

The Desert Inn

Established December 1909

On this site in 1909, Dr. Harry and Nellie N. Coffman opened the Desert Inn in a single-family house as a small sanitarium for patients suffering from tuberculosis and other respiratory ailments. It established Palm Springs as a desert health resort – and Nellie's boardinghouse was born.

The Desert Inn grew in popularity and size, adding simple cabins and rustic tents. Its focus gradually shifted from treating the sick to catering to the famous and the affluent. By 1919 Nellie began building her vision of a world-class resort.

In 1924, with a loan from oil tycoon Thomas O'Donnell, Nellie selected William Charles Tanner to design a Spanish Mediterranean Revival style hotel with over 110 rooms that set a new standard for luxury and comfort. Guests arrived from around the world: presidents, senators, governors, and royalty, artists, composers, and the crème de la crème of Hollywood – establishing an international reputation for Palm Springs. The inn offered fine dining, fashionable retail shops, and sports activities including tennis, golf and swimming; all amidst 35 acres of carefully manicured lawns and gardens.

Nellie Coffman was a tireless supporter of Palm Springs. Her innumerable charitable works earned her the affectionate title of "Mother Coffman."

On June 10, 1950 Nellie died at the age of 82. Her sons continued to operate the famous inn, but in 1955 it was sold to former actress Marion Davies who, in 1960, sold the Desert Inn to Samuel Firks and noted Palm Springs builder George Alexander, whose vision was to replace the inn with an eight-story hotel and convention hall. By September of 1967 the entire Desert Inn was demolished, replaced by an indoor shopping mall that was in turn demolished in 2009.

Although Nellie Coffman and the fabled Desert Inn have been gone for many years, her vision and love for Palm Springs can still be felt today.

Designated Class 2 Historic Site #17
September 4, 1985