

Annenberg Estate: Isolation for Nixon

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By JON NORDHEIMER SEP 14 1974

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RANCHO MIRAGE, Calif., Sept. 13—One of the few regular visitors to the desert resorts of the Coachella Valley at this time of year is the sloping wall of smog that spills through the San Geronio Pass at nightfall like a ghostly reminder of the Indian legends in which dead spirits walk the awesome brow of the San Jacinto Mountains.

September, with the blazing heat of the desert floor reaching 110 degrees or more every day, is the worst time of the year for smog that is pushed out from Los Angeles about 100 miles along Interstate 10 to the Palm Springs exit, where it thins out and hazes the last light of day over the golf courses and estates of Rancho Mirage.

Wealthy year-round residents of the town, population 5,400, rent beach houses in coastal retreats like Newport Beach or San Clemente on the other side of the mountains, where the cold Japanese Current freshens the breeze that rolls the smog inland.

So it was rather strange that a man with one of the finest estates in San Clemente should choose to journey here in the September doldrums, as former President Richard M. Nixon did this week, spending five days at the baronial winter residence of an old friend, Walter H. Annenberg, the United States Ambassador to the court of St. James's.

But even stranger was the way the former President slipped in an out of town, planting Secret Service decoys to slip past photographers and anything resembling the public. That was how Mr. Nixon departed under cover of night yesterday, electing to make the two-hour drive over the mountains to return to San Clemente in darkness.

Also strange was the way the former President slipped in and out of town, planting Secret Service decoys to slip past photographers and anything resembling the public. That was how Mr. Nixon departed under the cover of night yesterday to return to San Clemente.

Contrast to Eisenhower

Mr. Nixon's shadowy visit was in contrast to the local recollections of another former President, Dwight D. Eisenhower. General Eisenhower had a bungalow on the fairway at the Dorado Country Club in Palm Springs, which despite its exclusivity did not make him a recluse, and he became as much a part of the scenery as the brooding San Jacintos.

Mr. Nixon moved in and out of town like Howard H. Hughes, and already there is a growing aura of mystery surrounding the man, only five weeks out of the Washington fishbowl, that resembles the cult of the enigmatic billionaire.

"If Nixon keeps it up," remarked Sam Brockway, on his way to visit a patient at the Eisenhower Medical Center, "pretty soon we'll start hearing stories that his fin-

gernails are eight inches long."

The Annenberg estate is a half mile from the hospital, which Mr. Nixon dedicated in late 1971, and its proximity led to speculation that the former President came here this week to be closer to a major medical facility, a rumor that evaporated when he left for home last night without going to the hospital.

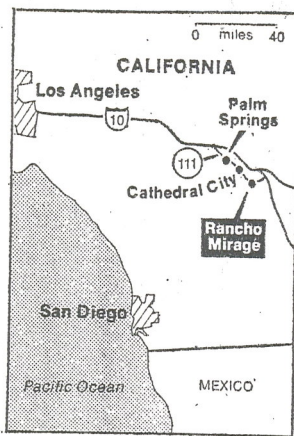
Whatever attraction lured Mr. Nixon to the desert, the Annenberg estate, called Sunnylands by its master, offered a kind of regal comfort that not even the General Services Administration could provide at San Clemente.

Built at an estimated cost of more than \$3-million nine years ago, it sits at the corner of Bob Hope Drive and Frank Sinatra Drive on 220 acres of lush property made green by a recycled irrigation system, and is surrounded by

700 more acres of desert "buffer" land.

A chain link fence topped by three strands of barbed wire guards the estate's perimeter, which is patrolled 24 hours a day by a large private security force, and privacy is maintained with the help of tall, thick clumps of white flowering oleander bushes and tamarisk trees all along the fence.

The main house contains 25,000 square feet of living space, more than one-half acre, but only two bedrooms, with the master bedroom taking up 2,000 square feet, or about the size of an ordinary house. A guest house has eight bedrooms.



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Visitors drive into a motor circle dominated by a foundation with a 25-foot high column copied from the original in a Mexico City museum, and the house looms in ranch style silhouette with Mexican lava walls and a precast concrete tile roof.

Outside is a 4,000 square-foot patio, large swimming pool, artificial lake, and a nine-hole golf course. The Ambassador, who is staying in Philadelphia this week, maintains a staff of about 30 here.

The resorts of the Coachella Valley are overrun by celebrities during the cooler season and the presence here of a former President draws little interest, even given the circumstances of Mr. Nixon's departure from office.

Also, there is a sense of awkwardness of embarrassment about Mr. Nixon's plight, clouds of doubt about the state of his health and a tendency to hope that the man's long hot summer will finally reach a solstice where he will find peace and serenity.

A Rally Is Foreseen

"Either he continues to hide his shame behind walls or he will come out into the sunshine," remarked Wallace Hamsen, a retired army medical technician. "I don't think he'll go down the drain. He'll rally eventually, that's his nature. The trouble is that he's fallen so low that the trip back up is very long.

Behind Mr. Hamsen, the San Jacinto Mountains jutted out of the wilderness into the desert sky. Only a trace of desert vegetation hardy enough to survive the merciless glare of the sun clung to the slopes, which were otherwise barren and bare. Boulders have peeled off the stern visage of the tallest peak of San Jacinto, to lie in timeless isolation at the foot of the mountain behind a trail of granite rocks and chips scattered in their trail.

It is said that the Cahulla [KAY-we-yah] Indians believe that the god Tahquitz, to whom the creators of the world had bestowed special powers, lives in the San Jacinto mountains, where he was banished after he misused those powers and divided his tribe.

Even today, when the earth trembles deep inside the San Jacintos, and earthquakes jar the land, there are those who point to the mountains and attribute the quakes to the great anger of Tahquitz, locked in torment deep in his rocky cave.