

Built for His TIME

Through decades of persistence and innovation, Richard M. Milanovich helped transform the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians into a national model of a modern-day tribal government.

BY TRAVIS ARMSTRONG

THE ME YAH WHAE LEADERSHIP series, now in its 12th installment, tells the stories of Tribal leaders who have served the Agua Caliente people since time immemorial, from the first societal roles that governed traditional Cahuilla life and the early 19th-century ventures of Chief Cabezón and Juan Antonio to Manuel Largo and Captain Andreas, who fought to protect Tribal land during California's early years of statehood. We've examined the inspiring stories of Chief Cabezón's son, Gervasio, and Juan Andreas during the establishment of Indian reservations, and we've met the four men—Pedro Chino, Alejo Patencio, John Joseph Andreas, and Marcus Belardo—who protected Tribal sovereignty at the turn of the 20th century. We've looked back at the granting of U.S. citizenship to Native Americans in 1924 and the role Francisco Patencio played during that time, as well as the rise of Palm Springs as a Hollywood getaway in the 1930s and '40s. Most recently, we chronicled the contributions of the all-women Agua Caliente Tribal Council, the first of its kind in U.S. history, and significant leaders who followed.

SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL, the Cahuilla people have lived in and stewarded the desert and mountain lands in the geographic center of Southern California. Ancient trails from the Colorado River to the Pacific Ocean crossed through their territory, eventually giving way to European explorers and settlers, stagecoach routes and the Pony Express, and railroad tracks and highways.

California statehood in the mid-1800s ushered in a dark period of laws designed to stamp out tribal cultures, languages and, often, Native people themselves. Smallpox and measles epidemics killed entire families and emptied villages. Federal policies—even in the last century—fluctuated from aiming to terminate tribal governments to promoting self-determination, depending on the whims of those in control in

Washington, D.C. Most Native Americans across the United States did not receive full U.S. citizenship and the right to vote until the Snyder Act of 1924.

Cahuilla society has proven dynamic enough to both survive and thrive through ever-changing times, and despite the hardships and challenges thrown at them, they endured as a people, united by purpose, traditions, beliefs, and family relationships. Lineages in the Palm Springs area came together to form the modern-day Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, one of nine Cahuilla bands that are federally recognized tribes today.

Culture, tradition, and innovation form part of the Cahuilla's continuing history. But so, too, do the leaders chosen to guide the Agua Caliente people through these many

different eras. The Agua Caliente story is one of leaders rising to the occasion, and one cannot consider the final decades of the 20th century without reflecting on the contributions made by Richard M. Milanovich, who, like so many Agua Caliente leaders before him, seemed destined to lead.

Milanovich served as Tribal Chairman of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians from 1984 until his death in 2012 and knew the value of long-term goals and the persistence required to achieve them; he helped the Agua Caliente become one of the premier tribal governments in the country, known for its self-sufficiency, entrepreneurship, and economic and community development.

By Milanovich's time, the Agua Caliente had already made significant progress toward

solidifying the Tribe's future. Previous leaders, for instance, had secured the ability to lease Tribal land held in trust by the federal government for up to 99 years, giving the Tribe and its members the ability to enter into more long-lasting business arrangements than short-term leases could offer. Past leaders had also fought efforts by federal and local officials to break up communal Tribal landholdings to the point that the Tribe may cease to exist, all of which helped lay the foundation for what was to come.

PALM SPRINGS ROOTS

Born in Banning, California, in 1942, Richard M. Milanovich spent much of his early youth in an area of Palm Springs known as Section 14, a square-mile parcel of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation located in the heart of downtown. Many other Agua Caliente leaders also had family property here, sometimes growing up in the dilapidated housing common in the early to mid-1900s. Milanovich often joked that he lived in a house the size of a cracker box, but when he would tell people the size of his family's home, he'd be told actual cracker boxes were bigger.

Nearby, the Tribe operated a commercial bathhouse for many decades at the site of the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring, which

continued on page 72

Tribal Chairman Richard M. Milanovich with his Palm Springs star in front of the former Agua Caliente Cultural Museum on South Palm Canyon Drive in downtown Palm Springs.





CAHUILLA / AGUA CALIENTE LEADERSHIP TIMELINE

This is the 12th installment in a series celebrating the leadership of the Native people of the Palm Springs region, today known as the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

Moment of Creation

Momtakwit is the first net (chief) in Cahuilla history, and Isil (Coyote) serves as first paxaa (assistant)

Time Immemorial to 1900s

The establishment of leaders is based on traditional clans and lineages

1775

Juan Bautista de Anza travels through Cahuilla traditional territory

1800s

Traditional Tribal leadership structure continues and clans band together

1830s

Chief Cabezón serves in leadership roles

1840s

Juan Antonio serves in leadership roles

1850s

Captain Andreas serves in leadership roles

1852

Cahuillas sign the Treaty of Temecula; it is never ratified by Congress

1863

Manuel Largo serves in leadership roles

Mid-1860s–1870s

Juan Andreas serves in leadership roles

1876 and 1877

Agua Caliente Indian Reservation established

1884

Gervasio Cabezón serves as chief

Late 1800s

United States attempts to impose leadership styles on Cahuilla

1890s–1900s

Pedro Chino serves in leadership roles



Marcus Belardo

1890s–1920s

Alejo Patencio and José Rafael serve in leadership roles

Mid-1890s–1930s

John Joseph Andreas serves in leadership roles

Early to Mid-1900s

Tribal Committee, or Indian Committee, negotiates landholdings with the U.S. government

1905

Marcus Belardo serves as captain

1923

Pedro Chino serves as captain of Cahuilla

1924

U.S. grants citizenship to American Indians

1925

Francisco Patencio serves as net



Francisco Patencio

1934

Albert Patencio serves as captain of the Tribal Committee



1935

Willie Marcus serves as captain of the Tribal Committee

1937

Willie Marcus serves as Tribal spokesman

1938

City of Palm Springs is incorporated

Marcus Pete serves as captain of the Tribal Committee

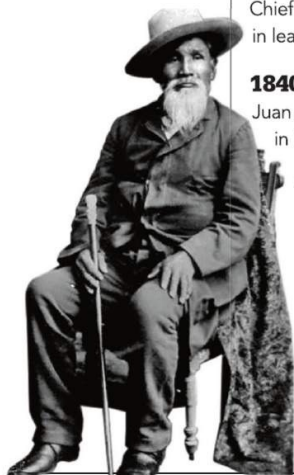
1939

Willie Marcus serves as chief of the Tribal Council/Committee

Francisco Patencio serves as ceremonial chief



Willie Marcus



Chief Cabezón



Pedro Chino



Lee Arenas

1940

Lee Arenas serves as chairman of the Tribal Committee; Willie Marcus serves as chairman of the Tribal Committee

October 1941

Lee Arenas serves as chairman of the Tribal Committee

December

1941-1942

Willie Marcus serves as chairman of the Tribal Committee

1945 and 1949

Romalda Lugo Taylor serves as chairman of the Tribal Committee

1948

Lorene Welmas serves as chairman of the Tribal Committee

November 1949-January 1952

Francisco Segundo serves as chairman of Indian Tribal Council

1955

Tribal Council is established, with five elected members, including a chairman, to oversee government affairs and economic ventures

1955-1958

Vyola J. Ortner serves as Tribal Chairman

1959-1965

Eileen Miguel serves as Tribal Chairman

March 22-Aug. 2, 1966

Edmund Peter Siva serves as Tribal Chairman



Edmund Peter Siva

1966-1967

Dora Joyce Prieto serves as Tribal Chairman



Dora Joyce Prieto

1968-1969

Joseph Patrick Patencio serves as Tribal Chairman

1970-1971

Larry N. Olinger serves as Tribal Chairman



Larry N. Olinger

1972-1981

Ray L. Patencio serves as Tribal Chairman



Ray L. Patencio

1982-1983

Barbara M. Gonzales Lyons serves as Tribal Chairman

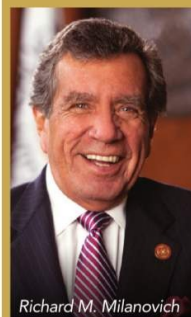


Barbara M. Gonzales Lyons

1984-2012

Richard M. Milanovich

serves as Tribal Chairman



Richard M. Milanovich

2012-present

Jeff L. Grubbe serves as Tribal Chairman



Jeff L. Grubbe

Eileen Miguel





continued from page 68

gave, in part, both the Tribe and the city their names. Milanovich's mother, LaVerne Saubel, worked there before serving as a member of the first all-women Tribal Council in the United States—the Council that successfully secured the ability to lease Agua Caliente Tribal land on a long-term basis. His father was a first-generation American, the son of immigrants from Yugoslavia, and moved from Indiana to California in the 1930s.

His parents met in Los Angeles, with Milanovich spending time there later as a young adult. Among other jobs, he worked in department stores, enhancing salesmanship skills needed years later when he would promote big projects such as casino and hotel development.

His father, who served in

World War II, inspired Milanovich to join the U.S. Army; he spent more than two years in Germany, obtained his GED, and credited his military experience for giving him a sense of direction and personal responsibility.

Still, Palm Springs beckoned. A father by now, Milanovich moved back for good in the early 1970s to raise his family in his own community, manage land he owned, and (among other things) hike the Indian Canyons, which were part of his ancestral legacy.

Because of the strong influence and respect for his mother, Milanovich also sought out the counsel of the other notable matriarchal leaders of the Tribe including Vyola Ortner, Dora Prieto, Eileen Miguel, and Gloria Gillette to name only a few.

“
*It's the land . . . in
and of itself, which is
the cohesive basis,
together with the
cultural ties, which
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make our people
who they are.*

**Richard M. Milanovich,
Former Tribal Chairman**

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ABOVE: 2010 Agua Caliente Tribal Council Members. Council Member Anthony J. Andreas III, Secretary-Treasurer Karen A. Welmas, Council Member Vincent Gonzales III, Chairman Richard M. Milanovich, Vice-Chairman Jeff L. Grubbe. **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT:** Tribal Chairman Richard M. Milanovich at the construction site of the Agua Caliente Casino in Rancho Mirage. Milanovich with then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in Sacramento. Milanovich with then-newly elected 44th U.S. President Barack Obama in Washington, D.C. Milanovich honoring anthropologist Dr. Lowell J. Bean for his work.

He joined the Tribal Council on a temporary appointment. “Since I didn’t do any noticeable damage,” Milanovich once joked with a newspaper reporter about his early tenure on the Tribal Council, “I was elected to full council status in 1977, served four one-year terms, and one two-year term each as

ETHAN KAMINSKY





Secretary and Vice Chairman. In 1984, I was elected Chairman."

The Agua Caliente people have long had a reputation as a people who both developed and absorbed new technologies and ideas to benefit their communities. They have been known for facilitating relationships, including trade at great distances between ancient people from the Pacific coast deep into the desert and beyond.

Milanovich, like the generations of Tribal leaders before him, built on these traditions. But the ensuing decades would stand out as a time when tribal self-determination reached new heights. An often-used term in Indian Country, tribal "self-determination" can have different meanings, but at its heart, it entails asserting a tribe's inherent sovereign right to govern itself and its people, increase economic and educational opportunities, and protect and promote cultural practices and views.

For the Agua Caliente, these were more than ideas; these principles manifested themselves in brick-and-mortar projects during the Milanovich years, including the new Spa Casino Resort in downtown Palm Springs, the Agua Caliente Resort Casino Spa in Rancho Mirage, the Tribal Administration Plaza headquarters in Palm Springs, and the Tribal Building near the Indian Canyons, among other projects.

Such buildings remain a prominent part of the Coachella Valley landscape today. However, less visible to the outside world is the funding of educational opportunities, healthcare services, public safety, and cultural and museum programming that these ventures have since provided. The lives of the Agua Caliente people were forever changed. Getting there, however, wasn't easy.

The Gaming Era

Honoring the land and culture and

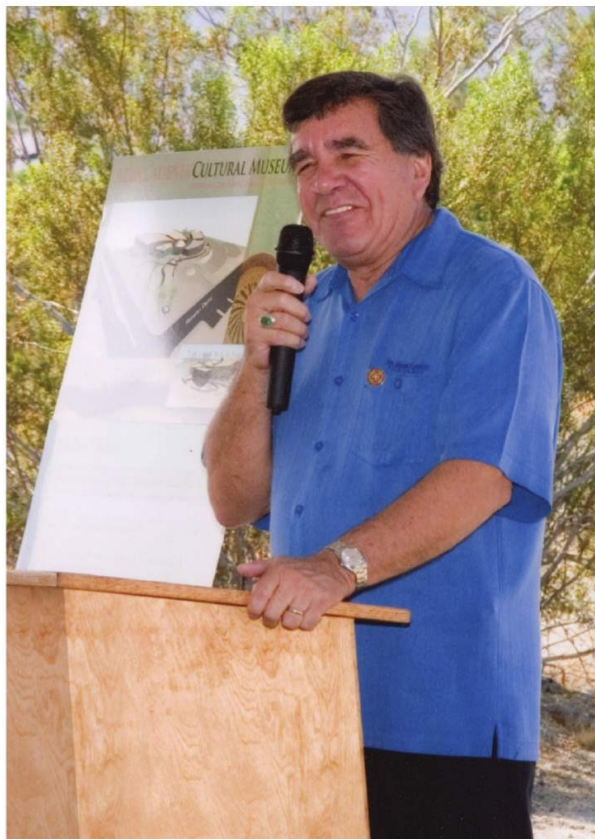
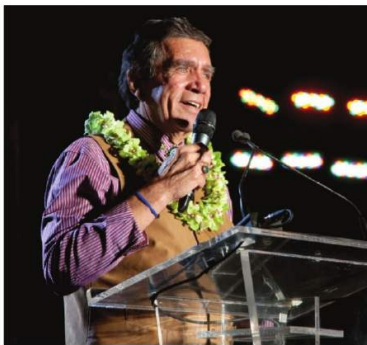
working hard were foundations of Milanovich's leadership. He was known for building consensus for projects—including, at times, ones that may have been seen as daring or even controversial—to get them approved and completed.

Today, casinos on Indian reservations across the United States represent a multibillion-dollar industry, but such progress required Native American tribes to assert their rights in court and convince Congress to set up a regulatory framework, which became a significant issue in the 1980s. Another concern centered on the types of gaming (e.g., bingo, cards, roulette, slot machines, etc.) allowed under federal rules.

Tom Davis, the retired long-time planning director for the Agua Caliente Tribe, recalls there were only six full-time Tribal employees when the Tribal Council hired him as a part-time consultant in the 1990s.

ABOVE: Tribal Chairman Richard M. Milanovich with Gov. Schwarzenegger during the signing of the Tribal compact with the state of California. **OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT:** Milanovich speaking at the annual Dinner in the Canyons at the Indian Canyons. Milanovich with the Tribe's Chief Planning and Development Officer Tom Davis. Milanovich speaking at a community event. Milanovich with his wife, Melissa.

At the time, the Tribe had an ordinance prohibiting gambling. In some ways, the law was meant to give the Tribe some breathing room as reservation gaming elsewhere began to take off. As Chairman, Milanovich reached out to Tribal members to explain why the time had come to change this and how the investment would secure a better future for the next generation. Tribal members voted to repeal the ban; however, a tentative agreement with Caesars World for a downtown Palm Springs facility with bingo, card



games, and off-track betting unraveled, in part, because other Vegas-style gaming at the time, such as slots machines, wasn't part of the deal due to uncertainties in federal and state law.

The Tribe, on its own, then opened a gaming facility as part of its downtown Spa Hotel.

Davis notes that members of the Agua Caliente Tribal Council had valuable experience as landowners themselves, having managed their own reservation parcels situated in the heart of an ever-growing destination (in contrast to many other reservations across the country located in more remote or rural areas). Thus, they knew the value of seeking out reputable and knowledgeable advisors, and they were able to successfully navigate the complexities this new development brought on.

For instance, in 1988, Congress passed the Indian

Gaming Regulatory Act to lay out conditions for reservation gaming enterprises. Part of this required tribal governments to negotiate agreements with their respective states, which tribes viewed as an unprecedented intrusion by the states into tribal sovereignty because responsibility of such compacts should rest with the federal government.

Some states, including California, took hard stances, including prohibiting certain types of gaming and wanting financial payments that tribes viewed as unreasonable.

The Agua Caliente joined a coalition of California tribes that decided to go straight to voters and force state leaders to approve tribal-state gaming compacts. Proposition 5 passed with nearly two-thirds of the vote in 1998, but the California Supreme Court struck it down because of the state's existing prohibition on Vegas-style

casinos. The court ruling meant slot machines on any Indian reservation in the state were at risk of federal agents shutting them down.

Undeterred, Milanovich and other Tribal leaders went back to the people of California. Once again, with nearly two-thirds approval, voters passed Proposition 1A in early 2000, which allowed slot machines and other types of gaming on Tribal lands. Next, voters overwhelmingly rejected allowing such gaming at racetracks and cardrooms.

Californians had spoken. But Arnold Schwarzenegger, who served as governor of California from 2003 to 2011, had claimed that tribes should pay their "fair share" as part of his gubernatorial campaign. Milanovich was determined to work with the governor; he reached out and struck a deal to expand Agua Caliente gaming enterprises in return for financial payments to

the state through an amended compact.

Despite the deal, a special interest group managed to place the Agua Caliente and three other gaming pacts up for a vote in the 2008 election. Milanovich fought back, and once more, voters sided with the tribes.

"We negotiated a compact with the governor that is fair and equitable," Milanovich said after that vote. "We stood our ground, and we persevered." He added: "If you follow your heart, the way you learned from your heritage—your mothers, fathers, and ancestors—and stand by your principles, things will be OK."

Being Agua Caliente

Tribal councils across the United States are unique to their respective communities, but they all share a responsibility of governing their reservations and acting as heads of business enterprises. Council members are



responsible to each other and to their fellow Tribal members. Non-native residents may not always understand the reasons behind some of the internal decision-making that takes place.

Milanovich was occasionally asked by non-Tribal members to explain his decisions as Tribal Chairman, and he'd often reply that it was a private matter or that a certain action was taken because it is "our way" as a people.

When he sat down to be interviewed for an oral history project in 2001, the interviewer asked him about being Agua Caliente.

"It's the land ... in and of itself, which is the cohesive basis, together with the cultural ties, which keep our people together, which make our people who they are," he began. "That coalition of tribal member to tribal member, brother, sister, aunt, and uncle. It's all interwoven, and it's like a whirlwind at times, but it's all—we're all still here.

"I think in many ways, Indian people do that irrespectively, they do it by example. I mean, we don't say, 'Well, you can't do this,' or 'You

can't do that,' or 'You should do this,' or 'You should do that.' It's more, 'See your uncle over there, see what your dad is doing. See what your mom is doing. See what ... your ancestors have done.'"

Milanovich certainly led by example himself. Davis recalls, for instance, his decision to go back to school and earn a bachelor's degree from the University of Redlands—while serving as Tribal Chairman.

"I said, 'Why are you doing this? You have accomplished so much already,'" Davis says. "Richard answered me, 'To be a leader of this tribe in this situation, I need to walk the talk and go get my degree.' He didn't make a big deal out of it. There was no big ceremony. He simply went back to school."

Milanovich understood the role higher education played in paving a path toward economic prosperity. Today, the Richard M. Milanovich Legacy Hike (created to honor the former Chairman's service and legacy) helps prepare the next generation of leaders in Indian Country by giving students who are members of

federally recognized tribes new opportunities.

Several other qualities made Milanovich stand out as a leader, particularly his ability to truly listen to others without interrupting them. "He had a great respect for other people who were in leadership positions even though he didn't agree with them," says Davis, describing Milanovich as "personable and likable, even when dealing with adversaries."

In 2012, Milanovich passed away, after decades of following his heart and standing by his principles to lead the Agua Caliente into another new era, together as a people. Upon his death, then-California Governor Jerry Brown told the *Los Angeles Times* that Milanovich "reshaped his community, helped preserve its rich heritage, and left a legacy that lives in the thousands of lives he touched. Richard was a good friend, and he will be missed."

Longtime friend Lynn Valbuena, then-Vice Chair of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, added: "Richard never forgot where we came from and how difficult it was for all of us before gaming. He

ABOVE: Agua Caliente hotel ground-breaking in Rancho Mirage, April 17, 2009. From left, Council Member Jeff L. Grubbe, Vice-Chairman Barbara M. Gonzales-Lyons, Chairman Richard M. Milanovich, Secretary-Treasurer Moraino J. Patencio, and Council Member Jeannette Prieto-Dodd.

worked very hard to get his tribe on its feet and do very well, and he did the same for many other tribes in California."

However, while Milanovich was a good listener, he also stood up for what he believed in and when the occasion called for it. This is one of the reasons he was so well respected. "Chairman Milanovich was a strong leader who always listened to everyone before making a decision or giving input," says Tribal Chairman Jeff L. Grubbe. "He had a genuine desire to make things better for the Tribe, our Tribal members, our employees, and Indian Country. He always saw the bigger picture and was able to identify the steps the Tribe would need to take to get there. For me personally, he showed me through his actions what it meant to be a great leader. I consider him to be one of the greatest mentors of my life." 🍌