

HISTORY

History: Developers stamped modern home neighborhoods throughout desert

Tracy Conrad Special to The Desert Sun

Published 7:00 a.m. PT April 9, 2023

The tiny January 1960 newspaper advertisement screamed, “SACRIFICE, 3 bedroom, 2 bath, carpets, drapes, refrigeration.” It contrasted wildly with the one above it that listed a “CHARMING 2 bedroom, 2 bath custom built.”

The “sacrifice” was being made in a little development called Enchanted Village. Conceding a reduction, the asking price was an entirely reasonable, in fact, most attractive, at \$19,000. The broken-hearted seller must’ve only had the place for a short time as the development was only a few years old and had first been called Ramon Rise Estates.

For lack of better directions, it was somewhere in the Deep Well “area” of Palm Springs, near the Biltmore Hotel, St. Theresa Church, Cahuilla school, and really near the high school. In 1960, it would have been easy to pick out among the sand dunes when looking east from Palm Springs.

David Hyams and Brian Ramos have unearthed the history of the development and each of the 84 homes built in the neighborhood between 1956 and 1958. (Their little booklet can be had for \$5 by writing to tamcollect@gmail.com.)

In February 1954, The Desert Sun headline read, “Man Buys Indian Land.” That was indeed newsworthy. The sale would have required the approval of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and perhaps a conservator, or guardian of the owner. The article noted, “Announcement was made this week of the purchase by George Goldberg, well known hotel man, of a 40-acre parcel of Indian land opposite Palm Springs High School and also fronting across Ramon Road from St. Theresa parochial. Goldberg is one of the larger

chain hotel operations of the nation owning hotels in Chicago, Detroit, Phoenix and...Los Angeles. He is a resident of Palm Springs.”

Joining forces with Samuel Sontag, of the eponymous drugstores, Goldberg formed SonGold Land Development Company and brought in builder Jack Meiselman to create their envisioned neighborhood. By 1956, the development, called Ramon Rise Estates, was sprouting from the sand dunes.

The new subdivision touted “an entirely new concept of Palm Springs indoor/outdoor living.” Noting that “particular attention has been paid to privacy and spaciousness with accent on expansive view with large sized ...lots. ‘Another new plateau in development has been reached in the construction industry in Palm Springs’ declared Meiselman in assuming charge of this history making project.”

According to Hyams and Ramos, SonGold, under the direction of Meiselman, contracted for the first 21 homes between October 1956 and March 1957 – a mere six months! The building spree possible in an age when city bureaucracy was minimal. Contractors Ryan & Ryan built homes along El Cielo and six on the east side of Canon, while Thor Fredricksen Jr. built nine homes on the west side.

Canon was a famous street in Beverly Hills. The desert subdivision required more street names. The ritzy city was easy to emulate. Homage to Roxbury, Bedford, Beverly, as well as variations of the names of their wives were used for remainder of the streets, eventually the area would come to be known as Little Beverly Hills.

SonGold subsequently wanted to develop a shopping center along Ramon Road but was stymied by the city causing the team to lose interest in the remaining 63 homesites originally planned for the 40-acre site. SonGold gave up and sold.

But builder George Alexander and his partner J.C. Dunas were buying. Alexander was headed to the desert for his health from Los Angeles and began buying lots of land for home development.

Alexander’s son Robert introduced William Krisel to his father, and his architectural firm Palmer & Krisel. The elder Alexander was skeptical about the newfangled modern architecture being proposed but humored his son in Woodland Hills and built some

Krisel-designed homes. Their swift sales convinced him to replicate the designs in the desert.

Alexander and Dunas commissioned Krisel to design, and they built, the Ocotillo lodge at a staggering cost of \$1,000,000. The idea proved worthy as they sold it a year later for \$2,000,000. On newly purchased land to the west of the Ocotillo Lodge, Krisel designed 90 houses with varying facades and floor plans and named the neighborhood Twin Palms.

SonGold's remaining homesites were developed by Alexander and Dunas with houses in Krisel's floor plan, dubbed The Ramon Rise, of 1,240 square feet featuring 3 bedrooms and 2 baths. The plan would be replicated in the Sunmor and Sunrise Park neighborhoods and expanded in a larger version for Vista Las Palmas as the developers bought more and more land.

Ramon Rise Estates was re-branded Enchanted Village. There were five exterior styles named El Dorado, Enchantment, Fiesta, Fleetwood and Suburba. The houses were priced between \$18,000 and \$20,000, making the \$19,000 asking price advertised by the dejected seller in 1960 a sacrifice indeed, especially considering the 100% appreciation of the Ocotillo. Although the style was not specifically identified, the experience had clearly not been golden, enchanting or a party for the poor seller.

Krisel's original exterior façade design for Ramon Rise was rejected as being too expensive. The Desert Sun noted in 1958 what would become the Sunmor tract homes "are designed by the prominent architect Richard Leitch." Hyams and Ramos believe that as the facades of both neighborhoods are so very similar, practically identical, they are likely by the same hand.

Eventually Enchanted Village would be known as Little Beverly Hills and had 84 quintessentially modern homes. Hyams and Ramos have delved extensively into the history of the development and its developers. They write, Alexander and Meiselman "were both born in Brooklyn in 1898 and 1899 respectively" within a mile of each other. Hyams and Ramos remark that 65 years later they were both in Palm Springs and had streets named after them, just 200 feet apart, in their Racquet Club Estates neighborhood.

Alexander's son Robert also has a street named for him there. He'd originally championed the Enchanted Homes tracts in the Sunrise Park area and had commissioned Krisel to

design his House of Tomorrow in Vista Las Palmas that would become famous as the house where Elvis and Priscilla honeymooned.

In addition to filling out Enchanted Village, the Alexander company developed modern houses for the masses in the desert in neatly laid out tracts including Racquet Club Estates, Sunmor, Twin Palms, Golf Club Estates, Green Fairway Estates, New Riviera Gardens, Indian Wells Village, and Desert Lanai 1,2,3 and 4.

Tragically, both George and Robert Alexander and their wives died in a small plane crash in 1965 flying back to Burbank from Palm Springs. Their company perished with them. But their developments, street names and many of their enchanting, modern houses persist.

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