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ROYAL PALMS RESORT AND SPA: A DISTINGUISHED HISTORY

PHOENIX – With its perennial sunshine, Phoenix has, for generations, been a favorite winter escape for guests fleeing the less hospitable climes of the northern United States, Canada and Europe. Inns here began welcoming “snowbirds” just after the turn of the century, encouraged by the promotional efforts of railroad and real estate speculators.

But when the property first opened its doors to guests in 1948 as The Royal Palms Inn, it was already a local landmark, having previously served as the private residence of one of the Phoenix area’s most prominent citizens.

The original mansion was built in 1929 as the winter home of Delos Willard Cooke, a New York industrialist and financier, and his wife, Florence. The grandson of the controller of the state of New York, Cooke had long ties to the railroad, and had been vice president of the Erie Railroad in New York. During World War I, Cooke took on several key civilian responsibilities, including overseeing transportation for the Red Cross, freight movement in the U.S. and fuel administration in New York City. After the war, the governments of France, Italy and Great Britain officially recognized his contributions.

Cooke subsequently worked in the U.S. and Europe for the Cunard Steamship line, and sat on the boards of companies such as Chrysler Motors, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and the Foreman State Bank of Chicago. In the mid 1920’s, when Florence’s health required warmer climates, Cooke retired his positions and set his sights on Phoenix.

Cooke and Florence chose a 65-acre parcel near the base of the southern slope of Camelback Mountain. Against this dramatic backdrop, they built *El Vernadero*, their winter haven. The respected Phoenix architectural firm of Lescher & Mahoney designed the home, a 3,500-square-foot Spanish Revival villa. With its white plaster over brick, Granada-tiled roofs, elaborately grilled windows and doorways, and elegant archways, the mansion made a lasting impression on all who were fortunate enough to receive invitations to visit.

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Lofty palm trees marked the gracious driveway, leading visitors to the south entrance. A pair of enormous wooden doors opened into the *zaguan*, a covered breezeway, which then led to the central courtyard. An impressive fireplace and high-beamed ceilings adorned the living room. A west wing held bedrooms.

The Cookes were garden lovers and used much of their \$10,000 annual household budget to purchase and plant rare and unusual flora. The property nurtured some 900 palms, many imported from Egypt; a lush citrus grove; numerous varieties of shrubs and flowers; and a rare specimen cactus garden.

It is rumored that the Cookes were devout Catholics, and there remain several evidences of their faith on the property: a holy water stoup and plaster sculpture of Christ are located just off the Courtyard, and a crest above the front door reads, "En Dieu Est Ma Fiancé," which translates, "To God I am betrothed." In addition, the mansion features a room which is rumored to have hosted a live-in priest.

Though Delos Cooke died in 1931, Florence Cooke continued wintering in her Phoenix hideaway until 1937, when she sold the property to W.E. Travis, then president of Greyhound Bus Lines. It was during his tenure that the second story was added to the west wing of the mansion. Following the death of his wife, Travis sold the home to John Ross, president of the Aviola Radio Company, who shortly thereafter sold it to former band leader, Al Stovall.

A visionary who predicted a boom in tourism to the Southwest following World War II, Stovall and his partners guided the estate's transition from private residence to inn. They built 15 casitas to the west of the original Cooke home, and converted the main house into several more guest rooms, a reception area and dining room. In the winter of 1948, the first room reservations were recorded for the newly named Royal Palms Inn.

In the early 1950's, an additional 45 free-standing casitas were added to the property, which by then was offering tennis, riding, and swimming in the hotel's unique heart-shaped pool to its upscale clientele. Celebrity guests, such as Helena Rubenstein and Groucho Marx, were among those who checked in for the season.

When Chicago investor Charles Alberding added the Royal Palms Inn to his portfolio of hotels in 1956, he completed the transition from retreat to resort, making the property a formidable competitor to the new upstarts on the Phoenix lodging scene. Under Alberding's watchful eye, the inn saw additions and improvements such as new meeting rooms, the expansion of the dining room, a new lobby and reception area, a modern, rectangular swimming pool and a new two-story building, complete with underground parking and hotel suites. Alberding also transformed a citrus grove to the west of the hotel into a nine-hole golf course.

According to local folklore, while the local country clubs discriminated with their membership in the mid 1950's, the Royal Palms Inn welcomed all guests equally, thus becoming wildly popular with local Jewish residents because of its unrestricted access to the golf course, swimming pool and tennis courts.

In the early 1970's, Alberding promoted his long-time Chicago secretary, Pat Ryan, to general manager of the hotel. She was one of the first female general managers of a resort in the U.S. It was Ryan who decided to keep the hotel open year-round beginning in the late 1970's. She was also responsible for the Royal Palm's reputation as *the* place for dining and dancing in the mid-1980's, booking small orchestras and accomplished vocalists into the property's Orange Tree dining room.

Alberding died in 1989, and six years later his family sold the Royal Palms Inn to local businessman Fred Unger. A perfect match for the hotel, Unger had recently restored another Arizona heritage property, The Hermosa Inn, and was excited to bring this momentum to another lovely, historic haven. Unger commissioned Don Ziebel, president of Phoenix-based Oz Architects, and Hardison-Downey Construction to recreate and expand upon the original mansion, maintaining the integrity of the structures and multimillion dollar landscaping. The nine-hole golf course was sold separately, to a residential developer.

While much of the historical artifacts, structures and antiques were preserved, the newly restored hotel acquired a new level of luxury and hospitality. As a result, the property also acquired a new name, Royal Palms Hotel and Casitas. Unger also created a parent company, Spring Creek Hospitality, to own and operate both Royal Palms and its sister property, The Hermosa Inn.

Overall interior design for Royal Palms was created by renowned San Francisco designer Joszi Meskan. However, as a unique twist to the restoration, Royal Palms was selected as the 1996 ASID Designer's Showhouse, a benefit for the Phoenix Symphony Guild. Engaging the significant talents of more than 20 design teams from the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), Royal Palms now boasts many distinctively designed guestrooms and public areas.

Under Fred Unger's ownership, Royal Palms expanded its meeting space, added four new executive suites, a small spa and fitness room, a reflection pool, a cocktail lounge, a library, a cigar room, an outdoor cafe, six outdoor fireplaces and 14 water fountains. Hammocks were introduced to the aromatic orange grove, private outdoor patios were added to all suites. Planning, design, construction and refurbishment of Royal Palms was completed in only one year, and the hotel was opened in spring of 1997, with Greg Miller as its general manager.

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The resort's restaurant was renamed T. Cook's, in honor of a persistent local myth that for generations has, erroneously, tied Delos Cooke to the British Thomas Cook travel agency family. The restaurant operated briefly before closing for the renovation, and enjoyed overnight success with its menu of rustic Mediterranean fare.

Newly restored, Royal Palms has become one of the most respected and gracious hideaways in the Valley of the Sun, offering, once again, its fortunate guests the privacy and pampering that Cooke's closest friends experienced.

A member of Historic Hotels of America, Royal Palms Resort and Spa is a AAA Four Diamond resort located at the foot of majestic Camelback Mountain. Combining the graciousness and sophistication of a Mediterranean villa with the intimacy and privacy of a secluded retreat, Royal Palms offers: 117 custom-appointed guest rooms and intimate clusters of casitas and villas; regal Spanish Colonial architecture; over 20,000 square feet of estate-like meeting space; Tuscan-style gardens; exquisite tapestries, antiques and stone fireplaces throughout. Designed around the original historic private mansion, Royal Palms is home to the award-winning T. Cook's restaurant, Alvadora Spa, a swimming pool with private cabanas, and croquet lawn. Just minutes from Scottsdale's shopping, galleries, golf, Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport and the Camelback financial corridor, Royal Palms is an ideal retreat for business, pleasure and special occasions, offering luxury, privacy and convenience.

Royal Palms Resort and Spa is one of 32 independent, upscale and luxury hotels, resorts and golf clubs in the United States managed by Destination Hotels & Resorts, the fourth largest independent hospitality management company in the country. The company, based in Englewood, Colo., features a portfolio of more than 8,000 guest rooms, 13 golf courses and nine full-service spas. DH&R properties are located in key metropolitan and resort markets including New York, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Denver, Dallas, Boston, San Diego, Aspen, Phoenix, Palm Springs, Jackson Hole, Maui and Lake Tahoe.

Destination Hotels & Resorts also provides consumers with access to a unique collection of lodging properties in the United Kingdom through a sales and marketing alliance with the De Vere Hotel Group PLC. This partnership extends the reach of DH&R to the U.K. with a partner who offers a similar portfolio of distinctive hotels and resorts. For more information on the properties in the Destination Hotels & Resorts collection or the De Vere alliance, please visit www.destinationhotels.com.

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