

1957 - The California Desert Resorts are Booming

The California & Arizona desert resort towns were in full swing in the late 1950s. Palm Springs being the closest to Los Angeles was the most popular. Lake Havasu with its seemingly endless supply of Colorado River water was second, Salton City which sat on the largest lake in California was in third place, and the quaint town of Oasis Palms came in a distant fourth.

Palm Springs, CA est. 1884 – The City of Palms Springs was founded in 1938 but by that time the town was already firmly established as a desert playground. In 1884, the first major settlement began when Judge John Guthrie McCallum relocated from San Francisco with his family hoping the dry climate would cure his son's tuberculosis. McCallum purchased land from the Southern Pacific Railroad and built an aqueduct from Tahquitz Canyon to bring water to his land holdings in Palm Springs. McCallum started selling parcels of land and the area

became a popular desert resort city.

Starting in the 1930s, Palm Springs became a celebrity playground for Hollywood's A-list. At the time, most Hollywood celebrities were under contract in the "studio system" which required that actors remain within 2 hours away in case the studio required their services. That made Palm Springs the perfect escape from the glare of Hollywood and provided Hollywood actors and actresses a welcoming place to enjoy the sun and let their hair down.



In the 1950's and 1960s, the population of the town exploded when developers tapped the hidden treasure beneath the ground. Beneath the Coachella Valley lies a 39 Million acre 1000-foot deep aquifer that created the "springs" in

Palm Springs. Tapping this massive body of water allowed the population of Palm Springs and the surrounding area to boom. Mid-century modern pool and golf communities were built, palm trees were planted, and lawns and fairways emerged from the desert where there was once only sand and rock.

Oasis Palms, CA est. 1885 – Originally settled in 1842 Oasis Palms was originally a gold mining town that pivoted to a tourist destination at the turn of the 20th century. Blessed with natural springs fed by the Fenner aquifer 300 feet below the surface with over 34 million acre-feet of water, Oasis Palms was able to thrive where other desert mining and railroad towns had gone bust. Given its remote location nestled in the Ship Mountains, Oasis Palms was never able to exploit the residential construction boom of the other towns in the 1950s Oasis Palms tapped into the post-war Route 66 tourism and was able to establish a thriving community.

Bombay Beach, CA (Salton Sea) est. 1929 – Towns near the Salton Sea started popping up in the 1930s. R.E. Gilliagan first developed Bombay Beach – Located on the east shore of the Salton

Sea, in October 1929 and others quickly followed. The Salton Sea is a man-made lake originally created in 1905 when water from the Colorado River spilled out of a poorly constructed California Development Company irrigation system and refilled an ancient dry-lake bed 225 feet below sea level in the desert. The lake then expanded in size for several years into a 400-square-mile body of water until workers were able to put a stop to the flow of water from the Colorado River. The Salton Sea became California's largest inland body of water and quickly became a recreational paradise.

The Salton Sea became a powerboating mecca. More than 2,000 spectators witnessed five world speedboat records set in 1929. High salinity in the sea made boats more buoyant and, at more than 200 feet below sea level, barometric pressure improved performance. A 1951 regatta hoisted on the Salton Sea boasted 21 world records.



The North Shore Beach & Yacht Club and its mid-century modern Albert Frey-designed building opened on the shores of the Salton Sea in 1960.

Communities around the Salton Sea were growing rapidly during the 1950s and 1960s. The area enjoyed immense popularity, as the Salton Sea became a sport fishing and speedboat playground.

In the 1950s, the man-made lake was stocked with a variety of fish, including sargo, corvina, and croaker, among other species. Around the same time, water skiing became a central attraction. By the end of the decade, a property developer by the name of Penn Phillips had taken a deep interest in developing the area around the Salton Sea. He bought and sold thousands of acres of land along the lake's western shores with the goal of growing the future Salton City into a thriving community and in 1960 the North Shore Beach & Yacht Club opened for business.

Lake Havasu, AZ est. 1963 – When the construction of the Parker Dam was completed in 1938 and was filled to its capacity of 211 billion gallons of water by 1942, the reservoir

created nearly 450 miles of pristine desert shoreline. In the late 1950s Robert Paxton McCulloch was in search of a fresh-water testing site for his [Flying Scott](#) outboard race motors and he learned about a man-made lake on the Colorado River and a small resort called the Fly-In Fishing Resort that was just an hour past the resort town of Oasis Palms. The Fly-In Fishing Resort had been built at Site Six a decommissioned WWII landing strip on the banks of Lake Havasu.

Robert Paxton McCulloch was the founder of McCulloch Motors and although he is best known for his chainsaws, it was his passion for boat racing that led him to the desert in the late 1950s. In his college years, while studying engineering at Stanford, McCulloch won 2 national championship trophies for outboard hydroplane racing. After college, he founded McCulloch Motors manufacturing small gasoline engines and Paxton airplane superchargers in Los Angeles. Then in 1956, he purchased the outboard motor manufacturer Atwater Scott eventually becoming the third-largest manufacturer of outboard marine engines.

McCulloch's search for an outboard motor

testing location led him by airplane out Route 66 over Oasis Palms to the Arizona side of the Colorado River region of the California desert. This portion of the Colorado River water was still, clear, and was the perfect location for McCulloch to race and test his outboards. In 1958 McCulloch purchased the Fly-In Fishing Resort at [Site Six](#) from the Spratt family and converted Site Six to a speed boat and outboard testing facility for his Flying Scott line of outboard motors.



Seeing the growth and popularity of the other desert resorts McCulloch quickly spotted a business opportunity and in 1963 McCulloch purchased 3,500 additional acres of the barren desert from the Federal Government. McCulloch and developer C.V. Wood who had previously

designed the Disneyland amusement park in Anaheim, California joined forces to build a new desert resort town. In 1964 McCulloch established an air charter to deliver prospective buyers directly to his doorstep. McCulloch and Wood's efforts were successful and by 1978 all the parcels had been sold, and the desert resort [City of Lake Havasu](#) was incorporated.