



La Casa del Zorro

Borrego Springs, Calif. 92004



Noel Crickmer Photo

Adobe house at Burks Ranch in Borrego Valley, as it appeared in 1937, was nucleus for what was to become La Casa del Zorro.

By Lois von Voigtlander

Much of the history of the development of Borrego Valley is contained, literally, within the walls of La Casa del Zorro.

The first structure, in 1937, was a simple adobe ranch house. Subsequently, it was turned into a small resort, and through more than three decades of remodeling, first as the Desert Lodge then as La Casa del Zorro, not all of the original structure was obliterated.

Adobe walls and beams of the ranch house still form part of the lobby and lounge of the modern, elegant hostelry as improvement and expansion continue.

From the beginning, this historic landholding was developed by men who had faith in the future of this desert valley.

One of these men, Noel Crickmer of El

Cajon, during a recent visit added many details of the history of La Casa and recalled names of those who had come to the desert for vacation and recreation.

The Crickmers visited Borrego in 1936 and returned to Del Mar where Crickmer was manager of the Del Mar Hotel. He was full of enthusiasm for this valley and the fascinating friendly folk they had met. Everyone, it seems, offered lodging, food, conversation and something to keep away snake bites.

Crickmer ultimately purchased what was the old Burks Ranch.

"The unfinished building," he said, "was slowly turned into a commercial establishment."

The Crickmers named it The Desert

Lodge. The uncompleted buildings were converted to suit a resort purpose.

Crickmer remarked that Dana Burks, builder of the ranch, was also an early developer of Palm Springs. "He could foresee what the desert might become," said Crickmer.

"Harry Woods, then developing Borrego, interested Burks in this valley. Burks acquired property, and then explored the agricultural possibilities and the valley's potential for a recreational and residential future," he said.

Fanning out as far as the eye could see were vistas of extraordinary beauty un-sullied by homes, roads and signs. But even then the few residents complained because agricultural activities had stirred up the good earth, causing erosion and sand storms.

Burks' method of building his original ranch was to use an inside form against which was poured a soil and cement mix of adobe held in place with rocks. The bottom of the form was wide, sloping to 10 inches at the top. Then a bond beam for rafters was fashioned.

Much of the original adobe and hand-hewn rafters remain in La Casa del Zorro, adding a quaint and authentic touch to the present building.

When Crickmer took over the ranch it consisted of the main house, a large and a small room and a lean-to kitchen. The kitchen was torn down and replaced with a larger more workable space later.

There was an engine house and two uncompleted restrooms. A room was created beneath a water tank and a bath was added to a small redwood house formerly occupied by a caretaker.

Shortly thereafter, The Desert Lodge was in business. By Thanksgiving Day, 17 guests were dining on turkey from "old Mac's" Turkey Ranch to the north.

With the arrival of the Crickmers the population of Borrego Springs zoomed to 25 persons.

"The valley wasn't dead," said Crickmer, "It was lifeless."

Early residents included the Ed Duvalls who ran the Borego Store, Tommy Davis, Al Mathis, Keith Ritchie, Bud Henry, a Dr. and Mrs. Church and of course Doc and Mrs. Al Beatty — without which no Borrego account would be complete.

Tommy Davis helped start the Ensign Ranch, now Borrego Springs Park, where they grew alfalfa, dates and kept a herd of cows. Up at Tub Canyon, Fred Lanz cultivated tomatoes.

Crickmer digressed to discuss how Tub Canyon was named. In the early days cattle roamed freely in the valley. They were especially partial to wild flowers in the spring.

Large tubs cut in half had been placed in the canyon to catch water for the cattle from streams. The tubs remained in place for years, long enough to name the canyon, but are now gone.

Rancho de Anza, up Coyote Canyon, cultivated grapes. The old Briniger Ranch, now disappeared, grew delicious grapefruit and figs.

"Along about this time," said Crickmer, "county supervisors were urged to build a better road into the valley.

"According to the supervisors, the road would lead nowhere and they objected to spending money on a useless, desolate area," he said.

Eventually Borregans had an opportunity to choose whether the narrow road over Yaqui Pass or the one that crossed San Felipe Wash would be rebuilt. The burning question was resolved by placing a ballot box in the old Borego Store. Yaqui Pass won.

Work was slow. It was not until the start of World War II that brought Army units here to train for the African campaign that the work was expedited by the service.

Also under heated discussion around the cracker barrel in the store along about mail time was the correct spelling of "Borrego." It had been spelled with one "r" for years.

Doc Beatty recalled "Borego" meant the name of a mountain sheep in Spanish, the kind of sheep with the curly horns which

still roams the surrounding hills of the valley. Research picked up the fact that "Borego" referred to the forage the sheep ate — not the animal itself.

"In any event," Crickmer said as he smiled, "the two R's did become official and have been ever since. The only hold out was the Borego Store, which refused to change."

The sign is still there, mute testimony to early pioneer days of the valley when hopes and dreams were rampant and not all of them came true.

No man worked harder to bring the valley to life, according to Crickmer, than Harry Woods, the great deeply tanned oak of a man who was Fred Woods' father. Woods has a realty office in Borrego.

By 1920 a small community had functioned here with an active Chamber of Commerce. There was little work and not enough clientele to keep businessmen here.

Mrs. Milo Porter, who later moved to

Julian, was the first chamber secretary. Crickmer talked a lot about the Beatty's, whose first ranch was in Coyote Canyon. There Beatty had a salad and produce garden and cattle. One day a cowboy checking cattle found Mrs. Beatty alone and with a broken leg. The cowboy set the leg and then waited until Beatty returned from a trip before moving on.

On another occasion Beatty had broken a wheel on his wagon in the vicinity of the old Borrego Spring. While digging in the sand he uncovered a fine silver crucifix of a type used by early Spanish missionaries. Fred Woods has a picture of Doc holding the relic that is still in the Beatty family.

Later, Beatty built a ranch at Molina Verde, now a part of the Aero-O-asis complex which earlier was the motel where Marlon Brandon once stayed while filming "The Young Lions." The original fireplace of the Beatty farm home is the base of a present day barbecue.

Mail in early days came into the valley



Noel Crickmer Photo

By 1940 at the former Desert Lodge additional adobe structures provided four more guest rooms.



Noel Crickmer Photo

Guests at Desert Lodge in 1946 enjoyed leisure in patio ringed by rock wall on north side of main building.

three times a week by a circuitous route. The route traversed Chuparosa Canyon, crossed Jackass Flats and wound over the high reaches of Tub Canyon through the eastern slope of Montezuma Valley to Ranchita.

Parts of the route could be traversed by horseback. The rest was footslogging over a trail.

Mrs. Beatty frequently carried the mail enduring both summer's heat and winter's chilled winds over the pass.

Ultimately the mail was delivered to the Borego Store.

Crickmer is an ardent admirer of the Borrego pioneer woman, one of our earliest settlers. Frances Beatty, according to Crickmer, was of Indian extraction and not only a friend to the Crickmers and many others, but a source of inspiration and admiration as well. It was Doc Beatty who interested Alta DuVall, a new bride and Los Angeles school teacher, in collecting Indian artifacts.

Now 30 years later, Mrs. DuVall's collection is enviable and her knowledge of the desert is enhanced by hundreds of trips to the desert outback.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the word had spread and news of The Desert Lodge brought guests flocking to the lodge.

The Crickmers had their hands full, coping with guests and emergency breakdowns, power failures and crucial decisions.

Happily, their guests were able to bend with the desert willow and accepted conditions as they found them.

The Crickmers made lifelong friends of guests who later became well known in the cultural, business and civic milieu of San Diego.

Among the first guests at The Desert Lodge in 1939 was Tom Sefton, who came down weekends with enough arms and ammunition to equip a small army.

Sefton, who is now president of the San Diego Trust & Savings Bank, and his guests

traveled to the Borrego Badlands to practice marksmanship.

Noel Crickmer, owner of the lodge, said that feeding Sefton and his friends was simple. All Crickmer needed was an ample supply of thirds and fourths for the ravenous bunch.

None of Sefton's friends enjoyed shooting his 1776 musket. According to Crickmer, the musket had a kick like an Army mule. The marksman was required to watch where the shot landed because ammunition for the ancient firearm was scarce.

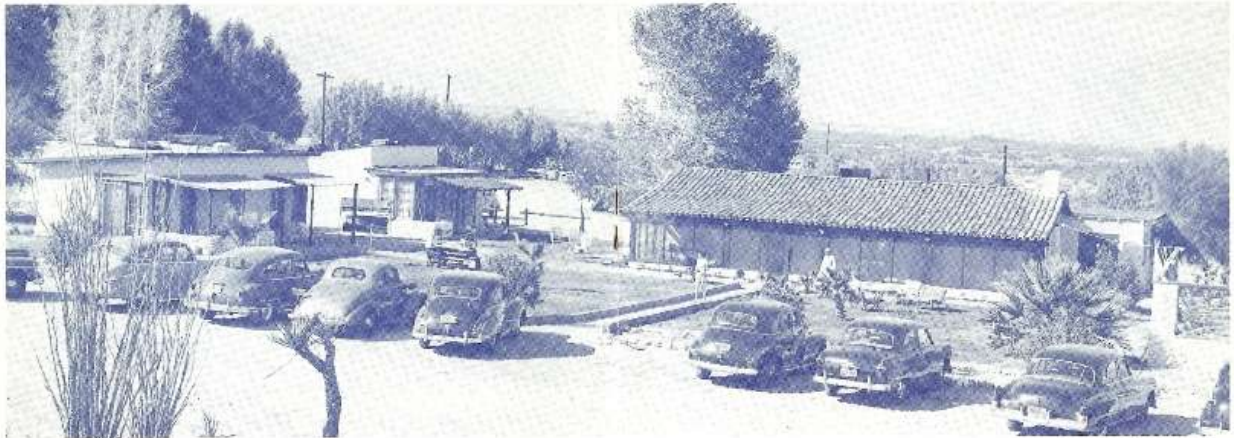
It was Sefton who gave Crickmer a beautifully bound leather guest book with "The Desert Lodge" embossed in gold.

Although it became lost over the years, Crickmer can remember many of the guests. The book read like today's San Diego social register. Guests came from

San Diego, La Jolla, and from as far away as San Francisco, Carmel, the British Isles, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

There were the J. Jessop family with their sons, Armand and Alonzo, and daughter, Emma, the George Jessops and Richard and Joseph Jessop. Admiral Fred Sherman and Mrs. Sherman, (she was Fanny Jessop), came to the lodge as did Mr. and Mrs. Walter Trepte with their daughter, Gretchen, and sons, Walter and Gene. Major Reuben Fleet enjoyed a game of chess with the host and usually beat him at his own game. George Marston and his daughter, Mary, were also ardent desert explorers.

Crickmer recalled a lively discussion one weekend when guests included the Armand Jessops, the Frank Howards, the Guy Flemings and county Supervisor Dean Howell and Mrs. Howell and Harry Woods.



A spirited discussion arose that evening over a proposed road through Coyote Canyon. It was one that would provide material for discussions for years to come and would not be solved by the county Board of Supervisors until 1971. It is interesting to note that then, as now, proponents of the road were the most vocal.

Crickmer decided something in the valley should bear the name of courageous Father Font, who traveled with the Spanish explorers. Having read Father Font's diary, Crickmer decided the point jutting over the Borrego Badlands which dominated the skyline with spectacular sun rises should be named Font's Point. Crickmer carved a redwood sign, burned in the inscription and fastened it securely to a redwood two by four. He placed it at the summit along with a cairn of stones. All are gone now.

The Philip Gildreds came with their son, George, who was especially fond of the lodge's mascot, trusty "Towser."

The Philip Bancrofts, he was an historian, came from Walnut Creek.

The Griffing Bancrofts, who came over from La Jolla, used to worry the hosts. An interested botanist, Bancroft would explore for cacti in the hottest weather arriving back at the lodge exhausted, but happy.

The J. Dallas Clarks and Dr. and Mrs. Robert McIver, who were recent newlyweds, came often. In later years the Crickmers started a lodge at Tub Canyon and there the McIvers brought their daughter, Joan. The Tub Canyon Ranch is now the property of actor and television star Gale Gordon.

"Doc" Holloway, then president of the San Diego Gas and Electric Co., and Mrs.

Holloway were early seasonal guests.

Among others who found peace and solace in the desert environment were the late Col. Ed Fletcher and Mrs. Fletcher, who became regulars, and brought bags of chestnuts in season for everyone to enjoy. Ed Fletcher, Jr. and his family flew in with their plane. They established the Fletcher Air Ranch where they, their family and air-minded friends would fly in for Sunday brunch.

The fly-in breakfasts were coveted invitations to receive. Now the Fetters and many descendants of the late Col. Fletcher use the ranch as do their air-minded friends.

The vice consul of the Netherlands, Alexander van Leer and Mrs. van Leer and Miss Fanny van Leer also came to the lodge. Sometimes they brought along interesting friends from war-torn Europe to provide a cosmopolitan murmur of many languages around the table. Benny Benedict and Joe Sefton, Thomas Sefton's father, were among regulars who came in the early days.

Randall Henderson, editor and owner of the *Desert* magazine, at that time, enjoyed coming to The Desert Lodge and so did Phil Townsend Hanna, editor of "Touring Topics" for the Automobile Club of Southern California. *Westways* published a piece in their magazine extolling the virtues of the valley. It helped publicize both the lodge and the valley.

By 1940 four more rooms were built on in the adobe style used in the main building.

One afternoon three long shiny limousines swept into the drive. Out stepped the district attorney of Los Angeles County Byron Fitts and his staff, requesting rooms for the night. The next morning they planned to explore Coyote Canyon for the hidden grave of a former prohibition bootlegger. They had brought along a prisoner who had 'talked' and opined to know the location. The prisoner had been lodged for the night in the jail at Brawley.

The next morning two burly deputies arrived with the slight prisoner in tow. Then

came the press. It was winter, but mild.

Someone in Julian had warned the press party to dress warmly. They were prepared for blizzard conditions. Unfortunately the reporters missed the D.A.'s party and had to tramp miles into the canyon. The day waxed on and the temperature soared.

While reporters struggled on, the district attorney had returned after an unsuccessful hunt. Much later the disgruntled press party limped back to the lodge.

Sometimes guests at the lodge preferred to dine off the kitchen table where they were closer to the action. Some even washed dishes. The Howard Metcalfs of Warner Springs often came for luncheon at the kitchen table.

Metcalfe's father, Victor, was once secretary of the Navy. Crickmer recalls seeing a letter written to his son in which the former secretary prophesized the war with Japan.

In those days, smiled Crickmer, "the most we could offer guests were good beds, an ample supply of food and a friendly desert atmosphere. We planned picnics and excursions in order that our guests could imbibe desert pleasures to the fullest."

Many of the same early guests still enjoy coming here 30 years later. Some even built homes around the lodge complex to form a cordon solitaire of friendly neighborhood vacation homes.

The Crickmers planned to operate The Desert Lodge resort as a winter business and keep summers free for travel and recreation when they opened up in 1939.

But Dec. 7, 1941, changed many plans of many persons, including those of the Crickmers. Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, the few employees at the Lodge left thinking there would be little business until after the war.

Suddenly, Borrego came alive with Army and Marine units. Service influence expedited the completion of Yaqui Road. The Ensign Ranch, where Borrego Springs Park is now, was designated a Marine outpost to



Modernization had begun in 1961 at newly-named La Casa del Zorro. New pool was built at right.

train recruits, slated for duty in the northern deserts of Africa.

In Borrego they learned to drive under desert conditions at nighttime without lights.

Army tank destroyer units from New Mexico rolled into the valley. The Lodge was swamped with soldiers, their families and mounds of luggage. Built to accommodate 18 guests at the most, the Lodge was trying to squeeze in from 30 to 40.

No one cared how crowded it became as long as families could be together a few more days or hours. One night Crickmer and a guest slept on kitchen chairs after giving up their beds to tired, bewildered military wives.

Rationing and the OPA (Office of Price Administration) came into being. The Crickmers were able to serve staggered meals for guests by using ration stamps on hand. Then the stamp allotment was cut in half, necessitating drastic revisions.

Guests, who still came when they could,

brought in cigarettes, candy and soft drinks for soldiers until the Lodge was able to obtain a special permit to purchase such items.

Kitchen help was hard to come by. Mrs. Crickmer baked fresh bread three times a day. The Desert Lodge's source of milk, cream and butter — Bessie, the cow — was indispensable. Sometimes the Ensign Ranch could help with dairy products. A friendly merchant in Westmorland assisted when possible and when Ranchita ranchers butchered, fresh beef was available.

With help from desert friends the Lodge subsisted.

Two units of anti-aircraft units from Camp Callan near La Jolla arrived in the desert to train each week. In between times, clean-up squads arrived. They brought their own lunches but found the amount of food inadequate. They, too, found their way to the Crickmers' doorstep. Guests sometimes brought in extra rations to help out.

Executives from the aircraft industry ar-

rived as did professional people hard pressed in a war-oriented society.

To conserve fuel, the Lodge owners closed down the lighting system at 10 p.m. Guests who wished to stay up later did so with good grace, merriment and with the help of candles and kerosene lamps.

Soon P-38 planes were roaring and diving overhead on desert practice missions. Two pilots who crashed over Clark Dry Lake never went home.

As the war continued, maintenance problems became acute. Nothing was ever thrown away, not even bailing wire. It was a long haul to the outside for food and supplies and only an "A" card for gas was made available for the Lodge.

Sometimes friends donated gas or coupons. One couple, the Walter Treptes, who came often to the Lodge, helped solve the transportation problem.

Mrs. Trepte, a volunteer Gray Lady, needed a larger car. She traded her sedan for the Crickmers' station wagon and

tossed in a cement mixer with a five-horse power engine into the deal. The mixer was worth its weight in gold, because by using it as a gasoline requirement the Lodge was able to operate its vehicles with a narrow margin of safety.

Later, the cement mixer was used to help build two of Borrego's first motels.

As the war years drew to a close more visitors and realtors became interested in the valley. Some who had learned to enjoy the desert during the war returned.

There was talk of an agricultural future. Sam Fortiner had already begun to grow gladiolus.

The face and pace of Borrego began perceptively to change. Crickmers subdivided part of The Desert Lodge property and named the new section "Rancho Borrego."

In 1947, DiGiorgio Corp. moved in. Needing temporary housing for workers, it leased the Lodge for six months until its own buildings were completed.

Soon afterward, the Crickmers regret-



Original paintings add elegance to dining rooms. Butterfield Room is in background.



Seventeen cottages on grounds of resort hotel provide privacy and convenience.

fully decided to sell. The purchaser was A. A. Burnand Jr. Members of the Burnand family managed the Lodge until it was purchased by James S. Copley in 1960.

The name was changed, to La Casa del Zorro. However, other changes over the following decade have expanded and improved the hostelry without obliterating the elements that reflect the charm of its humble beginnings.

Modernization of the older motel units began in 1961, and the new 18-sided pool was built. The next year the dining room was enlarged. By 1964, the lounge reached its present spacious proportions.

In 1970 there was further modernization — offices and kitchens were enlarged, and the white-beamed lounge decorated with new furnishings. They subtly suggest the old in the flash of brass, copper and pewter. Winter firelight flickers on fruitwood pieces under a handsome new ceiling fixture.

Imported floor coverings in soft blue extend to the dining areas where original

paintings commissioned to illustrate Copley Books adorn the walls.

In the elegant Butterfield Room are the Marjorie Reed paintings which appear in the volume which recreates the 19th century stage line's role in developing California. The Butterfield route passed through the southern segment of what is now the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.

In 1971, the 17 guest cottages at La Casa del Zorro were refurbished, offering new convenience for families or groups. Young parents who once enjoyed serene desert sojourns now bring their children for similar holidays in the same setting.

Guests who once enjoyed the murals of desert Indians, painted by John Duarte, now chuckle at new murals in the bar created by Richard Gabriel Chase.

They no longer sit around the ranchhouse kitchen table to talk of friends, or read by kerosene lamps. The same friendliness is there, however, in the elegant furnishings and matchless service that offer a personal warmth to guests at La Casa del Zorro.



La Casa del Zorro
RESORT HOTEL

La Casa del Zorro

3845 Yaqui Pass Road • Post Office Box 127
Borrego Springs, California 92004 • (619) 767-5323