



Remembering Swallows Sun Island Resort: 1954-2008

By Gary Mussell

Swallows had a humble beginning in 1954 when Doc and Georgia Zehner, formerly of San Bexar Ranch, bought the 60 acres of land now called the "South Forty". Except for the three original buildings, the motel and clubhouse which have not changed appreciably on the outside~ and the Roost (then a house/garage) which has undergone extensive remodeling and additions, one would probably not recognize the park because of the many changes which have taken place in the past 29 years.

The Zehners and members were fortunate in that there were no problems with the law or the surrounding neighbors. Even then the Swallows was undoubtedly a vast improvement over the former business which consisted of a nightclub, gambling joint (the ruins up the hill) and possibly a house of ill repute (the motel).

Among the first projects were the swimming pool (which remains today) and a fence behind the pool. A sundeck was built in the area that is now Big Sue's kitchen and living room. Doc and Georgia occupied a portion of the clubhouse and the rest of Sue's apartment and the downstairs area served as the Zehner's bedrooms and garage.

Later the house was expanded and the Roost built. A concrete sundeck was poured and for many years did double duty as a shuffleboard court. The pop room beside the pool was the office and only a chain was used to block the entrance to the dub.

On weekends people came in with tents and campers. The hookups were a bit primitive and there was only a cold shower where the South Forty bathhouse is today~ Bath and shower facilities were located in the breezeway outside the house.

"T" and Sue Latimer were early Swallows members. In 1958 "T" was instrumental in building a new cement volleyball court, complete with markings and fence. For years, a sign on the fence declared it the "T" H Latimer Volleyball Court. A member planted the first lawn in any Southern California nudist park, a 12-foot strip along the East side of the then dirt volleyball court. This small bit of grass was so popular that in Spring 1958 "r" and Art Schumann got permission from Doc to plant the entire area in grass' Ä the forerunner of the great lawn of today.

One of the early events to be held at Swallows was the Art Festival Ä the first event of its kind ever to be held in a nudist park in the United States. Entries were received from all over the country and it was to be an annual event for years.

Another big event was the first WSA convention hosted by Swallows in July 1958. In 1961 the WSA Convention was again held at the Swallows as were other WSA events during the next several years.

In 1964 Doc and Georgia sold the property. Sue and "T", who had started the Sun Island Club in Escondido, leased the Swallows as of July 1 of that year, bringing their members with them. Membership in the club, which became known as the Swallows/Sun Island Club, had suddenly doubled. A number of the members of these original clubs members remained members to nearly the end: Roger & Rose, Byrie & Evelyn, Louise C, Ed' & Arlene O, Al H, Tom H, and Bob McKenzie Äto name a few.

The Latimer's first project in 1964 was to put a sliding door in the clubhouse; in 1965 the fireplace was built. The dirt volleyball court was enlarged and paved for a tennis court and a new fence put up. Trees were planted on the lawn and cactus placed outside the fence to discourage "peepers".

In 1967, one acre of land behind the swimming pool was purchased for campsites and later a shuffleboard court was built. Somewhere along the line the community kitchen was built and furnished by a group of members, as was an adjacent building which was known as the "Teen Hut" and which is now an apartment plus storage area. In early 1969, the neighboring 7-acre Valentine Ranch was purchased, and is now known as the North Forty. Along with the ranch house, the Latimer's acquired a cottage and stables (the shop area) and land on which to build an additional 18 residential trailer spaces.

The ranch or "red" house, was home to several tenants and is now used by the Swallows photo club. The cottage was home of the Sunlight Press for a while and the first issue of the Swallow Tales was published in January 1968.

The Swallows hosted the ASA Convention in 1971. The sauna was formally opened for this event and members and guests enjoyed the use of club-owned patio chairs and lounges – one of the few clubs to offer such equipment free of charge. Later that year Jim McDaniel, a long-time friend of "T" and Sue, became club manager after the departure of "T" to Florida.

Although no major facilities were built between 1972 and 1980, the grounds were continuously improved and facilities updated. The swimming pool was equipped with solar heat, installed by the late Bill Gaedke and the late Art Schlenker, both former Council Presidents.

Also, a joint effort by management and the Council produced the large patio on the north side of the clubhouse. During this time a pumper fire truck, aptly named "The Blushing Lady", was acquired and has since proved to be worth its weight in gold on more than one occasion.

In 1979, Jim McDaniel decided to "retire" as owner/manager and sold his interest in the Swallows Sun Island business to Jack Kisslinger, a resident and navy officer who was to retire from active duty.

Except for grounds maintenance, much of the improvements to buildings and grounds have been accomplished through the years by the Sun Island Council, a group of "volunteer members who hold monthly meetings" and who sponsor all social and money-making activities for the club. This group has purchased patio chairs, music equipment, casino equipment, concrete patios and – the most ambitious undertaking – raising nearly \$10,000 to build a jacuzzi, the latter being dedicated on March 1, 1980.

Throughout the years, the Swallows excelled in many areas of endeavors. The "Swallow Tales" was awarded the ASA plaque for excellence in journalistic communication two years in a row, and a Swallows float was entered in the annual El Cajon Mother Goose Parade for three years in a row; each year these professionally executed floats were awarded the highest honors. The club is a respected member of the community and has received favorable press, radio, and TV coverage on many occasions.

In 2001, Swallows hosted a very successful Western Gathering sponsored by The Naturist Society.

But Mother Nature was not always kind. In 1970 a brush fire lapped at the back of the trailers in both the North and South Forty. In subsequent years, smaller fires, if not actually presenting a threat, caused much excitement. Heavy rains created a disastrous flood in January 1979, filling the pool and covering the lawn and tennis/volleyball courts with mud; the old walls surrounding the pool area were torn to splinters. In February 1980, another flood inundated the lawn and tennis/volleyball courts, heavily damaging the residences of the South Forty as well. The volleyball court fence withstood the onslaught but the tennis fence was a twisted mass of wire.

In 1979, Jim McDaniel decided to "retire" as club manager and sold his part-interest in the Swallows Sun Island business to Jack Kisslinger, a resident and navy officer who was to retire from active duty. Then in 1992 "Big Sue," who was getting on in years, sold her interest to Jim and Ruth Shafer, longtime Swallows residents.

The bridges, one of which had been destroyed in 1979 and one in 1980 by the floods, were replaced by bridges of concrete and steel and it" said that they will remain long after the Swallows ceases to exist – they are so well built.

Over the years, fires and floods presented a danger to people living in the El Cajon area of the state, and Swallows had many close calls.

On October 21, 1982, the clubhouse was gutted by fire of unknown origin, but the social calendar of dances was continued in the Roost while repairs were being made. And out of the ashes came a beautifully decorated, furnished

clubhouse with new appointments and pool table. Miraculously, the music equipment, other than the speakers, was undamaged except for smoke.

However, the October 2003 Cedar Fire delivered a crushing blow to the resort. It destroyed over 80% of the resort properties with almost everyone losing their homes and possessions, barely escaping with their lives. Most of the buildings and homes on the grounds, including that of the Shafer's, was destroyed. The disaster almost caused the park to close, but an infusion of cash from AANR and other naturist volunteers from around the country infused enough capital to allow the park to rebuild.

Three years later, the Shafers retired and sold the park to Fernando Gonzales, another longtime resident. He dropped the name "Swallows" and renamed the park, Sun Island Resort.

Gonzales was in the construction business and was instrumental in getting the rows of prefab homes built in record time. Thus, many homes were rebuilt quickly and the club promoted itself to nudists seeking to move into the park. He opened RV sites with water and electricity, and tent sites for camping. The park looked like it was starting to recover.

The goal was to sell them quickly to pay off the loan used to purchase the land, but the housing market took its downturn and many of the homes remained unsold. Unfortunately, Sun Island could no longer make their payments and the lender instituted foreclosure proceedings. To prevent the foreclosure, former owner, Jim Shafer, took back control of the property and sold it to the current buyer, a non-nudist who will convert the land to non-nudist purposes.

The residents were informed of the sale at the beginning of May, 2008, and that they had 30 days to move. The web site and visitor day use ceased almost immediately. The residents were angry and lawsuits were threatened back and forth. The sale was finalized in July, 2008. Many of the now homeless nudists moved to De Anza Spring, about 45 minutes to the east, while others move to Glen Eden, about 90 minutes to the north.

So, after 54 years, Swallows/Sun Island became just a happy memory to those who were lucky enough to live there.



Above: The pool area and what was left of it following the 2003 fire.