



ABOVE: An aerial view of Palm Springs. OPPOSITE: Architect's rendering of the Palm Springs International Airport, which is built on the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation.

The Land They Built

How campaigning for and winning 99-year land lease terms ushered in prosperity for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

BY JUNE ALLAN CORRIGAN

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THE EFFORTS OF an enterprising Tribal Council composed entirely of women — a first in and of itself — were pivotal in determining the future of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, and, indeed the very course of development in Palm Springs. To truly understand how critical their efforts were, one first needs to examine the fallout from legislation dating back to 1887.

“The Dawes Act was both a blessing and a curse,” says Tom Davis, Chief Planning & Development Officer for the Tribe. Meant to improve Native American life across the country, the Dawes Act allotted portions of reservation land to individual Tribal members with the idea that they could create their own

estates. They could also sell their portion, if so desired.

Agua Caliente land amounted to nearly 32,000 acres, and almost 7,000 acres lay within Palm Springs city limits. However, restrictive federal leasing laws prior to 1960 that applied to Indian land did them no favors. At the time, residential and commercial properties were limited to mere five-year lease terms and agricultural properties to 10 years. In either case, no bank or insurance company would glance twice at development proposals. As a result, land use was generally restricted to low-income transient communities, such as mobile homes and temporary farms.

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**Tom Davis,
Tribal Chief Planning &
Development Officer**

either not getting a good lease, which was hard to come by, or working the land themselves or possibly selling it — and selling the land was a dollar in the hand, but afterwards, most of them spiraled into poverty,” Davis adds. “That’s where the Dawes Act failed.” In addition, there were unscrupulous non-Indians, either conservators or developers, who entered into lease agreements with Tribal members and took advantage of them.

In 1954, a newly elected all-women Tribal Committee led by Chairman Vyola Ortner sought to overturn the burdensome lease laws in a quest to make Tribal land profitable. Armed with the phrase “You can’t eat dirt!” (which later became the title



PALM SPRINGS LIFE ARCHIVES



ABOVE: The Palm Springs International Airport, one of the earliest developments on the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation, soon after its completion. RIGHT: An airplane landing at the Palm Springs airport in the 1930s.



PALM SPRINGS LIFE ARCHIVES (AIRPORT), PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY (LANDING AND AERIAL)

RIGHT: An aerial view of the Palm Springs Army Air Field (which would later become the Palm Springs International Airport) during World War II.



of Ortner's autobiography), the members of the pioneering all-women Tribal Council traveled to Sacramento, California, and Washington, D.C., frequently to argue for legislation they hoped would raise their people's economic standard and place their lands on a competitive level with non-Indian properties. They hired attorney Raymond "Ray" C. Simpson, who helped them wade through complicated legalese and procedures. Congressman D.S. Saund, the Democratic representative in California's 29th Congressional District, which at the time included Palm Springs, also championed their cause.

After petitioning local, state, and federal governments for the first-ever long-term leases

of Indian land, this gutsy Tribal Council succeeded in securing 25-year leases with a one-time option to renew for a total of 50 years. The year was 1955, and Congress passed Public Law 255. It was a rather quick and significant victory for the Tribe and Indian Country — yet it was still not enough. Financiers favored leases of at least 54 years in duration, so the ladies went back to the drawing board and began lobbying for even longer terms. "We pushed for 99-year leases, just to be sure!" Ortner writes in *You Can't Eat Dirt*.

Allotment equalization issues complicated the process for a while, but four years later the House and Senate voted the final bill through, authorizing 99-year leases for

lands on the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation. President Eisenhower officially signed it into law on Oct. 22, 1959. He also authorized the Equalization Act of 1959, which evened out the differing financial values of land allotments regardless of their physical location.

The passage of these two laws spurred significant development in Palm Springs. For instance, they helped establish the Palm Springs Municipal Airport, which has since grown and acquired international status. The first long-term lease occurred when a Chicago real estate developer committed to leasing 8 acres of Section 14, including the eponymous Agua Caliente Hot Mineral

Spring, for a \$2 million spa with a \$1.7 million hotel known as the Palm Springs Spa Hotel. These and many other ensuing developments were a win for both the city of Palm Springs and the Tribe. While Palm Springs cemented its reputation as a resort destination, many Tribal members achieved economic independence.

The foresight and perseverance of Ortner's all-women Tribal Council during those midcentury years led the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians to the path they confidently travel today. Their success changed the course of history for Native Americans and has become a model worthy of emulation by other tribes across the country. 🍌