

# Radio history made at Palm Springs American Legion



Denise Goolsby, The Desert Sun 11:56 a.m. PST December 30, 2015



(Photo: Provided photo)

The American Legion hall in Palm Springs is hard to find if you don't know exactly where to look. Designed by the architectural firm of Albert Frey and John Clark, the Owen Coffman Post 519 War Memorial building sits on the east side of Belardo Road, facing the O'Donnell Golf Course, on land obtained from Austin and Pearl McManus for \$9.90.

The post was chartered in 1939 and its first commander was Earl Coffman, who served in France during World War I. He was the son of Nellie Coffman, founder of the Desert Inn. In the early days, the group held its meetings in the Fiesta Room at the hotel.

During World War II, Earl and wife Helen Coffman received the unfortunate news that their son, U.S. Army Air Corps B-17 pilot Owen Baylis Coffman, was killed in action over England. The officers of Post 519 held a special meeting to draft a resolution to rename the post in honor of Owen.

The new name of the post was approved by the Department of California, American Legion on May 29, 1944.

As the war wore on, and victory was in sight for the Allies, post leaders knew they'd soon need a larger meeting space to accommodate the men returning from the service.

Legionnaires first conceived the idea to build their own facility in 1944-1945.

According to a story in the Feb. 28, 1947 Desert Sun, the men who came up with this plan were those who "fought in World War I but were too old or disabled to enter the services in World War II."

"I've heard them tell of the motivation that laid behind the building plan back in 1944," reporter Bill Rashall said in his story. "At that time it was thought possible to erect the Wars Memorial building for \$75,000. These men who had tasted what war was like in 1917 to 1919 said, 'It will be a nice place for the boys when they come home. They'll want it big enough so that all fraternal organizations in the city will be able to use it – a place that will be an asset to the community.'"

Their dream almost didn't become a reality. In fact, according to this story, headlined "Legion Post Considers Dropping Memorial: Public Lack of Interest Held Cause," the campaign to raise money for the project was stalling due to community indifference.

But the Legion's fortunes changed – much of the materials and labor to construct the post was donated – and in August 1947, a groundbreaking ceremony was held at the site. The post was officially dedicated on Jan. 3, 1948, by American Legion national commander James F. O'Neill.

On Jan. 6, 1999, the American Legion post was designated a Class 1 Historic Site by the Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board.

There's a lot of history inside that building. I can just imagine the conversations that have taken place and the war stories that have been swapped in the nearly 70 years of its existence.

Radio days

There's pretty much no place like an American Legion hall, most of which are outfitted with full bars and some, like Palm Springs, run their own restaurants.



American Legion Owen Coffman Post 519, Palm Springs. (Photo: Photo courtesy of American Legion Owen Coffman Post 519, Palm Springs.)

Near the back of the Palm Springs post – next to a stage flanked by American flags and life-sized cardboard cutouts of John Wayne and President Ronald Reagan – is an old broadcast booth featuring original 1930s- and 1940s-era equipment that transmitted locally recorded radio shows from coast to coast.

This was made possible by the installation of Palm Springs' first radio station, KCMJ 1340, in 1946.

On Feb. 20, 1946, as a benefit for the American Legion's Wars Memorial fund, a gala for the new station headlined by Frank Sinatra was held at the Plaza Theater. Immediately following Sinatra's show was the formal inauguration of KCMJ – a 250-watt radio station built north of the city by Palm Springs Broadcasting Company, comprised of Dick Joy and Donald McBain.

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Desert Sun advertisement announcing the premiere of the radio station KCMJ - featuring Frank Sinatra - on Feb. 20, 1948 at the Plaza Theatre in Palm Springs. (Photo: The Desert Sun)

The American Legion began broadcasting from its site in early 1948.

According to the Feb. 24, 1948, edition of The Desert Sun, "Marking the third national broadcast to emanate from the American Legion hall within the month, Al Jolson's show will go out on the air from Palm Springs Thursday night at 6 p.m.

"With Jolson, a Villager during the season, will be Oscar Levant and Lou Bring's music. Guest star for the occasion will be actor David Niven.

"The first broadcast featured Bob Hope (Hope's shtick was "wrapped" entirely around his "inauguration" as Mayor of Palm Springs) and last Sunday, Jack Benny and his troupe were on the stage of the auditorium. Benny had the capacity house in an uproar from the time he walked on the stage, through the preliminaries and then through the broadcast itself. Almost 500 people packed into the auditorium roared with laughter throughout and were glad of the chance to see the people they had heard so often over the air."

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RCA Portable Amplifier OP-6 sits in the broadcast booth at American Legion Owen Coffman Post 519, Palm Springs. Nov. 18, 2015. (Photo: Denise Goolsby/The Desert Sun)

In the Feb. 27, 1948, edition of The Desert Sun, the follow-up story reported, "Another packed house heard a national broadcast go out from Palm Springs last night when Al Jolson put on the Kraft Music Hall from the American Legion.

"Featured were several of the perpetually popular songs which Jolson helped make famous, piano number by Oscar Levant and the appearance of David Niven as guest star."

Lou Brings' augmented orchestra was heard in several numbers with Ken Carpenter announcing.

Jolson broadcasted from Palm Springs again the following Thursday with Cary Grant as guest star and the same supporting cast.

In another newspaper account, The Associated Press reported a big faux pas on Jolson's part.

"If you don't laugh, get the hell out of here," were the first words Al Jolson's audience heard Thursday night.

"Jolson's quip, not intended for broadcast, was directed at the studio audience at the end of a preliminary warm-up, but the program already was on the air.

A National Broadcasting Company spokesman called it 'a regrettable incident.'"

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Original 'On Air' sign outside the broadcast booth door at American Legion Owen Coffman Post 519, Palm Springs. Nov. 18, 2015. (Photo: Denise Goolsby/The Desert Sun)

The Desert Sun reported on another Benny performance in its April 6, 1948, edition.

"When Jack Benny and Mary Livingston returned to Palm Springs this week, their writers came with them. For the noted star of stage, screen and radio is going on the air again from the American Legion auditorium next Saturday."

"The Desert Sun was asked by the Benny organization to handle a portion of the ticket distribution for the broadcast. A limited number of tickets was given each newspaper and will be distributed tomorrow on the basis of first come, first served.

"Tickets may be had as long as they last – which won't be long – at the business office of The Desert Sun. They will be limited to two per person with no favoritism shown – first come, first served until they are gone."



From left, Charlie Farrell, Jack Benny, unknown and singer Dennis Day at the American Legion Owen Coffman Post 519 in Palm Springs. (Photo: Photo courtesy of American Legion Owen Coffman Post 519, Palm Springs.)

In February 1953, Bing Crosby was featured in a broadcast of the Jack Benny Program, originating from the American Legion hall. Crosby had just finished his autobiography, "Call me Lucky," and installments were appearing at the time in the Saturday Evening Post.

With the strains of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" fading out in the background, the announcer introduced Benny.

"And now ladies and gentleman, I bring you a man, who after one week in Palm Springs has become a picture of health. He was on the golf course Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday - looking for the ball he lost on Monday - and here he is, Jack Benny!

"Audience laughter!

"Enter Bob Crosby, Bing Crosby's brother.

"Jack: Well Bob, are you still enjoying yourself here in Palm Springs?

"Bob: Oh, pretty good.

"Jack: What do you mean, pretty good? You're living in one of the swankiest places in town, the El Mirador.

"Mary: Well, that's right Bob, and you know during the war, the El Mirador was a hospital, but it isn't anymore.

"Bob: Well I wish someone would tell the waiters.

"Jack: Why?

"Bob: Well last night, I ordered Borscht.

"Jack: Borscht? Well didn't it taste good?

"Bob: Who knows, they laid me on the table and shot it in my arm.

"Audience laughter!

Bob: Then for dessert, they gave me an anesthetic.

"Mary: Well, Bob, that had nothing to do with the dinner, everyone who lives at the El Mirador gets an anesthetic. "Bob: Yeah, but why?"

"Mary: That way, when they give you the bill, you won't come to until you go through Banning.

"Audience laughter!"

Nearly 70 years after the first broadcast from the American Legion hall, a group of legion members have restored the booth to its almost original luster. The men – members of the legion's amateur radio club – have been working on the project for about the past seven months.

"This is where they recorded – and it was live broadcast, hard-lined into Los Angeles – where it went on the air," Tom McLean told me during a recent tour of the post.

"We kept the original colors, which was battleship gray, World War II (era) – and the white ceilings," he said. "We kept everything original – we wanted to preserve everything. Then we got an FCC license for an amateur radio club here."

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From left, legion members James Smith, Glenn Morrison and Tom McLean in the broadcast booth at American Legion Owen Coffman Post 519, Palm Springs. Nov. 18, 2015. (Photo: Denise Goolsby/The Desert Sun)

Glenn Morrison, who has been a Ham radio operator for nearly 50 years, did some checking on the Internet and found that K6TAL, a "vanity call" – think vanity license plate – was available.

K is for U.S., 6 is for California and TAL stands for The America Legion.

The broadcast booth hadn't been used in decades – it had mostly been used for storage.

"We gutted everything. ... Our intention is to preserve the integrity of everything else," Morrison said. "These were the pictures that were here," he said, pointing to photos of Benny, Charlie Farrell, singer Dennis Day and others.

Below the photos sat some of the original equipment used to broadcast the shows, including mixers, amplifiers and a very cool original RCA Microphone – Model 77B – dating from 1938.



A 1938 RCA Microphone - 77B - stands in the broadcast booth at American Legion Owen Coffman Post 519, Palm Springs. Nov. 18, 2015. (Photo: Denise Goolsby/The Desert Sun)

"It was used by everyone," McLean said, looking at the shiny, silver, old-time mic. "Glenn took this home, cleaned it – he had to scrape off about a quarter inch of nicotine off because back then, everybody smoked."

With the official American Legion Post 519 Amateur Radio Club up and running, members are looking to buy some additional equipment.

"The next step is to put some antennas on the roof," Morrison said. "The ultimate goal of the club is to ... have a club where people come operate. A lot of people live in HOAs and they can't put up antennas. Legion members, who are licensed amateurs, can come in to here and be able to operate and get on the air."

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