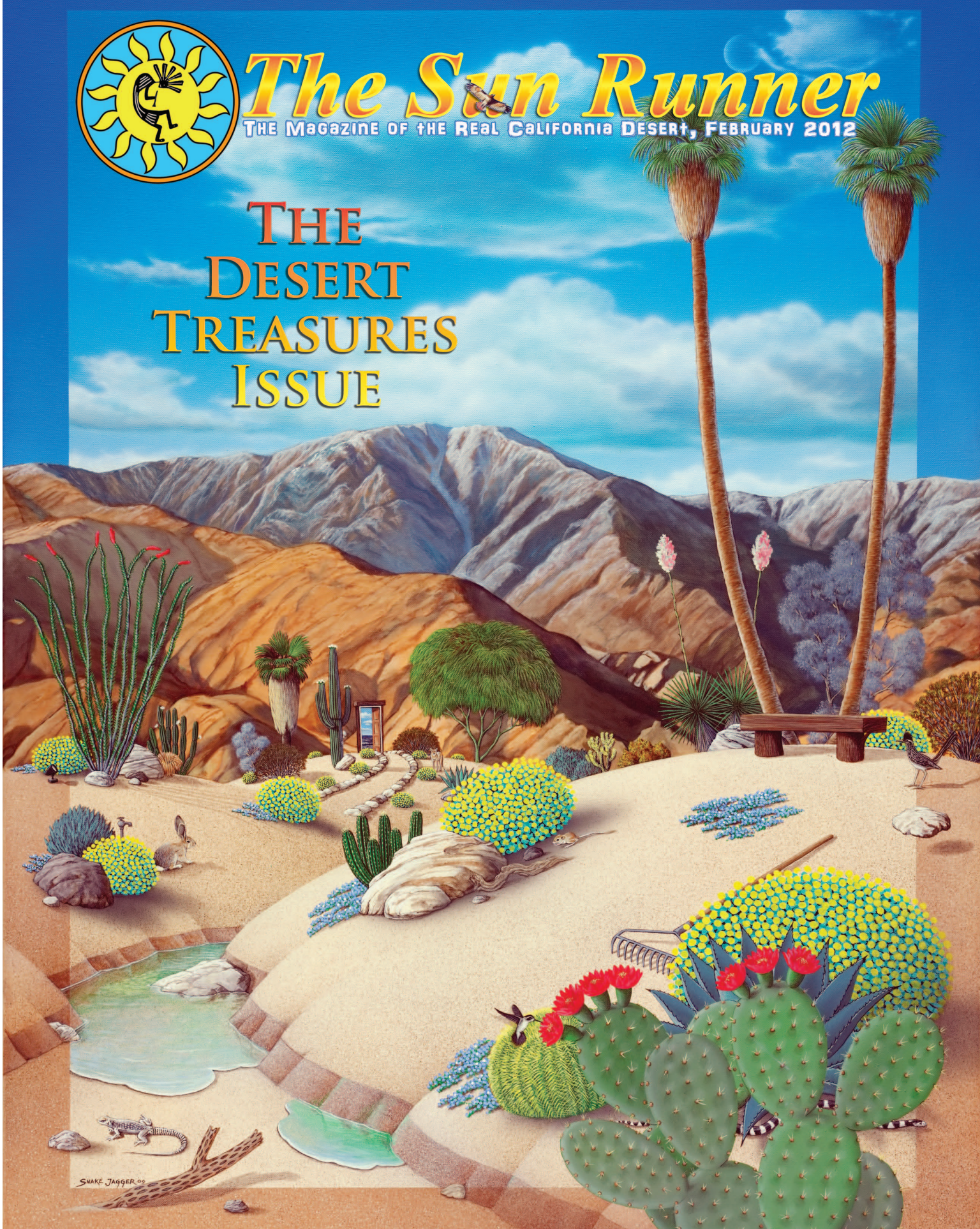




# *The Sun Runner*

THE MAGAZINE OF THE REAL CALIFORNIA DESERT, FEBRUARY 2012

## THE DESERT TREASURES ISSUE





# Palm Springs Treasure Re-discovered

by Patrick McGrew

**A**s part of Palm Springs Modernism Week, the current owners of the Dr. Hugh Stephens residence have offered their home to the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation for house tours on Tuesday, February 21. The Stephens home, completed in 1949, languished, almost forgotten, behind a dense natural landscape, until it was “rediscovered” by a PSPF Board Member in 2010 and nominated as a Palm Springs Class 1 Historic Site. It is a prime example of modernist residential architecture by the firm of Clark & Frey and was particularly noteworthy when published in the September 1955 issue of *House Beautiful* where it helped introduce the idea of “The Family Room” to post-war America. The building’s stylistic markers place it directly in the historic context of Palm Springs’ Modern Period. Although not well-known, the house is a prime intact example of the significant modernist architecture for which Palm Springs is widely known.

Dr. Hugh E. Stephens (1915-1984), for whom the house was built, was the son of a Kansas City insurance agent. After completing his education, he began his professional career in Santa Barbara at Cottage Hospital, but relocated to Palm Springs in March, 1946. The Community Desert Hospital had just opened and Stephens affiliated with the hospital and became the first physician to maintain a year-round practice in Palm Springs. Stephens was related to Prescott ‘P. T.’ Stevens, the Colorado cattleman turned Palm Springs developer [Stevens who had married a Stephens, just to confuse things] who came to the village in 1912, purchased a thousand acres from the railroad and became one of the village’s earliest developers. He was a principal backer of the El Mirador Hotel. It was P. T. Stevens’ daughter Sallie and her husband Culver Nichols who invited both Dr. Stephens and architect John Porter Clark to settle in Palm Springs. In so doing, the course of the town’s architectural history would change.

Dr. Stephens, together with his wife Mary (Paradise), raised their five children (Mary Jo, Sally, Nan, Beth and Jim) in the home until his death in 1984. The family eventually sold the property, and in 2002, the home was nearly destroyed by a fire caused by an unattended candle. The house’s survival was largely due to its masonry construction, although the roof structure was completely destroyed. Fortunately, the house was reconstructed utilizing the original drawings.

The home is located on two lots in the Palo Verdes Tract

1 P. T. Stevens married Frances Stephens. Her brother was Hugh Stephens, Sr.

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in the south end of Palm Springs. The parcel is triangular in shape, the hypotenuse having been formed by a creek that eventually became an angled road called along the backside of the property. The property is heavily landscaped rendering the home virtually invisible from the street. A sidewalk from the front road leads directly to a covered porch and the formal entrance to the house. So important is the building’s setting that the entire feeling and association of the building to its site would be seriously compromised if the property were to be sub-divided. The single story, three-bedroom two and one-half bathroom house is generally an elongated rectangular form with an east to west orientation. The principal façade is set back 25 feet from the street. A garage located at the eastern end of the property is attached to the main house via a breezeway—the garage, with its sloping roof is set at an angle to the main house, and is accessed via a driveway. The roof above the living area at the west end of the house slopes up from an otherwise flat tar and gravel roof. The eaves extend beyond the walls of the house to provide overhangs that shade the house from the desert sun; the wood framing for the roof structure is visible both inside and out.

The walls are painted concrete masonry units, approximately 6 inches x 16 inches x 8 inches deep that form both the exterior and interior walls of the building, and are set in a running bond. Patterns of evenly spaced blocks are used in various locations around the house to give it visual interest. Door and window openings are trimless and frameless; windows are steel-framed, used in a combination of casements and fixed panes while the sliding doors are aluminum framed; 18-inch square glass blocks are also used in vertical rows to bring light to the interior and also as a design feature. An occasional masonry wall extends to the edge of the overhang, and is punctured by 18-inch square openings—a repeat of the design elements found elsewhere on the house. A wooden single-light French door with a sidelight and transom are features of the covered entry, along with a large stone planter. A freestanding steel post supports the overhanging roof at the entry.

*Palm Springs Modernism Week, a celebration of Mid-Century Modernism, is February 16 through 26. Get all the information on special events, films, lectures, parties, and tours at [www.modernismweek.com](http://www.modernismweek.com). Visit The Palm Springs Modern Committee’s website at [psmodcom.org](http://psmodcom.org) for extensive information on Desert Modern design and preservation.*