

## HISTORY

# Palm Springs Kiddie Kollege was teachers' and students' dream

**Tracy Conrad** Special to The Desert Sun

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Five years before President Lyndon B. Johnson's Head Start preschool program in 1965, there was Kiddie Kollege in Palm Springs. Founded in 1960 by Edith Ritter, the preschool served generations of families in the desert, [until its closing at the end of this school year after 65 years.](#)

Kiddie Kollege offered "a complete program for children from two through six, including kindergarten class. Children have a regular schedule of supervised outdoor play, arts and crafts, and classes in reading, writing, phonics and Spanish."

"Occasional field trips to local places of interest are included in the program. These excursions take the youngsters to the airport, Desert Museum, Tamarisk Park and sometimes to the nearest ice cream store for cones."

"The modern building and play yard were designed by an architect especially for nursery school needs." Kiddie Kollege was purpose-built for the desert and its specific function of serving little ones in a beautiful way.

"The new school utilizes two oversized classrooms, each capable of holding two 15-student classes simultaneously. Around and about these two basic rooms are located a nursery for the very small pre-schoolers, an isolation (sick) room, a

teacher lounge, a cook's quarters, a combination kitchen and snack bar and three individual patios."

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"Inside the 'L' created by the shape of the buildings is a wealth of playground equipment. Swings, teeter-totters, slides, gym equipment and a 'forest' of palm trees – donated to the school by the Biltmore Hotel – are augmented by a series of playhouses constructed especially for the school by George Ritter, Jr., son of the headmistress."

"All of the play equipment – and all the buildings – are geared to the younger set. Doorknobs are set low enough to allow the tiny students to reach them with ease. All the furniture is constructed for little bodies. The drinking fountains will bend the average adult half in two although they're just right for the youngsters. Rest room facilities are likewise set at an altitude more in keeping with the size of the children."

"Danish architect Per Toft utilized long low lines, a wealth of windows, and thorough research in planning classroom alignments to deliver a structure that is a teacher's dream."

"And contractor-builder Charles Vander Ploeg spared no expense or effort in sending the building upward in time for the fall school year." Those were the days when a building could be finished in a matter of months!

"Another remarkable facet is the striking use of color, supervised by color consultant Connie Nash. Doors invite the tykes."

Ritter was an experienced teacher of little tykes. She worked at The Desert Inn kindergarten and then St. Theresa's School before venturing out on her own.

The original plans for her school at 250 Patencio Rd were dashed at the Planning Commission when it rejected a conditional use permit based on neighbor concerns over noise. Undaunted, Ritter moved her location and was ultimately successful in obtaining a conditional use permit and building permit for Compadre Road, kitty corner from St. Theresa's.

(Current neighbors and historians David Hyams and Brian Ramos researched the history and hope the special building is protected for the future. The structure was included in the 2015 Palm Springs Citywide Historic Resource Inventory of Eligible Resources.)

Toft lived with his family on Whispering Palms, nearby the school site. Palm Springs phone books in the late 1950s show Toft as employed by Pro Tech, Professional Technical Services, the entity under which architect William Cody operated at the time. Cody's brother John was the President. "Master of the Midcentury: The Architecture of William F. Cody" by Cody's daughter Catherine, contains a 1961 photo of Toft with Cody and his brother.

Vander Ploeg was an experienced contractor and had been involved with construction early in Palm Springs history appearing in the 1939 Palm Springs Directory with an occupation of carpenter, just after the city's incorporation in 1938.

Two architectural engineering students from California State Polytechnic College in San Luis Obispo, both alumna of Palm Springs High School, were also involved.

Ritter's son George Ritter, Jr. graduated from Palm Springs High School going on to Cal Poly. As a sophomore at Cal Poly George won the Dr. Albert Ganz, AIA award in architecture. Cal Poly records indicate that George graduated in 1961 and went to work in Palm Springs for William Cody until 1963. He became a

member of the AIA in 1969 and practiced architecture in California, Nevada, Texas, and Arizona. Well-known local projects include the Palm Desert Middle School, Palm Desert High School, La Quinta Middle School, Amistad Continuation School, Amistad Continuation School, the Child Development Center at College of the Desert, and the Ritter House located at 73345 Juniper Street in Palm Desert.

Constance (Connie) Nash graduated from Palm Springs High School also went on to Cal Poly. As a freshman at Cal Poly became the first woman to win the John Badgley Award for excellence in architecture. The following year she won the Lew Litzie Award. Cal Poly records indicate she graduated in 1962 becoming one of the first four women to obtain a degree in Architectural Engineering. The 1964 Palm Springs phone book indicates that she was working for William Cody.

The combined efforts resulted in the opening of Kiddie Kollege in September 1960 to accolades.

The newspaper recorded, “When the State Division of Schoolhouse Architecture approved Edith Ritter’s Kiddie Kollege, at 490 Compadre Road here, they included the notation that the new pre-school institution was ‘one of only three in the State of California’ comparable in quality and fitness for the job it has to do. That pleased Mrs. Ritter, who has been teaching kindergarten, nursery and pre-school children for the past nine years, and it also brought smiles of satisfaction to the persons who constructed it for her.”

The regular teachers were supremely professional and experienced.

Ritter also involved experts in art and music to enrich the school’s classes. The community deemed Kiddie Kollege an exceptional institution and Ritter ascribed her success to the kids themselves, saying that the caliber of child “who abides in

Palm Springs” was superior. “Mrs. Ritter thinks Palm Springs children are ‘exceptional in every way.’”

For the past 47 years the school was operated by Ritter’s daughters Kathy and Sandy. The Palm Springs institution served the community so very well, a dream come true.

“For Mrs. Ritter, the adobe-walled school is the culmination of a dream that began longer ago than she likes to recall. ‘It’s perfect,’ she says, surveying the grounds where children are playing. ‘It’s everything I dreamed it would be. All of the parents who come here are enthusiastic about the way we’ve come along. I love a happy parent best of everything I know except one. And, that’s a happy child.’”

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