

'WHISPERING WATERS' IN RANCHO MIRAGE

How a dream project for a Long Beach doctor became a hotel owned by the biggest TV stars of the 1950s

Hollywood stars turned their sights on Rancho Mirage in the mid-1950s, when the Thunderbird and Tamarisk Country Clubs were gaining popularity; new golf course homes were built for celebrities like Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, and Frank Sinatra left downtown Palm Springs for a quieter life overlooking the Tamarisk fairways.

Some of the most famous TV stars of the day bought a small Rancho Mirage hotel called 'Whispering Waters'. Dennis Weaver (*Gunsmoke*), Hugh O'Brian (*Wyatt Earp*), Clint Walker (*Cheyenne*), Lloyd Bridges (*Sea Hunt*), Aaron Spelling (famed writer and TV producer), and Spelling's wife Carolyn Jones (*Morticia* in *'The Addams Family'*) were the TV equivalent to the Rat Pack and for a while they entertained friends, locals and hotel guests at Whispering Waters.



(caption). Hugh O'Brian (as manager), Dennis Weaver as sports concierge, Aaron Spelling as desk clerk, Carolyn Jones as maid, and Lloyd Bridges as pool boy.
(TV Guide, March 29th, 1959. ModMirage archive)

The same group of buildings still stands today and you can see elements of the original hotel, the main façade is on Sahara Road. It's now a senior living complex, still called 'Whispering Waters'.

In 1956 this area of Rancho Mirage - now Magnesia Falls Cove across from 'The River' and just up the hill - was called simply 'Rancho Mirage'. Developer Ronald Button (future treasurer for the State of California) had built / planned more than 100 homes when he brought in his old friend and media star, Art Linkletter, to help fund hundreds more homes in the cove.

With the new community growing rapidly, an enterprising family practice doctor from Long Beach, Dr Harry Johnson, decided to buy some land nearby and embark on his dream to build and own a hotel. Harry Johnson loved bringing his family out to the desert for weekends and vacations and wanted to cement his passion for the desert with his hotel project.

Johnson employed Long Beach architectural practice Powers Daly & DeRosa, who had designed the family home in Lakewood, to come up with a site plan and design for a group of buildings gathered around a pool and loggia. Initially called 'Dancing Waters' - a rendering of the planned hotel shows a display fountain near the hotel's entrance, the final name became 'Whispering Waters' (the dramatic fountains were obviously amended!). Powers Daly & DeRosa are now lauded for their wacky Google-style bowling alley designs across the USA (nearly 100 in all) including the demolished 'Java Lanes' in Long Beach and the Covina Bowl - currently on LA Conservancy's watch list. 'Java Lanes' entry bears certain similarities to 'Whispering Waters.' Their designs were the focus of a 2014 exhibition at the Los Angeles Architecture & Design museum, 'Bowlarama'.



*Architectural rendering of 'Dancing Waters' hotel Rancho Mirage for H. Johnson
By Powers Daly & DeRosa
(image: Linda Johnson Davidson family archive)*

In October 1956 Dr. and Mrs. Johnson received planning permission for their apartment hotel and restaurant. Construction started in spring 1957



Photo: Linda Johnson Davidson archive

and by January 1958 the hotel – that reportedly cost half a million dollars (more than \$4 million at today's value) - was open for business. An early ad in The Villager noted:

The finest accommodations – Heated pool, refrigerated air conditioning throughout. Game and Terrace Room. Beautifully Landscaped. Intimate Cocktail Lounge.

THE FINEST IN RANCHO MIRAGE

The finest accommodations — Heated pool.
Refrigerated air conditioning throughout.
Game and Terrace Room. Beautifully Land-
scaped. Complimentary Continental Break-
fast.

Eat Royally, Reasonably

at

**WHISPERING
WATERS**

RANCHO MIRAGE — 1 Block off Highway 111

Phone: FAirview 8-3131



INTIMATE COCKTAIL LOUNGE

For the first year, Johnson and his wife ran the hotel from a distance (Dr Johnson was still a practicing doctor) with a manager on site. The restaurant served 'Scandinavian and Continental cuisine' (Mr Johnson was Swedish, his wife was Danish). According to the Johnsons' daughter, Linda Johnson Davidson, the couple found the business harder to run than they anticipated. Frustrated by management difficulties, the Johnsons soon abandoned their dream.

Eat Royally, Reasonably
at
Whispering Waters
Scandinavian & Continental Cuisine
SERVED DAILY TO YOU AT
POPULAR PRICES
BREAKFAST, LUNCH AND DINNER in our
SANTA ROSA DINING ROOM or
POOLSIDE TERRACE

**WHISPERING
WATERS**

RANCHO MIRAGE—1 Block off Highway 111
PHONE: FA 8-3131
ERNIE BOUDREAU, Resident Mgr.

Desert Sun ad, January 1958

In October 1958 new owners took over the hotel. The most successful (and good looking) faces on TV in America at the time, the ownership team starred in a veritable TV Guide of everyone's favorite TV shows. On March 29th 1959 TV Guide magazine itself featured an article celebrating the hotel's new ownership. (See [article image at top](#)).

The TV Guide article explained, tongue-in-cheek:

"Like any new owners in a new venture, they take it pretty seriously. They spend most of their weekends looking for spots on the rugs, chips in the furniture and algae in the pool. Bridges, of Sea Hunt, has adopted the pool as his project. He's as happy cleaning it as swimming in it. If you should ever stay over, don't bother to tip them. They're doing quite all right as it is."

In Carolyn Jones' biography, *"In Morticia's Shadow: the Life and Career of Carolyn Jones"*, the group's purchase is described as a 'real estate investment'. They clearly decided to have some fun with their investment too. Following is an extract:

"At the hotel's grand reopening, the new owners surprised guests by taking on the responsibilities of the staff, including Carolyn's stint as upstairs maid while husband Aaron was desk clerk. Many stars from Hollywood were on hand to celebrate the reopening. Desi Arnaz joined Carolyn in a floor-show as the two played bongo drums."

(Image: Desert Sun, 3rd February 1959)

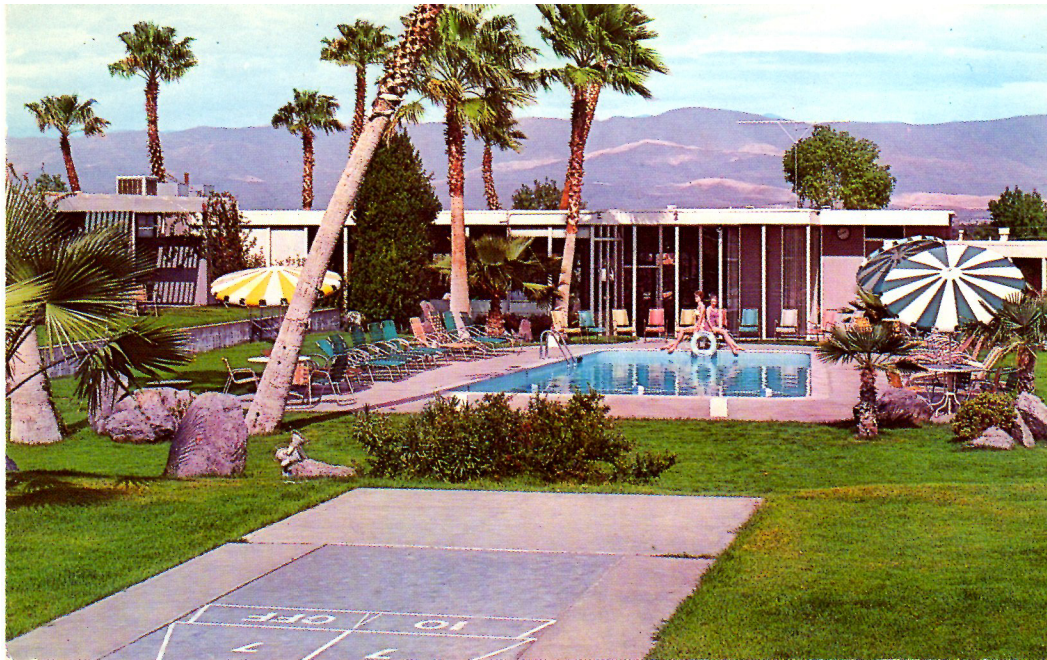


Although the Hollywood team's ownership was short-lived, they kept up ownership through the next season. The Desert Sun enthusiastically reported on 18 November 1960:

"There'll be no lack of stars when the Rancho Mirage luxury hotel unveils on two big nights: tonight and tomorrow. In fact the chances are fairly good that the explosive content of this two-night show could hit like a thermonuclear device... Look at the ingredients: owners Lloyd Bridges, Dennis Weaver, Carolyn Jones, Hugh O'Brian and Pat Conway plus regular entertainment of a spontaneous nature. Aaron Spelling, who

will also emcee the shows, wrote the special material that the stars will utilize and he's one of the most highly-regarded writers in the Southland today."

According to Carolyn Jones' biography, *"The joint venture, however, was short-lived. ... Carolyn, O'Brian, Bridges, and Weaver decided to pull out and invest in a large Los Angeles apartment."*



After its somewhat madcap early years, Whispering Waters settled into a quieter mid-life as a popular hotel. As hotel tastes changed, it fell on harder times and in the mid-1990s, the hotel became the Whispering Waters senior housing complex that it is today. The main façade on Sahara Road and the name are retained, and the buildings and pool are still in place – although inevitably altered with time.