

**Inspiration Point  
a.k.a.  
The Promontory**

**West Chino Drive  
Palm Springs, CA 92262**

**Nomination Application  
for City of Palm Springs  
Class 1 Historic Site**



**Prepared by  
Steve Vaught  
for the  
Palm Springs Preservation Foundation  
December 2018**

# *Acknowledgements*

The author gratefully wishes to thank the following individuals/organizations for their professional expertise and/or editing assistance:

Barbara and Ron Marshall; Tracy Conrad; Steven Keylon; Rene Brown, Palm Springs Historical Society



**Above: Stacked stone wall detail.**

**Front cover: Inspiration Point as seen from the O'Donnell Golf Course.**

**(Both, author photos, November 2018)**

# **INSPIRATION POINT**

## **Class 1 Historic Site Nomination**

### **Table of Contents**

INTRODUCTION: PAGE 3

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: PAGE 4

CLASS 1 HISTORIC SITE DESIGNATION APPLICATION FORM: PAGE 6

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: PAGE 10

BACKGROUND/HISTORIC CONTEXT: PAGE 35

EVALUATION FOR CLASS 1 SITE DESIGNATION: PAGE 36

INTEGRITY ANALYSIS: PAGE 37

#### **APPENDICES**

I	Assessor Maps
II	Thomas A. O'Donnell Biography
III	Nathan F. Milnor Biography
IV	Frank C. Dougherty Biography



**Inspiration Point showing its position above the O'Donnell Golf Course. The clubhouse, formerly O'Donnell's "Golf House," is seen below.**  
(Courtesy Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce)

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation (PSPF) 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."

In July of 2018, the PSPF board of directors assigned the task of writing Inspiration Point's Class 1 Historic Site nomination to Steve Vaught.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## **SIGNIFICANCE:**

Inspiration Point, also known as the Promontory, (hereinafter referred to as “Inspiration Point”) is one of the Coachella Valley’s most visible landmarks. Located on the lower slopes of Mount San Jacinto above the O’Donnell Golf Course, Inspiration Point was constructed during the years 1934-1935. It is a physical representative of the legacy of Thomas Arthur O’Donnell (1870-1945), one of the most significant figures in the history and development of Palm Springs. Inspiration Point and the circumstances surrounding its construction place it in the historic context of “Palm Springs Between the Wars (1919-1941).” This was the period in which Thomas A. O’Donnell was most active in the community, making meaningful contributions to Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley, a number of which may still be felt today.

## **DESIGNATION CRITERIA:**

Inspiration Point has been flagged as a historic site as early as 1979 when it was included for designation as one of 10 historic sites deemed worthy of preservation by the city of Palm Springs’ Historic Site Preservation Board. It is also included again in the HSPB’s 1987 list as well as in the draft 2015 Citywide Historic Resources Survey.

A summary of the evaluation contained in this nomination is as follows:

8.05.020 (a) paragraph 1 - **Events**: This criterion recognizes properties associated with events or patterns of events or historic trends. The applicable “event” in this nomination is the Great Depression and its effect on Palm Springs. While Palm Springs overall fared better than many other places, it was not completely spared, particularly in regards to its working-class population. The nominated site is directly associated with this event, being specifically created as a “make work” project to help local citizens struggling to find work during the Depression. *Inspiration Point is associated with this event for its ability to exemplify a particular period of the national, state or local history. Therefore, Inspiration Point qualifies for listing as a Class 1 Historic Site under Criterion 1.*

8.05.020 (a) paragraph 2 - **People**: This criterion recognizes properties associated with the lives of persons who made meaningful contributions to national state or local history. The nominated site, Inspiration Point, was built by Thomas A. O’Donnell, a figure of international standing in the petroleum industry and a significant figure in the history and development of Palm Springs. O’Donnell’s influence extended over tourism, golf, economic development, and the day-to-day well-being of its residents, no matter their social, racial or economic circumstances. Inspiration Point is associated with Thomas A. O’Donnell, a person who had influence in national, state and local history. *Therefore, Inspiration Point qualifies for listing as a Class 1 Historic Site under Criterion 2.*

## **SUMMARY:**

This evaluation finds Inspiration Point eligible for listing as a Palm Springs Historic Site under 8.05.020 (a) paragraphs 1 & 2 of the local ordinance’s seven criteria.



**Thomas Arthur "Tom" O'Donnell, (1870-1945).**  
(Courtesy ancestry.com)



# CITY OF PALM SPRINGS

**Department of  
Planning Services**  
3200 East Tahquitz Canyon Way, Palm  
Springs, CA 92262  
Telephone: 760-323-8245  
Fax: 760-322-8360

---

---

## **HISTORIC SITE DESIGNATION**

The City of Palm Springs allows for the local designation of historic buildings, sites or districts within the City (Section 8.05 of the Palm Springs Municipal Code.) This application packet is to be completed in order to request a historic designation. For additional information, please contact the Department of Planning Services at 760-323-8245 or [planning@palmsspringsca.gov](mailto:planning@palmsspringsca.gov).

### **APPLICATION**

The completed application and required materials may be submitted to the Department of Planning Services. The submittal will be given a cursory check and will be accepted for filing only if the basic requirements have been met. A case planner will be assigned to the project and will be responsible for a detailed review of the application and all exhibits to ensure that all required information is adequate and accurate. Incomplete applications due to missing or inadequate information will not be accepted for filing. Applicants may be asked to attend scheduled meetings pertaining to their project. These will include the Historic Site Preservation Board (HSPB) and the City Council.

### **HISTORIC SITE PRESERVATION BOARD (HSPB)**

Once the application has been determined to be complete, the HSPB will review the application to determine whether the site meets the minimum qualifications for designation pursuant to Chapter 8.05 of the Palm Springs Municipal Code. If such determination is made, a public hearing will be scheduled for a future meeting.

A public hearing will be held by the HSPB to receive testimony from all interested persons concerning the Historic Site Designation. The public hearing may be continued from time to time, and upon complete consideration, the HSPB will make a recommendation to the City Council. Notice will be provided as indicated below.

### **CITY COUNCIL**

After receiving the recommendation of the Historic Site Preservation Board, a public hearing will be held by the City Council to receive testimony from all interested persons concerning the requested Historic Site Designation. The public hearing may be continued from time to time, and upon complete consideration, the City Council will then conditionally approve, deny, or approve the application as submitted. The City Council's decision on the application is final.

### **NOTIFICATION**

Prior to consideration of the application by the HSPB and the City Council, a notice of public hearing for an Historic Site Designation request will be mailed to all property owners within 400 feet of the subject property a minimum of ten (10) days prior to the hearing dates.



**Office Use Only**

Date:
Case No.
HSPB No.
Planner:

**CITY OF PALM SPRINGS  
Department of Planning Services**

**HISTORIC SITE DESIGNATION APPLICATION**

**TO THE APPLICANT:**

Your cooperation in completing this application and supplying the information requested will expedite City review of your application. Application submitted will not be considered until all submittal requirements are met. Staff may require additional information depending upon the specific project. Please submit this completed application and any subsequent material to the Department of Planning Services.

This form is to be used to nominate individual properties for Class 1 or 2 historic designations, or to nominate the formation of historic districts. Applicants are encouraged to review two bulletins from the US Department of Interior for additional information:

- “How to Complete National Register of Historic Places Registration Form” (National Register Bulletin 16A / <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb16a/>); and
- “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation” (National Register Bulletin 15; <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb15/>).

Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions in the Bulletins.

**1. Property Information**

Historic name: Inspiration Point  
 Other names: The Promontory; O'Donnell Promontory; O'Donnell's Lookout; Sosomomo  
 Address: Western terminus of West Chino Drive, Palm Springs, CA 92262  
 Assessor Parcel Numbers: 513-070-006 and 505-312-007 (See Appendix I)  
 Owner Name: Old Las Palmas Point, LLC  
 Owner's Address: P.O. Box 1573  
 City: Rancho Mirage, CA 92270  
 Telephone:  
 Fax number:  
 E-mail address:



---

**5. Criteria (Fill all boxes that apply for the criteria qualifying the property for listing.)**

---

**Events**

■ (1) Fill this box if the property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

**Persons**

■ (2) Fill this box if the property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

**Architecture**

(3) Fill this box if the property reflects or exemplifies a particular period of national, State or local history, or

(4) Fill this box if the property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or

(5) Fill this box if the property represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or

(6) Fill this box if the property represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

**Archeology**

(7) Fill this box if the property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Other Criteria Considerations (Check all the boxes that apply.)

the property is owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes

the property has been removed from its original location

the property is a birthplace

the property is a grave or cemetery

the property is a reconstructed building, object, or structure

the property is commemorative

the property is less than 50 years of age or has achieved significance within the past 50 years

---

## 6. Statement of Significance

---

### Summary

Inspiration Point is located on a mountainside eminence several hundred feet above the O'Donnell Golf Course in central Palm Springs. Access to the site (presently gated off) is by way of a 2,100-foot private road that begins at the western terminus of West Chino Drive in the Old Las Palmas neighborhood. Inspiration Point's prominent position on the mountainside has made it one of the village's most notable landmarks from the time of its construction in the mid-1930s. The Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce lists queries about Inspiration Point among the organization's most frequently asked questions.

The property of the nominated site consists of two separate parcels. The principal parcel encompasses 30.82 acres or 1,342,519 square feet. Its legal description is 30.82 ACRES IN POR LOT 1 MB 018/050 AMD MAP PALM SPRINGS.

The second parcel consists of a strip of access road to the principal parcel. The lot size is .0177 acres or 7,720 square feet. The legal description for this parcel is POR SE ¼ OF SEC 10 T4S R4E FOR TOTAL DESCRIPTION SEE ASSESSOR'S MAPS.

Inspiration Point was constructed between 1934-1935, although there is evidence that work continued on the project till 1940.



**A Google Earth view of Inspiration Point showings relation to the O'Donnell Golf Course.  
(Courtesy Google Earth)**

## **First Owner, Thomas Arthur O'Donnell**

Thomas A. "Tom" O'Donnell (1870-1945) was a towering figure both in the petroleum industry as well as his winter home of Palm Springs. During his two decades in the desert, O'Donnell, along with his wife, Dr. Winifred Willis Jenney, made notable contributions to village life both socially and civically, doing much to aid Palm Springs' growth from modest country village into world-class resort (see full O'Donnell biography in Appendix II).

## **Construction of Inspiration Point**



**A view of Inspiration Point looking north towards Old Las Palmas showing stone retaining wall topped with perimeter wall incised with triangular openings.**

**(Author photo. November 2018)**

In 1933, the United States and the entire world were paralyzed by the global economic collapse known as the Great Depression. In 1929, before the October stock market crash shattered the world economy, the U.S. unemployment rate stood at 3.2%. Three years later it had risen to 24.9%, the highest recorded rate in U.S. history, with virtually every corner of the country affected. Palm Springs had fared better than most owing to its continued popularity with the wealthy, but that did not mean the region was not adversely affected. Tourism had dropped considerably and new building and civic programs had

virtually ground to a halt. These factors brought great distress to the valley's working classes, which were made up mostly of Native Americans and Hispanics.



**Detail of waist-high perimeter wall with triangular openings. View is to the southeast.**  
(Author photo. November 2018)

By this time, Tom O'Donnell had been a fixture of village life for nearly a decade. A man of tremendous personal wealth, O'Donnell had not hesitated to open his wallet for the benefit of the community if other sources were not available. His generosity ranged from the large scale, such as financing the extensive expansion of the Desert Inn with a loan of \$300,000, to the modest, such as purchasing a group of trash cans to help keep Main Street (now Palm Canyon Drive) clean.

In spite of his wealth and social prominence, O'Donnell never lost sight of those who were not as well off. O'Donnell himself had been born of modest circumstances and throughout his life he found as much pleasure in his associations with oil workers and other laborers as he did with presidents of the United States and captains of industry.

As the effects of the Great Depression wreaked havoc throughout the country and to the working citizens of his beloved Palm Springs, O'Donnell looked for ways to provide relief. He felt that people didn't want handouts. They wanted work. During this time, O'Donnell witnessed the multiple steps the Roosevelt administration was taking to bring work to the

unemployed through a variety of programs such as the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) and the Civilian Conservation Corps. (C.C.C.). These initiatives were showing signs of success with the unemployment rate starting to slowly tick down after years of increase. This may have been why O'Donnell decided to embark on what one writer called "his own personal W.P.A. project."

Beginning in May of 1934, O'Donnell set in motion an ambitious construction project designed to provide desperately needed jobs for local workers. The plan was to create a large, flat building pad on the mountainside several hundred feet above his Desert Golf Course. O'Donnell owned much of the mountainside between West Tahquitz Canyon Way and West Alejo Road and it was where his Ojo del Desierto estate had been built in 1925.

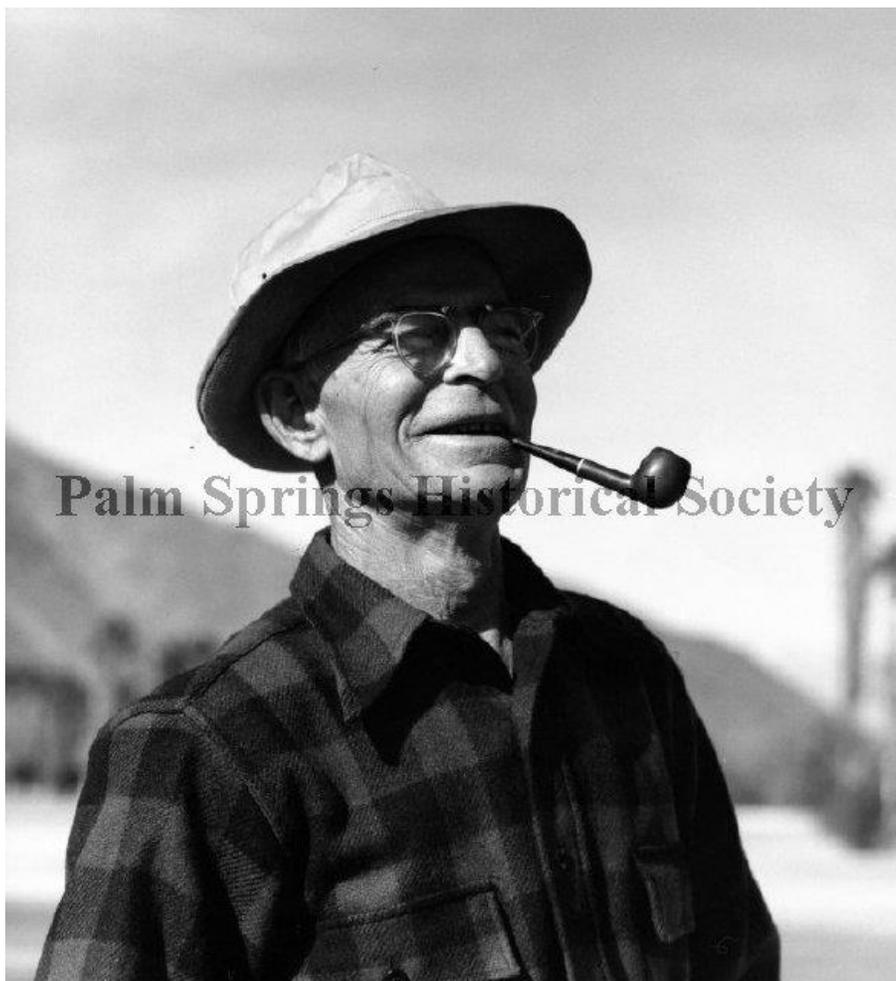


**A view of the construction of the retaining wall for Ojo del Desierto. 1925. The technique and design would be repeated almost identically for the construction of Inspiration Point.**  
(Courtesy Tracy Conrad)

The concept of the pad was virtually identical in scope to that which was created for the construction of Ojo del Desierto, nearly a decade earlier. Like the earlier project, a building pad would have to be created virtually from scratch by leveling a large section of mountain slope. And, like the earlier project, there was no natural access to the site so a road would have to be built as well.

On the Ojo del Desierto project, the road had been as difficult to create as the pad itself. On the new project, the road was going to have to be considerably longer, an estimated 2,100 feet, running from the terminus of West Chino Drive upwards and across the mountain slope to the pad.

O'Donnell placed his trusted friend John Kline in charge of the effort, which the Desert Sun called "one of the most monumental projects ever undertaken here." Kline began his association with O'Donnell as chauffeur, but over time he was entrusted with greater responsibilities. In 1927, O'Donnell installed Kline and his family in the Ojo del Desierto gate lodge at 421 West Alejo Road (today's Committee of 25 clubhouse) after naming him as manager of his Desert (O'Donnell) Golf Course. Kline would serve ably in that position well into his 70s before retiring in 1952.



**John Kline supervised the construction of Inspiration Point.**  
(Courtesy Palm Springs Historical Society)

Kline was responsible for hiring and supervising the men on the project, which would constitute a force of approximately 20-25. At O'Donnell's instructions, the men were to be paid \$2.50 a day, which was considered a very good wage at the time. The work was grueling and continued into the heat of the summer. But the workers were grateful for having the work and to O'Donnell for providing it. "He gave a lot of people work who needed it," related Frank Reyes, one of the workers on the project. "He was a very nice man to all of us." In a 1961 interview on the history of Inspiration Point for the Desert Sun, Reyes spoke of the project, "We worked 18 hours straight sometimes," he said. "Those were the days before air-conditioning," he recalled. "The only relief in the summer was to

sleep outside at night.” Reyes also related that Kline, although he was their supervisor, “worked right along with us.”

The 1961 Desert Sun article offered a rare chance to actually learn the names of some of the talented workers who built Inspiration Point and its access road. In addition to Reyes, the article lists Luis Gutierrez, Aepimento Onopa, Victor Moreno, Merced Ortega, Jose Chacon, Manuel Fontez, Felix Torres, Manual Camarillo, George Bernal, and Alizdado Garcia, among those who toiled on the project.

The crew used picks, jackhammers and dynamite to blast away at the granite mountainside. The resulting rubble was then broken up further and sized for use on creating the retaining walls for both the road and the pad itself. Any remaining rubble was used as infill between the walls and the mountain slope.

Considering the roughness of the site and materials involved, the completed Inspiration Point gave a surprisingly graceful curving appearance that could almost be called Art Deco. To add to the architectural appeal, a waist-high perimeter wall was built featuring 105 triangular insets that ran the length of the eastern edge of the pad. As had been done with the Ojo del Desierto site, great care was taken that the construction would blend in to the mountain from which it was carved.



**Inspiration Point from the O'Donnell Golf Course.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)

The final part of the construction, and the one that has elicited the most curiosity over the ensuing decades, involved tunneling 35 feet into the mountain and blasting out a room, approximately 10-12 feet square. John Kline reportedly designed a pair of massive bronze doors for the site but they were never installed.

The purpose of this unusual room has been a topic of debate since the time of its construction as O'Donnell himself never publicly, or apparently privately, spoke of why it was built. Because of its appearance, the most obvious theory is that O'Donnell had intended it to be a crypt for himself and his wife. Why it was never actually used for the purpose has been explained that O'Donnell built the crypt before discovering it would not be legal for him to be buried there and thus the crypt has remained empty.



**Entrance to the mysterious chamber carved into the mountain as seen in 1961. Note the cross above, which had been donated by Earle C. Anthony and lighted by neon during the winter seasons.**

(Image by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio Collection. Courtesy Tracy Conrad)

This theory appeared in print as early as 1951, when the Palm Springs Villager did a story on Inspiration Point. While this may be a logical explanation, it has been challenged by Nellie Coffman's great-granddaughter, Kitty Kieley, who discounts stories of the crypt as mere rumors started by villagers "who didn't understand what O'Donnell was doing." Kieley believes the room was either intended for storage or as a garage in spite of its narrow width.



**Similar view today. Note vandalized protective metal screen.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)



**Interior of chamber showing hall towards main chamber. Note, inset on far wall matches triangular openings on the outer wall.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)

While Inspiration Point was largely completed by the fall of 1935, some construction continued at least until 1940. That year, the Desert Sun assured war-worried villagers that the blasting and dust clouds they were seeing from the hillside was not the work of enemy bombers, but only “to help in the work of finishing the road and bench project on the Thomas O’Donnell property on the commanding elevation over the Desert Golf Course.” When the road was completed, O’Donnell added a group of palm trees and cypresses to beautify the approach to Inspiration Point.

### **Post Construction**

Although O’Donnell himself stated that the project was created to give unemployed laborers badly need work during a time of great economic distress, it would seem unlikely that a businessman as savvy as O’Donnell would have launched a project without some thought of its future use. One logical explanation is that O’Donnell wanted the site so he could build a new home for himself and his wife Winifred.

Indeed, O’Donnell did wind up building a new home in 1935, but the location was below the site of Inspiration Point, directly on the golf course giving it the name of the “Golf House.” This house, which is now the O’Donnell Golf Club clubhouse, was underway around the same time Inspiration Point was still being built. Although it cannot be known with certainty, it is possible O’Donnell changed his mind about where he wanted his house midway through the project, leaving Inspiration Point empty.



**View of Inspiration Point showing its relation to O’Donnell’s Golf House. 1936.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)

It does appear that by September of 1935, O'Donnell had made up his mind that Inspiration Point and its surroundings were to become an exclusive real estate development. According to a September 27, 1935 article in the Desert Sun, John Kline was supervising a crew of workmen who were building a spur road running 500 feet out from the southern portion of Inspiration Point to a new building site. The site, "which is to be leveled, will cover about three acres, and will be one of the most picturesque and largest hillside homesites thus far developed." The article went on to state that, "It is understood there are a number of other points on the rugged mountainside above the golf course, which will be leveled and connected by roads."



**View showing the 500-foot extension road to proposed unbuilt 3-acre building pad to the south of Inspiration Point.**

(Author photo, November 2018)

Ultimately, O'Donnell did not build any other homes on the mountain side and he did not actually level the building site described in the Desert Sun article. However, below Inspiration Point, there may be seen today, several roughed out building sites that may have been part of O'Donnell's original plans for a hillside development. It should be noted that these sites, four parcels in all (which are not part of the nomination), have been for sale under the name of "Old Las Palmas Point," the same entity which presently owns Inspiration Point. The sale address is 523 North Patencio Road.



**A view looking north from Inspiration Point showing part of the four-parcel section currently for sale as building lots. These parcels are not part of the nomination.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)

The completion of Inspiration Point marked the creation of a new and highly visible landmark that drew the attention of both locals and tourists alike. In a 1953 article in the Desert Sun, columnist Phil Stone noted, “But virtually every visitor to Palm Springs stops among the Cadillacs and smart specialty shops on palm-lined Palm Canyon Drive to lift a finger and an enquiring voice in the question, ‘What’s that up there?’” Stone humorously but accurately related how hard it was to answer that seemingly simple question. “That? Oh, that’s O’Donnell’s Lookout’ ...then quickly walk away.”



**Central Palm Springs as seen from Inspiration Point.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)

## **Beyond O'Donnell**

Although he appeared in robust good health, O'Donnell was bedeviled for years by respiratory and heart problems and by the early 1940s he was making arrangements on the ultimate disposition of his estate. With regards to Palm Springs, O'Donnell moved to place his properties in the hands of friends. Among his holdings he arranged the following:

- The Desert Golf Course was given as a gift to the City of Palm Springs. However, it came with a caveat that the city had to honor a 99-year lease granted on the use of the course by the O'Donnell Golf Club. The city would not ultimately be able to take possession of the golf course until 2043.
- As Winifred did not plan to stay in the Golf House after O'Donnell's death, it was to be sold to their longstanding friends Frank "Pat" and Elsie Dougherty.
- Ojo del Desierto was sold to Nate and Virginia Milnor, old friends who had occupied the house most winters since he and Winifred settled in the Golf House in 1936.
- Inspiration Point was also sold to the Milnors.

Most of these arrangements had been finalized before O'Donnell's death at age 74 on February 21, 1945.

Virginia and Nate Milnor made no notable changes to Inspiration Point during their ownership. At the time, the drive was open to the public and it was visited by tourists arriving either by car, on foot or as part of the "Burro Train" making its way across the Skyline Trail from Tahquitz Falls. At night, according to O'Donnell Golf pro Larry Sitter and longtime resident Bill Bailey, Inspiration Point saw extensive use as a perfect "lover's lane."



**Looking south from Inspiration Point showing access road leading to the site from West Chino Drive.**  
(Author photo, 2014)

### **Music from the Mountain**

Although O'Donnell did not use Inspiration Point either as a home site or a burial crypt, he did find one novel use for the property that he thought brilliant and a great gift to the village of Palm Springs. Starting at Christmas, 1940, O'Donnell began experimenting with the idea of broadcasting music from Inspiration Point on Sunday afternoons by way of a

series of loudspeakers placed around the site. Because of the preeminent position of Inspiration Point, the music could be heard across virtually the entire village.

After receiving “much favorable comment,” from the locals, O’Donnell was encouraged to make “Music from the Mountain” a weekly Sunday afternoon feature. O’Donnell had great enthusiasm for the project, even bringing in a professional sound engineer to help with the equipment and its placement.

O’Donnell purchased the finest available equipment, an RCA studio model identical to that which had been used at the 1939 World’s Fair. The 4 loudspeakers had an undistorted output of 2,000 watts, twice that of local radio station KFXM.

After several weeks of experimentation, O’Donnell launched the first Music from the Mountain concert on Sunday, January 24, 1941, between 2-4 PM. Additionally, the speakers were used to produce a Chimes program each evening between 6-6:15 PM. The budding program was temporarily halted after O’Donnell’s February 1941 heart attack, but returned as he recovered.

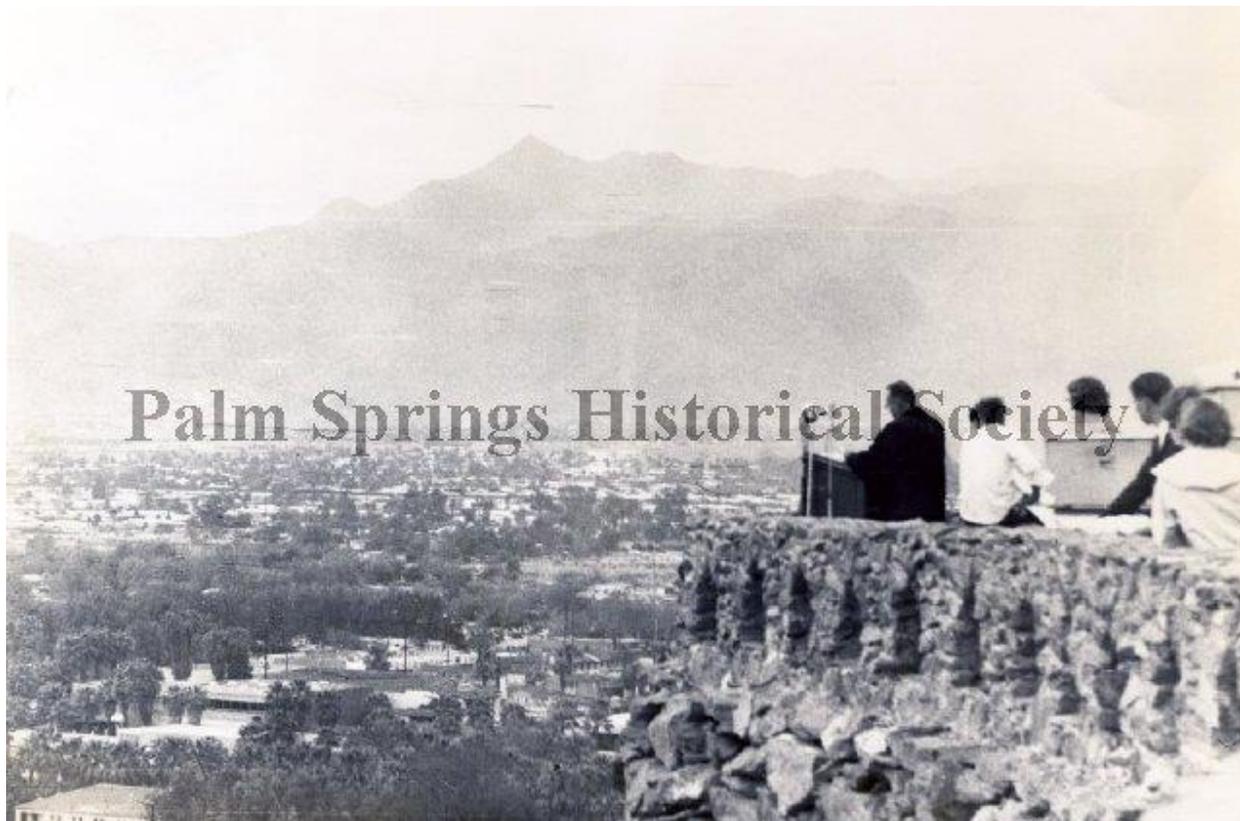
It is not clear exactly how often, and of what type of music emanated from the mountain, but the concept was not universally embraced by the citizens of Palm Springs and even during its experimenting stages there were “some complaints.” O’Donnell’s enthusiasm was undaunted and he continued to gift the village with concerts from Inspiration Point.

The Music from the Mountain program continued even after O’Donnell’s 1945 death, under the guidance of his old friend Nate Milnor, new owner of Ojo del Desierto and Inspiration Point. It appears however, that Music from the Mountain was no more popular now than it had been under O’Donnell. Dissatisfaction over what type of music should be played or whether it should be played at all was so pronounced, it led at least one local businessman, Fred Fulton, to make the controversy part of his ad campaign. One April 1945 ad for Fulton’s Menswear read in part:

THE loudspeakers  
ON the hillside  
COULD give forth  
WITH a little music.  
THE idea is not new  
AND neither  
WAS some of the music played,  
AND the kind of music  
SEEMED to grate  
ON your nerves  
SO that not too many kind words  
WERE said about hillside serenades...

Others were more proactive in their objections and, in 1946, the loudspeakers were so badly damaged by vandals it halted the planned Saturday afternoon “Western Day” concert. Although Milnor repaired the damage, Music from the Mountain, one of O’Donnell’s last gifts to Palm Springs, slowly fell into the past. The loudspeakers themselves, however, may have been repurposed for the annual Easter Sunrise services that were held for decades from Inspiration Point.

## Easter Sunrise Services (1947-1979)



(Courtesy Palm Springs Historical Society)

The tradition of Easter Sunrise services in Palm Springs began in 1917 on Sunrise Point and were conducted by the Palm Springs Presbyterian Church, forerunner of the Community Church. After Tom O'Donnell built Ojo del Desierto in 1925, he and Desert Inn owner Nellie Coffman coordinated to have the services held on the hillside below the house. Congregants would gather where they could on or around the trail leading up the hill.

The O'Donnell's also allowed attendees to use their property as well with worshipers lining the driveway leading to the house. As the site was used annually for the services, Coffman installed a large white cross on the hillside just below the O'Donnell's driveway. The choir was usually positioned below the cross. With a crowd generally between 1,000-2,000, the logistics of the services were awkward at best, but villagers continued to attend, in larger and larger numbers for decades, at least through the end of World War II. The services attracted national attention and for a number of years, they were simulcast across the country by one of the national networks.

In 1947, for the 30<sup>th</sup> annual event, the Easter Sunrise services were moved to Inspiration Point. The flat pad was more appropriate for the program and the loudspeakers, installed for the controversial Music from the Mountain, could be used to broadcast the services to the attendees gathered on the golf course below and beyond. Bleachers were built for members of the 60-person choir to help them to "see and be seen" and radio equipment

was installed to broadcast the services over station KCMJ. The local chapter of the Boy Scouts were called to duty to provide ushering services and to guard the site from any potential vandalism.



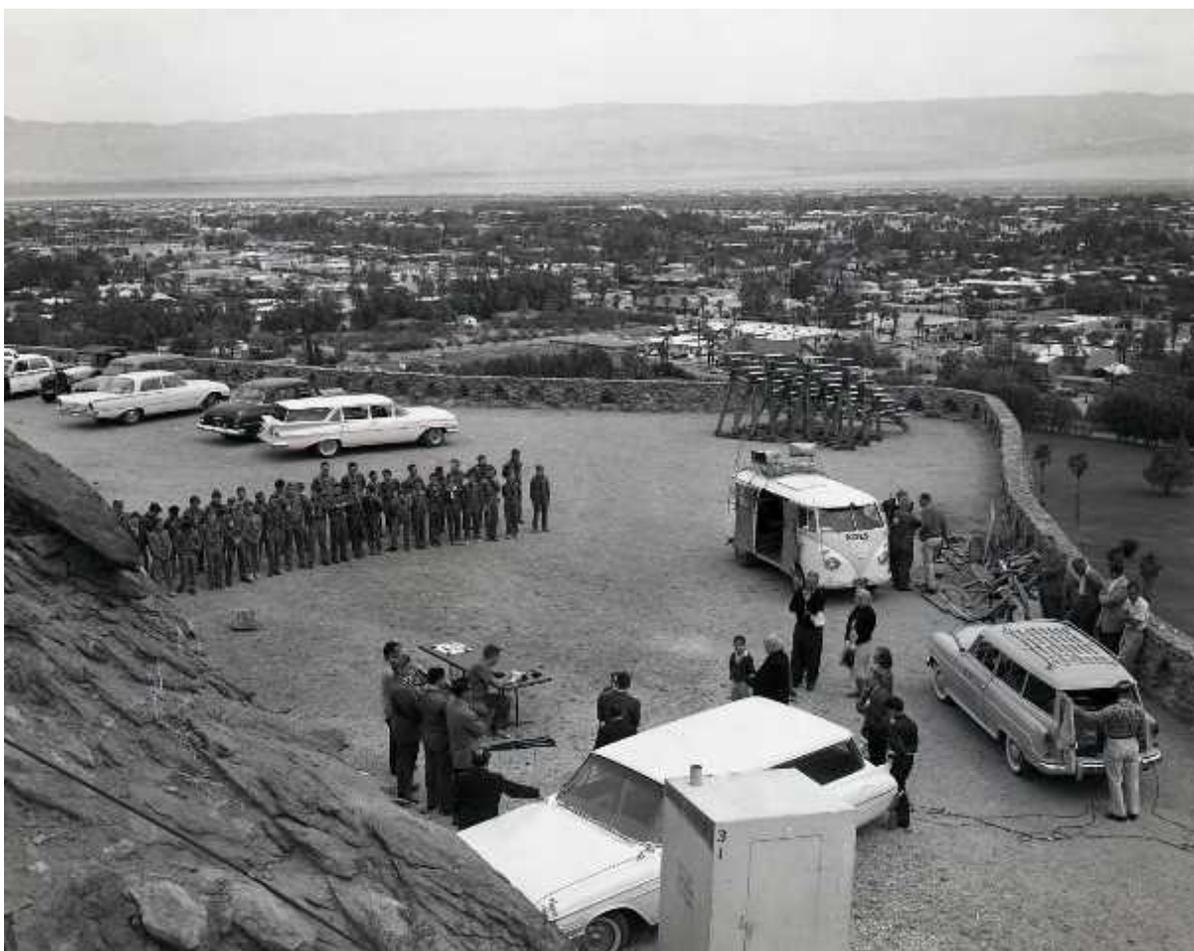
**View from the cross showing the position of the choir and organist perched at the edge of Inspiration Point ca. 1950s.**  
(Courtesy Palm Springs Historical Society)

The service, which was attended by a crowd estimated at 2,000, featured a sermon by the Community Church's Reverend John Robertson McCartney who had been conducting the services for more than a decade. A regular feature of the service was the release of 150 "white-winged birds" at the moment the sun appeared on the horizon. "These gentle creatures with unerring instinct," wrote the Desert Sun, "circle for a brief time then make off towards their home cotes." Another notable feature was the reading from "God of the Open Air," by well-known announcer Bill Hay.

Over the next decades, the Easter Sunrise service continued as a popular tradition from Inspiration Point. In 1952 the site was augmented by the addition of a large cross, 20 feet in height, which was placed on the hill directly above the building pad. Donated by famed auto dealer and Palm Springs winter resident Earle C. Anthony, the cross was originally

wooden, but after it had been knocked down several times by high winds, it was replaced by a new, sturdier redwood cross in 1955 and embedded in concrete.

The white-painted cross, which was visible for miles, was made even more noticeable by the addition of neon lighting. Appropriately, Anthony had been the one credited for introducing neon to Los Angeles in the 1920s. Throughout the winter season during the 1950s and into the 1960s, the cross was lighted at night. According to Dr. James H. Blackstone, pastor of the Community Church, the lighted cross provided so much inspiration from its perch at Inspiration Point that at least three poems had been written about it. During Easter week, the cross and Inspiration Point were guarded from vandalism by members of Boy Scout Troop 59.



**Boy Scouts lined up in formation in preparation to do their duty as ushers for the Easter Sunrise service ca. 1950s.**

(Image by Gail B. Thompson, Gayle's Studio Collection. Courtesy Tracy Conrad)

Even though it now faced competition from other sunrise services across the valley from Desert Hot springs to Rancho Mirage (and, after 1964, atop the mountain via Palm Springs Aerial Tramway), the Palm Springs Easter Sunrise service continued to draw large crowds during the 1950s-1960s, with an average attendance of some 1,500 worshipers. In 1963, it was reported that California Governor Edmund G. Brown and his family would attend the sunrise services and there was a rumor that former president

Dwight D. Eisenhower would come from Eldorado Country Club to witness the event. KCMJ, which had been broadcasting the services since the station first went on the air in 1946, continued through the 1960s, airing the program each Easter.

For the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary program in 1967, traditional favorites such as the trumpet calls at dawn, which signaled the release of 150 doves, were continued. Missing, however, was Bill Hay's annual reading of "God of the Open Air," a thirty-year tradition that was canceled due to Hay having taken a fall in his Beverly Hills home a few days earlier. However, other features continued including the service's broadcasts over KCMJ and ushering services provided by the Boy Scouts.

By the end of the 1960s, attendance at the Easter Sunrise service began to wane and what for decades had been a multi-denominational service had dwindled back down to just members of the Palm Springs Community Church. In 1978, Inspiration Point changed ownership and beginning in 1980 Easter Sunrise services were relocated to a different part of the O'Donnell Golf Course.



**Looking north towards Inspiration Point from the hillside below Ojo del Desierto, where Easter services were held through 1946.**  
(Author photo, 2014)

## Later Years

No formal title search was done as part of the research for this nomination. Therefore, a list of owners subsequent to Thomas A. O'Donnell is incomplete. However, several of the notable owners and sales history have been identified through other sources.

It appears that Inspiration Point was one of the properties that Tom and Winifred O'Donnell sold to their longtime friends, Nate and Virginia Milnor. It is not presently known if the sale was made after O'Donnell's death or was, like several other transfers, made while O'Donnell was still alive. Milnor was listed as owner in an article in the Desert Sun from 1946 (see Appendix III for full Milnor biography).

It further appears that after Nate Milnor's death in 1956, the property came into possession of Elsie and F.C. "Pat" Dougherty (see Appendix IV for full Dougherty biography). As had the Milnors before them, the Doughertys paid the electric bill for the neon-lighted cross. Dr. James H. Blackstone, pastor of the Community Church noted the inter-faith ramifications, "Two Catholics cooperating with a Protestant church to keep the cross lit."

However, even with the cross regularly maintained by the Community Church, the cross faced damage from both high winds and frequent vandalism. In 1965, there was an effort to enclose the neon in plexiglass to help it survive the heavy gusts. The cross continued to be lighted throughout the winter seasons during the 1950s-1960s.

In 1978, Inspiration Point was purchased by Jack Adamson. After the purchase, Inspiration Point was no longer used for the Easter Sunrise services. Adamson ultimately dismantled the cross as well, claiming it was a magnet for vandals. Adamson did not make any notable changes to the property and in 1986 he put it up for sale for \$2.5 million, considered a very pricy property at the time.

Further information on Inspiration Point's sales/ownership history in this period is sketchy. It was put on the market in 1997 but delisted in 1999. It was put up for sale in 2007 and again in 2009, this time by owners Brent and Beth Harris. The Harris's' put the property on the market for \$2.5 million. No buyers came forward and in 2011, the property was relisted at \$1.495 million.

## Current Owners

In February, 2018, the property was purchased for an undisclosed amount to Old Las Palmas Point, LLC. According to an article in the Desert Sun, Old Las Palmas Point, LLC, an entity associated with Brian Foster Designs. The purchase comprised a total of 35 acres including the 30.82-acre parcel that contains Inspiration Point. The article quoted a representative for Old Las Palmas Point, LLC, Scott Lyle, who stated that the owner had not yet decided whether or not they would develop the property. "The owner purchased this property," wrote Lyle in an e-mail to the Desert Sun, due to its spectacular setting and exclusivity. They intend to manage it carefully, being sensitive to the natural hillside terrain. If they decide to develop it, they will respectfully follow any required process."

However, the Desert Sun article further noted that both the Brian Foster Designs website and the website [www.oldlaspalmaspoint.com](http://www.oldlaspalmaspoint.com) each reference plans for 5 luxurious residences – 4 to be built on 2-acre pads and a 5<sup>th</sup>, at Inspiration Point. The website is password protected, but the Desert Sun was able to access it through a cached copy.

### **Site Description**

Location. Inspiration Point is located approximately 400 feet above the O’Donnell Golf Course on a high eminence along the lower slopes of Mount San Jacinto. The site is bounded on the east by the golf course and on the west, it backs up against the steep mountainside. To the south is more mountainside and to the immediate north is the set of four parcels described earlier with the collective address of 523 North Patencio Road.



**Looking north showing extent of stonework.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)



**General view looking south.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)



**Looking south showing wall structure.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)



**Detail of central bow of Inspiration Point looking east.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)



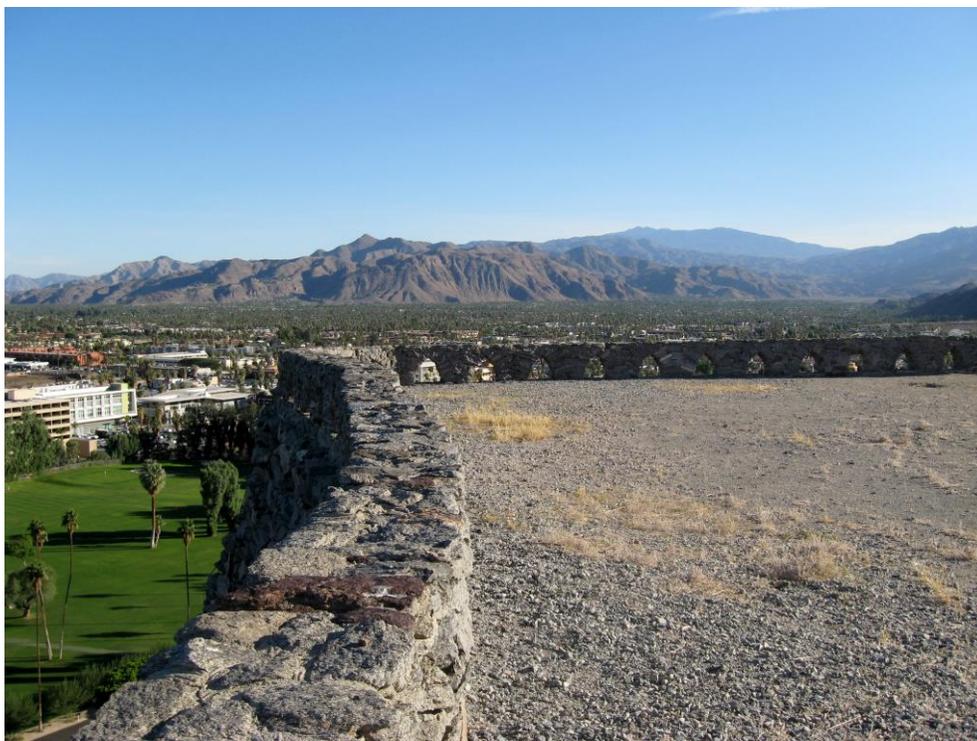
**Entrance to Inspiration Point from access road.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)



**Looking north.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)



**Entrance to chamber.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)



**Looking south showing center bow.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)



**General view looking south.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)



**Detail of stonework with triangular opening.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)



**Inspiration Point southern entrance looking north.**  
(Author photo, November 2018)

## BACKGROUND / HISTORIC CONTEXT

The relatively short history of Palm Springs can be organized into several distinct periods, as defined by the Historic Resources Group's Citywide Historic Context Statement & Survey Findings. These include the following:

- Native American Settlement to 1969
- Early Development (1884-1918)
- Palm Springs Between the Wars (1919-1941)
- Palm Springs During World War II (1939-1945)
- Post World War II Palm Springs (1945-1969)

It is within the context of the period "Palm Springs Between the Wars" that Inspiration Point will be evaluated. The following context statement is edited from the Historic Resource Group's *Citywide Historic Context Statement and Survey Findings*:

**Palm Springs Between the Wars (1919-1941):** This context explores the transformation of Palm Springs from a modest spa town into a luxury winter resort in the years between the First and Second World Wars. By 1918 Nellie Coffman and her sons, George Roberson and Earl Coffman, understood the town's potential, not as a health spa for asthmatics and consumptives, but as an exclusive winter resort for the well-to-do, and set about transforming their sanatorium into the luxurious Desert Inn, one of the most renowned hostelries in the country. Their success inspired the development of two equally spectacular hotels in the 1920s and cemented the town's growing reputation as one of the country's premier luxury winter resorts. The Oasis Hotel, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Jr. (known as Lloyd Wright) opened in 1925 by Pearl McCallum McManus; and the grand Hotel El Mirador, designed by Walker and Eisen in a sumptuous Spanish Colonial Revival style and opened in 1927.

Automobile tourism played an early and important part of the success and growth of Palm Springs as a destination. In 1914, highway bonds were passed in Riverside County for extensive road improvements and construction of new routes. As part of these efforts, the highway connecting Los Angeles and Palm Springs was completed in October 1916. Pavement of the highway through to Indio was completed in 1924, allowing travelers to drive all the way from Los Angeles to Palm Springs in less than 4 hours, all on paved roads. The first residential subdivisions were recorded in the early 1920s on tracts largely concentrated on land immediately surrounding the existing village and the resorts. Several tracts were subdivided by Prescott T. Stevens, along with other prominent early Palm Springs settlers including Pearl McManus, Raymond Cree, and Harriet Cody.

In the 1920s, business tycoons, industrialists, and other wealthy businessmen, along with the Hollywood elite, discovered the desert and began to transform Palm Springs into an international resort. While the movie stars primarily stayed at the resort hotels when visiting Palm Springs, other wealthy residents and seasonal visitors started building architect-designed estates and drawing increased attention to the growing resort town. Wealthy capitalists who came to Palm Springs in the 1920s include King Camp Gillette; Carrie Humphrey Birge; widow of George K. the wallpaper and Pierce-Arrow magnate; businessman and philanthropist William Mead; Frederick W. Stevens of the American

Locomotive Company; Chicago capitalist John Burnham; steel magnate Louis R. Davidson; and cereal king S.K. Kellogg.

Out of all the prominent businesspeople who began wintering in Palm Springs starting in the 1920s, none had a more pronounced and lasting impact on the community than Thomas A. O'Donnell. One of the "Big Four," of California oilmen, O'Donnell began wintering in Palm Springs at an unknown date, but by the mid-1920s he was already considered a community leader. It was O'Donnell who loaned Nellie Coffman the necessary capital to expand and modernize her Desert Inn, which would have a transformational effect on the fortunes of Palm Springs. In 1925, while the Desert Inn was being rebuilt under the designs of William Charles Tanner, O'Donnell constructed a home for himself and his wife, Dr. Winifred Willis Jenney, on the mountainside overlooking the Inn and all of Palm Springs. Appropriately named Ojo del Desierto (Eye of the Desert, the house became, and remains, one of the Coachella Valley's most visible landmarks.

During the 1920s, O'Donnell made further land purchases in the vicinity including the acreage to the north and northeast of Ojo del Desierto running to West Alejo Road as its northern boundary and Belardo Road as its eastern border. This included the steep mountainside as well as 33-acres of flat land which he converted, at a cost estimated at over \$200,000 into the first full-sized golf course in Palm Springs. Named the Desert Golf Course, it was originally a private course restricted exclusively for the O'Donnell's and their friends, but within a few years, O'Donnell began opening it up to Desert Inn guests and others. O'Donnell's course started and nurtured Palm Springs' ultimate reputation as one of the world's great golf destinations.

When the Great Depression hit after the stock market crash of October, 1929, Palm Springs was able to weather the disaster better than most other parts of the nation owing to its enduring popularity with well-off visitors who still had enough money to continue "wintering" in the desert. However, the village and the valley were not completely spared and parts of the economy were severely hit with a drop in tourism and an almost complete shut down of construction projects. The village's working class, which was made up mostly of Hispanic and Native Americans, were hit the hardest by this drop. O'Donnell, recognizing their struggle, created a "make work" project in the form of Inspiration Point. That and several other O'Donnell-funded building projects, helped many otherwise unemployed laborers to make their way through the crisis.

## **EVALUATION:**

**Criterion 1:** Significant Event. To qualify for listing under this criterion, a property must represent one of the earliest built structures in the city's history. Resources from this period are associated with Anglo-American settlers of Agua Caliente, the founding of the town called Palm Springs, and its subsequent development into a winter health spa and tourist destination. Resources eligible under this theme may include buildings (residential and commercial), ancillary structures, infrastructure, or other remnant features.

*Criterion 1* recognizes properties associated with events or patterns of events or historic trends. The applicable "event" in this nomination is the Great Depression and its effect on Palm Springs. While Palm Springs overall fared better than many other places, it was not

completely spared, particularly in regards to its working-class population. The nominated site is directly associated with this event, being specifically created as a “make work” project to help local citizens struggling to find work during the Depression. *Inspiration Point is associated with this event for its ability to exemplify a particular period of the national, state or local history. **Hence, the site qualifies for listing as a Class 1 Historic Site on the local registry under Criterion 1.***

**Criterion 2: Significant Persons.** Criterion 2 recognizes properties associated with the lives of persons who made meaningful contributions to the national, state or local history. The nominated site, Inspiration Point, was built by Thomas A. O’Donnell, a figure of international standing in the petroleum industry and a significant figure in the history and development of Palm Springs. O’Donnell’s influence extended over tourism, golf, economic development, and the day-to-day well-being of its residents, no matter their social, racial or economic circumstances. Inspiration Point is associated with Thomas A. O’Donnell, a person who had influence in national, state and local history. ***Hence, the site qualifies for listing as a Class 1 Historic Site on the local registry under Criterion 2.***

---

## 7. Integrity Analysis (using U.S. Secretary of Interior Standards)

---

### INTEGRITY

Integrity is the ability of a property to convey its significance. To be listed in the local registry, a property must not only be shown to be significant under the criteria, but it also must have integrity. The evaluation of integrity is sometimes a subjective judgment, but it must always be grounded in an understanding of a property's physical features and how they relate to its significance. Historic properties either retain integrity (that is, convey their significance) or they do not.

The definition of integrity includes seven aspects or qualities. To retain historic integrity a property will always possess several, and usually most, of the aspects. The retention of specific aspects of integrity is paramount for a property to convey its significance. Determining which of these aspects are most important to a particular property requires knowing why, where, and when the property is significant. The following sections define the seven aspects and explain how they combine to produce integrity.

### LOCATION

Location is the place where an historic property was constructed or the place where an historic event occurred. The relationship between the property and its location is often important to understanding why the property was created or why something happened. The actual location of a historic property, complemented by its setting, is particularly important in recapturing the sense of historic events and persons. Except in rare cases, the relationship between a property and its historic associations is destroyed if the property is moved. ***The nominated site, Inspiration Point remains in its original location and therefore qualifies under this aspect.***

## DESIGN

Design is the combination of elements that create the form, plan, space, structure, and style of a property. It results from conscious decisions made during the original conception and planning of a property and applies to activities as diverse as community planning, engineering, architecture, and landscape architecture. Design includes such elements as organization of space, proportion, scale, technology, ornamentation, and materials. A property's design reflects historic functions and technologies as well as aesthetics. It includes such considerations as the structural system; massing; arrangement of spaces; pattern of fenestration; textures and colors of surface materials; type, amount, and style of ornamental detailing. ***The nominated site, Inspiration Point, with the exception of graffiti vandalism, remains as originally built and still readily demonstrates conscious and skillful design, most notably in the well-executed stonework of its extensive retaining walls. These elements exhibit the hand of talented craftspeople and the fact that they have survived intact for more than 80 years makes the quality of their design and construction self-evident.***

## SETTING

Setting is the physical environment of a historic property. Whereas location refers to the specific place where a property was built or an event occurred, setting refers to the *character* of the place in which the property played its historical role. It involves *how*, not just *where*, the property is situated and its relationship to surrounding features and open space. Setting often reflects the basic physical conditions under which a property was built and the functions it was intended to serve. In addition, the way in which a property is positioned in its environment can reflect the designer's concept of nature and aesthetic preferences. ***The setting of Inspiration Point continues to reflect the builder's original design relationship of site and structure.***

## MATERIALS

Materials are the physical elements that were combined or deposited during a particular period of time and in a particular pattern or configuration to form a historic property. The choice and combination of materials reveals the preferences of those who created the property and indicate the availability of particular types of materials and technologies. ***The nominated site, Inspiration Point, was built entirely from the granite of Mount San Jacinto with all rubble generated by its construction repurposed into the site itself, leaving no scarring or detritus. The untold number of individual rough-hewn stone blocks that make up the massive retaining walls of Inspiration Point and its access road were all hand sized and placed by local workmen and remain exactly as envisioned by the original builders. As such, the physical elements that expressed the design during the building's period of significance; the pattern and configuration that today forms the site survives intact.***

## WORKMANSHIP

Workmanship is the physical evidence of the crafts of a particular culture or people during any given period in history or prehistory. It is the evidence of artisans' labor and skill in

constructing or altering a building, structure, object, or site. Workmanship can apply to the property as a whole or to its individual components. It can be expressed in vernacular methods of construction and plain finishes or in highly sophisticated configurations and ornamental detailing. It can be based on common traditions or innovative period techniques. Workmanship is important because it can furnish evidence of the technology of a craft, illustrate the aesthetic principles of a historic or prehistoric period, and reveal individual, local, regional, or national applications of both technological practices and aesthetic principles. Examples of workmanship in historic buildings include tooling, carving, painting, graining, turning, and joinery. ***The workmanship of Inspiration Point is comprised of locally quarried granite that has been carefully arranged and held in place by concrete binding. More than 80 years after its initial construction, Inspiration Point continues to exhibit a high degree of contemporary period workmanship.***

## FEELING

Feeling is a property's expression of the aesthetic or historic sense of a particular period of time. It results from the presence of physical features that, taken together, convey the property's historic character. For example, a rural historic district retaining original design, materials, workmanship, and setting will relate the feeling of agricultural life in the 19th century. ***Inspiration Point is sited on a high eminence which takes advantage of panoramic views across the whole of Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley. There has been no encroachment of modern development and the panoramic views have not been blocked, allowing Inspiration Point to be observed and interpreted in the same manner it has been since 1935. Accordingly, the nominated site, Inspiration Point, retains its original integrity of feeling.***

## ASSOCIATION

Association is the direct link between an important historic event or person and a historic property. A property retains association if it is the place where the event or activity occurred and is sufficiently intact to convey that relationship to an observer. Like feeling, association requires the presence of physical features that convey a property's historic character. For example, a Revolutionary War battlefield whose natural and man-made elements have remained intact since the 18th century will retain its quality of association with the battle. Because feeling and association depend on individual perceptions, their retention alone is never sufficient to support eligibility of a property for the National Register. ***The nominated site, Inspiration Point, is a physical representation of the influence Thomas A. O'Donnell has had on Palm Springs and a direct relic of the effects of the Great Depression, which had not only a devastating impact on the world and the nation as a whole, but to a critical portion of the citizens of Palm Springs. Like numerous surviving examples of New Deal projects created by the W.P.A. and other agencies, Inspiration Point stands as a reminder of those difficult times and tangible proof of efforts to combat them. Accordingly, it continues its association with a pattern of events that have made a meaningful contribution to the community.***

INTEGRITY SUMMARY: The nominated site, Inspiration Point, still retains the original feeling and sense of place in demonstrated at the time of its original construction. The site appears to be in excellent condition due to the use of construction materials suitable for the harsh desert environment and the skill by which they were placed. This integrity analysis confirms that the nominated site, Inspiration Point, still possess all seven aspects of integrity. ***In summary, the nominated site, Inspiration Point, possesses a high degree of integrity sufficient to qualify for designation as a Class 1 Historic Site.***

---

## 8. Bibliography

---

Attached is a list of books, articles, and other sources cited or used in preparing this application and other documentation that may be relevant.

### Books

Ainsworth, Katherine. *The McCallum Saga: The Story of the Founding of Palm Springs*. Palm Springs, CA; Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1973.

Bogert, Frank. *Palm Springs First Hundred Years*. Rev. ed. Palm Springs, CA; Palm Springs Public Library, 2003.

Bright, Marjorie Belle. *Nellie's Boarding House: A Dual Biography of Nellie Coffman and Palm Springs*. Palm Springs, CA; ETA Publications, 1981.

City of Palm Springs, City Manager's Staff. *Report on the O'Donnell Golf Course*. Palm Springs, CA; City of Palm Springs, 1977.

Dean, Terry & Judy Dickenson: *O'Donnell Golf Club: Jewel of the Desert for 65 Years*. Palm Springs, CA; O'Donnell Golf Club, 2009.

*Maxwell's Los Angeles City Directory*. Los Angeles, CA; Los Angeles Directory Co, Various dates 1893-1925.

McAlester, Virginia & Lee: *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York, NY; Alfred A. Knopf. 1998.

Merchell, Anthony A. & Tracy Conrad. *Ojo del Desierto: The Thomas O'Donnell House in Palm Springs*. Palm Springs, CA; The Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn, 2009.

*Palm Springs City Directory*. Long Beach, CA; Western Directory Co., Various dates.

Smith, J. Willetts: *Smith's Directory of the City of Bradford*. Hornellsville, N.Y.; J. Willetts Smith, 1877.

Vaught, Steve. *Sentinels in Stone: Palm Springs' Historic Tennis Club Neighborhood and Its Iconic Walls*. Palm Springs, CA; Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, 2015.

Ibid. *The Committee of Twenty-Five: The First Sixty-Five Years 1948-2013*. Palm Springs, CA; Committee of Twenty-Five, 2014.

Ibid and Tracy Conrad. *Einstein Dreamt Here: The Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn*. Palm Springs, CA; The Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn, 2015.

### Magazines

“PSST – Overlooked Palm Springs Real Estate.” *Palm Springs Life*, April 29, 2009.

Windeler, Robert. “The O’Donnell Golf Club’s Groundbreaking History.” *111*, Holiday, 2005.

### Newspapers

DiPierro, Amy. “Home Designer Sketches Hillside Enclave on 35+ Acres High Above Downtown Palm Springs.” Desert Sun, March 7, 2018.

Various issues of:

Desert Sun  
Limelight  
Los Angeles Herald  
Los Angeles Times  
New York Times

### Internet Resources

Ancestry.com  
Findagrave.com  
Pschamber.org  
Realtor.com

### Other Sources Consulted

Palm Springs Historical Society  
Riverside County Assessor’s Office

---

## **9. Geographical Data**

---

Acreage of Property: 30.82 acres  
Property Boundary Description: See Appendix I

---

## **10. Prepared By**

---

Name/title: Steve Vaught

Organization: Submitted on behalf of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation  
Street address: 1775 East Palm Canyon Drive, Suite 110-195  
City: Palm Springs State: CA Zip: 92264  
Telephone: (760) 837-7117  
e-mail address: info@pspreservationfoundation.org

---

## 11. Required Documentation

---

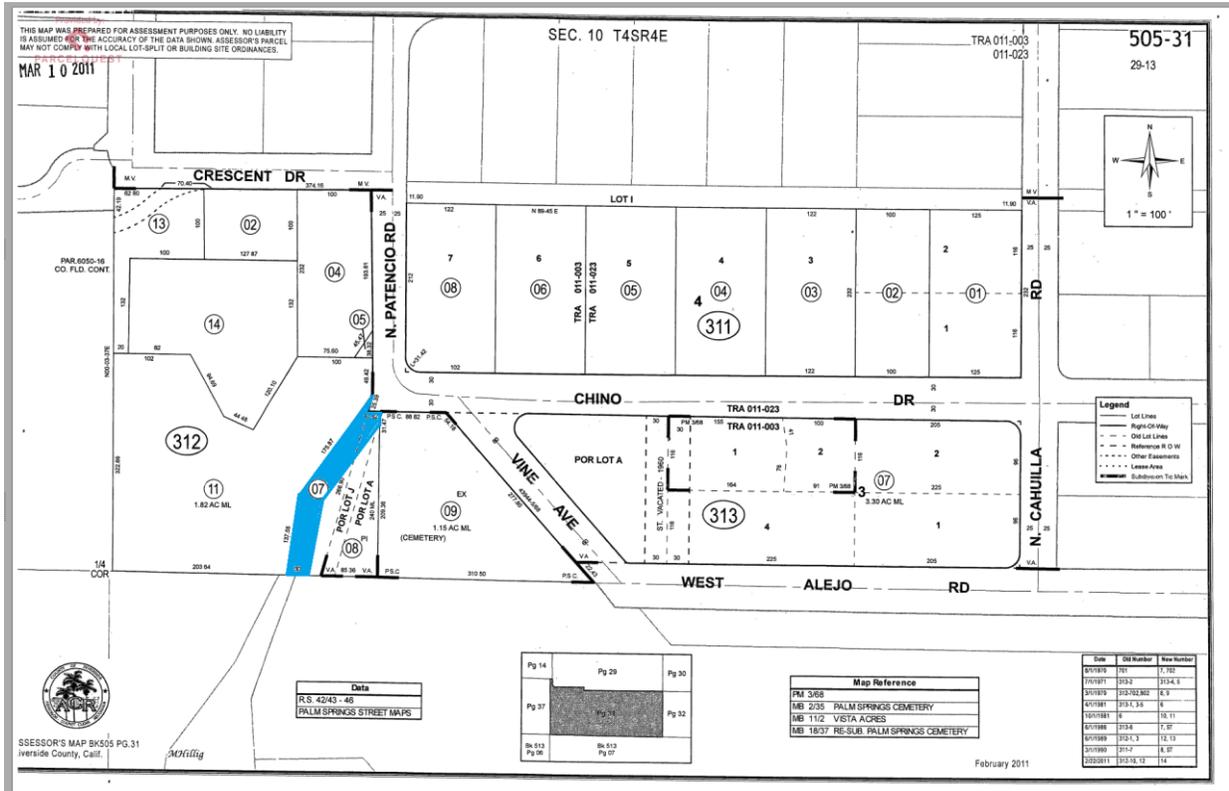
Submit the following items with the completed application form. **Do not mount any exhibits on a board.**

1. **Attachment Sheets.** Include all supplemental information based on application form above).
2. **Maps:** For Historic Districts, include a sketch map identifying the proposed district's boundaries.
3. **Photographs:** Eight (8) sets of color photographs showing each elevation of the property and its surroundings.
4. **Non-owner's Notarized Signature:** If the applicant is not the owner, a notarized affidavit shall be provided (see following page).
5. **Site Plan:** One 1/8" to 1/4" scale drawing of the site, and eight reduction copies (8 ½ x 11 inches). The site plan shall show all of the following: Property boundaries, north arrow and scale, all existing buildings, structures, mechanical equipment, landscape materials, fences, walls, sidewalks, driveways, parking areas showing location of parking spaces, and signs. **Indicate the square footage and use of each building and the date(s) of construction.**
6. **Public Hearing Labels:** Three (3) sets of typed self-adhesive labels of all property owners, lessees, and sub-lessees of record. **The labels shall include the Assessor's parcel number, owner's name and mailing address of each property with 400 feet from the exterior limits of the subject property.** Additionally, all Assessor Parcel Maps clearly indicating the 400-foot radius and a certified letter from a title company licensed to conduct business in Riverside County, California shall be submitted.

Note: If any property on this list is owned by the United States Government in trust for the Agua Caliente Indian Tribe or individual allottee, copies of notices with postage paid envelopes will be submitted to the Bureau of Indian Affairs to notify the individual Indian land owners of the public hearings.

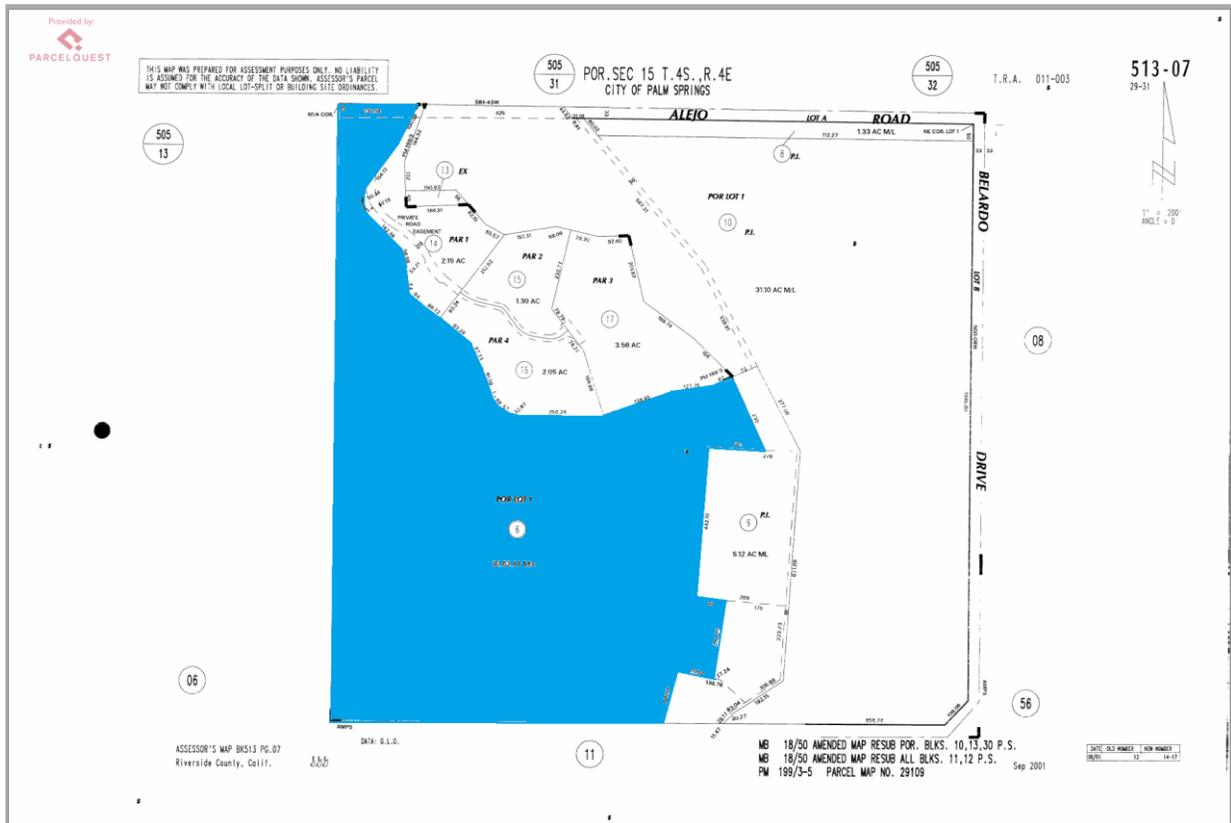
# APPENDICES

## Appendix IA Assessor Map #1



# Appendix IB

## Assessor Map #2



## **Appendix IC**

### **Additional Parcels Not Part of the Nomination**

In addition to the 2 parcels comprising the Inspiration Point nomination, there are four, 2-acre pads located below Inspiration Point with the overall address of 523 North Patencio Road. The parcels, which are not part of the proposed nomination, constitute a total of 9.12 acres. They are described as follows for the sake of clarity:

APN 513-070-014 – a 2.15-acre parcel, which contains a section of the access drive from West Chino Drive, is owned by an entity or a person(s) with a registered address of P.O. Box 1573, Rancho Mirage, CA, 92270. This is the same P.O. Box of Old Las Palmas Point LLC and Brian Foster Designs.

APN 513-070-015 – a 1.3-acre parcel, is owned by an entity or a person(s) with a registered address of P.O. Box 1573, Rancho Mirage, CA, 92270. This is the same P.O. Box of Old Las Palmas Point LLC and Brian Foster Designs.

APN 513-070-016 – is owned by an entity or a person(s) with a registered address of P.O. Box 1573, Rancho Mirage, CA, 92270. This is the same P.O. Box of Old Las Palmas Point LLC and Brian Foster Designs.

APN 513-070-017 – is owned by an entity or a person(s) with a registered address of P.O. Box 1573, Rancho Mirage, CA, 92270. This is the same P.O. Box of Old Las Palmas Point LLC and Brian Foster Designs.

## **APPENDIX II**

### **Thomas A. O'Donnell**



**Tom O'Donnell, (1870-1945).**  
(Courtesy ancestry.com)

In the history and development of Palm Springs, few have left a stronger and more lasting legacy than Thomas Arthur O'Donnell. Known simply as "Tom" to his many friends, O'Donnell first began wintering in the village in the early-1920s. Over the next twenty years, he and his wife Dr. Winifred Willis Jenney became village cornerstones, actively involved in virtually every aspect of the social and civic life of the community.

In his adopted winter home, O'Donnell brought the same skills, energy, determination, vision and enthusiasm that made him fabulously wealthy as one of the "Big Four," of the California petroleum industry. Yet, O'Donnell never arbitrarily imposed his will on the community, but rather listened more than he spoke, learning about what would serve Palm Springs best, and then using his skills to make it happen. Often, he would finance a needed project himself if no other means could be found. However, he was so reticent to draw attention to his philanthropy, many of his good deeds may never be known.

Yet what is known is exceptional. While Palm Springs might have become a success without O'Donnell it is unlikely that it would have grown so fast or so well without his gentle guidance. It was O'Donnell who facilitated the modernization of the Desert Inn, which quickly became one of the country's most famous hotels, bringing recognition and visitors to the previously-little known resort. And it was O'Donnell who first brought the game of golf to Palm Springs, for which today the region is internationally renowned.

O'Donnell was the driving force behind the Welwood Murray Memorial Library and the village's first free public health center. He donated the palm trees at the city's entrance, welcoming all to the village. He donated to innumerable charitable causes of virtually every type. He created work for the unemployed during the Great Depression and through it all, he had a great deal of fun. O'Donnell could always be counted on as a delightful and lively guest at the myriad social events held throughout the winter seasons. And through this all, he was ably and equally supported by his wife, Dr. Jenney who helped make the construction of the Palm Springs Woman's Club possible, among her many other achievements large and small.

In 1940, the Desert Sun wrote, "Palm Springs owes a debt to Tom O'Donnell it can never repay in dollars, nor would he accept it. He has been giving and giving, with no thought of recompense, but only to help the town he loves, and to give health and pleasure to others."

After Palm Springs lost its "greatest benefactor" in 1945, there were many loving tributes paid to O'Donnell. But it may have been Judge Albert R. Hoffman, who, after hearing that O'Donnell would yet again provide the funds for a worthy project, declared, "Thank God for such men as Tom O'Donnell!"

## **Early Life**

Tom O'Donnell's career in the petroleum industry may have been predestined by the circumstances of his birth. He was born Thomas Arthur O'Donnell Jr. in the northwestern Pennsylvania town of Bradford on June 26, 1870 to Thomas and Myra Parsons O'Donnell. Oil had first been discovered in Bradford in 1861, but it wasn't until 1875 that it became a major part of Bradford's economy with the 1877 *Bradford City Directory* stating "there can now be seen innumerable derricks and wells."

This was the atmosphere Tom O'Donnell grew up with and, while it is presently unknown what profession his father pursued, the 1877 directory lists a T. O'Donnell dealing in "doors, sashes, &c (sic)." Very little has been found on Tom Sr. other than the most basic information. It appears he was born in New York around 1845 and died, while O'Donnell was a child. This, doubtless, had a dramatic effect on the family, which now included two other children; Mary, born in 1872, and James, born in 1874.

In order to make ends meet and feed her family, Myra went to work. She is listed as a "laborer" in the 1880 census. And, even though he was only a child, Tom also joined the effort, becoming a paper boy for the local newspaper. As a result, O'Donnell's formal education was intermittent, but he nonetheless developed a love of reading that would last for the duration of his life.

By the early 1880s, Myra O'Donnell decided to look for opportunities elsewhere. Why she and the family relocated to Colorado at this time is not known, but they appear in the 1885 Colorado State Census with Myra listed as "keeping house" and Tom as being in school. In later profiles on O'Donnell, it was stated that he began working as a clerk in a grocery store in Florence, Colorado at the age of 12. "His ambitions extended beyond the limits of a grocery store," wrote a 1913 profile of O'Donnell, "and it was only natural that he should seek a place in the more lucrative, more exciting and more strenuous mining business."

Interestingly, considering his future trajectory, O'Donnell took up gold mining in an area that was developing into the core of a western oil boom. In fact, the very first oil well drilled west of the Mississippi was sunk in Florence in 1860. O'Donnell, however, stuck to his pick and shovel, working in the mines for five years. That appears to have been long enough for the ambitious young man and in 1889, at the age of 19, he put down his pick and struck out for California where he hoped to find success in the "Land of Sunshine."

## Oil

When O'Donnell first started appearing in the Los Angeles City Directory in 1890, he gave his occupation merely as "laborer." It is unknown what he was up to in those first few years, but O'Donnell, who had been surrounded by the petroleum industry from practically birth, must have sensed the familiar in these new surroundings particularly in the distinct smell of *brea* bubbling up from the sinkhole at the Hancock ranch west of the city.

The presence of oil in the region had been known since the dawn of human habitation, but its commercial value was negligible. In its original form, it could be used as a fuel, but the accompanying smoke deterred all but the neediest. Rather, coal was the prime source of energy in Victorian-era Los Angeles. Oil was considered a smelly nuisance and locals regularly found themselves outraged when, while trying to drill a water well, they'd strike oil or natural gas instead.

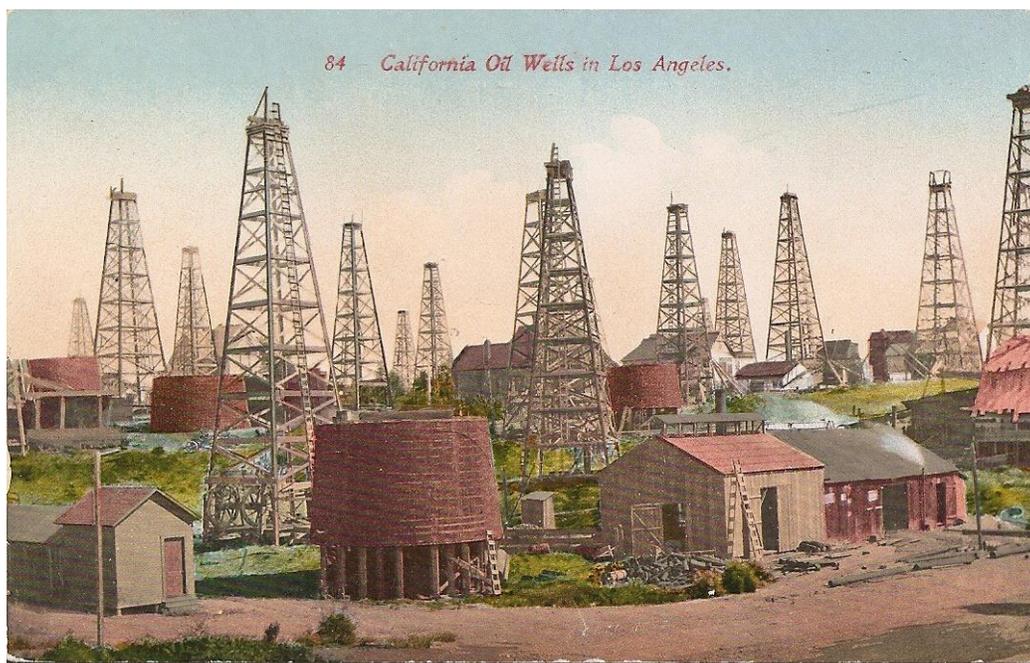
But, by the time of O'Donnell's arrival, there was a growing interest for petroleum products and a few visionaries saw the potential literally in their own backyards. One of those people was Edward L. Doheny. Like O'Donnell, he had originally pursued a career in the mines, but having never struck it rich, he wound up in Los Angeles looking for new opportunities. They didn't appear and he was finding himself in a more and more desperate state, broke with mounting debts and an ill wife and child to care for.

One day, while sitting on the porch of his boarding house contemplating his gloomy future, Doheny saw a wagon pass by filled with dirt. Out the back he spied leakage, a dark goo was dripping from the wagon as it passed. Intrigued, he went up and asked what the driver was hauling. "Brea," came the reply, adding that the load was destined for a nearby ice factory where they used it as a cheap coal substitute. When asked where it all came from, the driver pointed Doheny to the west, down a rutted dirt road that would one day be called Wilshire Boulevard. There was a hole out there near Westlake Park

filled with the stuff. Doheny went and inspected the site and in that hole, he saw the future. “My heart beat fast,” he later recalled. “I had found gold and I had found silver and I had found lead, but this ugly-looking substance...was the key to something more valuable than any or all of these metals.”

Doheny already knew that some small local businesses like the ice factory were able to power their equipment with oil at a cheaper price than coal. If output could be increased, then perhaps larger businesses would convert to oil as well. Enlisting his longtime business partner, Charles A. Canfield into his scheme, they raised \$400 to lease a three-parcel lot at State and Patton Streets near downtown and began to drill for oil by hand. After much struggle and setbacks, they struck oil at 200-feet on April 20, 1893.

Doheny and Canfield’s ultimate success in producing commercial quantities of crude at high profits became the talk of Los Angeles. “The oil boom spread like wildfire,” wrote Harry Carr. As the Federal Writers Project *Guide to Los Angeles* noted, the partners’ discovery, “brought the man in the street the idea that boundless wealth might be in his own backyard. [Doheny and Canfield’s] first well, flowing at forty-five barrels a day, stirred the town as nothing else had before or since.” Overnight, houses were torn down and oil rigs went up all over town, destroying whole neighborhoods and threatening to alter the entire character of Los Angeles. But with no regulations to prevent them, literally hundreds of newly-formed companies drilled wherever they pleased, and wherever they drilled, they found oil or natural gas. The profits and potential for more was staggering.



**The Los Angeles oil boom transformed once-quiet neighborhoods into bustling oil fields virtually overnight.**  
(Courtesy Author’s Collection)

Where was O'Donnell during this overnight boom? Ironically, he was already working in the oil business, not in Los Angeles, but up in Santa Paula. Around 1891, well before Doheny ever saw that wagon pass by, O'Donnell saw opportunity in Southern California oil, and headed north to Ventura County where oil had been exploited to a limited degree since the 1860s. He got a job with a newly-formed enterprise called the Union Oil Company of California in Santa Paula, becoming one of the future oil giants' first employees. Over the next few years he gained a first-class education in virtually every aspect of the petroleum field, mastering the oil business as one retrospective noted, "as few men had."

When O'Donnell returned to Los Angeles, he already had a leg up over most everyone else in the profession with years of practical experience under his belt and he quickly put it to use. Not unexpectedly, considering O'Donnell's experience, determination, and energy, he showed almost immediate signs of success. Yet, all that promise almost came to a tragic end when, on the night of September 9, 1895, O'Donnell was nearly killed by a natural gas explosion at the well he was working on at Welcome Street near downtown. Not realizing the odorless gas had already filled the drill hole, O'Donnell lowered a lantern in to get a better view, setting off a massive blast. As the Los Angeles Herald grimly reported, "The man's face is badly burned and both eyes are injured, besides his chest and left arm." Originally, it was thought he would die or at least remain blinded, but O'Donnell made a remarkable recovery and, within weeks, was back to work.

Over the next few years, everything moved at a dizzying pace, both in the Los Angeles petroleum boom and for O'Donnell personally. By 1896, he was doing well enough to buy a home of his own, which miraculously still stands at 1553 Rockwood Street, and bring his family out from Colorado. O'Donnell would also help his younger brother James enter the petroleum industry where he too would find success.

In spite of his frenetic work schedule, O'Donnell found time for romance, and on August 28, 1896, he took Lillian Constance Woods as his bride. Known as "Lilly," to friends and family, the new Mrs. O'Donnell was a native Californian. Ultimately, the couple would have two daughters together, Ruth, born in 1898, and Doris, born in 1901. By this time, O'Donnell had gone into partnership with Max Whittier, another pioneering oil man, who would later go on to become one of the founders of Beverly Hills. Their five-year partnership would help elevate them both into leaders of the California petroleum industry.

O'Donnell's rapid rise to success was aided not only by his solid skills as an oil man, but also because of his dynamic personality. Big, handsome, energetic, charming and gregarious, O'Donnell was extremely well-liked and respected by his fellow oil producers. A born leader, he became the person others turned to for help in negotiating deals, mediate disputes and speak for the growing industry. As early as 1897, he was already seen as an industry leader, speaking on behalf of the Oil Producers' Committee, in the efforts to reduce overproduction and keep oil at \$1.00 a barrel.

In 1900, O'Donnell and Whittier amicably dissolved their partnership and O'Donnell struck out as an independent producer, having founded the O'Donnell Oil Company. By this time, he was already noted in the Los Angeles Times as having been one of those

who had “made a fortune” in oil in Southern California. As it would turn out, it was only the beginning.

## Coalinga

O’Donnell recognized that the oil boom in Los Angeles would ultimately come to an end, particularly as the city finally began to take steps to curb drilling in residential areas. He had already been taking leases on land in the surrounding areas including Newhall and Whittier. But one oil district really caught his attention. It was the Coalinga field. Located midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, Coalinga was known to have oil deposits as evidenced by some of it seeming up to the surface. As in L.A. though, it was of little value for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some attempts at drilling were made as early as 1867, but the ground was hard and transportation costs outweighed any benefits. By 1890, however, the situation was changing and drillers were starting to take an interest in Coalinga.

In 1902, when O’Donnell first appeared on the scene, there were other drillers, but overall, Coalinga was still largely undeveloped. With his almost mystical ability to divine the best lands and with a sizeable amount of money with which to procure them, O’Donnell quickly became a major player in Coalinga. As his 1913 profile in *Who’s Who on the Pacific Coast* noted with true understatement, O’Donnell’s success in the Coalinga field was, “one of the most remarkable on record.”

The oil business was not for the faint at heart and there was a stiff competition that sometimes devolved into outright treachery. Coalinga was not immune to violence over land and there were even cases of claim jumpers who moved buildings onto unattended land in the middle of the night before anyone had a chance to stop them. The savvy O’Donnell was well aware of these tactics and to combat them he enlisted help from an unexpected source – his mother. By 1903, Myra had moved temporarily up to the area and would physically occupy O’Donnell properties whenever her sons (James was there too) had to be back in Los Angeles or elsewhere.

The more money O’Donnell pumped out of the ground, the more he pumped back into his Coalinga enterprises, purchasing every promising plot of land he could in the continually stiffening market. O’Donnell always seemed to be one step ahead of his competitors, procuring the most valuable lands and knowing where to “spot” the wells. At the same time, his leadership skills were earning him friends among his fellow Coalinga drillers and O’Donnell soon became an unofficial spokesman for the independents operating in the district.

In 1908, O’Donnell reconnected with E.L. Doheny in a big way. When he had first come to Los Angeles from Santa Paula in the mid-1890s, O’Donnell drew the attention of Doheny who was impressed by the young man’s knowledge and abilities in the oil business. O’Donnell worked for Doheny for about a year before becoming partners with Max Whittier. A decade later, Doheny, who had been focused on the Mexican oil industry, returned to California with the foundation of the American Petroleum Company. One of those he tapped for the organization was O’Donnell for whom he maintained the highest regard. O’Donnell, who was named general manager, returned the compliment by

directing Doheny's interest towards Coalinga. Doheny demonstrated his trust in O'Donnell's wisdom to the tune of \$2,000,000 in purchases of Coalinga land. By fall of 1908, eight wells were underway, with those in operation already delivering 100,000 barrels a month.



**The Lakeview Gusher.**  
(Courtesy [sjvgeology.org](http://sjvgeology.org))

Coalinga only continued to surpass expectations and in 1909, the Silver Tip well came in with a stunning output of 21,000 barrels per day. But on March 14, 1910, Silver Tip was dramatically eclipsed when the drill at Lakeview Well No. 1 struck an oil deposit of such gravity it sent the drill shooting hundreds of feet into the sky. As its crew ran for their lives, the well blew out with a mammoth gusher that would be the largest in American history. By the time what became known as the Lakeview Gusher was contained in September 1911, it had spilled more than 9 million barrels of oil. If anyone had questioned O'Donnell's wisdom in investing in Coalinga, the Lakeview Gusher dispelled all doubts.

In 1910, with Coalinga making international headlines, O'Donnell was chosen to head a delegation sent to Washington D.C. to lobby against the Pickett Bill, which would have had an adverse effect on California oil operators. O'Donnell's charm, knowledge and powers of persuasion, managed to get the legislation amended to be more amenable to the oil interests. It would be the first of many trips to Washington to speak and lobby on behalf of the petroleum industry.

That same year, O'Donnell became president and general manager of the newly-formed Doheny-backed American Oil Fields Co. The company, which resulted from the merger of a group of Coalinga-based entities, was considered the largest oil company merger in California history. In making the announcement, the company stated that O'Donnell would, "give the company his knowledge of the Coalinga field, gained from years of experience here."

## **CALPET**

In 1915, the American Petroleum Co. merged with the American Oil Fields Co. to become California Petroleum. Known by its acronym of CALPET, the company was the largest oil producing entity in the United States, second only to Standard Oil. O'Donnell was named as president. With his ascension, O'Donnell cemented his legacy as one of the most important figures in the history of not only the California petroleum industry, but the American petroleum industry as well.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, O'Donnell was tapped by President Woodrow Wilson to serve as Director of Oil Production for the United States Fuel Administration. It was a considerable task but O'Donnell served ably, smoothing over conflicts between the government and private oil producers. O'Donnell personally interceded with his own California oil producers in getting their cooperation after they initially balked on accepting the terms the Wilson administration proposed for "taking over" production during the war. O'Donnell told the producers that now was not the time to argue over money and that if they didn't submit to the government's terms, their holdings would be outright seized. They capitulated.

At war's end, O'Donnell was offered another notable honor and responsibility when he was elected as the first president of the American Petroleum Institute. This organization, which still exists today, is the principal lobbying group of the oil industry and has had notable successes through the decades in securing favorable legislation for the petroleum industry. O'Donnell proved to be an able spokesperson for the organization during his two terms as president from 1919-1924. During his tenure, he stressed self-regulation within the industry rather than government intervention.

At the same time, he had been elected to the board of the Union Oil Co., Farmers and Merchants National Bank, the Western Oil Producers organization, and the Chamber of Mines and Oil. He also enjoyed numerous social organizations including the L.A. Athletic Club, Jonathan Club, Los Angeles and Annandale Country Clubs, Sierra Madre Club, the Growlers of Coalinga, the Elks, and was a thirty-second degree Mason. Often, O'Donnell was called to speak at gatherings of these organizations, and was always an entertaining and informative speaker.

During this typically busy period, O'Donnell continued serving as head of CALPET, ultimately negotiating its merger with the Texas Company (TEXACO). He also represented the oil industry on several notable occasions including the 1920 conference establishing the International Chamber of Commerce, which was held in Berlin, Germany. O'Donnell used the trip to explore Germany and Europe, remaining on the

continent for four months. World travel was a common experience for O'Donnell during the 1920s, and he made a number of trips both for pleasure and business from Hawaii to Europe. Sometimes he would bring his daughter Doris with him as travelling companion.

Notably absent was Lilly O'Donnell. The pair had grown apart over time with O'Donnell taking a room at the L.A. Athletic Club while Lilly remained at the couple's mansion at 731 South Serrano Avenue. Finally, in 1924, she filed for divorce. "He has always taken care of me and provided adequately for all my needs," she told the court. "But apparently he just grew tired of me and left." O'Donnell did not contest the divorce and settled for a sum of \$750,000 in cash and securities, which by today's value (2018) would be the equivalent of nearly \$11,000,000.



**O'Donnell with Dr. Winifred O'Donnell on holiday in Germany, 1920s.**  
(Courtesy ancestry.com)

It is not clear when and under what circumstances O'Donnell met Dr. Winifred Willis Jenney, but on December 9, 1925, the pair were married at the New Willard Hotel in Washington D.C. Among the wedding party were "the First Lady of Law," Assistant United States Attorney General Mabel Walker Willibrandt, and Republican political

leader and fellow oil man Mark L. Requa, the latter serving as O'Donnell's best man. In honor of his bride, O'Donnell would soon name a 4,306-ton oil tanker after her – the S.S. Winifred O'Donnell.

Dr. Jenney was born Winifred Willis in Lockport, New York in 1880. At the age of 19, she married local dentist William E. Jenney, and together they had one son, William Willis Jenney, who would later follow his mother into osteopathic medicine. Although Winifred received her medical degree it does not appear that she actively practiced in Lockport, listing her occupation in various censuses and directories as "house wife." It is unclear when her marriage officially ended but by 1917, Dr. Jenney and her son had relocated to the west coast, settling first in Los Angeles and then Long Beach, California where she opened up a practice at her combination office/residence at 338 East 7<sup>th</sup> Street. Dr. Jenney quickly gained a reputation in her field and by 1925, when she married O'Donnell, the Los Angeles Times declared her to be "one of the most prominent women osteopaths in Southern California." Throughout her time of active practice, Dr. Jenney maintained offices in Long Beach and Los Angeles.

Early in their marriage, O'Donnell purchased the seaside mansion at 2300 East Ocean Boulevard as the Long Beach base for himself and his wife. The Craftsman-style estate, which was built in 1912 by Elizabeth Milbank Anderson, served as the O'Donnell's principal summer residence up until World War II when they turned it over to the Navy to use as a petty officer's club. In 1950, the city of Long Beach purchased the O'Donnell home and converted it into the Long Beach Museum of Art, which it remains today. By then, the O'Donnells had relocated their summer residence to 414 North Rossmore Avenue in Los Angeles' exclusive Hancock Park neighborhood.

## **Palm Springs**

It is not known when O'Donnell first discovered Palm Springs or what reasons brought him there. In spite of his outwardly robust health, O'Donnell suffered from respiratory problems and, later, a serious heart condition. He may have come for health or just seeking a rest from his incredibly busy schedule, but whatever the reason he was well established in the village by the mid-1920s.

O'Donnell's choice of lodging was the Desert Inn, which at that time was still a modest, somewhat ramshackle assemblage of Craftsman-esque cottages that was struggling to keep up with its ever-growing popularity. The draw may have been its pristine location in the heart of the still little-known desert oasis, but its secret weapon was its proprietress, Nellie Coffman. She possessed a rare mastery of the art of hospitality, knowing just the right things to do, just the right things to say, to keep her guests happy and coming back season after season. She could serve high tea to visiting royals one minute and then share bawdy laughs with local cowboys the next. She was an affable hostess and, at heart, a brilliant business woman.

That she and O'Donnell would hit it off was no surprise. They shared many of the same personality traits, love of people, and a good (or naughty) story. O'Donnell, like so many others, recognized in Coffman a unique and rare talent as an innkeeper. And like so many others, O'Donnell saw the potential for Palm Springs to develop into a world-class

destination. It lacked, however, the proper facilities to accommodate the type of visitors who might wish to winter in the village.



**The Desert Inn after its 1925 modernization.**  
(Courtesy Mott-Merge Collection, California State Library)

O'Donnell saw Coffman as the solution. He encouraged her to expand her rustic little inn into a modern, upscale resort. O'Donnell had not been alone in this suggestion. Coffman herself had wanted to do just that, but she lacked the enormous resources that would be required for such an undertaking. O'Donnell, however, did and happily loaned her the \$300,000 that she needed to modernize and expand the Desert Inn. Completed in time to open for the 1925 winter season, the newly-revamped hotel exceeded even the most optimistic projections and within a few years after its completion, both the Desert Inn and Palm Springs, were gaining international attention. A 1928 profile on Coffman in the magazine *Pictorial California* summed it up with the title, "A Woman Builds an Inn and Creates a Town."

### **Ojo del Desierto**

Contemporaneous to construction of the Desert Inn was the building of a winter home for the O'Donnells on the mountainside above the hotel complex. The house had been part of the deal O'Donnell made with Coffman in exchange for the loan. It was to be designed by Desert Inn architect William Charles Tanner to match the Spanish Colonial Revival structures being built below and was to be completed at the same time of the inn's reopening.

This proved to be a serious challenge as there was no proper building pad at the chosen site or even access from below. Everything, including the road to the site, had to be carved directly out of the mountain. While the long access road was being constructed, materials had to be lifted to and from the site by way of an improvised wench fashioned from an old telephone pole. A considerable amount of blasting was required to break up the hard granite, which resulted in large piles of rubble. However, this detritus was repurposed into the stacked-stone retaining walls and as infill between the walls and the mountainside. The result was not only no leftover “tailings,” but also the new construction blended well into the mountain from which it was built.



**Tom O'Donnell stands on the newly-completed building pad for Ojo del Desierto.**  
(Courtesy of Tracy Conrad)

When completed in 1925, the house, which the O'Donnells named Ojo del Desierto (Eye of the Desert) stood higher than any other house in all of Palm Springs, a preeminent position it would hold for decades. The house immediately became one of Palm Springs' most notable landmarks and what the Desert Sun described as the “most looked at” house in the entire valley. Ojo del Desierto would remain the O'Donnells winter residence over the next decade until they built a new house a short distance away in 1936.

Their new house, which was built directly onto the fairway of the Desert Golf Course, would be known as the “Golf House.” After its completion, the O'Donnells used Ojo del Desierto as a guest house for visiting friends, particularly Nate and Virginia Milnor. Ultimately, O'Donnell sold the house to the Milnors and it would remain their winter home for a number of years.

## **“Palm Springs’ Greatest Benefactor”**

Once O’Donnell and his wife took possession of Ojo del Desierto, they did not remain above the fray, merely looking down on the village below. Rather, they threw themselves headlong into village life, becoming active in virtually every aspect of the community for more than two decades. O’Donnell was elected the very first president of the Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce, serving during 1926-1927. The veteran oil magnate brought his extensive business acumen to bear on aiding the organization and aims of the nascent chamber.

And during this time, he not only gave advice, he took direct action himself to get things done. This could range from personally buying a set of trash cans to be placed along Main Street (now Palm Canyon Drive); joining with Prescott T. Stevens to help build the Frances S. Stevens School; donating a \$1,000 to help the Chamber of Commerce build 50 new parking spaces at the summit of Palm Canyon; and loaning Dr. Henry S. Reid \$50,000 to build the Reid Hospital in 1929, the first modern hospital in Palm Springs.

When the Great Depression shattered the world economy, virtually every corner of the globe was affected. Palm Springs fared better than most but its working classes were hit the hardest. Although O’Donnell was no fan of the New Deal, he saw wisdom in some its programs and created his own WPA-style work project – a large building pad and access road on the mountainside above the Desert Golf Course known by locals as “Inspiration Point.” No one knows how much this project cost O’Donnell but it brought desperately needed jobs for local laborers at a time of great economic crisis. Decades later, some of the those who worked on the project were still expressing their thanks to the help given them by O’Donnell when they needed it the most.

An undated biographical draft from the 1970s, captured something of the unpretentious, hands-on style of O’Donnell and his interest in making the village a better place for all. The biography describes how O’Donnell would appear at various town meetings, sitting in the back, on the radiator, “and listen as various factions from the community vigorously discussed the future of Palm Springs.”

Throughout the entirety of their time in the desert, the O’Donnells continued as cornerstones of the growing community. The couple frequently attended and sponsored the village’s big social and civic events such as the Desert Circus and the polo matches. Their names appeared on the guest lists of innumerable dinner parties, both public and private, held in the village’s restaurants, clubs, hotels, and private homes.

And they were both strong supporters of incorporation of Palm Springs into a city of its own. When cityhood became official, O’Donnell was granted the singular honor of receiving “Business License No. 1” for the Desert Golf Club in recognition for his years of service to the community. In return, O’Donnell gave back more than he received. His checkbook was always open for a good cause including providing the largest donation to fund the salary of a summer doctor, and personally paying for the backstops for the tennis courts at the new Palm Springs High School. And in 1939, he purchased and donated two groups of palm trees, 35 feet high and weighing 40 tons, that were used to adorn the northern entrance into the new city.

As for Winifred, she became a very active member of the Palm Springs Woman's Club and spearheaded the critical task of raising the funds for the new club house, which required more than \$12,500 to complete. After the successful completion of the drive and construction of the clubhouse, Winifred was elected president. She was also, along with her husband, a major force in the creation of a free public health clinic as part of her work with the Woman's Club and its Welfare and Friendly Aid division. And she was an enthusiastic booster of Palm Springs' golf, serving as chairperson of the first, and a number of subsequent, Palm Springs' Women's Invitational tournaments.

In 1940, O'Donnell was the leading figure behind construction of the city's new public library, the Welwood Murray Memorial Library, which was planned for a site at the corner of North Palm Canyon Drive and West Tahquitz Way donated by Murray's son, George Welwood Murray. O'Donnell took the lead in raising the necessary funds for the John Porter Clark-designed structure by pledging \$25,500 for its construction, which made up nearly the entirety of its total cost. Upon the Library's completion in February 1941, O'Donnell was hailed for his generosity, but in typical fashion he modestly tried to deflect such praise, pointing out he was only one of many who aided in the project.

The same was true with the plans for a free public health center. The proposed clinic had been for years what the Desert Sun called "one of the most cherished projects of this community." In 1940, O'Donnell personally pledged the first \$10,000 if the community would raise the remainder of the funds. But he soon proved he was no pushover when it came to writing checks. When the project got mired down amid bickering over the clinic's location, O'Donnell rescinded his offer. His move stunned the community into the realization that if they did not act to resolve their differences, they would lose for the indefinite future the much-desired and much-needed clinic. With a new sense of purpose, the different factions came together and the new Palm Springs Health Center, located at 299 East Amado Road, was opened during the fall of 1942. It would serve the community for decades before it outgrew its capacity and its services are now handled at the Desert Hospital and elsewhere.

During the war, he continued his philanthropy, including giving a \$1,000 donation to the servicemen's canteen and offering to convert his reservoir at Stevens Road and Palm Canyon Drive into a swimming pool for the soldiers stationed in the village.

### **Desert Golf Course**

Out of all the contributions O'Donnell made for the benefit of Palm Springs, perhaps none has had a more lasting impact than the Desert (now O'Donnell) Golf Course. For decades, Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley has enjoyed an international reputation as one of the world's great golfing destinations. Yet, at the time of O'Donnell's arrival, there was not a single course in the entire area other than a modest little green space west of the Desert Inn called the Mashie, created by Coffman so her guests could at least have a place to practice their putts.

O'Donnell, who was a serious golf enthusiast, looked beyond the Mashie, envisioning Palm Springs' first true golf course. The concept of a water-intensive golf course was

beyond the imagination or budget of most others, but O'Donnell was not daunted by the almost quixotic nature of his quest. He had a vision, a plan, and he had the money. And soon, he had the land, a broad flat expanse of desert just below and to the north of Ojo del Desierto.

Between May and December of 1925, O'Donnell purchased the desired parcels until he controlled 33 acres, plus an additional reservoir site as a perpetual water source, located near the corner of Stevens Road and North Palm Canyon Drive. Ironically, the sagacious oil man who had drilled and found oil throughout California, had not realized an extensive aquifer was located right beneath the course.

Throughout the following year, O'Donnell continued expending great sums to turn his patch of desert green. Some 2,000 tons of raw fertilizer were shipped in from the stockyards of Imperial County to give the newly-planted Bermuda and rye grasses a start. For shade and ornamentation, O'Donnell arranged for a group of oleanders and tamarisk trees to be planted around the grounds.

By far the most costly and beautiful addition to the course was the 130 stately palm trees O'Donnell had transplanted from Smiley Heights in Redlands, a mammoth project that surely counted for much of the \$200,000 he reportedly expended on building the course. Throughout the remainder of his life, O'Donnell took great pride that not a single tree died after being transplanted onto the course grounds.

As for the layout, O'Donnell and his good friend, Captain J.F. Lucey, fellow oilman and intimate friend of future president Herbert Hoover, designed the course themselves, basing the distance between holes simply by how far each man could hit the ball. Officially a par 35, nine-hole course, a double set of tees was added to allow 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. Almost instantly, however, it was more affectionately dubbed "O'Donnell's."

Although he had built the Desert Golf Course for his own pleasure, O'Donnell always saw the course as having a broader benefit for the entire community. Right from the outset, the course was available not only for his many friends but also to Desert Inn guests and Palm Springs homeowners for the price of a small greens fee. It would also be the setting for Palm Springs' earliest golf tournaments and the nucleus of what would ultimately become one of the world's great golfing destinations.

As he proudly watched the little village of Palm Springs grow and mature around him, O'Donnell felt the irony of his own strength ebbing away. Heart issues, long a problem, had only grown worse during the 1930s. Climbing the stairs at Ojo del Desierto was becoming a dangerous prospect and O'Donnell decided to leave the house, building a smaller, one-story hacienda right down on the fairway. Once again, O'Donnell brought in William Charles Tanner in to design the new home. Completed in 1936, the house afforded him a beautiful front-row view of his beloved golf course, yet that view must have been bittersweet for O'Donnell. Stairs weren't the only thing he wasn't supposed to attempt. There was golf too. Rather than be saddened, O'Donnell was surprised at how

thoroughly he enjoyed watching his friends play and resolved that they should be allowed to continue to enjoy the course even after his death.

### **O'Donnell Golf Club**

In the summer of 1944, with his mortality firmly on his mind, O'Donnell gathered together a group of his closest friends and organized the O'Donnell Golf Club, which he was elected to serve as first president. The non-profit club was created to perpetuate and maintain the O'Donnell course as well as “foster and provide social intercourse among its members.” The original membership was composed of exactly twenty-five, but it would not be long before the list grew until it was over 200.

O'Donnell decided the best way to preserve the land and his legacy was to gift deed it to the city, but he wanted first to ensure that his golfing friends would not lose out in the process. What he did first was to lease the land to the O'Donnell Golf Club for a term of ninety-nine years and then gift that same land to the City of Palm Springs. On December 27, 1944, Palm Springs became the official owner of the Desert Golf Course, but they also had to abide by the terms of the lease O'Donnell had made with the O'Donnell Golf Club. As such, the club is to remain lessee of the land until October 31, 2043. At that point, the course is to become a public park named the Tom O'Donnell Municipal Park.

O'Donnell's stipulation that the park be named after himself was a rare moment of self-recognition for the famously modest oilman. He believed his accomplishments should stand on their own merits and not be something for self-aggrandizement. The praise should be left to others. And it was. The community of Palm Springs had long known they had someone special in their midst in the form of Tom O'Donnell and, fortunately, they showed him their appreciation as often as they could.

In 1940, O'Donnell was invited to the home of his friend Judge Ralph Clock in Las Palmas for what he believed was a going-away party for another friend, Captain Langley. Instead it was a surprise appreciation dinner composed of twenty-five of his closest desert friends who called themselves the “25 Club” to honor “One of Palm Springs' most beloved citizens.” Each attendee got up and said something about O'Donnell and his contributions to the village and, as part of the occasion, O'Donnell was presented with a parchment scroll signed by all in attendance.

### **Later Years**

On February 21, 1941, while celebrations were still being held for the opening of the new Welwood Murray Memorial Library, O'Donnell suffered a severe heart attack at his golf course house in Palm Springs. The aging oilman had been ill with the flu for several weeks prior to the event. His illness and ultimate recovery were followed closely by the citizens of Palm Springs who sent every good wish possible to the man the Desert Sun called, “probably this community's greatest benefactor.”

The heart attack caused O'Donnell to reluctantly slow down after a lifetime of energetic activity. Yet it did not affect his enthusiasm and love for life and he continued his

longstanding social and civic activities and remained an avid “fan” of the golf games going on outside the windows of his golf course home.

In February of 1945, O’Donnell was struck again by a heart attack. His condition was so dire that an ambulance was summoned to race him to Los Angeles where more specialists were available and he was taken to Wilshire Hospital. In spite of their efforts, O’Donnell succumbed not long after arrival, dying at the age of 74 on February 21, 1945. O’Donnell’s passing was noted across the country with obituaries in both the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times. But his death was felt most deeply in his beloved winter home of Palm Springs where city offices and many businesses closed in his memory for several hours on the day of his funeral.

O’Donnell was not buried in Palm Springs, but at Forest Lawn in Glendale, yet there was a memorial for him in the desert community. O’Donnell’s old friend John Kline built a rostrum at the 8<sup>th</sup> fairway of the Desert Golf Course and, around it, several hundred villagers gathered to honor the late philanthropist and hear memorials from members of the clergy and longtime friends. Above them, the speakers from his beloved “Music from the Mountain,” let forth with a series of chimes.

In Washington D.C., the American Petroleum Institute, which O’Donnell helped to found and for which he served as its first president, released a memorial in his honor. It read in part, “Through his career epitomized the American Dream in which fortune marks certain players for unique and unforgettable roles, Tom O’Donnell never lost the common touch. Who of those who knew him will ever forget his massive frame, that earthy humor and rugged charm? His close friends ranged from the lowliest oilfield workers to a Scottish Lord, but they could pay no higher tribute than just to call him ‘Tom.’”

## **APPENDIX III**

### **Nathan F. Milnor**

Nathan Funston “Nate” Milnor (1882-1956) – A dedicated world traveler and expert on Asian decorative arts, Nate Milnor ran a successful import business throughout the 1920s-1930s. At its peak in 1929, Milnor’s Imports had shops throughout Southern California; Arizona; Hawaii; Agua Caliente resort in Mexico; Paris, France; and Havana, Cuba, as well as Palm Springs.

A native of Warrensburg, Pennsylvania, Milnor worked as a clerk and later bartender at his father’s hotel before becoming San Francisco branch manager for the Columbia Graphophone Company. After 1920, Milnor moved to Hawaii, where he would maintain a home for a number of years. In the 1930s, Milnor switched his political affiliations from Republican to Democrat. In 1938, he was named by newly-elected California Culbert Olson to the State Fish and Game Commission. The following year he was named its chairman.

In 1940, Olson appointed Milnor as one of six members of the State Conservation Committee. Milnor served on the State Fish and Game Commission until 1945 when Republican Earl Warren took office as governor.

Milnor was an avid sportsman and was heavily involved in the horse circuit from Agua Caliente to Santa Anita. Both Milnor and his second wife, Virginia, were close friends of Winifred and Tom O’Donnell and the couple later took over Ojo del Desierto, first renting before buying the hillside home. It was at Ojo del Desierto that the Committee of 25 was formed in 1948. Milnor would later serve as the organization’s second president from 1953 until his death in 1956.

## **APPENDIX IV**

### **Frank C. “Pat” Dougherty**

Frank Clark “Pat” Dougherty (1880-1959) was an old friend of O’Donnell’s from their days in the oil business. Born in Albany, Vermont to Irish immigrant parents, Dougherty led an exciting and adventurous youth, trying his hand at a variety of professions out in the west. Dougherty first came to San Francisco in the wake of the great earthquake and fire of 1906, taking a job as a surveyor before moving into a position with Pacific Telephone and Telegraph. Over the next decade, Dougherty would do stints as a newspaper solicitor, a stock salesman up in Canada and then as a stockbroker in San Francisco and later Manhattan.

During World War I, he served with the American Expeditionary Forces doing work for the YMCA in France. It was during the 1920s and 1930s that Dougherty moved into mining and petroleum investments, a move that was to build him a considerable fortune. With great wealth, Dougherty had the resources to indulge in his passion for horses, becoming a major player, at both Santa Anita and the Hollywood Park Turf Clubs.

Deeply Catholic, Dougherty also invested much in charity and served on the Board of Regents for Loyola Marymount University. In 1953, Pope Pius XII conferred the Order of the Knight Commanders of St. Gregory upon Dougherty.