

Press Room

Collecting the Past - A resident works to preserve the city's history

By David Olson
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When Gayl Biondi moved to Palm Springs 40 years ago, La Quinta was considered the boondocks.

"If you said you were going to La Quinta, you might as well have said you were going to the moon," Biondi said.

Today, the city, about 20 miles south-east of Palm Springs, is one of the fastest-growing places in California, and Biondi liked it so much that she moved there two years ago.

Biondi now is researching La Quinta's history as principal writer of a book that will document the past of a city that, at first glance, might not seem to have a lot of history to write about.

"La Quinta: Legend in the Making" will take readers from centuries ago – when much of the city was underwater as part of Lake Cahuilla and American Indians inhabited the area – to today's city of country clubs and shopping centers.

The book will be unveiled in April as part of the celebrations commemorating La Quinta's 25th anniversary. The city was incorporated May 1, 1982. Longtime residents and descendants of the city's pioneers will be among those at the unveiling, said publisher Victoria Bailey, of Desert Springs Publishing.

Bailey, a La Quinta resident who is also doing some of the research and writing of the book, has published books on the history of Indio, the Coachella Valley and San Francisco.

The city is paying Bailey \$25,000 to offset part of the cost to develop the book and will receive several copies.

The city is named after the La Quinta Resort and Club, which was built in 1926 as a luxury retreat in what was then mostly open desert far from the cities of Palm Springs and Indio.

A resort brochure from the early years notes that when Southern California was Spanish territory travelers on horseback or in covered wagons often would spend four days roughing it through the desert before stopping at sites that were designated resting places for the fifth day.

"La Quinta" is Spanish for "the fifth."

"On this day, the journey would end early and good food, music, dancing and wine would give the weary traveler his much needed relaxation," the brochure reads. It is unclear whether the site of the resort was one of those resting places, the promotional leaflet says.

When the resort was built, there already were scattered homes and ranches in what is now La Quinta, Bailey said as she thumbed through old photos and documents that she is using for her research.

Point Happy Ranch dates from the early 1900s. A 1928 photo of a one-room school at Point Happy shows 14 pupils gathered outside, yet the area still was somewhat remote.

A circa-1935 photo shows what is now the busy intersection of Highway 111 and Washington Street as a confluence of dirt roads with little more than telephone poles, desert brush and mountains in the background.

Stanley Sniff's family moved to the desert in 1915, first to a ranch in what is now Indio, and in 1944 to La Quinta. Sniff, 79, recalled how as a child, he would ride his bicycle from the ranch about five miles through the desert to Frances Hack Park, which is now part of the La Quinta park system.

The Sniff family home in La Quinta was in the Cove, an area sheltered by mountains that today has thousands of residents. But in 1944, the area had not more than 100 homes scattered about, Sniff said.

“There was a house here and there,” he said. “We really didn’t have any neighbors, because people lived 400 or 500 feet away from each other.”

La Quinta now has more than 38,000 residents. Most have moved to the city over the past 2 decades and may know little about La Quinta’s past, Bailey said.

“It is very significant to record the city’s history,” Bailey said, “because you have so many individuals who have been here for so long and have stories to tell.”