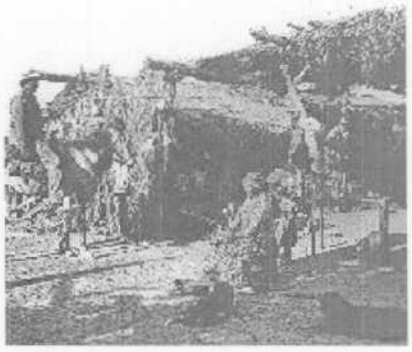
The History of Palm Springs

An Indian Beginning

From the book "PALM SPRINGS *First Hundred Years*" by Mayor Frank M. Bogert

According to anthropologists, Native Americans have lived beside the sparkling waters of Palm Springs' tree-lined canyons and around its bubbling hot springs for over a thousand years. They survived by using a multitude of desert plants for food, clothing, and medicine. With bows and arrows and sticks, the Indians hunted deer, bighorn sheep, rabbits, and other small animals. Recent discoveries indicate that their irrigation ditches may date back to pre-Columbian time.

After the arrival of the Spaniards, the Indians grew corn, squash, beans, and melons. They later cultivated orchards and began raising cattle and horses.



The Agua Caliente Indians of Palm Springs are one of ten or more independent clans of the Cahuilla tribe from the Shoshonean division (Takic) of the Uto-Aztecan language family. Their traditional communities were located in the Palm, Andreas, Murray, Tahquitz, and Chino canyons.

Closely allied with the Cahuilla clans of Indian Wells and San Gorgonio Pass areas, the Agua Calientes also maintained social, religious, and economic relationships with Indians from Los Angeles to the Colorado River. The Cahuillas all spoke the same language with some dialectical variations, a language closely related to their Serrano, Gabrielino, and Luiseno neighbors.

The Cahuillas had clan-based sovereignty over a particular territory of the desert and mountain terrain. Each community supervised individual areas used by its people for gathering food, hunting, ritual observances, and recreation. Disputes in Cahuilla history were usually arguments over hunting and food-gathering boundaries.

Chief Cabezon, who lived in the Thermal-Mecca region, was recognized as a leader, or Cacique, by many of the Cahuillas and was given considerable authority by the Mexicans and Americans. His nominal control extended over Indians from the desert through the San Gorgonio Pass. After his death, his son continued to exercise power over the tribe until his own death in the late 19th century.

The beavertail, most beautiful of all cactus blooms, grows up in the hills above the desert floor along with the agave, seen in the background. The agave plant was an Indian food staple. They cut off the leaves and baked the stalk in hot coals. Other famous Cahuilla leaders included Juan Antonio, later

appointed a general by General Stephen Kearney and a captain general by the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1855, and Antonio Garra, an authoritative figure in the 1840s.

Like Cabezon, they both functioned as intermediaries between the confederated Cahuilla groups and early pioneers entering the region.

All Cahuilla people belonged to one of two social groups -- the wild cat, *Istam*, or the coyote, *Tuktum*. These moieties were subdivided into a large number of clans. Membership into a clan was through the father; members of Istam were expected to marry into the Tuktum clan and vice versa.

By the turn of the century, Agua Caliente (as Palm Springs was called in the 1800s) became a focus of Cahuilla activity. The *Paniktum* lineage of Andreas Canyon was closely related to the *Kauisiktum* lineage of Agua Caliente and joined them in ceremonies, along with other groups who no longer had a ceremonial leader.

Alejo Patenciowas the Net, or head man, of the *Kauisiktum* clan in 1925.This was an office that passed from fathert to son unlessthe son was not qualified, in which case it reverted to another member of the family. The *Net* administered the affairs of the people of his group and settled clan disputes. His word was final and respected. He knew all the clan songs and legendary history as well as the minute landmarks of the clan's territory and food-gathering areas. He set the dates for all ceremonies and told his people when it was time to gather their various crops.

The *Net* ruled his domain from the round house, or *Kishumnawut*, in section 14 of Palm Springs. Considered a sacred site, it was the location of ceremonial dances and the place where the clan kept the *Maiswat*, their sacred belongings.

Marcus Belardo was Alejo Patencio's *Paxaa*, an assistant with special duties. His responsibilities included keeping order and silence at all solemn ceremonies, collecting food from each family for the round house ceremonies, and overseeing ceremonial protocol. This respected office, like the *Net*, passed from father to son.

Other clan officers included the *Takwa*, who prepared and distributed the food at ceremonies, and the *Haunik*, who sang at all the functions. The *Haunik* was revered by the clan for his fine voice and his repertoire of poetic song cycles, some of which lasted as long as 12 hours. He taught the songs and tribal history to the young people and instructed them in proper adult behavior. Joe Patencio was the last person to hold this office.

The shamans, or medicine men, were called *Puvalem*. The *Pavuul* exerted greater power than the *Puul*, the less-revered shamans. Pedro Chino was a *Partlid* noted for his extraordinary powers for predicting future events, making rain, stopping catastrophies, and other "miracles." He supposedly could change into a crow, mountain lion, coyote, or other bird or animal.

Puvalem were highly respected clan members. It was thought that they could cure any ailment with

their considerable knowledge of herbs and other medical procedures and neutralize the power of evil spirits with special songs and dances. They were an important part of all ceremonies and advised the *Net* of the most propitious time for all events. To demonstrate their power, they performed extraordinary feats such as eating hot coals at ceremonies.

Puvalem did not inherit their office but were born with their powers or taught by Puul who recognized a youth's talent. Often, both the *Net* and the *Paxaa* were *Puvalem*. These ceremonial roles and duties were quite confusing to pioneers, who mistakenly assumed all the participants to be chiefs.

In later years, the Agua Calientes also elected a secular leader to act as liaison between the clan and governmental agencies and other outside groups. His powers were limited and had no connection with the ceremonies. Lee Arenas, one of the best known of the clan leaders, often acted as a guide and interpreter for the area's white settlers. He later led the fight to get reservation land allotted to individual members of the tribe. Today, the Agua Caliente people have an elected council to administer tribal affairs.

At the beginning of the 20th century, many of the Cahuillas spoke Spanish and had Spanish names, but, thanks to their remote location, they were able to escape much of the Mexican influence and to preserve most of their own Indian culture.

The Americanization of the Indians began after the Mormons settled in San Bernardino around 1852. Soon, their invasion extended as far south as San Timoteo Canyon, with several settlers moving into the San Gorgonio Pass region. By 1862, the Bradshaw Trail from Redlands to Arizona became an important stage stop and a one-day trip from Banning.

Jack Summers ran the way station and raised barley for horses on the 10 acres he rented from the Indians. Many of the Agua Calientes got jobs on the railroad Southern Pacific built through the pass in 1875. The Craft family had a large orchard near Yucaipa and hired many Indians. Among them was Francisco Patencio, an excellent farmer. Pedro Chino and Miguel Saturnino, both highly skilled cow punchers, went to work for Paulino Weaver, who ran 4,000 head of cattle on his ranch in San Gorgonio Pass.

The number of Agua Calientes began to diminish in later years. Because of their close association with white people, many Indians fell victim to the great small pox epidemic of 1862. By 1884, around 70 Indians were living in the Palm Springs area; in 1925, only 50 remained. Today the tribe numbers 240 members.

Fortunately, David Prescott Barrows arrived on the scene in 1900 to prepare an anthropological report on Cahuilla culture. By the early 1920s Alfred Kroeber, Lucille Hooper, and William Duncan

Strong all studied and published material on the Cahuillas. In 1972, Dr. Lowell Bean published one of the best anthropological studies ever made of an Indian tribe. Mukat~ People was based on his 15 years of work with the Cahuilla elders and his correlation of previous tribal knowledge.

After reading this book, one cannot help but have a tremendous admiration for these interesting people. They are a strong, intelligent, tenacious group with a high degree of morality and integrity. That they could exist in such a barren environment shows considerable initiative and great industry.

The Cahuillas' oral treasures are highly poetic and their crafts were extremely artistic in design. All of their tools, mats, baskets, and pottery show a high order of craftsmanship. Many of today's young Cahuillas have rediscovered their culture and are nghtfully proud of their heritage.

1st picture - *Courtesy Palm Springs Historical Society Collection*
2nd picture - *Palm Springs Desert Museum*

PALM SPRINGS HERITAGE ASSOCIATES
PUBLISHER

Home Golf Lodging Activities Points of Interest Map Real Estate
History Dining Services Art Feedback