[www.pspreservationfoundation.org](http://www.pspreservationfoundation.org)

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