




City of Palm Springs

Department of Planning Services

Memorandum

Date: May 8, 2012

To: HSPB Board Members

From: Craig A. Ewing, AICP, Director of Planning Services 

Subject: Initiation of Procedure for Designation of Historic Sites:

- Charles Farrell House, 630 E. Tachevah
- C. Farrell Guest House, 1120 Via Miraleste
- Charles Farrell House at the Racquet Club

Over the past two months, the Board has discussed the possible designation of one or more of the residences of Charles Farrell (1901-1990). At its last meeting, the Board continued its review of the various properties reported to have been occupied by the Virginia and Charles Farrell, including their home within the Racquet Club.

The Farrell House at the Racquet Club

At the April meeting, the HSPB requested that staff research certain information on the Charles Farrell house within the Racquet Club development. The following information is provided in response to the Board's questions:

1. Is the building still standing?
 - A. Yes, according to Mike Mueller, a developer who secured entitlement for the property's redevelopment in 2007. (He is no longer involved with the property, but staff spoke with him by telephone about the site's conditions.)
2. What condition is it in?
 - A. Staff has not been on site or inside the building. However, according to the former developer, the building was previously gutted to create a clubhouse for the pool, with the kitchen and bedrooms removed. Mr. Mueller indicated that only a large interior space and separate locker rooms for men and women remain inside.

3. How is it conditioned in the current entitlement?
A. The staff report prepared for the Planned Development (PD 313) includes the following statement about the Farrell House:

The project also proposes the restoration of...the Charlie Farrell House, which would become a spa and gym facility for the use of Racquet Club homeowners.

The approved Planned Development includes a site plan and elevations for the Farrell House's continued use as part of the common facilities for the project. No specific conditions of approval were adopted regarding the Farrell House in the Planned Development (PD 313).

Staff notes the following additional information from the staff report:

The Racquet Club had its beginnings in 1932... In the 1940s... other expansions including the Farrell House were added to the site.

(Around 1960,) the existing Farrell House was converted to a game room and was used for private dinner parties, luncheon and executive conferences.

Additional changes, conversions and remodeling were made to the Racquet Club between 1970 and 1990s. An enhanced brick entrance, a canopy, new landscaping and lighting was added to the Farrell House.

In an effort to revitalize activities in the Racquet Club, the Farrell House was converted to a banquet facility in the 1980s

There are no specific conditions in the Planned Development (PD 313) for the Farrell House structure. Staff is attempting to gain entry onto the property to review actual conditions.

177 Santa Catalina Road

As noted in the attached information by Patrick McGrew, there is no information available to suggest that Charles Farrell ever occupied the property at 177 Santa Catalina Road. Staff has reviewed the building permits for that address, but there are none older than 2011 permits for building remodel, including legalization of non-permitted additions from prior years.

Unless new information is found, staff does not recommend further action to research the Santa Catalina property for designation.

630 E. Tachevah Road and 1120 Via Miraleste

The attached information from Mr. McGrew provides a valuable summary of the life of Virginia and Charles Farrell during their time in Palm Springs. The two properties at the northeast corner of E. Tachevah Road and Via Miraleste are now separate lots and must be treated as individual designation requests. The Board may consider one or both of these for further investigation.

The Board may, by adopting a motion, initiate the process of designation for any or all of the above properties.

Attachments:

1. E-mail and attachment from Patrick McGrew, April 20, 2012
2. Memo re: 177 Santa Catalina from Senior Permit Center Technician, May 11, 2005

Craig Ewing

From: Patrick McGrew [patrickmcgrew2@gmail.com]
Sent: Friday, April 20, 2012 4:09 PM
To: Craig Ewing; Gary Johns
Subject: Henry / Farrell Residence
Attachments: CHARLES FARRELL HOME(S) IN PALM SPRINGS.docx

FYI,

see attached

-Patrick

CHARLES FARRELL HOME(S) IN PALM SPRINGS

Born in Walpole, Massachusetts, Charles Farrell (1901-1990) began his career in Hollywood as a bit player for Paramount Pictures. Farrell did extra work for films ranging from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* with Lon Chaney, Sr., Cecil B. De Mille's *The Ten Commandments*, and *The Cheat* with Pola Negri. Farrell continued to work throughout the next few years in relatively minor roles without much success until he was signed by Fox Studios and was paired with fellow newcomer Janet Gaynor in the romantic drama *Seventh Heaven*. The first Oscar for Best Actress in 1928 went to Gaynor. The film was a public and critical success and Farrell and Gaynor would go on to star opposite one another in more than a dozen films throughout the late 1920s and into the talkie era of the early 1930s. Farrell married former actress Virginia Valli (1898-1968) on February 14, 1931, and the couple was married until her death.

After the opening of the El Mirador Hotel in 1927, Farrell took up residency there for several months and the gravitational pull of his tennis-playing celebrity friends was strong. Frequent visitors included Ralph Bellamy and many others whose common denominator was they all played good tennis and they frequently monopolized the El Mirador court. It became obvious that additional facilities for the game must be acquired, if not at the hotel then elsewhere. Farrell and Bellamy acquired 52 acres from Alvah Hicks located on North Indian Avenue about a mile north of El Mirador where they formed a small club for tennis buffs and named it "The Racquet Club." It consisted of only two courts surrounded by a board fence with a small building that contained lavatory facilities and dressing rooms. Much of the surrounding land was subdivided into small lots on which members could build private cottages. In time it attracted members from all over the globe and became known the world over.

Farrell's career at Fox ended abruptly in 1932 when he refused a single role in the film *The Face in the Sky*. He terminated his contract with Fox, and having problems in his recent marriage, moved to London where he continued to make films from 1935 to 1937. His career in the UK failed to materialize, and after making a few "B" pictures he returned to the US. Given the problems with his faltering career, in 1937 he chose a different path and moved to Palm Springs becoming a full time resident.

Farrell's first listed address in Palm Springs according to the 1937 City Directory was at 362 West Chino Drive.¹ But, with the initial success of the Racquet Club, Farrell was able to embark upon a building program that by 1938 included the extant Club House with its famous "Bamboo Lounge" and a home that the Farrells owned and occupied as the Club managers. The Club address was 2143 (later renumbered to) 2743 North Indian. The name of the architect of the Racquet Club buildings has been lost to time, although, given Farrell's LA connections, it was most likely not designed locally. The Racquet Club building itself reflected a rustic Anglo-Colonial style with white-washed board-and-batten siding, and shingled hipped roofs, topped with cupolas and weathervanes. The Farrell residence was similar, although it featured painted cement plaster walls and an interior courtyard. Virginia Valli Farrell, long reconciled with Charlie, nurtured the Club while Charlie pursued a modest film career in LA and by the 1950s the racquet Club had become the "playground of the stars." The club's success cemented Farrell's status as "Mr. Palm Springs," and in 1948 he ran for public office and was elected Mayor of Palm Springs, a position he held for six years from 1948 to 1953, while still acting and managing the Racquet Club. The Farrells lived in the Racquet Club residence until 1951, when it appears they moved briefly into the Grace Miller Lewis residence at 2311 North Indian for a year. In 1952 the Farrells purchased and moved into the Charles Ellwood Henry home at Tachevah at Via Miraleste.

¹ The Riverside County Assessor's office indicates that the current residence at that address was built in 2000, so this is not the building in which the Farrells lived.

The Henry Residence and guest house were built in 1934 in the El Mirador Estates tract for Alexander Henry (1892-1979), a wealthy Beverly Hills investment broker. His parents Thomas B. and Jesse L. Henry immigrated to Los Angeles from Canada in 1886. The property contained a main house at 630 East Tachevah and a guest house at 1120 Via Miraleste. Later owners included Rexford P. and Lois Shea in the Main House and John P. and Edna Lawler in the Guest House in the 1940s. After their purchase of the home in 1952, the Farrells moved into the main house on Tachevah. The Farrells commissioned an addition by Clark & Frey; and a wrought iron arch above the entry bears Farrell's initials. Soon thereafter, the guest house was occupied by photographer Gail B. Thompson and his family. The relationship between the families was very cordial, and Thompson assumed the role of official photographer, endlessly documenting Farrell's numerous public appearances.

In 1952, about the same time as the Farrells moved into the Henry Residence, Farrell also moved into television. He accepted the role of the male lead on a television show called *My Little Margie*. A summer replacement for *I Love Lucy*, it became a runaway hit. During the course of his television career Farrell commuted from Palm Springs to LA via private car and driver. When *Margie* ended in 1956, Charlie was offered his own show, *The Charles Farrell Show*, a fictionalized account of life at the Racquet Club that ran for a year.

Charlie sold the Racquet Club in 1959 for a substantial profit; but it was a business decision that triggered a profound depression that lasted the rest of Charlie's life. Over the years he became more and more reclusive, Charlie died believing he was alone and forgotten. He was certain that his work lost its relevance over time. Today, Farrell's Racquet Club along with its famous Bamboo Lounge where the Bloody Mary was conceived along with four inscribed bar stools reserved for Clark Gable, William Powell, Spencer Tracy and of course Charles Farrell has survived, but is currently vacant. Farrell has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for his contributions to television and is also honored with a star on the Palm Springs Walk of Fame on the west side of Palm Canyon Drive between Tahquitz and Arenas. Palm Springs has a history of naming city streets after popular actors. The tradition started with Charles Farrell. Farrell Drive which runs through a residential area of the city originated as the roadbed of a narrow gauge railway which was original built to serve the early agricultural development called Palm Valley.

Although one of the HSPB Work programs lists the residence at 177 Santa Catalina Road, there is no other record to indicate that the Farrells ever lived at this address, as well as substantial evidence to the contrary. That house was built in 1936 for Mrs. Theodore Arthur (Florence V.) Willard of Beverly Hills who continued to reside there until at least 1953. Arthur Theodore Willard (1862-1943) was an engraver for the *Northwestern Miller* in 1882. However, at about the same time he started experimenting with battery cells. In 1886 he went to Cleveland, Ohio, where he lived with his uncle Archibald M. Willard (an artist who painted the famous "Spirit of '76" portrait) and in the 1890s began the Willard Electric Battery Company, which later became the Willard Storage Battery Company. Shortly after he left Minneapolis, Willard changed his name to T. A. Willard. Willard was also interested in the pre-Colombian art of Central America and wrote and researched extensively on the Mayan civilization. Possibly of minor historic significance for its distant association with Willard, the home has been extensively altered and is no longer capable of reflecting the period of occupancy by the Willards.

Memo

Date: 05/11/05

To: File

From: Angela LaFrance, Senior Permit Center Technician

RE: 177 Santa Catalina

To Whom It May Concern:

I have tried to research the permit records for the above address upon request from a customer trying to find the legal permitted square footage. We do not have the original permit since the house appears to have built in the 1930's. The Assessors record indicates the original house built in 1936 was 2,234 square feet. I do not find any permits for additions done to this house since then. I do find a job card for a "storage room" but the permit is not present and there is no indication of any square footage for this structure.

It appears from the assessor's records that the storage room has been turned into living area and two other additions have been done without permits. I suggest that a Code Compliance inspection be done to have a full report of what needs to be brought into compliance. An estimate of permit fees for adding approximately 1,845 square feet would be \$3,600.00. School tax would also have to be paid. School tax is approximately \$2.24 per square foot at this time. The fee for a code compliance inspection is \$176.00.