

The J. Cheney Wells Residence

Smoke Tree Ranch
Palm Springs, CA 92264

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

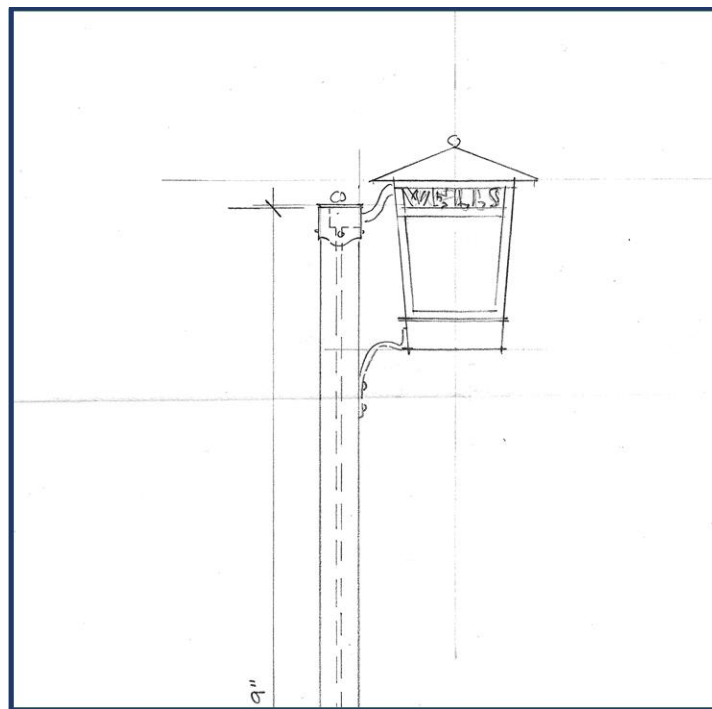


Prepared by
Steve Vaught
for the
Palm Springs Preservation Foundation
September 2019

Acknowledgements

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Getty Research Institute; UCSB; Bill and Jenny Fain; Barbara and Ron Marshall; Gary Johns; Tracy Conrad; John H. Welborne; Christian Yen; Cheney Wells' granddaughter Lisa Markman; Frank Lopez of the Architecture and Design Collection, Palm Springs Art Museum; Nancy Hadley of the American Institute of Architects; Christina Rice of the Los Angeles Public Library; Renee Brown of the Palm Springs Historical Society; and "Jack," faithful guardian of the Wells Residence.



Front cover: J. Cheney Wells Residence, photographed by Julius Shulman in 1947.
(© J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10))

**Above: Detail of entry walk lamp post from blueprint, Job 418,
office of John Porter Clark, 1941.**
(Courtesy Architecture and Design Collection, Palm Springs Art Museum)

THE J. CHENEY WELLS RESIDENCE

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 44

EVALUATION FOR CLASS 1 SITE DESIGNATION: PAGE 45

INTEGRITY ANALYSIS: PAGE 47

APPENDICES

I	Owner's Notarized Letter of Support
II	Assessor's Parcel Map
III	Site Plan
IV	Google Earth Image
V	Joel Cheney Wells Biography
VI	Albert Frey Biography

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 January of 2019, the PSPF board of directors assigned the task of writing the J. Cheney Wells Residence’s Class 1 Historic Site nomination to Steve Vaught.

The Owner’s Letter of Support is at Appendix I.



View looking southeastward from rear terrace. Bedroom wing left center.
(Author photo. May 2019)

Prepared by Steve Vaught on behalf of:
The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation
1775 East Palm Canyon Drive, Suite 110-195
Palm Springs, CA 92264
760-837-7117
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Executive Summary

SIGNIFICANCE:

The J. Cheney Wells Residence (hereinafter referred to as the “Wells Residence”) is located in the Smoke Tree Ranch district in Palm Springs. Completed in 1942, the house was designed by Albert Frey for industrialist/philanthropist J(oel) Cheney Wells and his daughter Gertrude Wells Overly. The home’s builder was Wilson & Sorum, well known desert contractors of the period. The Wells Residence is an important example of a custom traditional ranch structure as interpreted by a modernist master. Overall, it exhibits numerous stylistic features that place it within the historic context of the period “Palm Springs between the Wars (1919-1941)” as defined in the Citywide Historic Context Statement & Survey Findings created by Historic Resources Group. This is a period when wealthy and influential people were building second homes in the growing and increasingly well-known resort Village.

DESIGNATION CRITERIA:

The Wells Residence has not been previously evaluated for Class 1 Historic Site eligibility.

Criteria for the Designation of a Class 1 Historic Resource: Pursuant to the Palm Springs Municipal Code (PSMC) Section 8.05.070(C,1): A site, structure, building, or object may be designated as a Class 1 historic resource or a Contributing Resource in a proposed historic district by the Palm Springs City Council, provided both of the following findings are met. Refer to the US Department of the Interior National Register Bulletin “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation” of potentially historic resources for further information.

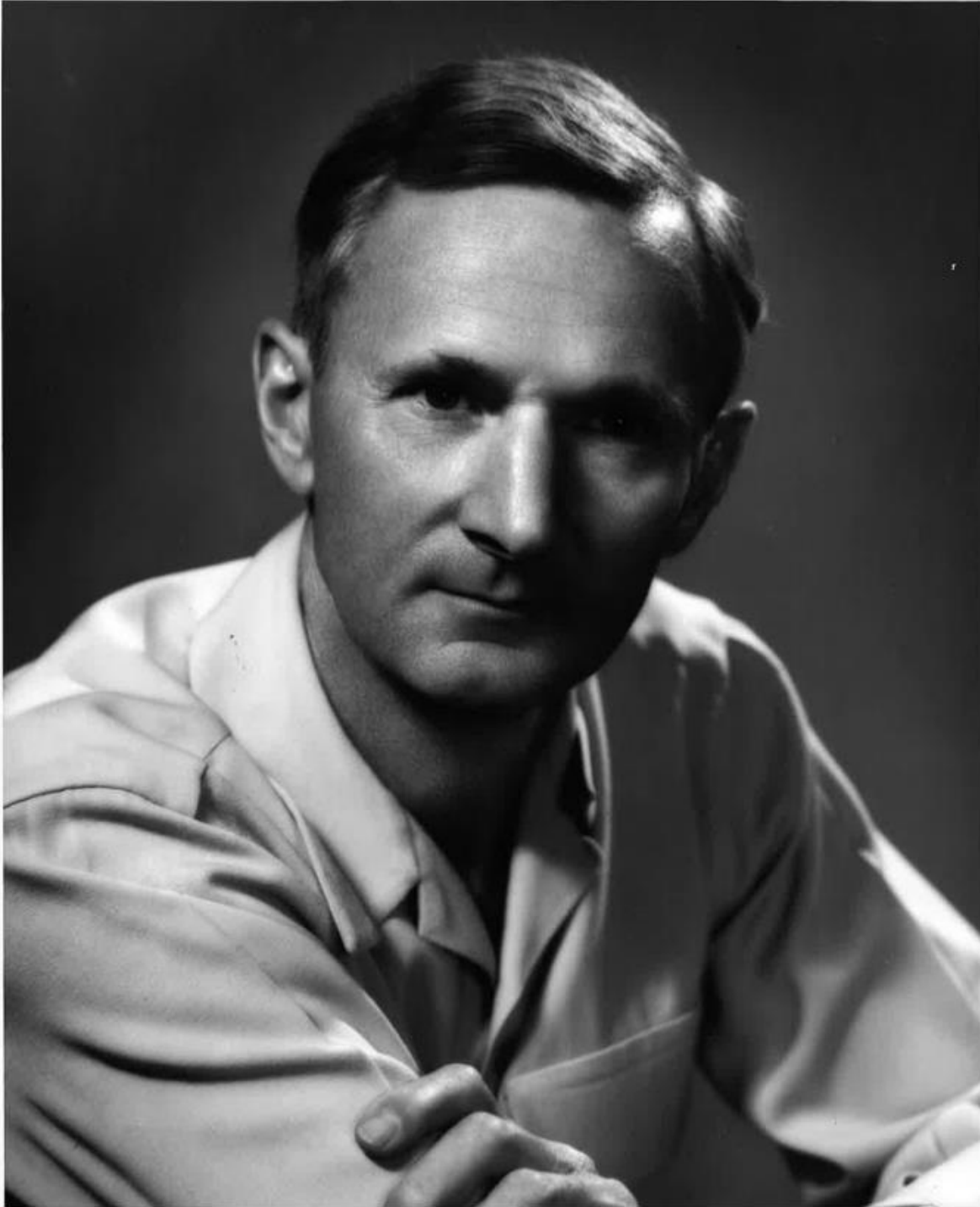
FINDING 1: The site, structure, building or object exhibits exceptional historic significance meets one or more of the criteria listed below:

8.05.070 C.1.a (paragraph 2) - **Persons:** This criterion recognizes properties associated with the lives of persons who made meaningful contributions to national state or local history. In this nomination, the Wells Residence is associated with J. Cheney Wells (1874-1960) who, along with his brothers Channing and Albert, were heads of the American Optical Company, the largest optical manufacturing enterprise of its kind in the world. Further Cheney and Albert were the founders and developers of Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, which is the biggest living history museum in New England. The Wells Residence is associated with J. Cheney Wells, a person who had influence in national history. Therefore, the Wells Residence qualifies for listing as a Class 1 Historic Site under Criterion 2.

8.05.070 C.1.a (paragraphs 3, 4 & 5) - **Design/Construction:** The Wells Residence is eligible under the theme of Ranch style architecture because it possesses numerous distinctive characteristics that make up the Ranch style including clapboard exterior cladding, low pitched and hipped roof with wood shakes, and an architectural design that blurs the line between the indoors and outdoors. As a custom residence skillfully designed by Albert Frey, it rises to the level of work by master architects with high artistic values. Therefore, for its distinctive characteristics, as the work of Master architects, and for its high artistic values, the residence qualifies as a Class 1 Historic Site under Criteria 3, 4 and 5.

SUMMARY:

This evaluation finds the Wells Residence eligible for listing as a Palm Springs Historic Site under 8.05.070 C.1.a paragraphs 2, 3, 4 and 5 of the local ordinance's seven criteria. Additionally, the Wells Residence retains a "high degree" of integrity (see Section 7, "Integrity Analysis").



Albert Frey, F.A.I.A. (1903-1998).
(Courtesy of A.I.A. Archives)



CITY OF PALM SPRINGS

Department of Planning Services

3200 East Tahquitz Canyon Way, Palm Springs, CA 92262

Phone 760 323 8245

Fax 760 322 8360

Historic Preservation Officer 760 322 8364 x8786

HISTORIC RESOURCE DESIGNATION (HRD)

WHEN TO USE THIS APPLICATION:

Use this application if you are seeking Class 1 or Class 2 historic designation for a property or parcel or for historic district applications.

Use the MINOR ARCHITECTURAL APPLICATION FORM (MAA) if you are seeking approval for alterations to Class 1, Class 2, Class 3 or Class 4 historic sites. (Contact the Planning Department if you are unsure of the classification of your property.)

WHO MAY APPLY:

Any individual or organization may apply to the City for consideration of a request for historic resource designation. Applications must be signed and notarized by the owner(s) of record of the site, structure, building or object for which the designation is sought.

PROCEDURE:

1. For proposed historic sites or resources: Refer to Palm Springs Municipal Code ("PSMC") Section 8.05.070 for *Procedures and Criteria for the Designation of Class 1 and Class 2 Historic Resources*. Visit: www.palmspringsca.gov/government/departments/planning/municipal_code/title_8/section_8.05 "Historic Preservation").
2. For proposed historic districts: Refer to Municipal Code Section 8.05.090 for *Procedures and Criteria for Designation of Historic Districts*. Visit: www.palmspringsca.gov/government/departments/planning/municipal_code/Title_8/section_8.05 "Historic Preservation.
3. Complete all parts of the application and include related reports, mailing labels and back up information in support of the application. Denote "NA" for any line item that is not applicable.
4. Once the application is complete, contact the Planning Department and schedule a pre-application conference with the City's Historic Preservation Officer ("HPO").
5. Submit the completed application and related materials to the Department of Planning Services. A Planning Department case number will be assigned to the application.
6. Applications for historic site / resource or historic district designation are evaluated by staff in the City Planning Department who will prepare the application for consideration by the City's Historic Site Preservation Board ("HSPB") at a noticed public hearing. Applicants should plan on attending the hearing. City staff will schedule site visits for members of the HSPB to become familiar with the site prior to the public hearing. (Exterior review only, interiors are not subject to HSPB review.)
7. At the public hearing, the HSPB will evaluate the application and make a recommendation for City Council action. The City Council will consider the application and the HSPB's recommendation at a second noticed public hearing. The applicant should again attend that hearing.
8. The final action of the City Council to designate will be recorded on the property title with the County Recorder's office.

FOR HISTORIC SITE / RESOURCE APPLICATIONS, SEE CHECKLIST FOR CLASS 1 AND 2.
FOR HISTORIC DISTRICT APPLICATIONS, SEE CHECKLIST FOR HISTORIC DISTRICTS.



CITY OF PALM SPRINGS

Department of Planning Services
3200 E. Tahquitz Canyon Way, Palm Springs, CA 92262
Tel 760-323-8245 – FAX 760-322-8360

<i>For Staff Use Only</i>
Case Number: _____
In-Take Planner: _____
Date: _____

HISTORIC RESOURCE DESIGNATION PLANNING / ZONING GENERAL INFORMATION FORM

TO THE APPLICANT: Complete all parts of this application. Denote "NA" for lines that are not applicable.

Project Information:

Applicant's Name: William H. Fain Jr. & Jennifer Nelson Fain

Applicant's Address: 1850 Smoke Tree Lane, Palm Springs, Ca 92262

Site Address: 1850 Smoke Tree Lane, Palm Springs, Ca 92262 APN: 510-192-003

Phone #: 323-224-6000 Email: wfain@johnsonfain.com

Zone: _____ GP: _____ Section/Township/Range: /XX /XX

Description of Project:

Completed in 1942, the J. Cheney Wells Residence is an exceptional example of the Ranch House style of architecture as interpreted by noted desert modernist Albert Frey. In spite of its age, the house remains remarkably intact including the extreme rarity of retaining all of its original bathrooms. All alterations/additions between 1947-1983 were made by Frey himself.

Note: For Historic District applications: on a separate page provide a list of all sites/parcels within the proposed historic district boundaries with the same information listed above.

Is the project located on the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians Reservation? Yes/No: No
(Refer to the Land Status Map under Tribal Resources on the Planning Department home page)

Construction Date: 1942 Estimated Actual (denote source, i.e. building permits)

Architect: Albert Frey

Original Owner: J. Cheney Wells/Gertrude Wells Overly

Common/Historic Name of Property: J. Cheney Wells Residence/Overly Residence

Other historic associations: _____

Attach to this application any information, photos, drawings, newspaper articles, reports, studies, or other materials to fully describe the characteristics or conditions that support this application for historic designation.

Architectural Style: Ranch House

Refer to the Architectural Styles chapter of Citywide Historic Context Statement, under Historic Resources on the Planning Department Home Page: www.palmspringsca.gov.

HISTORIC RESOURCE DESIGNATION APPLICATION (CONT.)

Criteria for the Designation of a Class 1 Historic Resource:

Pursuant to the Palm Springs Municipal Code (PSMC) Section 8.05.070(C,1): A site, structure, building, or object may be designated as a Class 1 historic resource or a Contributing Resource in a proposed historic district by the Palm Springs City Council, provided both of the following findings are met. Refer to the US Department of the Interior National Register Bulletin "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation" of potentially historic resources for further information.

Provide a written description of how the site qualifies as a historic resource per the following Findings. Please provide answers on a separate sheet or report.

FINDING 1: The site, structure, building or object exhibits exceptional historic significance and meets one or more of the criteria listed below:

- a. The resource is associated with events that have made a meaningful contribution to the nation, state, or community. 1
- b. The resource is associated with the lives of persons who made a meaningful contribution to national, state or local history.
- c. The resource reflects or exemplifies a particular period of national, state or local history.
- d. The resource embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction.
- e. The resource presents the work of a master builder, designer, artist, or architect whose individual genius influenced his age, or that possess high artistic value.
- f. The resource represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction, as used in evaluating applications for designation of historic districts, for parcels on which more than one entity exists.

FINDING 2: The site, structure, building or object retains one or more of the following aspects of integrity, as established in the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. Provide a written description for each element as listed: Design; Materials; Workmanship; Location; Setting; Feeling; and Association. 2

Criteria for the Designation of a Class 2 Historic Resource:

Pursuant to the Palm Springs Municipal Code (PSMC) Section 8.05.070(C,1): A site, structure, building, or object may be designated as a Class 2 historic resource or a Contributing Resource in a proposed historic district by the Palm Springs City Council, provided the site, structure, building, or object exhibits significance and meets one or more of the criteria listed in Finding 1 above. A Class 2 historic resource is not required to meet the findings for integrity as described in Finding 2.

Criteria and Findings for Designation of Historic Districts:

In addition to the criteria listed in Finding 1, to be considered for designation as a Historic District, a defined area must:

- a. Contain contributing resources on a majority of the sites within the proposed district which individually meet the criteria in Finding 1. The defined area may include other structures, buildings, or archaeological sites which contribute generally to the overall distinctive character of the area and are related historically or visually by plan or physical development. *Provide a separate list by address and Assessor Parcel Number (APN) for each site/parcel that meets the criteria outlined in Finding 1.*
- b. Identify non-contributing properties or vacant parcels to the extent necessary to establish appropriate, logical or convenient boundaries. *Provide a separate list by address and APN number for each site/parcel within the proposed historic district that is considered non-contributing to the overall historic significance of the historic district.*

1 NOTE: Unlike the National Trust criteria, the City's criterion does not consider "patterns of events". For consideration of "patterns of events", use Criterion "C", reflecting a particular period.

2 NOTE: Refer to the U.S. Department of the Interior Bulletin for "How to Evaluate the Integrity of a Property".

**CITY OF PALM SPRINGS
PLANNING DEPARTMENT APPLICATION
HISTORIC RESOURCE DESIGNATION**

CLASS 1 AND CLASS 2

APPLICANT'S REQUIRED MATERIAL CHECKLIST

The following items must be submitted before a **Historic Resource Designation** application will be accepted. Please check off each item to assure completeness. Provide twelve (12) hard copies and one (1) PDF copy of the following materials unless otherwise noted:

	Applicant Only	City Use Only
Application Information:		
• General Information form (1 copy)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Notarized letter from property owner consenting to Historic Designation (1 copy)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Ownership and Address History ("Chain of Title") (1 copy)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Historic Resource Report:		
The following items shall be included in a historic resources report describing the site, structure, buildings, or objects eligible and appropriate for designation per PSMC 8.05.070.		
• Photographs of the exterior of the proposed site, structure, buildings or objects.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Aerial photo of the site/resource (from Google Maps or equal).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Information on the architect, designer, and/or developer.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Date and method of construction. Provide copies of building permits.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• A detailed assessment of the character defining features describing materials, architectural details/style, landscape elements, or other relevant descriptors.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Evaluation of the site relative to the Criteria and Findings for Designation of Class 1 and Class 2 Historic Resources.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Additional Information:		
• Site Plan: 8-12" x 11" or 11" x 17"	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Public Hearing labels per PSZC Section 94.09.00.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Any other documentation or research as may be necessary to determine the qualifications of the site, structure, building, or objects.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

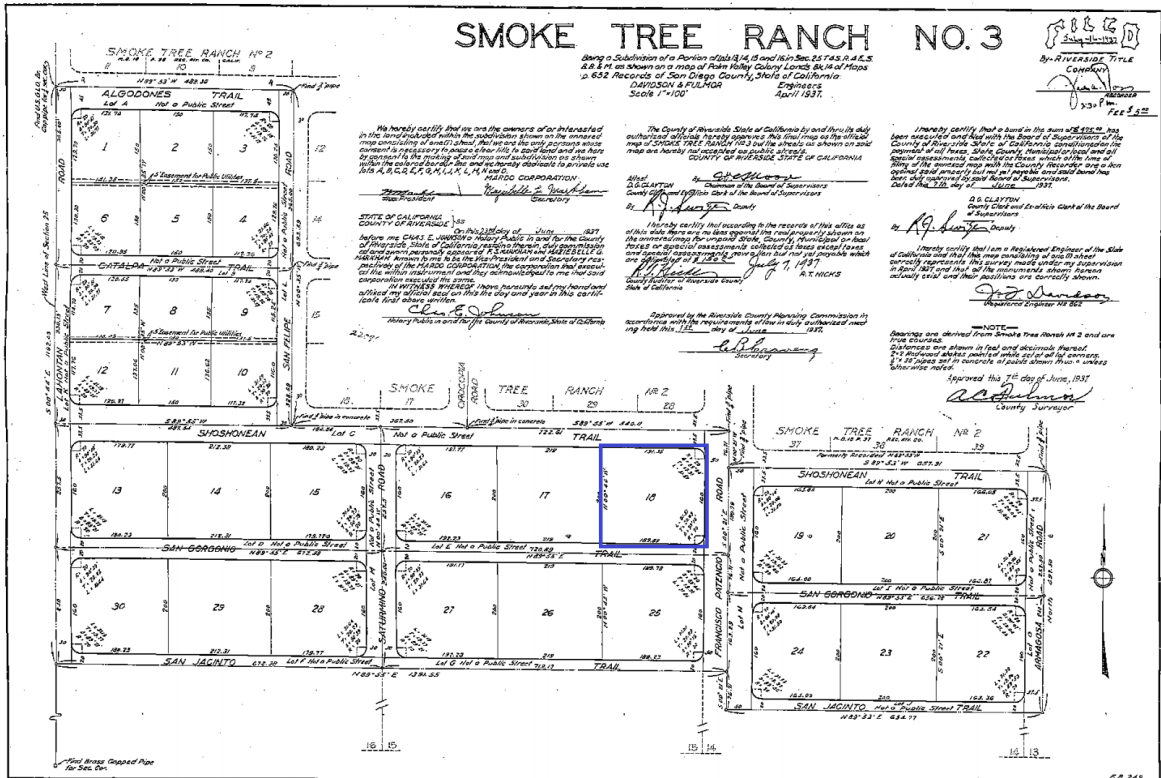
Applicants are encouraged to review the bulletin from the U.S. Department of the Interior titled "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation". (National Register Bulletin 15 (<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb15/>)).

Statement of Significance

Summary

The Wells Residence is located within the historic Smoke Tree Ranch development. As is the case with all Smoke Tree Ranch homes, the Wells Residence bears the official address of 1850 Smoke Tree Lane, although internally it is located at Rock 12, which had originally been designated as Shoshonean Lane.

The legal description per the Riverside County Assessor is LOT 18 MB 019/024 SMOKE TREE RANCH 3. The "3" is in reference to the different sections of the ranch, which was laid out and developed in four distinct parcels. The Wells Residence was built in Smoke Tree Ranch No. 3., which had been opened for subdivision in 1937.



The tract map for Smoke Tree Ranch No. 3, April 1937, as shown in the *City of Palm Springs Citywide Historic Context and Survey Findings*. The Wells lot is shown in blue.

First Owners, J. Cheney Wells/Gertrude Wells Overly



In this 1948 image from the *Boston Globe*, J. Cheney Wells is seen demonstrating an Early American kitchen aide, a two-handed chopper.

For more than a generation, J. Cheney Wells (1874-1960) was a towering figure in the international optical industry as the head, along with brothers Channing and Albert, of the American Optical Company in Southbridge, Massachusetts. Founded in 1869, American Optical grew from a modest family business to an international industrial giant of more than 10,000 employees by the time Wells built his home in Smoke Tree Ranch. His deep involvement with the company extended beyond administrative management: he personally held more than 40 patents related to eyeglass design from frames to lenses.

One of the passions Wells shared with his brothers was in the collection of antiques, particularly those of the Early American period. Wells focused on rare paperweights, early clocks and timepieces. By the time of the construction of his Smoke Tree Ranch residence, Wells had amassed what was considered to be one of the nation's finest and most important collections of vintage paperweights and clocks. At least one of these rare clocks was brought to Palm Springs where it was given a place of honor in the home's living room.

The collections of the Wells brothers rose to such a degree both in quality and quantity that they inspired the development of a museum to house and display them. But rather than being a static museum, brothers Cheney and Albert underwrote the creation of a unique living history museum where visitors could come and see antique tools, equipment, farm implements, kitchen and domestic items actually in use, demonstrated and explained by skilled artisans who were dressed in authentic period costumes. Known as Old Sturbridge Village, the living history museum is located across a sprawling 240 acres in Sturbridge, Massachusetts and includes dozens of structures that recreate a typical New England village from the 1790s-1830s (see full Wells biography in Appendix V).

Wells Residence Construction



The Wells Brothers were an unusually tightknit trio who successfully built the American Optical Company into an international powerhouse. Brother Channing is at left, Albert at center and Cheney on the right. Note the dog sleeping at Cheney's feet.
(Via The Wells Family by Ruth Dyer Wells)

From their early childhoods, when they accompanied their father on his frequent sales trips for American Optical, the Wells brothers developed a love of travel. For much of their lives it was part of their jobs, but with wealth and success their travels became more for pleasure and the trio racked up such an impressive list of destinations they were justly called globe-trotters.

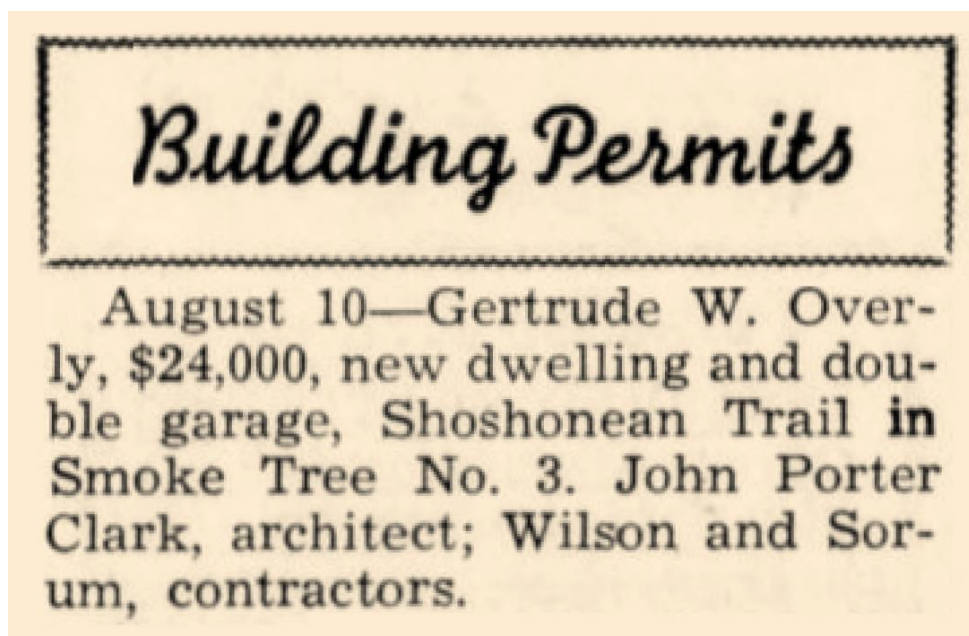
Cheney, in particular, was an inveterate wanderer. In 1937, he and his daughter Gertrude completed a round-the-world trip that culminated in their being among the first group of passengers to inaugurate the Hawaii Clipper from Honolulu to San Francisco.

Although there were a number of spots frequented by the Wells family, by the 1930s, Southern California had become a favorite, and not just for brief visits, but as a permanent winter base. The pioneer was Albert who in 1932 purchased an extensive property at Rancho Santa Fe. "There is something about California that no other place seems to have," he said. "Of course, when I say California, I mean Southern California, not Los Angeles or any place north."

Albert may have chosen Rancho Santa Fe because it was already the winter home of his brother-in-law John Hudson Burnham. But Burnham also had a desert retreat in Palm Springs, which he cultivated as an artist's colony. Today this property is known as Colony 29 and it may have been through Burnham that the Wells brothers began to appreciate Palm Springs.

While Albert stayed mostly at Rancho Santa Fe, Channing and Cheney settled on Palm Springs. The first destination was the Desert Inn, but by the mid-1930s, Cheney was wintering at the Smoke Tree Ranch. His companion was usually his daughter Gertrude as his wife Florence, immobilized from a stroke, could not travel. Cheney and Gertrude both fell in love with Smoke Tree Ranch and in March 1938, Cheney purchased two lots on Shoshonean Trail in Smoke Tree Ranch No. 3 with plans for a future home.

It would take several more years before Cheney took the formal step to build a winter residence on his property. On August 10, 1941, a permit was taken out with the city of Palm Springs for the construction of a residence with double garage at a cost of \$24,000. The name on the permit was Gertrude W. Overly. The contractor was Wilson & Sorum and the architect was listed as John Porter Clark.



Announcement of construction of the Wells Residence in the *Desert Sun*, August 15, 1941.
(Accessed via California Digital Newspaper Collection)

J. Cheney Wells or Gertrude Wells Overly

Gertrude's name on the permit has created some confusion over who the Wells Residence was built for, whether it was Gertrude or her father Cheney. The blueprints and related documentation further this uncertainty with their names interchanged throughout. The commonly accepted story is that Cheney built the house for Gertrude as a gift, but she disliked the home and refused to live there, claiming it was too large. While this is a charming bit of lore, it stretches the bounds of credulity as it would have been highly unlikely Gertrude would not have been aware of the home's dimensions considering it was her name on the building permit as well as half the blueprints. According to Gertrude's daughter Lisa Markham, Gertrude moved out of the house (in 1944) for the practical reason of wanting to be closer to relatives while her husband was away at war.

John Porter Clark or Albert Frey

The 1941 building permit also draws confusion regarding the name of the architect, which is listed as John Porter Clark. The Wells Residence was not designed by Clark, but rather his associate, Albert Frey. This was verified by Frey himself who approved the list of his work, which appeared in Joseph Rosa's *Albert Frey, Architect* (Rizzoli, 1990). At the time of construction, Frey had been serving as Clark's associate. He had not yet been officially elevated to partner status and, as such, it was Clark's name, not his, which was listed on the permit. Clark's name is also found on the blueprints and related documents on the house found in the Frey Collections both at UC Santa Barbara and the Palm Springs Art Museum. The practice of a head of an architectural firm being given the credit for an associate's work was and remains common in the architectural practice. Neither Frey nor Clark were new to the situation, having been both uncredited for the work they performed as Palm Springs representatives for Van Pelt & Lind in the 1930s. Further, it may have been because Frey was not yet licensed to practice in California at the time of construction.

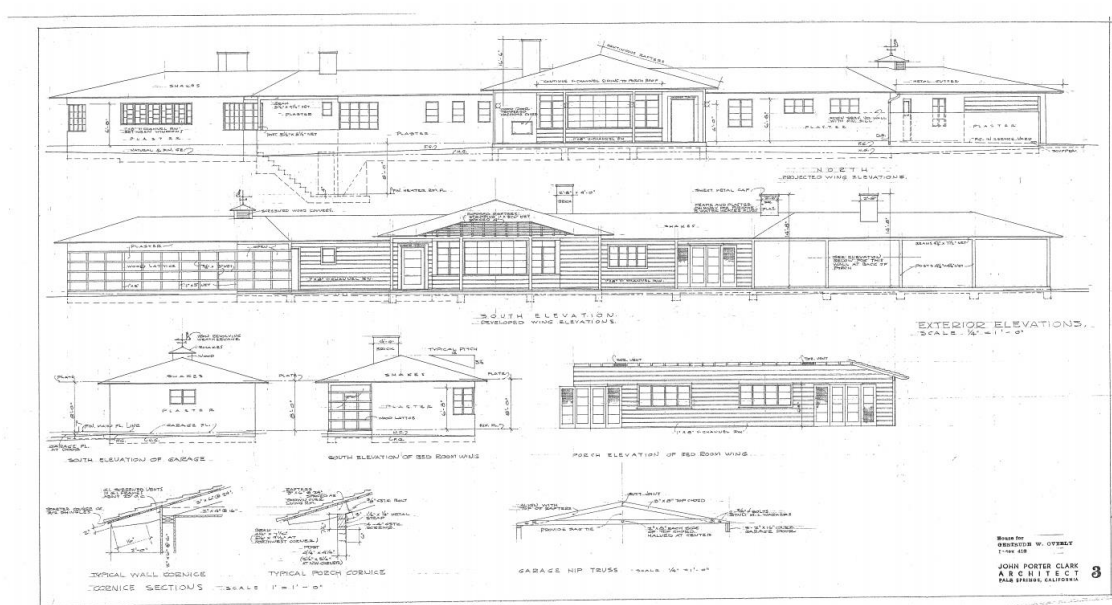
The Wells Residence was one of three Smoke Tree Ranch houses, Frey (under Clark's name) was to design in 1941-1942. Frey's first Smoke Tree Ranch commission, the home of Fred and Nina Johnson, was located just across the street from the Wells Residence and completed around the same time. The third residence was the Fred and Mazibelle Markham Residence. This was an important commission as the Markhams were the owners of Smoke Tree Ranch. These houses would be the start of a long and impressive association with the ranch that would involve designing or providing additions for some 30 residences in the colony between 1941 and 1985. This is even more remarkable considering there are fewer than 100 houses in the whole development (see full Frey biography in Appendix VI).

The Architecture

In approaching his design of the Wells Residence, Frey faced preexisting design conditions imposed by the covenants of Smoke Tree Ranch. Only traditional "ranch" style architecture was allowed. Homes were required to be one story with pitched

shingled roofs and sit apart on large lots with no front lawns or non-native shade trees. While this might have made working on the Wells Residence an unsatisfying experience for a modernist like Frey, rather he appears to have risen to the challenge, designing a house that blended the best elements from both traditional ranch and modern styles.

Architecturally, the Wells Residence checks off virtually all of the character-defining features of the traditional ranch house such as its low-pitched shake roof, rambling, irregular floor plan, wide verandahs, minimal orientation, and its relation between indoor-outdoor spaces. Yet, it nonetheless bears an unmistakably modern feeling in its sleek lines, which are clean and free of unnecessary adornment. This is made particularly potent by just how low Frey made the pitch of the rooflines as well as his glassed-walled living room.



Elevation plan of Job 418 showing Frey's emphasis on horizontality.
(Courtesy Architecture and Design Collection, Palm Springs Art Museum)

Frey's first design decision was the physical placement of the house. Rather than siting it squarely in the center of the large corner lot, Frey turned it at an angle so that it faced the northeast. This positioning allowed the house to gain the fullest benefits of morning sunlight as it entered the valley and conversely the spectacular desert sunsets visible from the rear as they played against the mountains in the southwest.

In terms of the massing, Frey broke the house up into three distinct sections with a main mass flanked on either side by lateral wings, which projected outwards into the desert landscape and helped to define an enclosure in the rear. This type of massing was typical of Ranch architecture and helped give the illusion of a house added onto over time. The central mass itself was arranged in the form of a cross with a center volume and symmetrical volumes emanating from each side.

The wood-framed structure was sheathed in a combination of wide, horizontal plank boards and stucco, which was intended to resemble adobe. The combination of the two types of sheathing was not only aesthetically pleasing it referenced a common occurrence in ranch house architecture as a number of the original adobe homes had been sheathed with boards in the late 1800s by settlers to give them a more “American” look. Further, it added to the illusion of a house that had been enlarged over time as the original adobes tended to be.



**A 1974 image by Albert Frey of the rear elevation showing the multiple roof planes.
Note the hitching post in the lower center.**

(Courtesy Albert Frey Papers, Architecture and Design Collection, UC, Santa Barbara)

The Roof and Verandahs

The rambling, asymmetrical floorplan of the Wells Residence with both projecting and recessed volumes was reflected in the home’s roof. Frey masterfully transformed what might have merely been a simple pitched, hipped roof into a visually arresting masterwork by giving each individual volume its own distinct roofline. The result is a series of intersecting planes which appear to fold away from the central mass.

To provide freedom of airflow, Frey added screened end vents below the crown of each of the hips as well as a separate ridge vent over the garage. The plans for the house show that this was to be surmounted by a whimsical weathervane forged in iron that depicted a jackrabbit. Today, the roof ventilator is topped by a simple arrow weathervane. It appears the jackrabbit was lost sometime after 1974.



A view showing some of the intersecting eaves on the southern façade and Frey's 1968 redwood covered terrace addition.
(Author photo. May 2019)

Frey extended the roof over the façade to provide overhanging eaves, which served to shade the house from the desert sun when it was at its peak. After having experimented with flat-roofed structures with no eaves in some of his early Palm Springs work, Frey had concluded that eaves were a necessary addition for desert designs.

While overhanging eaves projected from most of the house, Frey extended the roofline further in several areas to create verandahs. This was done on both the front and rear elevations of the central core as well as along the rear of the east (bedroom) wing. These verandah overhangs were supported by simple wooden posts with a width of 4 ¼”.

When it came to the rear (southern) verandah, Frey made the interesting choice of leaving the rafters exposed to the sky above. The result was an ever-changing play of light and shadows as the sun moved across the sky. Frey had been fascinated by the relation of light and shadow ever since his early days with Le Corbusier. He used this same motif on certain other designs at least back to his days with Van Pelt & Lind and would use it again in various forms for the remainder of his career. On the Wells Residence, the open rafters were roofed over at a later date.



A 1947 Julius Shulman view of the southern verandah. Note, the open section of the roof with its light-shadow effect.
(Courtesy Architecture and Design Collection, Palm Springs Art Museum)

Windows and Exterior Doors



**A 1947 Shulman view of the northern portion of living room window showing Frey's use of metal casements to create a "wall of glass." Note built-in flower box and cabinets below. The old Smoke Tree Ranch water tower may be seen in the distance.
(© J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10))**

An abundance of light and access to the outdoors were critical elements in any Frey design. For the Wells Residence, Frey introduced modern steel casement windows of varying configurations and sizes over all of the wall surfaces. These ranged from single to multipaned varieties. In some cases, casements were used at corners to further a glass-wall effect. Nowhere was this more evident than in the living room, where its two projecting bays were essentially made entirely of glass through bands of 5-pane casements and two multipaned pocket doors on the southern portion.

Not allowed to use single sheet glass as it would be deemed too modern, Frey was nonetheless able to achieve the same effect with casements, making the living room a "see through" space where one could simultaneously view the surroundings to the north and south. And from the outside, one could see straight through the house from front grounds to the rear and vice versa. Frey treated windows as more than just openings

for light and air. He used them artistically in size and arrangement to make them points of interest across the façade as evidenced on the northern elevation of the bedroom wing, which included a band of six windows divided by equal-sized sections of horizontal boards. The windows, which provided light for two dressing rooms, were partially smoked for privacy.



The same view today.
(Author photo. May 2019)

Exterior doors were also glass-paned French doors in both single and double sets. Frey made the entry doors on both northern and southern elevations oversized with glass panes, which allowed one to see directly through the house and out to the landscape beyond. He also added French doors off each of the three principal bedrooms on the southern elevation for direct access to the rear grounds.

Frey's exterior plans included two other elements of interest, one being a staircase leading to a small basement and the other a small door opening off the northern façade that could be used to deliver wood for the living room fireplace.

Interior Arrangements and Treatments



**The bar off the entry hall. Door partially visible on left is the powder room.
(Author photo. May 2019)**

In his plan for the Wells Residence interior, Frey captured the spirit of what Cliff May, foremost proponent of the modern ranch house, called the “special way of living – informal yet gracious.” All of the interior spaces both public and private were arranged for ease of flow, livability and hospitality. Frey began with the entry hall, making it a room unto itself and not just a pass through to other spaces. Wide enough to allow mingling, Frey gave a reason to tarry with the addition of a bar, which was given added charm by a horizontal board base and a set of louvered doors, which could be opened or closed as desired. It was through the entry that one could enter the living room through a wide opening or into the dining room and kitchen beyond. Frey also included an adjacent powder room with a hand-painted built-in shelf. It was here, on the powder room’s southern wall, that Frey managed to sneak in an overtly modern touch by giving it a graceful curve. Although he tempered it on the outside by sheathing it in vertical boards.

The visually stunning living room was the home’s most dramatic space owing to its walls of glass on either side, which served as frames for the surrounding spectacular desert scenery. Anchoring the room on its eastern wall was a tiled fireplace, which was surrounded by redwood paneling. As the home’s current owner, architect William Fain, Jr., FAIA, noted, the horizontal boards of the living room exterior “were run into the living room side walls as if the outside is brought inside for each wing with the high living room space between and open masterfully towards views at the ends. The reference to an ‘indoor-outdoor’ relationship is quite cleverly done.”

The rich redwood tone of the walls was contrasted by the light, pickled look of the exposed beam ceiling, while the floor was composed of stained concrete. In the living room as throughout the home, Frey followed Le Corbusier's preference for built-ins with a low set of bookshelves running under the length of the northern windows. On either side of the southern portion of the room, Frey added glass-paneled pocket doors for ease of access in and out of the adjacent verandah. Today, all of these elements remain in place, although the redwood paneling has been painted white.



This 1947 Julius Shulman image shows the living room fireplace. Note the distinct contrast between the redwood stained walls and the beamed ceiling. (Courtesy Architecture and Design Collection, Palm Springs Art Museum)



Shulman's 1947 view of the living room's southern side. Note the grandfather clock likely from the Wells Collection. Paneled door leads to the master bedroom dressing room.
(© J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10))

It was through a simple paneled door to the right of the fireplace that one accessed the bedroom wing of the house. The Wells Residence was composed of three principal bedrooms each *en suite* with an adjoining bathroom and dressing room. Frey's handling of the dressing room/baths, which were actually larger than the bedrooms themselves, was inspired and brought the home's charms and comfort to a higher level.

Perhaps considering how much time a person spends in the bath, Frey transformed what might otherwise be utilitarian spaces into de facto living rooms where one could lounge and even entertain. The toilet was discreetly hidden away behind a door in one corner, while a stall shower made up another. The deep porcelain bathtub was surrounded by colorful tiles as was the sink, which featured a large mirror that extended to the ceiling. Frey provided a built-in dressing table with hand painted top. Here, and at other spots, Frey added plenty of drawer space. But the dressing room/bath's most unique feature was the kiva fireplace which anchored the space, providing both warmth and charm. The room was large enough and was intended to accommodate a club chair where one could sit and read by the cheerful crackling of the fire.



One of the dressing room kiva fireplaces.
(Author photo. May 2019)

Ample closet space was included both in the dressing rooms and adjacent bedrooms. While the bedrooms themselves lacked the stand-out features of the dressing rooms, they did each have French doors opening out onto the verandah and the rear grounds. It should be noted that the Wells Residence was designed to be only one room deep, which allowed for exposure to both the north and south. Originally, one could have passed through the entirety of the house from living room to end bedroom by way of a series of connecting doors. However, several such doors have been closed off in the ensuing years and today two of the bedrooms are accessed by way of their French doors opening onto the verandah.

On the other side of the entry hall is the kitchen, dining and service area. Originally, the house had only a breakfast room. There was no official dining room as it was expected that the occupants would dine al fresco out on the southern verandah. However, the breakfast room was later expanded by Frey into a full-sized dining room.

Beyond the dining room is the kitchen, laundry room and separate staff bedroom and bath. Making up the end of the western wing is a two-car garage. Frey showed his usual conscientiousness and attention to detail in these utilitarian areas, providing ample light and efficient use of space with adequate shelving and storage. Frey even brought a bit of style to the drying yard off the side of the laundry area, enclosing it in a graceful semi-circular wall.



**An example of vintage tiling and fixtures in one of the dressing rooms. The home still retains the original 1941 fixtures and tiling in all three baths and powder room.
(Author photo. May 2019)**

Finally, a small but significant addition to the home was made by J. Cheney Wells in the form of cut crystal doorknobs, which had originally graced the Wells family home built in 1900 in Southbridge, Massachusetts. These unique and historic additions remain with the home today.



**One of the crystal doorknobs added by Cheney Wells to the house.
(Author photo. May 2019)**

Grounds and Landscaping

As per Smoke Tree Ranch requirements as well as what would be appropriate for the Ranch style, the landscaping of the Wells Residence was kept simple. The entirety of the front of the lot was kept in its natural state with entrance walks and a carriage light at the street being the only intrusions.

The rear of the property was landscaped but it was kept simple with a grass pad and a small group of citrus trees. Frey added trellises to the verandah of the bedroom wing to which bougainvillea was trained. The site today also exhibits mature palm trees although it cannot be verified exactly when these were introduced.



**A Julius Shulman view of the rear verandah capturing how life in the desert should be lived. Note the small orange orchard. Identity of the couple is not presently known. It may be Gertrude Wells Overly and her husband Homer or possibly Cully and Clara Stimpson who purchased the home in 1947, the same year this photograph was taken.
(Courtesy Architecture and Design Collection, Palm Springs Art Museum)**

Wells Family Occupancy 1942-1947



A Bachrach photo of the strikingly beautiful Gertrude Wells, which appeared in the *Pittsburgh Press* at the time of her engagement to Homer R. Overly in July 1939.

Gertrude Alice Wells (1919-2011) was the youngest of three children born to J. Cheney and Florence Wells. She grew up in Boston and in Southbridge, Massachusetts attending private schools or privately tutored in the Wells home. Later she attended the Bancroft School and Westover, from which she graduated in 1936. Gertrude made her debut during the 1937-1938 social season and was a member of the Worcester Junior League. In 1939, she married Homer Roy Overly Jr. (1916-1998), a recent graduate of the Harvard Business School and the Wharton School of Finance. Together, the couple would ultimately have three children, Lisa, Peter and Christopher.

The Wells family occupancy of their new desert retreat coincided with America's entry into the Second World War and everyone appears to have been involved in different ways to help the effort. Cheney and his brother Channing became sponsors of the local chapter of Bundles for Bluejackets, an organization providing support for sailors. One of those sailors was Homer Overly, who had enlisted in 1942. Gertrude herself quickly became involved in an exciting new program known as the Women's Aviation Service Pilots (WASP). This was a civil aviation program that was attached to the U.S. Army Air Corps. The purpose was to free male pilots and crew for more critical combat missions by having women take on the tasks of testing, ferrying and towing aircraft to their needed locations around the U.S. and to combat zones. They also were used as instructors to train other pilots. More than 1,000 women were involved in the program, 38 of whom lost their lives including one who went missing while en route to the base at Palm Springs.

The WASP program was of critical value during the war, but it faced opposition from male civilian pilots who feared post-war competition. Gertrude and the other WASPs were denied veteran status and the program was ended in December 1944. Decades later, the WASPs were finally given their due with veteran status and in 2009, President Barack Obama signed a law honoring the WASPs with a special Congressional gold medal. The 90-year-old Gertrude was among those in attendance.

With the end of the WASP program, Gertrude looked for other ways to help in the war effort and in December 1944 she completed her training as a Red Cross nurse at Torney General Hospital, where she worked for the duration of the conflict. By this time, she had left the Wells Residence but not Smoke Tree Ranch. In 1944, she took over the Ralph F. Burnham house located at Rock 6 at the ranch. Burnham, a millionaire citrus rancher was a family relative and the home had been a part of the Wells orbit since it was completed in 1936. Gertrude would remain at the Burnham house until 1952 when she divorced Homer Overly and subsequently married Frank Michael Brennan.

During her marriage to Brennan, a music company executive, Gertrude lived first in Brentwood and later, in the 1960s, in San Diego. But she never lost her love of Palm Springs and Smoke Tree Ranch. In 1966, she and her husband purchased another house on the ranch, the 1941 Knight Residence at Rock 15. Upon moving in, she engaged Frey to do an addition. In 1991, she purchased again. Her new home was her former home – the Burnham House at Rock 6. She passed away in 2011 at the age of 92.

Additional Owners

1947-1954
Cully & Clara Stimson

1954-1988
Harold & Jane Miller
(Jane was the daughter of Cully and Clara Stimson)

1988-2004
Bruce and Grace Jones

2004-2013
Anne R. Witherspoon

2013-2018
Stephen and Melissa Babson

2018-Present
William and Jennifer Nelson Fain

It should be noted that Mr. Fain, FAIA, partner at Johnson Fain Inc. in Los Angeles, is an important and award-winning architect. Both he and Mrs. Fain are much interested in preserving and protecting the residence and are actively desiring its designation as a Class 1 historic site.

Changes and Additions to the Wells Residence

A search was made with the city of Palm Springs for permits related to the Wells Residence. In spite of using different search criteria including parcel, lot number, APN, etc., the city was unable to locate any permits other than for a 2014 spa addition. Therefore, the following list has been compiled from other sources.

According to the inventory of commissions compiled by Joseph Rosa and included as part of his book on Frey, there were additions/alterations made to the house in the years 1947, 1968 and 1983, all done by Frey himself. A review of documentation in the Albert Frey collections at both UC Santa Barbara and the Palm Springs Art Museum show changes made by the following dates:

1947 – Clark & Frey. Addition of a small shop/work room at what had been the terminus of the southern verandah and adjacent to the third (end) bedroom. This space remains as built; however, it has been converted into a child's bedroom.

1951 – John Porter Clark. Design and installation of a new screen door.

1968 – Albert Frey. Several notable additions/alterations:

- Creation of the dining room by extending the former breakfast room outward. A new hipped roof was added to cover and complement the existing rooflines.
- Addition of a new semi-covered porch attached to the southern side of the west wing. This rustic structure was roofed in split redwood rails and laid at intervals to allow sunlight to shine through. This semi-open roof achieved what the original southern verandah had done, which is to create an unusual striped light and shadow effect. This remains as built.
- Removal of old concrete on southern verandah and replaced by Kooldeck concrete.
- Addition of a swimming pool designed by Hoams Pools of Rancho Mirage. Cost of the pool was \$3,300.

1974 – Albert Frey. Several notable additions/alterations:

- Addition of an office attached to the master bedroom which included its own separate entrance accessible by way of the front (northern) verandah.
- Enlargement/remodel of the laundry room.
- New hipped roofs for both additions to match existing roof.

1980 – Albert Frey. Unspecified work for the Harold Millers.



A view showing how Frey's 1968 dining room addition (right of the verandah) and his 1974 office addition (left of verandah) integrate into the façade.

(Author photo. May 2019)

It has not been possible to locate any alterations/additions performed by Frey in 1983 as referenced in the Rosa book.

2004-2013 –

In 2009, Anne R. Witherspoon replaced the 1968 Hoams pool with a new cloverleaf-designed version. Additionally, it appears Witherspoon redid the front walkways leading from the street and from the parking area to the main entrance. This is evidenced by a flagstone bearing her initials near the parking area.



(Author photo. May 2019)

2013-2018 – In 2014, Stephen and Melissa Babson added a spa to the pool. This work was authorized by Palm Springs Building Permit #2014-2406. The Babsons also made certain changes to the landscaping at the rear of the house as well including the construction of a concrete wall enclosure for the pool equipment. However, as noted, the permits related to that work did not turn up during a recent search of the records.

Character Defining Features of the Wells Residence

The Wells Residence is an exceptional example of Ranch House architecture, a style which began to appear in Palm Springs during the 1930s and which would reach its peak of popularity in the 1950s-1960s. The quality of Frey's design for the Wells residence and his other early Ranch houses helped to set a standard for future Ranch House style designs. The Wells House exhibits classic Ranch House elements including:

- An emphasis on horizontality including its low pitched roof
- Blending of indoor and outdoor spaces
- Informal, asymmetrical layout
- Clapboard and stucco (made to mimic adobe) exterior wall treatments
- Overhanging eaves
- Covered patios and arcades
- French doors
- Steel casement windows
- Living room walls made largely of windows to create "walls of glass"

Contributing Elements

- Main residence and attached garage
- Landscaping

Non-Contributing Elements

- 2009 Swimming pool and 2014 spa
- Walkways/driveway
- Perimeter wall and equipment enclosure wall

Local Architectural Context

The Wells Residence should be viewed within the context of the period between World Wars I and II, when Palm Springs was becoming established as a fashionable winter resort for wealthy and/or famous people. According to Historic Resource Group's [Palm Springs] *Citywide Historic Context Statement & Survey Findings*, "In the 1930s important figures in finance and business continued to flock to the desert in the winter, helping to cement the village's reputation as one of the nation's top winter resort destinations. J. Cheney Wells and his brother Channing Wells were among those figures. Architecturally, the Spanish and Mediterranean Revival styles were the town's dominant architectural expression during this period. However, the Ranch style began to gain in popularity. The Ranch style emerged from the 1930s designs of Southern California architects and designers such as Cliff May who merged modernist ideas with traditional elements of the working ranches of the American West and in particular, the rustic adobe houses of California's Spanish- and Mexican-era ranchos.

In 1930s Palm Springs the Ranch house took on the simpler, more rustic style of traditional southwestern adobe, hacienda, and wood vernacular types that was believed to be better suited to the desert climate and casual lifestyle. These tended to be informal one-story houses finished in plaster, brick, or board and-batten siding, with irregular or rambling plans, low-pitched tile or wood shake roofs, wide verandas, wood or steel windows, and minimal ornamentation.

The Ranch-style house proved popular both before and after the war, combining as it did modernist ideas of open interior space with traditional imagery of working ranches and Spanish ranchos.

Site Description

Location. The Wells Residence is located on a prominent corner lot in the Smoke Tree Ranch colony, one of the desert's most historic and exclusive residential districts. The home is part of a series of residences designed by master architect Albert Frey and is surrounded by other homes designed by such noted architects as Wallace Neff, E. Stewart Williams, William F. Cody, Marston, Van Pelt & Maybury, Rose Conner, among others. Directly across from the Wells Residence is the Johnson Residence, which was Frey's first Smoke Tree Ranch commission (1941). The topography of the lot is level. The site is largely left to natural landscaping on its front portion with some added cacti, succulents, etc. The rear portion of the lot has been planted in grass with mature trees, shrubs and varying types of bougainvillea.



General view as seen from street looking south showing northern façade.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



View from across Rock 12 showing paved driveway to attached garage.
Note original 1942 lamp post in center.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



Closer view of north elevation showing some of the native plantings.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



Recessed entry. Note view straight through to rear.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



Looking eastward across front verandah. Note doorway to Frey's 1974 office addition.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



View showing opening to basement stairs.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



View looking northeast across rear grounds and clover pool/spa.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



Looking west showing verandahs and 1968 redwood terrace.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



Looking northward along the verandah walkway of the bedroom wing.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



One of the original 1942 wrought iron light fixtures.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



**A peek through the trellis framing the bedroom wing verandah.
(Author Photo. May 2019)**



**Frey's curved wall outside of the powder room, one of his only overtly modern additions. Note
the wide glass-paned rear entry door.
(Author Photo. May 2019)**



Band of casements defining two of the home's dressing rooms.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



Living room view. Ceiling retains its original color. Redwood walls have been painted white.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



Frey's 1968 dining room expansion.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



Another living room view looking west across entry into dining room.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



One of the three bedrooms showing exposed beam ceiling.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



View from living room towards 1968 redwood terrace addition and San Jacintos beyond.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



View across rear grounds and pool showing the “see through” living room.
(Author Photo. May 2019)



Bougainvillea covered trellises of the bedroom wing.
(Author Photo. May 2019)

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*. It is within the context of the period "Palm Springs between the Wars" that the Wells Residence will be evaluated. The following context statement is edited from Historic Resource Group's *Citywide Historic Context Statement & 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 as an exclusive winter resort for the well-to-do. They set about transforming their sanatorium into the luxurious Desert Inn, one of the most renowned hostelrys in the country.

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. The 1930s saw Palm Springs blossom, as more and more celebrities made it their winter weekend getaway, and more development sprang up to house and entertain them. By the start of World War II, Palm Springs had so long been thought of as a movie star's playground that some of the neighborhoods were described as "Beverly Hills in the desert."

In the 1930s important figures in finance and business continued to flock to the desert in the winter, helping to cement the village's reputation as one of the nation's top winter resort destinations.

One of their favorite neighborhoods was the Smoke Tree Ranch. Smoke Tree Ranch is a 375-acre resort and housing development that was one of the few subdivisions developed in Palm Springs during the Great Depression. Originally developed as a dude ranch resort, Smoke Tree Ranch was started in 1930 by L. Mac Blankenhorn and named after the characteristic trees that dot the landscape. Early advertisements for the guest ranch emphasized an exclusivity that continues to this day. "Designed for those wishing to escape from the turmoil of weekend resorts...introductions or satisfactory references are required." In 1936, Fred and Maziebelle Markham (operating as the Mardo Corporation) bought Smoke Tree Ranch. With the help of local educator and real estate investor Raymond Cree, Markham subdivided the ranch into parcels for single-family residences.

Under the Markhams, the guest ranch did not advertise or seek publicity. The Smoke Tree way of life (for guest ranch patrons as well as homeowners who are historically known as "Colonists") was simple without the need to impress, as "most who have come here have been every place, seen everything and done most things." Smoke Tree Ranch purposefully maintained a rustic atmosphere. Homes were required to be one

story and sit apart on large lots with no large lawns or non-native shade trees. They were to be built in a traditional Ranch style with a pitched shingle roof. Streets were intentionally left as dirt roads groomed by a sprinkler wagon and scraper. There were no street signs, and instead roads were indicated with rock markers.

In his book *The Frontier of Leisure*, historian Lawrence Culver identifies Smoke Tree Ranch as looking unlike much of Palm Springs architecture of the time and instead reflecting the Ranch-style architecture in California and across America. "They were clear early examples of the ranch house—the domestic architectural style that would carpet the floor of the San Fernando Valley after World War II, writes Culver, "and appear in every community in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s."

EVALUATION:

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. J. Cheney Wells was an industrialist and philanthropist who led, with his two brothers, the American Optical Company, the largest optical enterprise of its kind in the world. Additionally, he, along with his brother Albert, founded Old Sturbridge Village, the largest living history museum in New England and one of the largest in the United States. J. Cheney Wells was an influential and well-known figure on a national and even international level. Hence, the Wells Residence qualifies for listing as a Class 1 Historic Site on the local registry under Criterion 2.

ARCHITECTURE (Criteria 3 – 6)

Criterion 3: *(That reflects or exemplifies a particular period of the national, state or local history).* The Wells Residence, completed in 1942, exhibits many stylistic markers which place it directly in the historic context of Palm Springs' Between the Wars. The private residence represents a prime and largely intact example of the traditional Ranch-style, which was gaining in popularity at the time of its construction and which grew even more popular after the war. As such, the Wells Residence may be viewed as an important component of the historic trends that have come to define Palm Springs' image as a center of important Ranch House architecture, i.e., an historic trend that exemplifies a particular period of the national, state or local history. The residence qualifies for listing as a Class 1 Historic Site on the local registry under Criterion 3.

Criterion 4: *(That embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction; or) Type, Period, and Method of Construction:* "Type, period, or method of construction" refers to the way certain properties are related to one another by cultural tradition or function, by dates of construction or style, or by choice or availability of materials and technology. To be eligible under this Criterion, a property must clearly illustrate, through "distinctive characteristics" a pattern of features common to a particular class of resources. "Distinctive characteristics" are the physical features or traits that commonly recur in individual types, periods, or methods of construction. To be eligible, a property must clearly contain enough of those characteristics to be considered a true representative of a particular type, period, or method of construction.

Characteristics can be expressed in terms such as form, proportion, structure, plan, style, or materials.

The Wells Residence is eligible under the theme of Ranch-style architecture because it possesses distinctive characteristics that make up the many qualities endemic to the style such as horizontality, a pitched and hipped shake roof with overhanging eaves, stucco and clapboard sheathing, a rambling, asymmetrical floorplan, and an emphasis on indoor-outdoor living. As such, the residence is eligible under this criterion because it represents an important example of building practices in Palm Springs between the wars. The residence qualifies for listing as a Class 1 Historic Site on the local registry under Criterion 4.

Criterion 5: (That (a): represents the work of a master builder, designer, artist, or architect whose individual genius influenced his age; or (b): that possesses high artistic value).

5a: Work of a Master: In the case of the Wells Residence, the work of Albert Frey, F.A.I.A., one of Palm Springs' most important and influential architects, can certainly be described as the "work of a master" in view of his history of architectural excellence. (See appendices III and IV.)

5b: Properties possessing high artistic values: High artistic values may be expressed in many ways, including areas as diverse as community design or planning, engineering, and sculpture. As an exceptional example of Ranch-style architecture, the Wells Residence certainly articulates the best of what made Ranch House architecture so popular to a level of excellence and confidence that, in total, could easily be considered an aesthetic ideal. For its high artistic values, the residence qualifies for listing as a Class 1 Historic Site on the local registry under Criterion 5.

Criterion 6: (That represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction). This Criterion was created to address the resources contained within a potential historic district and as such it does not apply to this nomination. Hence, the residence does not qualify under Criterion 6.

ARCHEOLOGY

Criterion 7: (That has yielded or may be likely to yield information important to the national, state or local history or prehistory.) The Wells Residence is not likely to yield information important to the national, state or local history or prehistory. Hence, the residence does not qualify under Criterion 7.

FINDING 2: The site, structure, building or object retains one or more of the following aspects of integrity, as established in the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. Provide a written description for each element as listed: Design; Materials; Workmanship; Location; Setting; Feeling; and Association.

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 Wells Residence 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 Wells Residence's essential characteristics of form, plan, space, structure, and style have survived largely intact. Similarly, the structural system; massing; arrangement of spaces; pattern of fenestration; and the type, amount, and style of detailing have survived largely intact. The residence has retained so much of its original elements including all three of its vintage tiled bathrooms and much of its kitchen, a condition of integrity almost impossible to find in a home of this age. Further, the additions and alterations made through the decades to the residence were done by Albert Frey, its original architect.***

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 the Wells Residence continues to reflect the architect'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 Wells Residence's exterior surface materials, which consist primarily of stucco and horizontal redwood clapboard boarding over wood framing have remained essentially intact and continue to express the physical elements as designed during the building's period of significance; the pattern and configuration that today forms the residence and contributing structures 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 the Wells Residence is evidenced by extensive use of wood in both the exterior and interior as well as the number and variety of original steel casement windows, original decorative tile, original stained concrete flooring, original built-in cabinetry, original bathroom fixtures, etc., all of which were part of the original design/construction. The residence continues to express 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. ***The Wells Residence is sited on a prominent lot which takes advantage of panoramic views of the surrounding desert and mountain ranges to the north and south just as it did when completed in 1942. Accordingly, the residence and contributing structures retain their 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 Wells Residence is an important example of a custom-designed traditional Ranch-style private residence in Palm Springs. Accordingly, it continues its association with a pattern of events that have made a meaningful contribution to the community.***

INTEGRITY SUMMARY: The Wells Residence appears to be in excellent condition partially due to the use of construction materials suitable for the harsh desert environment. This integrity analysis confirms that the building and site of the Wells Residence still possesses all seven aspects of integrity. ***As noted, the Wells residence retains a remarkable amount of original details and that which was added later were done almost exclusively by the home's original architect Albert Frey between 1947-1983. In summary, the Wells Residence still possesses a high degree of integrity sufficient to qualify for designation as a Class 1 Historic Site.***

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John H. Welborne

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Riverside County Assessor's Office

Appendix I

Owner's Notarized Letter of Support

JOHNSON FAIN

WILLIAM H. FAIN, JR., FAIA
PARTNER

August 25, 2019

City of Palm Springs
Historic Site Preservation Board
3200 Tahquitz Canyon Way
Palm Springs, CA 92262

RE: Class 1 Historic Site Nomination

Dear Honorable Board:

As the current owners of the Cheney Wells Residence located at the Smoke Tree Ranch, we enthusiastically support the Class 1 Historic Site designation of our property by the city of Palm Springs. We have asked the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation to assist us in the preparation of the required paperwork.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact us at wfain@johnsonfain.com.

Sincerely,



William Fain



Jennifer Nelson Fain

ARCHITECTURE • URBAN DESIGN • PLANNING • INTERIORS
1201 North Broadway, Los Angeles, CA 90012
[323] 224 6000 • [323] 224 6030 fax • www.johnsonfain.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

A notary public or other officer completing this certificate verifies only the identity of the individual who signed the document to which this certificate is attached, and not the truthfulness, accuracy, or validity of that document.

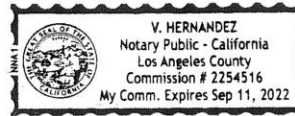
State of California
County of Los Angeles)

On September 3, 2019 before me, V. Hernandez, Notary Public
(insert name and title of the officer)

personally appeared William Fain and Jennifer Fain
who proved to me on the basis of satisfactory evidence to be the person(s) whose name(s) ~~is~~/are subscribed to the within instrument and acknowledged to me that ~~he~~/~~she~~/they executed the same in ~~his~~/~~her~~/their authorized capacity(ies), and that by ~~his~~/~~her~~/their signature(s) on the instrument the person(s), or the entity upon behalf of which the person(s) acted, executed the instrument.

I certify under PENALTY OF PERJURY under the laws of the State of California that the foregoing paragraph is true and correct.

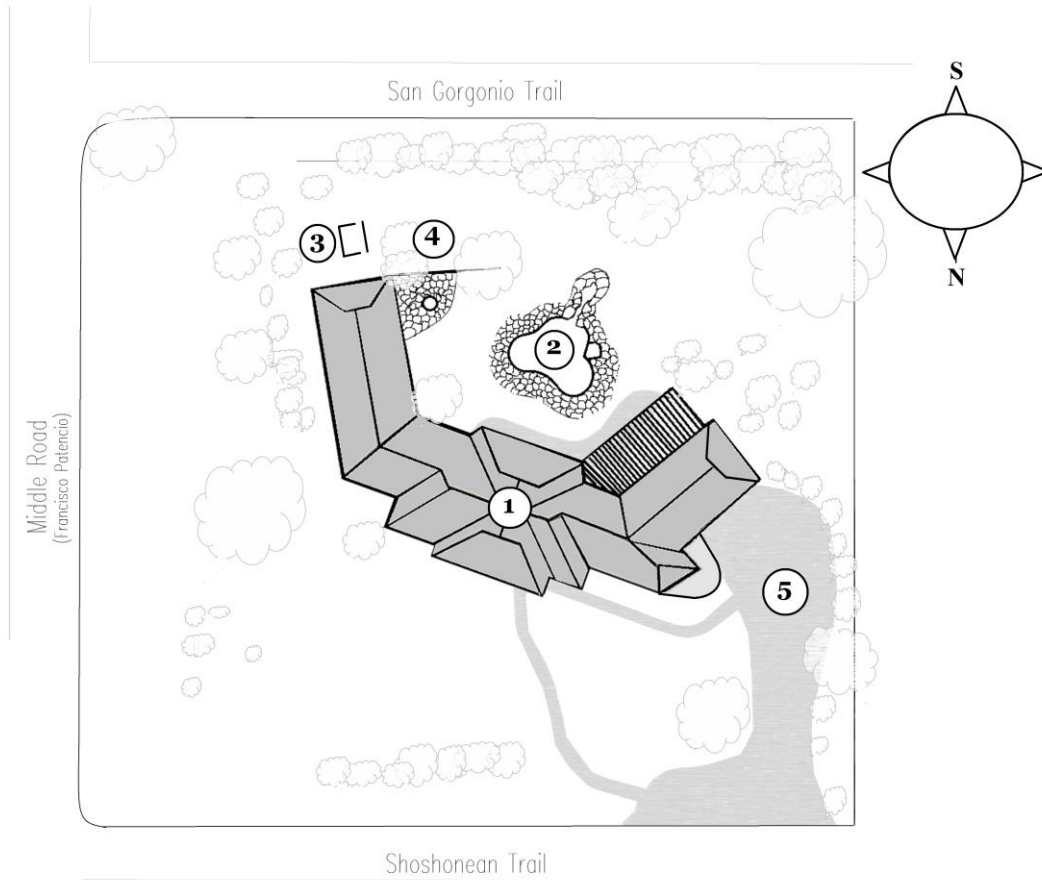
WITNESS my hand and official seal.



Signature V. Hernandez (Seal)

Appendix III

Site Plan



**SITE PLAN FOR
J. CHENEY WELLS
RESIDENCE**

Smoke Tree Ranch
Palm Springs, California

Albert Frey, architect
1942

1. Main House and Attached Garage
2. Pool and Spa*
3. Equipment Enclosure Wall*
4. Perimeter Wall*
5. Drive and Walkways*

*Non contributing structures

Appendix IV

Google Earth Image



Appendix V

Joel Cheney Wells



Joel Cheney Wells (1874-1960)
(Via ancestry.com)

During the course of his remarkable life, Joel Cheney Wells built an enviable record of achievements in both business and philanthropy, creating enduring legacies that continue to prosper today. A member of a distinguished New England family with roots in the new world dating back to the 1600s, Wells had a strong appreciation for American history that ultimately became a passion.

Cheney Wells' fortunes were inexorably tied to that of his two older brothers, Albert and Channing. For decades they worked together in unusual harmony, building the American Optical Company, a relatively small family business, into the largest enterprise of its kind in the world.

While this alone would be more than enough to secure a lasting legacy for the brothers it proved to be only one of two significant successes they accomplished in their long and productive lives. Today, Cheney and his brothers are equally honored for both their business acumen and their passion for historic preservation, which led to the creation of Old Sturbridge Village, the largest living history museum in New England.

Early Life

Joel Cheney Wells, known simply as Cheney, was born on November 11, 1874 in Southbridge, Massachusetts to Mary E. and George Washington Wells. He followed his older brothers Channing McGregory Wells (b. 1870) and Albert Bacheller Wells (B. 1872). In 1878, he gained a younger sibling with the birth of his sister Mary.

Wells' destiny was virtually preordained by the work of his father George. By the time of Cheney's birth, George had been working tirelessly at the American Optical Company, which he had founded with partner Robert H. Cole in 1869. The enterprise could actually trace its roots back even farther to 1833. It was in that year that William Beecher opened a spectacle manufacturing shop above his jewelry store in Southbridge and began making some of the earliest spectacles in America. At the time, essentially all spectacles, from frames to lenses, were being manufactured in Europe. The War of 1812 halted such importations and by necessity a few jewelers began to create spectacles themselves.

Beecher was one such pioneer and he soon made a name for himself with the introduction of steel-framed glasses. Until then, frames were made of gold or silver, but Beecher experimented with steel, which proved to be just as effective and far cheaper. His business prospered to such an extent it drew competitors, making Southbridge the spectacle manufacturing hub of the United States.

When Beecher retired in 1862, he sold the business to his former apprentice Robert H. Cole, who had started with Beecher at the age of 14. Like Beecher, Cole also took in apprentices, one of whom would ultimately play a major part in the future fortunes of Cole personally and the American Optical Company professionally. The apprentice was George Washington Wells.

George's original trajectory was teaching but he quickly found himself bored and when his brother Hiram told him about opportunities in the spectacle manufacturing industry in Southbridge, he quickly changed course and headed back to Massachusetts. Working in spectacles appealed to George as it allowed him to explore his interest in mechanics and machinery and it brought him back closer to his family.

George's arrangement with Cole was to be paid by each completed piece and he quickly found ways to improve efficiency and turn out more work faster. Rather than be thrilled by such an increase in production, Cole balked and announced that in the future the price per piece would be less. George told Cole what he thought of that idea and walked out across the street where he immediately got a job at a rival company.

It wasn't long before Cole realized his mistake and make overtures to get George back but he refused. Cole, however, knew he had lost a goldmine with George and in 1869, he offered him a full partnership. The result was the creation of the American Optical Company, which would soon overtake its rivals and become the largest, finest optical company in Southbridge.

George and Cole worked well enough to build the venture into a success, but with such strong personalities, clashes were inevitable. Over time George grew more and more frustrated after seeing idea upon idea nixed by Cole who held more shares than George. George thought the only way was to gain majority control of the company for himself. Quietly, he kept an eye out for any share of stock that might become available. It took ten years but by 1879, George had gained majority control over American Optical and it was to remain his, and his family's, for the remainder of his life and much of theirs.



American Optical Company as it was in 1883 shortly after George Wells gained control.
(Courtesy Jacob Edwards Library, Photographic Collection of the American Optical Company)

By all accounts, the Wells household was a happy and loving one, overseen by Mary while her husband spent much of his waking life at the office. Yet, whenever possible,

he would break away to engage in some sort of family fun be it a fishing expedition, camping trip, or an excursion to see the latest wonders including the unveiling of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1885. Although he was what would be considered a workaholic, George never lost sight of the fact that there was more to life than working and both he and Mary taught their children to maintain and enjoy a balance between the two.

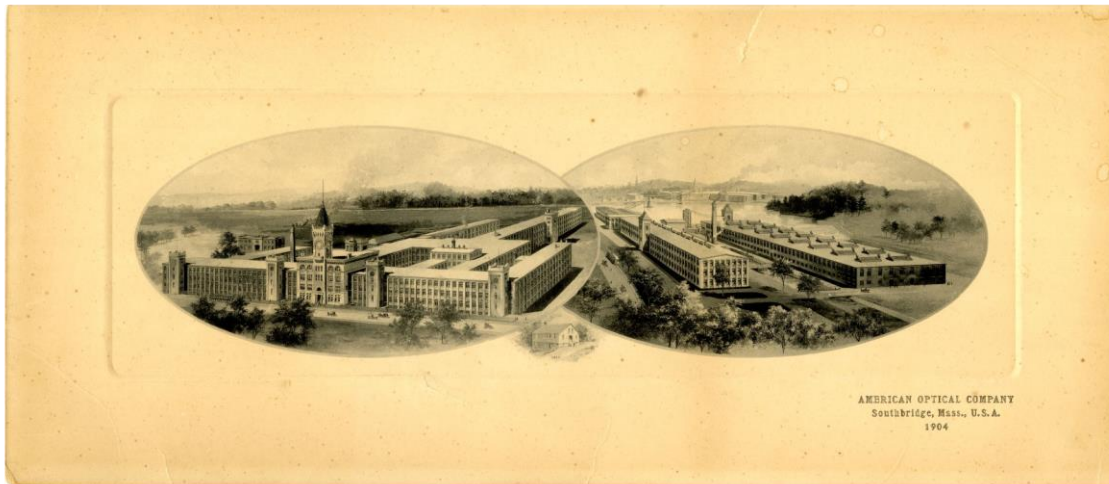
Travel was one of the joys that would become a lifelong passion for the children and it started early. George always saw the company as a family business and from an early age, he began introducing his boys into the fold by taking them with him, one at a time, on his frequent sales trips around New England and, later, to the Midwest. This was how Channing, Albert and Cheney first became involved and interested in American Optical.

Later, in between school time, they would also earn money by working at the company, helping out wherever needed. For the older brothers it was a natural fit, with Albert and Channing taking up positions at the company as soon as they finished college. Cheney, however, was not so easily swayed, much to the consternation of both father and brothers.

Rather, Cheney plotted a different course, desiring to become a doctor. Although he was deeply disappointed, George respected his son's wishes and approved his choice of Worcester Academy for college as a stepping stone to Yale and ultimately medical school. So intent was he in this plan that he briefly took on the nickname of "Doc."

But Cheney hadn't factored on the pull of family ties in his plans. And these ties pulled steadily, not only from George but Albert and Channing as well. Cheney never really had a chance and by 1893, the family had convinced Cheney he belonged with them at American Optical. It was a decision he did not regret.

George didn't just want his sons around for familial closeness, he genuinely needed them. Under his steady leadership, American Optical had grown dramatically since he acquired majority ownership in 1879 and they had grown from being essentially a frame manufacturing plant into a full optical facility, producing the lenses as well. Prior to 1884, virtually all of the lenses were imported from Europe, but starting in that year, George, along with friendly competitor Bausch & Lomb in New York, began importing raw unfinished lenses and grinding them themselves. The result was a savings to American consumers of 15% to 25%, which greatly increased demand. In 1887, American Optical employed 400 people, but within 5 years, around the time the brothers joined the firm, they had doubled their workforce and had a solid stake in the entire U.S. optical market. George wanted his sons to help him manage this ever-expanding company and leave it in their capable hands when he retired.



An appropriately “spectacle-eye” view of the American Optical Company as it looked in 1904.
(Courtesy Jacob Edwards Library, Photographic Collection of the American Optical Company)

Into Business

In her charming history of the Wells family, Ruth Dyer Wells described what came to be known as the “triumvirate” of Channing, Albert, and Cheney, “three disparate, yet in some ways oddly similar, characters [who] would eventually mold themselves into a team unique in the annals of New England industry.”

Channing was described as being the “elegant” one, handsome, charming and always smartly attired. It was inevitable that he would take on the public face of the organization in sales. Albert, who was nicknamed “Brick,” was the wild one, getting into trouble, but with a gift for mechanics that matched that of his father’s. Cheney was described as the “precise” one, with “a flair for tinkering and was assigned most of the household chores...He repaired everything from the leg of a table to the kitchen clock and...acquired the knack of turning ideas into improvements, like his father.”

Although they were taken into the company by their father, the boys did not become the typical “bosses’ sons.” They were given entry level positions and expected to work as hard, if not harder, than employees whose last names weren’t “Wells.” Channing started in the shipping room. Albert in the lens manufacturing plant. Like Channing, Cheney too was first placed in the shipping room. His first task was to take a feather duster and keep the bins where customers’ orders were placed in free of dust. All three began being entrusted with greater responsibilities after showing both skill and initiative in their initial tasks as well as learning all aspects of the firm from the ground up.

As part of his duties, Cheney was entrusted with keeping track of the various patents being filed with the U.S. Patent Office and became a trusted advisor on various optical patent matters for his father. George was himself responsible for some 26 separate patents relating to tools for “splitting, grinding and cutting lenses and for milling spectacle frames.”

Cheney and his father both shared a love of invention and innovation and, as Ruth Dyer Wells wrote, Cheney’s passion “was to devise, invent and maintain the quality of the finished products...It must have been a singular and mnemonic pleasure for George W. to work with his son on inventions and patents...But the ultimate satisfaction was for George to see one of his sons deeply involved in the type of work that was his forte as a young man.” It would have pleased him even more to know that Cheney would surpass even his father as the holder of some 40 patents “relating to improvements in eyeglasses of various types also of bifocal lenses.”



Channing M. Wells

Albert B. Wells

J. Cheney Wells

The Wells Brothers.
(Courtesy Optical Heritage Museum)

Throughout the duration of the 1890s, Cheney and his brothers continued to learn, grow and steadily find their ultimate places within the American Optical Company. The success of the enterprise did not, however, bring material wealth to the brothers. The way the company was arranged, most profits went either back into the business or as dividends to the shareholders who earned an extremely high 150%-250% return. Because of the way stocks were distributed, Cheney and his brothers were not large shareholders and earned from salary about \$1,500 a year each.

Inevitably, this arrangement became a source of growing agitation for the brothers and, together, they devised a bold scheme to dramatically change the salary versus dividend payout. It would, however, mean confronting their father. To get what they wanted they

were prepared to leave the family business, even going as far as becoming competitors. Their father heard them out and then agreed to help.

What followed was a complicated reorganization of the company's financial arrangements but, in the end, it provided a more equitable arrangement for all concerned. However, perhaps the most important lasting impression was it showed how well the brothers could and would work as a team. It was a prelude to how they would operate as heads of American Optical in the coming years.

An increase in material wealth did not necessarily mean that Cheney and his brothers would start to take it more easily. Everyone continued to work diligently, mostly "factory hours," of fifty-eight hours per week. But still, somehow, they found moments for relaxation and fun. George and Mary took a grand tour of Europe while Channing fell in love with Cape Cod. Cheney settled on Boston as "his" spot.

By now, the family had given in to at least one nod to success with a new grand home built on a multi-acre parcel just across Main Street in Southbridge that was directly across the way from the company factory. Not only did George and Mary live there, but all three sons as well, with each paying \$4.00 a week in rent for the privilege. It was an arrangement that lasted happily until each of the sons married and built homes of their own, adjoining homes, of course.



The Dutch Colonial J. Cheney Wells Residence at 40 Main Street in Southbridge, Massachusetts. It was from this since demolished home that the crystal doorknobs at the Smoke Tree Ranch house came from. His parents' home is the multi-chimneyed house to the center left.

(Courtesy Photographic Collection of the Jacob Edwards Library)

Cheney's home was described as an "elegant" Dutch Colonial, "with a wide porch and curved bay windows of the period." Cheney had built the house as a home to raise his family after marrying Florence Morse of Boston in 1901. Together, they would have three children beginning with John in 1903, followed by Florence in 1911 and finally Gertrude in 1919. The fact that the three children were born almost exactly eight years apart was something of a mystery to other members of the Wells family, but one explanation was that John had been a difficult birth and Florence had been in no hurry to repeat the process.

According to the recollections of John and Gertrude, their father, the perfectionist, ran a rather tight ship and was a somewhat stern disciplinarian. "In his opinion anyone could do anything if he set his mind to it – and no excuses." The words "I'm sorry," according to Gertrude, were almost a mantra for the children. It was not a house that would be described as a "fun" place to live unlike that of Albert's across the street where each Sunday the kids would race over for his famous pancakes, always made by Albert himself.

In 1906, Cheney and his brothers finally made the rite of passage into leadership of American Optical when their father George announced he was stepping out of active business. Channing was named the new president, Albert as Treasurer and Cheney as company secretary. George wanted to have his sons run the business while he was still active, telling them, "If you make any mistakes, I'm here to correct them but if you wait until I die, you're going to be out on a limb."

George, who was being more and more afflicted by the Diabetes that would ultimately kill him, wanted he and Mary to have more leisure time together while giving his sons their "apprenticeship" under his watchful eye. This arrangement, which proved to be a decided success, lasted some six years before George's death in 1912.

The loss of the Wells Paterfamilias to this unusually tight-knit family was felt hard by everyone, but George's wise planning had left both his family and his beloved company in good hands. Under the leadership of the triumvirate, American Optical thrived in ways scarcely imagined in the early years with the company going not only national but international as well. This suited the travel-loving brothers perfectly and they were almost invariably on the road either for business, pleasure or a combination of both. The rule was that at least one brother must remain in Southbridge at all times.

Although three in number, the brothers appeared to function as one, so in sync were they in company decisions. "No one really knew who was boss among the three brothers, said longtime Wells' family associate Henry S. Woodbridge. "Whatever arguments they had, and they must have had them, occurred behind closed doors. Who twisted whose arm is a mystery. When they emerged, however, they presented a united front."



(osv.org)

Old Sturbridge Village

With American Optical humming along, the brothers and their wives began enjoying the rewards that hard work had brought. There were summer homes, “city” houses in Boston, travel, and expensive automobiles. But there was one shared pleasure that would go from a hobby to a mania – antiques and collectibles. While the brothers and their wives had all developed a love of European antiques as a result of their sojourns to Europe, there came to be a mutual fascination with American treasures.

Channing devoted his interest to Duncan Phyfe and the works of the early cabinet-makers of Colonial America while Cheney began amassing a world-class collection of antique paper weights and vintage clocks. Albert’s main focus was on early silver. But in 1926, Albert took it all to another level when he dove headlong into American country furniture and household items.

According to family recollections, Albert had been on holiday up in Manchester, Vermont with some friends with intention of having a golfing weekend. A steady rain stymied those plans and the group decided instead to go antiquing. Albert wasn't really interested, but was ultimately talked into tagging along. When the group entered a well-stocked antique shop in Henniker, New Hampshire, he had an epiphany. Completely fascinated by the variety and uniqueness of various vintage items such as sausage stuffers and apple parers, and many other early New England antiques, Albert found himself wanting to collect them – all of them.

To what must have been the stunned pleasant surprise of the shopkeepers, Albert bought almost everything in the store, so many items, that it ultimately required two full truckloads to get everything to Southbridge. The hoard ultimately became the nucleus of more than 100,000 objects acquired by the Wells brothers, which was considered to be the largest and most valuable antique collection in America.

The brothers threw themselves into collecting with a zeal that might well have been called obsessive. By 1927, the old family home in Southbridge had filled with so many antiques, a two-story wing had to be constructed. Soon, the collections even overtook the family bowling alley on their property, which was partitioned into display cubicles. And yet, even this proved almost immediately inadequate.

In the early 1930s, the collections had grown so large they could no longer be kept in their present facilities. A decision was made to build a new house on Walker Pond in nearby Sturbridge where the Wells family had maintained summer cottages for years. But in 1935, plans began to evolve and the idea of opening a museum began to take shape, which was formalized by the incorporation of the Wells Historical Museum. Plans advanced as far as even engaging an architect who designed several early New England style buildings arranged together in a horseshoe on the site of the old family home on South Main Street.

But it was Albert's son George B., later to become president of American Optical after his uncle Channing retired, who spoke out at a meeting of the trustees that changed the whole direction of the museum. George thought that the only way these beautiful old implements and furnishings would be of any real value for education was not to look at them through a glass case but to actually see them in action, to see them being used in the way in which they were intended. He suggested that instead of a static museum that they build a live village, "one with different shops operating with employees who were then available, who would know how to use the old tools, the old methods."

Everyone at the meeting was impressed by what George B. had suggested, not the least of whom were Albert and Cheney. "This was a revolutionary idea as far as I was concerned and I was taken off my feet," Albert later recalled. "So was my brother Cheney. Cheney said, 'Albert if you'll accept George's idea, I'll go in with you 50-50...Well, inside of a week, we had bought the property at Sturbridge...We really started to work then, together hand-in-glove, as we had through forty-odd years at the American Optical Company.'"



Blacksmiths at work. Old Sturbridge Village.
(osacps.org)

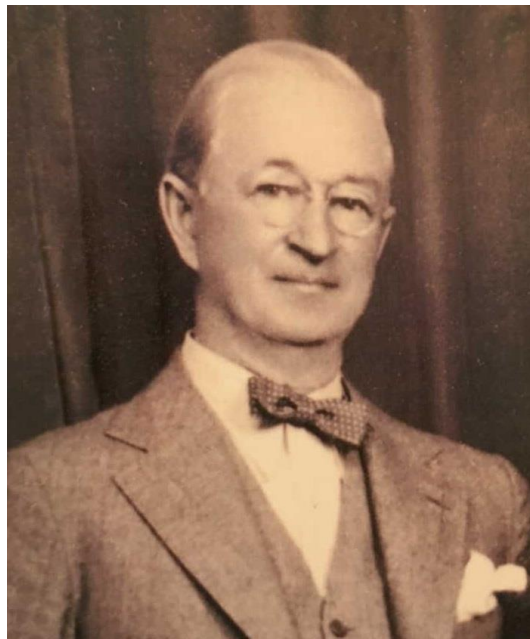
From that meeting rose the vision of what became Old Sturbridge Village. The brothers threw their collections, their money and their passion into making this idea a success. It was not always easy. Almost all their efforts were nearly wiped out in the catastrophic hurricane of 1938 and then came World War II, which put a virtual stop on the project. But as they had done in business, Albert and Cheney worked steadily and methodically, buying old buildings and having them moved to the 230-acre site, engaging talented people to manage and staff the facilities, and, of course, adding their incomparable collections for the public enjoyment.

Today, Old Sturbridge Village, which recreates rural New England village life from the 1790s-1830s, is the largest living history museum in New England and one of the largest in the entire country. There are several dozen antique structures brought in from nearby sites as well as modern recreations, all populated by knowledgeable costumed interpreters who demonstrate crafts or portray early professions. Additionally, there are three water mills and a working farm. Old Sturbridge Village would remain a source of pride for both Albert and Cheney as well as the rest of the Wells family for the remainder of their lives.

Later Years

By the time Old Sturbridge Village was starting to take shape, Cheney and his brothers were beginning to leave the active management of the American Optical Co., but felt secure in its future after having installed Albert's son, George Burnham Wells, as president in 1936. They had been with the firm in one way or another almost their entire lives and it seemed the time had come to slow down and pursue more leisurely lifestyles.

A favorite place to enjoy that lifestyle proved to be Southern California. In 1932, Albert became the first to become a permanent winter resident when he and his wife Ethel brought property at Rancho Santa Fe. The fact that Ethel's brother, John Hudson Burnham, had a home there, may have led to their choice of location. But Burnham had a place in Palm Springs as well and it was the desert resort that brothers Channing and Cheney were drawn.



J. Cheney Wells ca. 1930s.
(Ancestry.com)

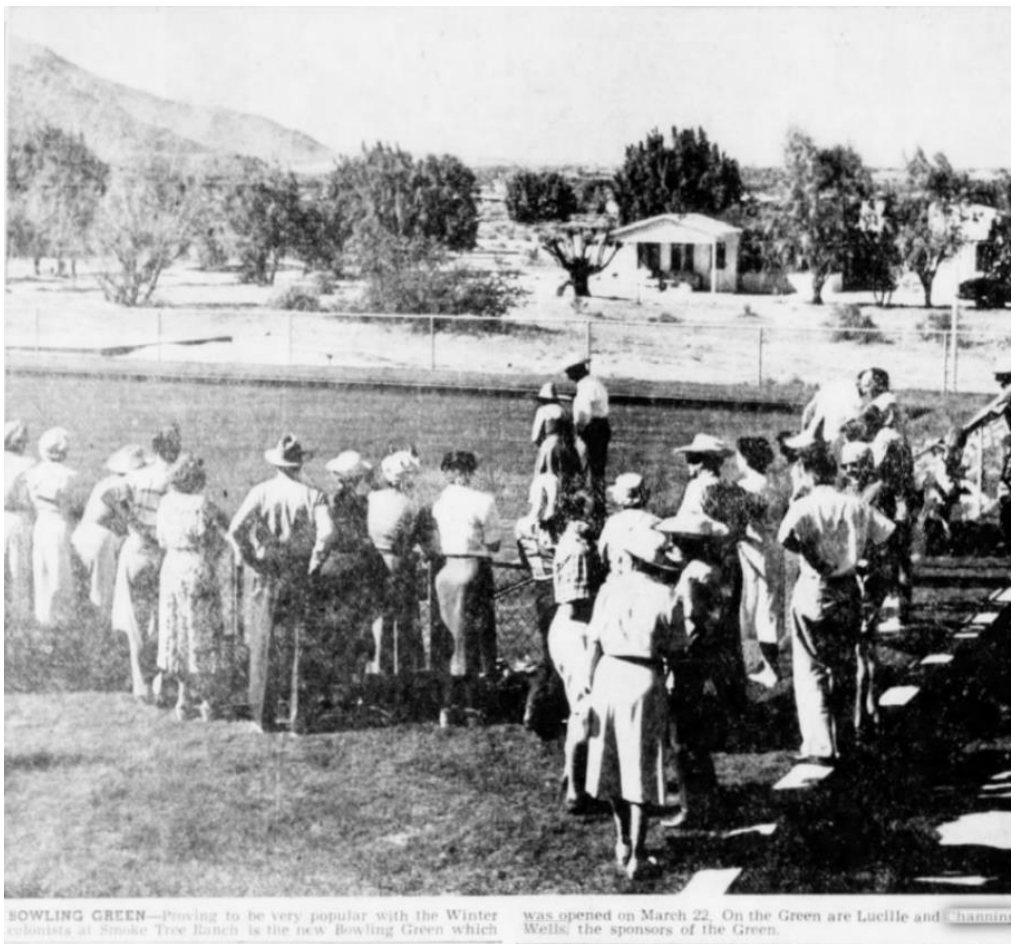
Channing and his wife Irene began wintering at the Desert Inn starting in the mid-1930s where they maintained a bungalow while Cheney enjoyed the Smoke Tree Ranch. For the first few years, Cheney rented a cottage at the Ranch but by 1938 plans were made to build a permanent home, which was completed in at the end of 1941. In the desert, Irene, Channing, and Cheney were active members of local society during their winter sojourns. Cheney's wife, Florence, however, largely remained back east. She had suffered a stroke in 1927 and never fully recovered. In her place, Cheney frequently brought his daughter Gertrude who came to love the desert as much as did her father and uncle.

In 1940, both Channing and Cheney suffered tragic losses when their wives passed away. Irene, who had been diagnosed with a weak heart, refused to give up her active social schedule for a lap robe on the porch. After ringing in the new year at a swirl of parties, Irene was stricken and ultimately succumbed in January 1940. Florence followed later in the year, dying on August 22nd.

Both brothers were devastated by the twin losses, but both soon remarried. For Channing it was his late wife's sister, Lucile on February 12, 1941, which proved to be a long and successful union. As for Cheney, he married Marion Hollister of New York City on July 20, 1942. It too proved to be a durable union ending only with Marion's death in 1955.

Cheney's family life had seen more than its share of tragedy and drama, most notably the death of his daughter Florence, better known as "Flossie" in a car crash on Cape Cod in 1930. And the long debilitation of his wife by stroke. "Father's hair literally turned white overnight," recalled Gertrude. Of all his children, Cheney appears to have been closest with Gertrude, even building a house for her at Smoke Tree Ranch.

His relationship with son John, however, was more problematic. Like all the male Wells progeny of the brothers, John was expected to go into American Optical. Yet John found he was much more interested in pursuing a career in electronics and aviation. Cheney, however, would hear none of it and ordered him to stay with American Optical. John did his best, but after a long and tortured period of trying, he finally made the decision to pursue his own dreams rather than that of his father's. As expected, it put a serious strain on their relationship, but other members of the family worked to smooth things over.



This 1953 image taken from the *Desert Sun*, shows Cheney's brother Channing and his wife Lucile inaugurating Smoke Tree Ranch's new lawn bowling green, which Channing and Lucile gifted to the ranch.

Cheney's brother Channing and his second wife Lucile switched over from the Desert Inn to Smoke Tree Ranch and became so involved with the community they ultimately donated a bowling green, which remains today. And while Palm Springs may have been a favorite winter spot for Cheney, it wasn't his only destination. During the 1930s and 1940s, Cheney continued his lifelong habit of regular travel both domestically and internationally including a 1937 around-the-world trip with Gertrude. The memorable journey ended with them being among the first passengers aboard Pan American Airways' new Hawaii Clipper from Honolulu to San Francisco. Hawaii itself was also a popular place for Cheney as was Palm Beach. After his marriage in 1942, Marion also began joining her husband on his frequent excursions.

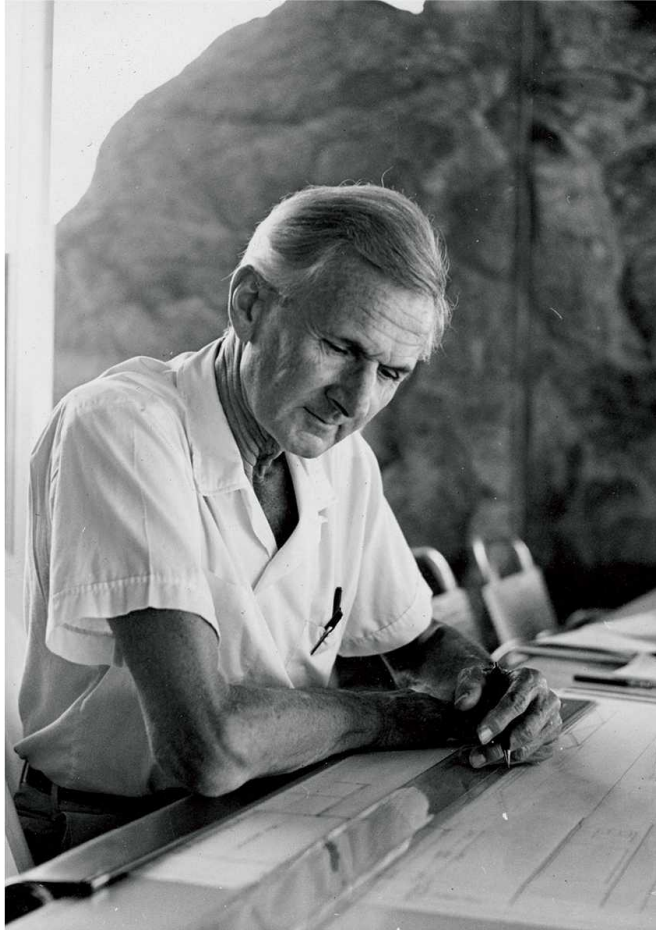
Travel never ceased to be a source of joy for Cheney as was his pride in seeing Old Sturbridge Village continue to prosper. The big heartbreak was American Optical, which slipped away into corporate ownership at the end of the 1940s. Cheney had helped guide it from less than 1,000 employees in the early 1900s to more than 10,000 by 1945. Today, the company still exists under the name AO Eyewear even though they have

long shifted operations from Southbridge down to San Diego, with their factories in Mexico.

Cheney, the youngest brother, proved to be the last survivor of the triumvirate. Albert died in 1953 and Channing in 1959. Cheney himself passed away of natural causes on January 6, 1960 at the age of 85 at his home in La Jolla, where he had moved during the 1950s.

Appendix VI

Albert Frey



(psmuseum.org)

(The following obituary, written by architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff, appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper on November 17, 1998)

Albert Frey, Modernist Architect, Dies

Design: His series of landmark buildings helped define Palm Springs as a hotbed of experimental work. He was 95.

Albert Frey, the Swiss-born architect who became one of the leading California Modernists of his generation and recently enjoyed a revival of sorts with the sudden popularity of mid-century Modernist work, died Saturday night at his home in Palm Springs. He was 95.

During the 1940s, '50s and '60s, Frey designed a series of Modernist landmarks that eventually came to define Palm Springs as a hotbed of architectural experimentation. Among them were a house for industrial designer Raymond Loewy, the Palm Springs City Hall and the Tramway gas station. The houses, in particular, were remarkable for their sleek, almost surrealistically futuristic forms and their experimental use of materials.

But Frey, generally underappreciated at the height of his career, only recently achieved international recognition, when modern design became fashionable again. In recent years, images of Frey and his houses became fixtures in fashion and design magazines. Last year, several of his buildings were designated city landmarks in Palm Springs after his design for a gas station was temporarily threatened with demolition.

Frey was born in Zurich, Switzerland, on Oct. 18, 1903. He was 25 when he began working in the Paris office of Le Corbusier, who would soon emerge as one of the great architects of the century. Le Corbusier was then at work on the seminal works of his early career. Frey spent 10 months working for Le Corbusier as one of only two paid design assistants, yet he contributed to two Modernist landmarks: the design for the Centrosoyuz building in Moscow, which was never built, and the Villa Savoye (1929-31) in Poissy, France, which, along with Frank Lloyd Wright's 1936 Fallingwater, ranks among the most famous 20th century buildings in the world.

"That was one of the things that separates him from others of his generation, his association with Le Corbusier," said Joseph Rosa, the author of a 1990 monograph of Frey's work. "He was the first disciple of Le Corbusier to build in the United States."

Frey moved to the United States in late 1930. It was a time when America was seen as the home of all that was modern, from jazz to skyscrapers to industrial and technological invention. Frey joined with A. Lawrence Kocher, a central figure on the New York cultural scene, and began what was to become an extraordinarily inventive and long-lived career. Together, the two designed the Aluminaire House, an experimental prototype for a modern house that incorporated an ingenious use of industrial materials and Corbusien notions about mass production and the open plan. (In 1987, the house was moved to the New York Institute of Technology's Islip, New York, campus from its original site in Huntington, N.Y., where it is now under renovation.)* Later, Frey worked briefly on Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durrell Stone's design for New York's Museum of Modern Art and was largely responsible for the building's auditorium.

But Frey never felt completely at ease in the congested, bustling metropolis, and in 1936 he moved to Palm Springs, the city with which he would be most identified. There, he produced a body of work that melded the Modernist obsession with the machine and mass production techniques with a deep sensitivity to natural surroundings.

In his design for Raymond Loewy, completed in 1947, Frey created an L-shaped house overlooking a rough desert landscape, with an ameoba-shaped swimming pool that flowed into the living room. Later projects were perhaps more Expressionist, even

flamboyant, among them the North Shore Yacht Club in Salton Sea (1958-59), whose stylized facade includes protruding, porthole-like windows.

Among Frey's greatest creations was a house that he designed for himself at a mountainside site overlooking Palm Springs, completed in 1964. The house is tiny--1,200 square feet--yet it encapsulates all of Frey's ideas about nature and the man-made, about the poetic beauty of living a life intimately connected to the human scale.

The house was designed as a narrow glass box and is set lengthwise along the side of the mountain. Frey used the tough industrial materials that marked much of his work--steel frame, glass walls, corrugated metal roof. But the refined, Cartesian-inspired order of the house is intentionally distorted by the rugged mountain landscape. Inside, the house's floor is divided into two levels to reflect the mountain's steep slope, and a boulder seemingly crashes through the living room, cunningly separating living space from the lone bedroom. It is that tension--between the order of man and the order of nature--that came to define Frey's best work.

The house established Frey's reputation as a leading figure of the Modernist avant-garde. Yet its immediate ambitions were more humble. This was still the postwar building boom, the architectural photographer Julius Shulman noted. "Young married couples could afford to build small houses," Shulman said, "And this little house had a million ideas. He had designed space for everything, the compact kitchen, the bathroom was oriented towards the morning light--everything he did was meticulously oriented towards design. It was the efficiency of the Swiss mind."

In many ways, the image of Frey became entwined with the image of that house. High above the city, Frey, a vegetarian and nature lover who said that the clean mountain landscape reminded him of his native Switzerland, would regularly do his yoga exercises or wander outside to feed quail, squirrels and lizards.

"He was gentle," Shulman said. "He did not want to produce big, glamorous images of his work like [his contemporary Richard] Neutra, for example. He was a quiet, nonaggressive person. That's maybe why people didn't know his work until later years."

By the mid-'80s, Frey was semiretired, although he continued to consult on local architectural projects, including some design work for the Smoke Tree Ranch...a ranch-style residential community in Palm Springs. Nearly a decade passed before Palm Springs was rediscovered. Suddenly, it was touted as the West Coast's answer to Miami's Art Deco tradition. Worshipful students and curious reporters began to make the pilgrimage to Frey's mountainside house for interviews. His house was repeatedly used for fashion shoots. Frey is survived by a sister, Emma, and his longtime companion, Jean Farrar.

*Since the publication of this obituary, the Aluminaire House has been relocated to Palm Springs.