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Blue Skies Smiling at Me



Blue Skies Village Then & Now

On opening day, November 5, 1955 (above) Blue Skies Village Trailer Park's entry featured a mid-century modern neon sign that faced Highway 111. The signpost on the right pointed to its star studded streets. Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Rosemary Clooney and Jose Ferrer Roads no longer exist at the park. (Left) The Highway 111 monument sign of Blue Skies Village as it looks today. The community dropped the word "trailer" from it's name and installed entry gates for security.

Black & white photos by Gayle B. Thompson, courtesy of Grant Dixon & The City of Rancho Mirage

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Bing Crosby's 50 year old trailer park stands the test of time

*I was blue, just as blue as I could be
Ev'ry day was a cloudy day for me
Then good luck came a-knocking at
my door
Skies were gray but they're not gray
anymore*

*Blue skies
Smiling at me
Nothing but blue skies
Do I see*

*Bluebirds
Singing a song
Nothing but bluebirds
All day long*

*Never saw the sun shining so bright
Never saw things going so right
Noticing the days hurrying by
When you're in love, my how they fly*

*Blue days
All of them gone
Nothing but blue skies
From now on*

-Blue Skies by Irving Berlin

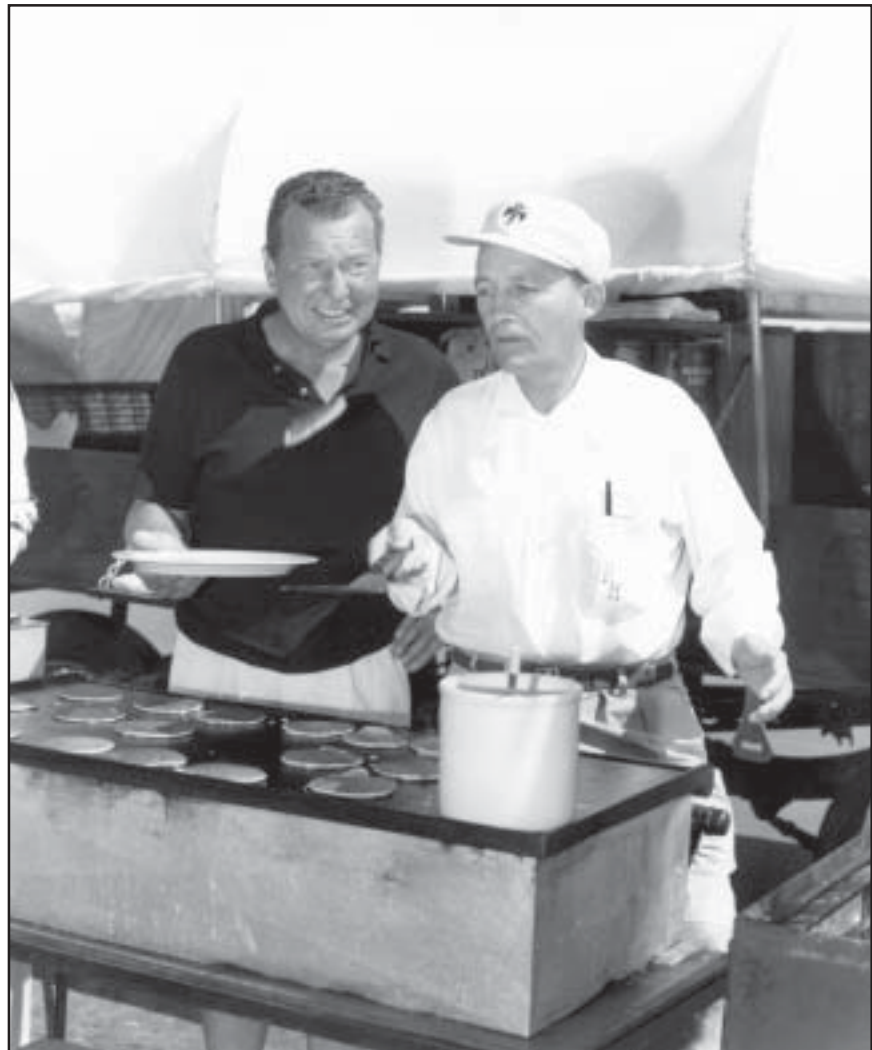
In popular American culture, trailer parks are often depicted as shantytowns in tornado alleys filled with low-lifers, drifters and ultra-available females. In recent decades, most people have seen that unfortunate stereotype in movies and popular television shows like *Cops*, *America's Most Wanted* and *The Blue Collar Comedy Hour*. While affordability is certainly a factor for some mobile home park residents, it should be noted that many respectable people live in manufactured housing because they prefer it.

Fifty years ago things were different. After World War II, returning GIs pushed the demand for housing to all time highs. Suburbs and housing tracts began to sprout up outside of most large American cities. Unlike earlier generations, these young families, tested by the poverty of the Great Depression and the cruelty of World War II, seemed much more

willing to pull up stakes and move for the sake of career success to provide for their families and to give their children the things they never had growing up. Broadcaster Tom Brokaw calls them, "The Greatest Generation." Advances in post-war technology gave mobile homes all the comforts and conveniences of the modern home.

Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball, part-time Rancho Mirage residents, were No. 1 on television with *I Love Lucy*. During their summer hiatus in 1953, they filmed *The Long, Long Trailer*, a tale of newlyweds who buy a trailer instead of a conventional house. The comedy, directed by Vincente Minnelli, was the 15th highest grossing film of 1954.

Bing Crosby had the highest grossing film of 1954 with *White Christmas*. Crosby, also a part-time Rancho Mirage resident, was at the peak of this career in 1954. As an actor he starred in the highest grossing film and won wide critical acclaim portraying an alcoholic entertainer opposite Grace Kelly in *The Country Girl*, the year's fifth place box office winner. As a singer, Bing topped the charts with songs from *White Christmas*. His *Count Your Blessings* song from that film was nominated for an Oscar. Bing also hosted a weekly radio variety program, golfed every chance he had, and invested his earnings wisely.



Bing and pal Phil Harris flip flapjacks for the opening day breakfast November 5, 1955



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One of his real estate investments, right here in Rancho Mirage, was Blue Skies Village.

Alan Hess & Andrew Danish write in the book, *Palm Springs Weekend, the Architecture and Design of a Mid-century Oasis*, "The name Bing Crosby appears infrequently in the architectural history books. But when he took a personal hand in the design and planning of a mobile home park in Rancho Mirage, the star of stage, screen and radio added, intentionally or not, a new dimension to the American architectural landscape: the luxury, planned trailer park."

Crosby's involvement went beyond his investment. His pride in the Blue Skies Village Mobile Home Park was obvious. He named it after



*"Noticing the days hurrying by
When you're in love, my how they fly"*

Above: Entertainer Jack Benny with loving wife and co-star Mary Livingstone sitting on the curb admiring his named street at Blue Skies Village.

Left: Entertainers, neighbors, lovebirds and husband & wife, Phil Harris & Alice Faye sneak a kiss behind one of Blue Skies 140 mature palm trees on Opening Day.



one of his hit songs (written by Irving Berlin); it sat near his home at the Thunderbird Country Club in Rancho Mirage. He invited friends to invest in it as well and named the park's streets for them: Burns and Allen (George & Gracie), Barbara Stanwyck, Greer Garson, Jack Benny, Claudette Colbert and Danny Kaye.

Blue Skies Village began as a spin-off of the movie industry in Palm Springs. Trailers used as temporary housing for actors and technicians working on movies shooting in the area were parked on Crosby's property off Highway 111. The desert already had several trailer parks for transient

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tourists. Local magazines in 1946 advertised Rancho Park ("trailer living, picnic tables, cottages, 1563 S. Palm Canyon Dr.") and the Ramon Trailer Park. But Blue Skies was an evolutionary step beyond those; it was an established neighborhood using the traditional means of planning, architectural controls, landscaping and community services.

Crosby's high profile in the project added another level of respectability. So did the property with 140 palm trees, a pool, dance hall and strict guidelines on the size and landscaping required for each home. Jack Benny, Phil Harris and Alice Faye, and Bing himself, would attend breakfasts and the round of social functions at Blue Skies just as they would at Thunderbird Country Club.

At the Grand Opening of the park, on November 5, 1955, Bing's Hollywood friends came in droves to help him mark the occasion. The photos here



Above: Actress Claudette Colbert (standing, right) poses with friends at the opening. Below left: Actress & current Rancho Mirage resident Jane Wyman tours one of the trailers. Below right: Actor William Holden (left) at the Blue Skies pool with co-developer Rex Thompson (left) on opening day.

Photos courtesy of Grant Dixon & City of Rancho Mirage. Photography Gayle B. Thompson





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*Oriental Moderns
Top: The striking Chinese red Torii gate frames a golden Buddha statue against a screen of decorative concrete block.
Middle: A side view of the same house showing decorative trim and upswept roof corners.
Bottom: Another Oriental Modern home has similar roof lines and is decorated with Chinese characters.*

from that day were courtesy of Grant Dixon and the City of Rancho Mirage, photographed by Gayle B. Thompson, wife of Bing's co-developer Rex Thompson.

A mobile home park is a scaled-down town. At Blue Skies home setbacks from the streets are minimal; the tiny streets are made for golf carts (introduced to American culture next door at Thunderbird Country Club) more than cars. Every inch counts and the landscaping is trimmed and carefully arranged. On



my first visit to Blue Skies, it reminded me of a giant-scale miniature golf park, with its unusual buildings and shallow blue water hazards. Blue Skies, well maintained and largely unchanged since the 1950s, is a premier example of planned trailer parks in the country.

The winding streets are consciously picturesque. At the heart of the town is the central park, a town green, a patch of lawn with turquoise pools. Crosby, of course, also included a nine-hole pitch and putt golf course. This is the social heart of Blue Skies as well; the dance hall is set here, and several of the homes proudly facing on the center of town are larger and

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Above and left: The Egyptian Temple of Karnak or King Tut's Tomb as it has been known, is a creative facade that disguises the mobile home with raised fascia featuring hand-painted hieroglyphics and a full size painting (partly obscured by Mexican Bird of Paradise) of an ancient Egyptian priest. Below: The main house facing the village green has been known as the Tara plantation house and the Mount Vernon replica. It features the columned porch, a pool with water fountain, two footbridges and a sundeck on the roof.





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more elaborate than those on the side streets.

Blue Skies Village reflected the park's character as a Hollywood colony. The basic manufactured units are enlarged in size and imagery with porches, facades and armadas that make them appear to be standard in-ground houses. The mobile homes of Blue Skies take on many forms: there is an Oriental Modern that contains a meditation garden with Chinese red torii gates, and a golden statue of Buddha; one enlarged trailer seems completely surrounded by a screen of decorative concrete block; another home is enlarged as King Tut's Egyptian tomb, with a raised roof ornamented by painted hieroglyphics.

The mobile home near the central green space of the park added a moat-like fountain with two walk bridges in front of the multi-columned porch that is reminiscent of *Gone With The Wind's* Tara or Mount Vernon. On the side of that home is a spiral staircase that leads to a sundeck over the porch. There are many desert modern facades with sleek lines and walls of glass.

Not your typical trailer park.

The three homes on this page reflect the higher quality of the homes in the park. **Top:** A picturesque New England seaside cottage look is achieved with a pitched roof, faux shutters, shaded front porch and a manicured front garden. **Middle:** This desert contemporary home facing the village green offers sleek lines, picture windows, sliding glass doors, a fountain and cultured stone fireplace wall. **Bottom:** The lush landscaping, offset by a curving, gated driveway, gives this mobile home the look of a countryside manor's Coach House.



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Rancho Mirage's Only Parking Meter

The only parking meter in the whole city of Rancho Mirage is located within Blue Skies Village Mobile Home Park. It has been standing sentry for a half century as a monument to the gifted and talented comedian Jack Benny.

Jack Benny's stage persona and comedy hinged on three concepts: his lack of talent, his vanity and being stingy. Benny's character played the violin badly, while thinking he was a concert virtuoso. He had great concern about his looks and growing older, while insisting to everyone that he was just 39 years old. Benny's character was cheap and a spendthrift, pinching pennies and always looking for an angle to make a few dollars, while making frequent trips to his hidden safe to look at all of his money.

Our lone parking meter played on two of those three concepts.

His *shtick* was a hit with



radio listeners, who kept his weekly show on the air from 1932 to 1955. Benny took several characters from his radio show with him to his television show that ran from 1950 to 1964 on CBS.

Tinky Weisblat, Benny's biographer writes, "The Jack Benny with whom viewers were familiar was a cheap, vain, insecure, untalented braggart who would never willingly enter his fifth decade. Despite his conceit and braggadocio, however, Jack Benny's video persona was uniquely endearing and even in many ways admirable. He possessed a vulnerability and a flexibility few male fictional characters have achieved."

Benny was also a film actor and made 29 films during his career. His biggest critical success was for the 1942 movie *To Be or Not to Be*. Benny played a hammy stage actor in World War II occupied Poland trying to thwart the Nazis.

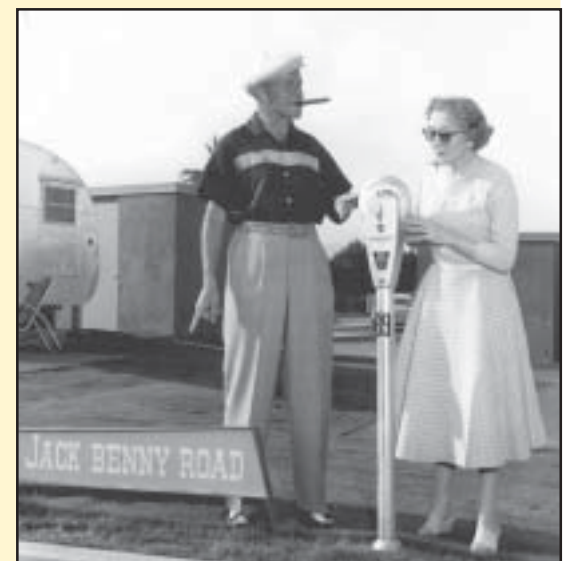
Jack and Mary Benny were no strangers to the desert. They had a house in Palm Springs and during the 1940s, Benny would broadcast his radio program from the Plaza Theater downtown in front of local audiences.

Several sources credit Benny as the catalyst behind the founding of Tamarisk Country Club, which came after he was refused membership at Thunderbird Country Club because he was Jewish. While this sounds incredibly horrible in 2006, that type of "restriction" was nothing out of the ordinary anywhere in the United States in 1951. Sympathetic Thunderbird members often held dual membership in both clubs.

Benny guest-starred on many television shows right up to his death in 1974 of stomach cancer. The role played by Walter Matthau in *The Sunshine Boys*, opposite George Burns, was originally written for Jack Benny.



Actress Lauren Bacall does a sexy pose with Jack Benny's parking meter.



Comedian George Burns explains the joke to wife Gracie Allen; connecting the parking meter to Jack Benny's miserly ways. Gracie thought it was just a very large radio microphone.