

PALM SPRINGS WRITERS GUILD:

A Brief History



Ginger Rogers
being inducted
as honorary
Guild member

by: John G. Peters, Jr., Ph.D.

Cobbling together the 40-plus-year history of the Palm Springs Writers Guild

reveals information as vast, diverse and colorful as its Sonoran Desert-based home. Its rich and vivid heritage showcases a range of human behaviors and emotions: mystery, deception, corruption, dedication and kindness. These are interwoven to explain the intriguing mosaic of protagonists and antagonists involved, much like we find in the variety of works published by Guild members. One constant is the dedication of the volunteers who have helped with the presentations, workshops and "boot camps" aimed at improving our writing skills.

Early membership in the Guild was limited to 24 individuals; today, membership has grown to over 200 members, but not all has been rosy. The group was unincorporated when founded in 1977, and its early years were informal and relaxed, with two membership categories: published and nonpublished. Nonpublished members were accepted only after they had "met criteria."

This small, nomadic group of writers met in Palm Springs and Palm Desert before settling in Rancho Mirage. Its Palm Springs venues included Imperial Savings

(1983, 1985), Pomona First Federal bank building (1985), Temple Isaiah and the Mizell Center (2005). The Palm Desert Library Community Room was also used until the meetings were relocated to the Rancho Mirage Library and Observatory.

The late Shirley Hammer, a founding member, credited the Guild concept to Rex Nivens, who lived in the desert and was a *Los Angeles Times* reporter. Another charter member, the late Edna Margolis, also helped organize the new Guild. Kirk Douglas and Harold Robbins, both literary giants in their day, spoke at Guild meetings and became "honorary members." Other such members included Ginger Rogers, Ray Bradbury, and Mike and Bob Pollock.

Assumed to be a nonprofit association in the late 1990s, the informal Guild was found not to be a valid or legal entity in 2001, a situation that resulted in several Board member resignations. It would take another four years until not-for-profit status was discussed, but as in many of the novels being written by members, mystery, intrigue and alleged criminal activity took center stage at the beginning of the 21st century.

In June 2000 then-president Hyacinthe Baron announced Guild plans to publish an

anthology. The *Writing Experience 2001* appeared the following year and had 45 contributing authors, filling 328 pages. Shortly thereafter, Baron announced the anthology would be an annual publication, appointed her husband Guild treasurer, and charged a fee for each submission. It soon became apparent the project was "personalized" and was not a Guild activity. When some authors demanded back their money, she refused and was taken to small-claims court, where she lost.

Some members asserted that the Barons "stole" the name and the entity "Palm Springs Writers Guild," making it their own. When they demanded that the pair leave the Guild, the group's money disappeared, and it was rumored the Barons fled the Valley in a used car purchased with some of the "appropriated" money. As long-standing member Carol Mann wrote in February 2006, the Guild changed its name to "The Original Palm Springs Writers Guild" to distance itself from the debacle. It was also known as "The Palm Springs Writers Guild of the Coachella Valley."

Oh, by the way, the second anthology was never published. Imagine that!

In December 2005 the Guild became a California nonprofit corporation and went on to implement a formal accounting system in 2006. It also built a website and stopped publishing its newsletter, "Guild Gram", instead directing members to visit its website to learn about its upcoming activities and its community-oriented programs.

Among its many projects, the Guild has awarded student scholarships to local high school and college students, receiving news coverage in the *Desert Sun* from the late Gloria Greer as early as 1986. This unique affiliation with schools continued

in 2006 when three members—Kathy Nguyen, Judy Fabris and Mary Barer—spoke to 140 students at Salton City. In 2018, Board member Marly Bergerud coordinated with Rancho Mirage High School's essay contest, with each grade's winners attending a meeting of the Guild and receiving monetary prizes and a certificate.

At the core of the Guild's scholastic projects is the Barbara Seranella Scholarship, which is presented annually to students planning to become writers. The award is named in honor of Barbara Seranella, a mechanic, hippie, Guild member and (in later life) best-selling author who died at age 50.

Another Guild activity is the Desert Writers Expo. Held in collaboration with the Rancho Mirage Library and Observatory, this yearly book-signing event began in 2009 and has been held at the Library for several years. Forty Guild authors assemble their books on decorated tables and eagerly await visitors seeking autographed copies.

Motivated people founded the Guild, and its members, volunteers and supporters keep it growing and prospering. A common thread among members is writing, but you shouldn't believe that their only focus is on writing books and articles. Many are accomplished artists, sculptors, painters, songwriters and scriptwriters.

At the core of every not-for-profit organization are volunteers, and the Guild Board members thank every volunteer. This includes our past presidents who have volunteered their time, energy and leadership: Diana Miller-Castells; James McFarlin (3 terms); Mark Anderson; Dolores Carruthers; Judy Weigle; Dawn Huntley Spitz (2 terms); Bill Clark; Grahame Smith; Hyacinthe Baron; Buddy Kaye; Sally Bowman; Sydney Phillips; Vern Murphy; Sylvia Milsted; Stan Reyburn; Jack Titus; Lois Hinkin; Walter Futterman; LaDonna Harrison; and Shirley

Hammer.

Today's Guild is vibrant and energized; its membership is growing and its participation in community events and programs is increasing. I invite you to attend a Guild meeting (it's free), a specialized writing workshop or a boot camp. Presenters and topics are listed on the Guild's website at www.palmspringwritersguild.org. Get involved in the Guild's anthology project, chaired by local College of the Desert writing professor Ruth Nolan. Please consider submitting an entry or making a financial contribution. You will find submission criteria on our website.

Cheers,
John



John G. Peters, Jr., Ph.D. was appointed president in April 2016 and elected president in June 2016. He has been re-elected twice, most recently in June 2018. He resides in Palm Desert and holds a post-doctoral M.A. in Education from the California State University at San Bernardino, Palm Desert Campus.

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