

Hollywood Greats Flocked To Racquet Club West

By Don Soja

An “official” neighborhood since 2007, the famed Racquet Club West (RCW) was once in the thick of all things “Hollywood” in Palm Springs.

Sitting behind the notorious Racquet Club founded by two tennis-addicted actors, Ralph Bellamy and Charles Farrell (who had been politely asked to vacate the courts at the El Mirador Hotel, or so it’s said) the location made adjacent homes attractive to the hottest celebrities of the period.

Dinner and dancing, drinks at poolside or sets of tennis were but a short walk or bike ride to the club.

(Aside: Bicycles hadn’t been “adult toys” since the 1890’s but were re-popularized in Palm Springs. True.)

At any given time, if you could bypass vigilant guards, you’d see Clark Gable, heartthrob Tyrone Power, Doris Day, Kirk Douglas, dancer Ann Miller, honeymooners Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Spencer Tracy or Bob Hope. This neighborhood was also rife with major producers, directors and screenwriters.

Tucked between the two major north/south corridors of the town (Palm Canyon and Indian Canyon drives), Racquet Club West is bordered by West San Rafael Road on the north and San Marco Way and Alvarado Road on the south. This mix of 175 one- or two-bedroom villas, unprepossessing weekend cottages, charming Spanish casas, and homes by famed architect Don Wexler and the Alexanders is said to have inspired Raymond Chandler’s book Poodle Springs.

The number of Top 100 American Movies, created here poolside and “over a highball” is astonishing. Everything from back-end production to camera work was plotted out in careful detail right there in Racquet Club West.

Nearby on West San Marcos Way was renowned producer/director Mervyn LeRoy (“Wizard of Oz,” “Little Caesar,” “Little Women,” “Random Harvest”). Columbia Studio chief Mike Frankovich and wife Binnie Barnes later lived there, too.

Producer Armand Deutsch (“Champion,” “Home of the Brave”) who lived on Santa Clara Way, had marathon meetings with actor Kirk Douglas frequently catered by the Racquet Club. Legendary Oscar-winning composer Jimmy van Heusen was on West Cabrillo.

Dead-pan comedic actor, Charles Butterworth, one of the four original members of the Racquet Club, had a “Spanish colonial” on La Puerta del Sol. Years later, another owner leased it to Jane Wyman, shortly after she divorced Ronald Reagan.

Next door to Butterworth was the heavily-accented but suave Warner Brothers leading man, Paul Lukas (another of the original four). If you didn’t see him in “Watch on the Rhine,” you should know he is the one who invented and/or popularized mens’ tassled loafers.

Hollywood attorney Gregson Bautzer, as famous for flamboyance as Casanova qualities, also lived on San Marcos. His 1947 home, built by May Company owners, was his desert destination with a bevy of beauties including, Lana Turner, Ginger Rogers, Joan Crawford and his future bride, Dana Wynter.

With the demise of the Racquet Club itself over the years, Racquet Club West is sometimes overlooked because it's right in the middle of your "way to somewhere else." You don't know what you're missing!