



# 10 Years of Gaming, Centuries of History

by Sunday **Silverman**

In April of this year, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians will celebrate ten years of gaming in downtown Palm Springs, California. A tribal venture that began as a small poker room with a handful of blackjack tables has blossomed into two casinos, the Spa Resort Casino in Palm Springs and the Agua Caliente Casino in Rancho Mirage, the only tribe in the State of California with two casinos.

Gaming has been very profitable for tribal members, who are collectively the members of the Agua Caliente Development Authority, owners of the Spa Hotel, the Spa Resort Casino, the Agua Caliente Casino and the former Canyon Country Club, Canyon Hotel & Conference Center and the 18 hole South Canyon Golf Course which has been refurbished and recently

reopened to the public. Situated on approximately 530 acres, there are plans to renovate the resort and complete approximately 500 residential and condominium units.

But tribal history goes back several centuries. The name Cahuilla (pronounced co-we-ha) is derived from the concept of 'master' or 'powerful ones', a people whose physical power has a counterpart of deep inner strength. Cahuillas believe nature in all of its forms is connected into a single harmonious whole, where man is not master of the universe, but part of its cooperative design. They are protective of the earth being careful to not allow destruction of plants, animals and resources.

The Agua Caliente discovered the hidden medicinal wonders of the area which is now known as Palm Springs.

Centuries before any European settlers entered California, the Cahuillas inhabited the west end of the Coachella Valley from Mount San Gorgonio to Borrego Springs and from the San Jacinto plains to the Orocopia Mountains. They treasured the 'agua caliente', the healing hot water springs for which they are named and learned to use the vegetation for food, medicine and building materials. The Cahuilla name for the area was 'Se-Khi' (boiling water) which was changed to Agua Caliente by the Spanish. The official U.S. government name later became Palm Springs.

Communities were developed in Palm, Murray, Andreas, Tahquitz and Chino Canyons where the tribe found food and materials for producing clothing, housing, weapons and weaving intricate baskets. The canyons

were a source of shade, cool breezes and a ready supply of fresh water from streams that ran year round. A network of trails created access between the mountains and the desert and also connected them with other cultures from the Pacific Ocean to Arizona and from Mexico to the Central Valley of California. Palm Canyon is fifteen miles long and contains the world's largest fan palm oasis. Palm, Andreas and Murray Canyons are listed in the National Register of Historic Places for their historical and biotic values and are open to the public from September through May for hiking and picnicing. Tahquitz Canyon can be seen by obtaining a special permit. Tahquitz Falls pours across sheer granite in a breathtaking 60 foot drop. You may remember seeing these falls in the movie 'Lost Horizon'. Tahquitz and Andreas Canyons contain the oldest Cahuilla villages in the area.

The Cahuillas belong to the Shoshonean division of the Uto-Aztec linguistic family. Other tribes in this group are the Aztecs, Hopi, Papago, Pima, Ute, Serrano, Cupeno and Gabrieleno. Recent research has shown that Indians occupied the area between 350 and 500 years ago. The Tahquitz alluvial fan and the area surrounding the nearby hot springs was home to the Kawasic Band. The Painakic Band lived in Andreas and Murray Canyons, the Wanikik Clan lived in Snowcreek and Whitewater Canyons. Palm Canyon was occupied by another clan, but for unknown reasons, its identity has been lost. All of these Indians were living in the area during the time that the Agua Caliente Reservation was first established on May 15, 1876 by executive order of President U.S. Grant. At the same time the government deeded 10 miles of odd sections of land to Southern California Railroad to induce them to build a track through the area. 6700 acres lie within the city limits of Palm



Spa Casino interior

Springs with the remaining sections fanning out across the desert and mountains in a checkerboard pattern. Other sections were added to the reservation on September 29, 1877 and February 2, 1907. On January 12, 1891, Congress passed the Mission Indian Relief Act which authorized allotments to individual tribe members from the acreage that comprised the reservation in Palm Springs. Almost 60 years passed before Public Law 339 equalized the property values of the allottees and set up long term leasing for up to 99 years for many tribes, finalizing the allotments and designating certain lands for tribal use and cemeteries.

The tribes of the area were very isolated and were fortunate to be spared from the barbarous lifestyle of the early Spanish and Mexican periods. The first recorded contact with 'civilization' is in the baptismal records of San Gabriel noting that Indians in the area were baptized as early as 1809. The diary of Brevet Captain Jose Romero notes the day before his expeditions arrival in the area on December 28, 1823 that there would be no water or pasture for the horses until Agua Caliente was

reached. This statement implies that although he was on an exploration to find overland routes from Sonora to California for the Mexican government, he was aware of the existence of the hot springs beforehand and it was not to be a new discovery. The diarist, Lt. Jose Estudillo wrote that upon the return of the expedition in 1824 to a spot known as Los Vernitos (Little Springs) that the soldiers were impressed at the sight of corn, pumpkins, melons and other summer crops being grown in mid winter.

Cahuilla villages were occupied year round, with one or more people venturing out when it became necessary to hunt, gather plants for various reasons or to visit or trade with other tribes. At harvest time, 50% to 65% of the tribe left the villages to assist in gathering crops and would move to a collecting area for up to several weeks. Crops in the area were irrigated by water from nearby streams by rock lined ditches from Tahquitz, Andreas and Chino Creeks and are still visible in undeveloped areas. Old letters on file with the Bureau of Indian Affairs written in the mid-1880's contain remembrances of elderly Indians whose parents worked on

these ditches when they were very young.

Women were responsible for gathering plants that were used for food such as acorns, mesquite beans, seeds, wild fruit, agave and yucca. Mesquite beans, pinion nuts, acorns and the dates of the native palms were ground into meal and prepared as a cake or mush which was a large part of their diet. After gathering these commodities were stored in baskets and earthen pots for later use. The women were also the creators of the intricate baskets and pottery. Many grinding stones can still be found in areas where food was prepared.

Men hunted wild game needed for food and clothing and used bows and arrows, nets and throwing sticks to capture wild game such as deer, quail, other small animals and reptiles. The agave cactus was a source of food, but the fiber was also used in making slings, nets and sandals. It was also their needle and thread.

Cahuilla villages contained housing that was big enough for extended families. The early ones were circular, brush shelters built over a scooped out hollow and built up with boulders. After being exposed to Mexican influence, the houses were more rectangular and had walls plastered with mud or adobe and thatched roofs. Villages usually had 100 to 200 inhabitants each and were connected politically and territorially in units with other villages in groups called a triplet or sib. Each sib was divided into lineages which consisted of both nuclear and extended families. Cahuilla society was divided into two groups or moieties known as Wildcat and Coyote.

The Tribe's bylaws and constitution were adopted in 1952 by a majority vote of the Indian people and officially approved by the

Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs and later amended several times. The document established the governing body of the Tribe. It also established the jurisdictional boundaries of the reservation as set aside by President U.S. Hayes in 1877 and regulates membership, the powers of the tribal council, inherent powers, meetings, adoptions, amendments and the repeal process of the document.

In 1977 the Tribe voted to change the name to read 'Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians' because the Tribe did not have any contact with the missionaries that brought so many Indians to California from Mexico and were mainly confined to the coast. 'Cahuilla' is a linguistic group. The Tribe has a 'government to government' relationship with the United States government. As a federally recognized 'Tribe' and sovereign tribal entity, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians has governmental authority over its reservation land and people. The constitution and by-laws outline a two-tiered democratic tribal government structure, the tribal membership and elected tribal council. The tribal council is comprised of five elected positions and four proxy members. The elected members are chosen by secret absentee ballot and the four proxy members are then appointed by the elected council members.

Economic development began in earnest in 1992 with the purchase of the Spa Hotel, which replaced the Old Bath House' and 'Hot Mineral Springs'. The Tribe employs a Director of Planning & Development and a Planning Department. The Tribe has also formed an Indian Planning Commission, which is made up of a cross-section of tribal members and community members who meet on a regular basis to lend their expertise. The Tribe is committed to only the



best use of Indian Trust Land which they believe will only occur through sound planning and fair and equal zoning.

In 1989, the Tribe formed the Agua Caliente Development Authority (ACDA), once again

involving a cross-section of Tribal Members and community members who can lend their expertise to this organization. The ACDA is an Economic Development Subsidiary of the Tribe established to increase Tribal assets, which will benefit all Tribal members.

To increase more awareness of the Indian people in the community, the Tribe formed the Interpretive Center Committee in 1989. This committee is now called the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum Committee and is in the process of establishing just that--an Agua Caliente Cultural Museum in one of the Tribal reserves, Indian Canyons. The museum would promote the history, culture and traditions of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

Education has always played an important part within the Tribe, and through the Tribal Constitution and Bylaws, a portion of Tribal funds have been set aside for that purpose. Since more Tribal members have become



interested in higher education, a Scholarship Commission was formed for funding members who want-

ed to increase their education (academic and/or vocational schools). An in-house management training program at the Spa Resort Casino trains Tribal members in various departments. At the conclusion of the course, candidates



can choose to work in the department for which their talents are best suited.

The Tribe employs over 2000 members of the surrounding community at the Spa Hotel, Spa Resort Casino, Agua Caliente Casino, Indian Canyons, Cultural Museum and Tribal offices. They are active in community events and have contributed to local charities to the tune of over \$8 million dollars over the years. The Tribe was also instrumental in promoting the unsuccessful Proposition 70 in the recent California election which would have allowed tribes to have unlimited numbers of slot machines as opposed to the 2000 per tribe limit currently in force in exchange for paying the state 8 1/2 percent tax on gross revenues, the same as any other business in California. The Tribe's economic growth philosophy is simple: Their prosperity is linked directly to Palm

Springs' prosperity. What benefits one benefits the other.

The Spa Hotel, 100 N. Indian Canyon Dr. Palm Springs, CA house 221 rooms, luxury spa facilities, outdoor pools and hot tubs, a brand new 7000 sq. foot health club, meeting facilities in various sizes and dining at the Agua Bar & Grill.

The New Spa Resort Casino, 401 E. Amado Rd. Palm Springs, CA opened in November 2002 with 1000 slot machines and 32 table games. The Platinum Room provides privacy for high limit slot and table players. Restaurants include The Stage Deli, Oasis Buffet, Noodle Bar and Roppongi (asian fusion). Sports can be viewed in the Sundance Lounge and the Cascade Lounge provides live entertainment on weekends.

Agua Caliente Casino, Bob Hope Drive & Ramon Road, Rancho Mirage, CA opened April 2001 with 1000 slot machines, 49 table games, 10 poker tables and bingo. Visit the Primrose Room for high limit action. You can dine at the Desert Eatery food court, Grand Palms Buffet, Mariskinos Restaurant & Bar or Prime 10 Steakhouse. The Cahuilla Showroom hosts big name acts as well as boxing. Canyons Lounge has Monday Night Football and entertainment nightly.

More information can be obtained on the Tribe's website [www.agua-caliente.org](http://www.agua-caliente.org)