

## **Bloomsbury, P.S.**

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By Ann Japenga

NOW AND THEN a knot of likeminded artists and writers converges in one place and you get a Bloomsbury Circle or an Algonquin Roundtable. Such a confluence happened in Palm Springs early in the 1900s. But instead of paneled drawing rooms, the artists convened in a couple of oil can shacks beside the Tahquitz ditch, near where the Tennis Club is today.

There were authors Charles Francis Saunders, George Wharton James, J. Smeaton Chase and famed desert naturalist Edmund Jaeger. Artist Jimmy Swinnerton was a frequent guest, along with Cabot Yerxa, creator of Cabot's Pueblo in Desert Hot Springs.

The spiritual figurehead of the Palm Springs Roundtable was Carl Eytel, a slight and austere German immigrant who wore a Stetson hat with a rattlesnake skin band. A nomadic artist, Eytel wandered the desert with his mustang Billy, existing on a monk's diet of oatmeal, cornmeal, coffee and cocoa.

While the other Roundtable members dipped in and out of the bohemian life, Eytel lived in his Tahquitz shack full-time. It was a good day for the artist when one of Palm Springs' society crowd paid \$10 for a painting. When he died poor and obscure in 1925, Eytel was one of only two white men buried in the Agua Caliente Indian Cemetery. The Roundtable leader never told his own story, so I was excited to find a cache of letters from Carl Eytel to Edmund Jaeger in the Palm Springs Desert Museum collection. The letters not only let us hear Eytel in his own words, they also reveal the intense bonds within the Tahquitz Brotherhood. In fact, Eytel frequently refers to his friends as "Brother Chase" or "Brother Saunders."

In the excerpts below, the name "Pester" refers to the hermit William Pester, who lived at what is now called Hermit's Bench in Palm Canyon.

The letters begin: "My dear Edmund ... "

January 21, 1917. Many thanks for your charming card with the three owls brotherly sitting and oo-hooing ... News came this afternoon in the figure of Abbott Kinney who is in Palm Springs and came to see me. Told me he wants a few of my paintings for his museum in Venice as representatives of desert painting.

I believe all houses in Palm Springs are taken and the town makes quite a showing. Miss Cornelia White, your friend of nail-biting fame, bought the Brooks place where she can practice nail-eating herself if she likes to.

Pester bought himself a nice palm house in Palm Canon, while brother Sass still camps in Chino Canon.

April 16, 1917. Just a few minutes ago when I was at the Post Office I met Pester who shocked me with the news that the Palm hut in Chino Canon had burned to the ground and Sass barely escaped being burned. All his belongings were destroyed. Contrary to Pester's warning he kept a fire in the stove inside of the cabin and the wind did the rest. Poor man.

October 14, 1917. Daily I think of you when I see your little deserted house and I hope some evening there will be a campfire again close to the cabin and cheery voices joining the water which alas is now flowing so low that you can get no more than a cup full of water at a time.

I have not been up at the pines as I hoped, but I have not given up the idea to say how do you do to the old giants before they close themselves in their winter mantels.

Quite a number of new houses were built during the last year, in fact it is getting too thick here.

April 19, 1919. I made up my mind that the next man who lays down the cash gets the painting. For I need the money far worse than I had figured out. My amount in the Banning Bank is only 35 dollars, and this sum will dwindle before a short time.

April 9th, 1923. Our friend Chase was buried on Good Friday in Palm Springs ... Quite a number of his friends were there but friend Saunders was not able to attend. In a short time he will be forgotten when his books are put on

the list of those “out of print“ like the “Wonders of the Colorado Desert“ and gradually we older ones will fade away while the world goes on around us just as if nothing had happened.

*Excerpts of letters are courtesy of the Carl Eytel Collection, Palm Springs Desert Museum.*