

The 'X' Factor

Q: What do you get when you put five women on a Tribal Council? A: Progress.

BY KAY KUDUKIS

THE 1950S WERE full of upheaval and social change. Although African Americans, women, and Native Americans had all won the right to vote (in 1870, 1920, and 1924 respectively), decades later those in Indian Country were still struggling for equal rights.

The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, a patrilineal, patriarchal society, was undergoing changes, too. For more than 100 years, male members of the Patencio family served as net (chief), culminating in Albert Patencio's passing in 1951. With no one knowledgeable enough to serve, and already halfway through the 20th century, the elders made a difficult decision, which became a turning point for the Tribe. They lit on fire the ceremonial house and generations of tradition burned to the ground, lighting the way for the future.

In addition to the net, the Agua Caliente had an all-male Tribal Committee until the 1940s when women began to serve. In 1952, women dominated the Committee with Lorene McGlamary as Tribal Chairman, Vyola Ortner as Vice Chairman, and Flora Patencio as a member. Two years later, McGlamary was out and LaVerne Saubel, Eileen Miguel, and Elizabeth Pete Monk joined the Committee with Ortner as Chairman and Gloria Gillette eventually taking Patencio's place when she

retired shortly thereafter. The Tribe made national history with the first all-women Tribal Business Committee.

How did this shift in power come to pass? Monk's explanation to daughter Mildred (Millie) Browne was pretty straightforward: "The guys weren't doing it, so [the women] got together. They just wanted to get things fixed, get things done."

As a teen, Browne frequently traveled with her mother on Tribal business to Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C. She describes Monk as being "funny, fashionable, and forward thinking" with her "hair and nails always done. She was always dressed impeccably." However, Monk often demurred to those she deemed more educated and wished she had finished high school. "She said there were only so many books to go around, and the non-Indian kids would not share them with the Indians," Browne says. "So she dropped out in her senior year."

Racism and discrimination were still thriving in 1950s America when Monk was elected to the Committee, but television was also on the rise (by 1960, 90 percent of American households had a television), and the communication invention was rapidly becoming a catalyst for change. Despite the challenges faced by Native Americans at this time, Monk was determined



The second all-women Tribal Council, 1956 (from left): LaVerne Saubel, Elizabeth Pete Monk, Gloria Gillette, Vyola Ortner, and Eileen Miguel.



LEFT: Reviewing the master plan for Section 14 are, from left, Eileen Miguel, LaVerne Saubel, Gloria Gillette, Elizabeth Pete Monk, and Vyola Ortner, 1956.

Leading Ladies

Meet the members of the first all-women Tribal Council for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians:

Vyola Ortner, Chairman

Notable: Was half Cahuilla and half European (on her father's side). Because she understood both cultures, she felt she had an edge when it came to tribal negotiations with local, state, and federal governments.

LaVerne Saubel, Vice Chairman

Notable: In September 1957, Saubel's 30-year-old husband, James, was struck and killed by an automobile on Highway 111. She continued to serve on the council despite the personal tragedy.

Eileen Miguel, Secretary

Notable: Once famously stated in a federal hearing: "We have valuable land, but you can't eat dirt."

Elizabeth Pete Monk, Council Member

Notable: Direct descendant of Willie Boy, the subject of the 1969 film *Tell Them Willie Boy Was Here* starring Robert Blake, Robert Redford, and Katharine Ross. Served as president of the Palm Springs Business Women's Association.

Flora Patencio, Council Member

Notable: Daughter of last Tribal net, Albert Patencio.

Gloria Welmas Gillette (Flora Patencio resigns, Gloria fills her spot)

Notable: Gillette is the last living member of the all-women council.

to make sure her children received the education she never got and to give them a better life.

While all of the women on the Committee made significant contributions to the future of the Tribe, it was Ortner who saw the immediate need for a constitution and bylaws. Using her own money, she hired an attorney to help the Council establish rules and regulations, as well as to help untangle the threads of state and federal leasing regulations. Once the regulations were written, the Committee took them on a roadshow, knocking on Tribal members' doors to get a buy-in. In 1955, the constitution and bylaws were ratified, and the newly rebranded Tribal Council became official.

One of the provisions of the governance was to "regulate

the uses and disposition of tribal property." The current five-year federal lease law was paltry and inadequate; there was no economic value to the Tribe, and the ladies weren't having it. They began pilgrimages to Washington, D.C., proposing new leasing legislation and testifying and lobbying on its behalf for passage. In 1955, President Eisenhower signed the General Leasing Act for a 25-year lease term, with a one-time renewal option for another 25 years. It was progress, but in order to get businesses to invest in infrastructure on Indian land, they needed more. By 1958 their hard work had paid off; a 99-year lease was signed with developer Samuel Banowitz, and construction began on

the Palm Springs Spa.

Thanks to the groundbreaking efforts of these remarkable women, the Agua Caliente Tribe has a strong legacy that will benefit Tribal members and other Native American tribes for years to come. Browne, who followed in her mother's footsteps and served as Tribal Council Vice Chairman in the 1990s and has been the Chairwoman of the Board of Directors of the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum since its creation, recalls that time. "They were very bold-thinking women, and were very brave," she says.

Ortner, who passed away in early 2017, said with a chuckle in a 2016 C-Span interview, "I don't think the men have ever really gotten over it. All the women. The strong, strong women." 🍌