

# Legacies of LEADERS

From the 1800s through today, Tribal leaders have advanced a thriving and prosperous Agua Caliente government.

BY TRAVIS ARMSTRONG

**THE ME YAH WHAE LEADERSHIP** series, now in its 11th 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.

**A CENTURY** and a half ago, long before the city of Palm Springs existed and when stagecoach wagons running through the desert signaled changes to come, Cahuilla leader Manuel Largo said he'd "go out upon the desert and die" before allowing his people and their land to be taken away.

The leadership of the Agua Caliente people, has come in varied approaches over the centuries. Leaders adapted to the changing eras, from Chief Cabezon, who in the 1800s unified villages to keep foreign governments out of Cahuilla land, to Lee Arenas, who in the mid-1900s took disputes over land ownership all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Different leadership styles abounded. And yet, commonalities endured. Built on values handed down from ancient times and adapted to modern realities, the men and women who led the Agua Caliente people put the survival of their people and land at the forefront.

Largo's declaration about going out to the desert and dying before giving up his ancestral land is one of centuries of such expressions about protecting traditional homelands. Political and ceremonial leader Pedro Chino said more than a century ago, "We claim upon our homes in which our fathers and grandfathers lived, died,

and were buried ... whoever wishes to [come onto our lands]] must ask for our consent." Later, elected tribal leaders would oppose local zoning restrictions on Tribal lands that reduced their value and economic potential.

Seemingly against the odds, the Native people of Palm Springs are still here — and thriving as a national model of a prosperous Tribal government in the 21st century.

Five years ago, *Me Yah Whae* began this series about significant leaders in the Tribe's journey from time immemorial to the present, together, as a people. Their leadership guided ancestors

through ancient times spanning thousands of years, the upheaval of when Europeans descended on their territory, and the transition to a present-day sovereign Tribal nation of, by and for the Agua Caliente people with a government-to-government relationship with the United States.

## **BARBARA M. GONZALES LYONS: EARLY 1980S**

Barbara M. Gonzales Lyons has decades of experience as a leader of the Agua Caliente







COURTESY BARBARA GONZALES LYONS

people. But it was the beginning of the 1980s when she was elected to the top leadership position on the Tribal Council, serving as Tribal Chairman in 1982 and 1983, after a year as Vice Chairman in 1981.

Born in Palm Springs in 1954, Gonzales Lyons spent much of her childhood on the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation. One of her first memories is simply being on Section 14 (the original square-mile tract of Agua Caliente

Indian Reservation and, at the time, home to some of the community's poorest residents). Her maternal grandparents, Frances Saubel Patencio and John Joseph Patencio, lived close by and were fixtures in her early life.

The Patencio family comes from an ancient Cahuilla lineage within the Kausik clan and has held political and spiritual positions since the beginning of recorded time. John Joseph Patencio was once in tribal leadership himself; but what

Gonzales Lyons remembers most about her grandfather is his singing. "He was the last ceremonial bird singer for our clan," she recalls. "He'd tell me, 'I have to sing this oral history. This is the history of our people.'"

That responsibility for preserving and sharing — even making — Tribal history — continued to run in the family, with Gonzales Lyons's mother serving on the Tribal Council in the 1950s.

It was Gonzales Lyons's uncle Joseph Patrick Patencio ("Uncle

**ABOVE:** Barbara Gonzales Lyons, second from right, and fellow Tribal Council members break ground on Agua Caliente Casino Resort Spa in Rancho Mirage in 2001.

Boy"), however, who asked her to run for Tribal Council when she was only 21 and still working a part-time job at Camelot Theatres in downtown Palm Springs. "He kept wanting me to run, and I'd say 'Oh, but I'm working, I'm going to school,'" she says. "I really wanted to become a veterinarian. That was my goal."

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## CAHUILLA / AGUA CALIENTE LEADERSHIP TIMELINE

This is the 10th 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

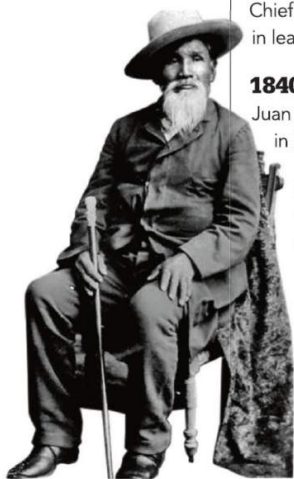
Chief Cabezón serves in leadership roles

#### 1840s

Juan Antonio serves in leadership roles

#### 1850s

Captain Andreas serves in leadership roles



Chief Cabezón

#### 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



Pedro Chino



Willie Marcus

#### 1923

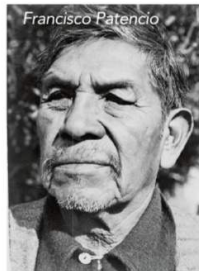
Pedro Chino serves as captain of Cahuilla

#### 1924

U.S. grants citizenship to American Indians

#### 1925

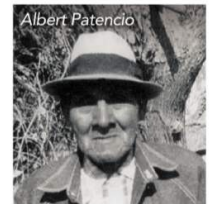
Francisco Patencio serves as net



Francisco Patencio

#### 1934

Albert Patencio serves as captain of the Tribal Committee



Albert Patencio

#### 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



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







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After missing the deadline to submit her name on the official ballot, she won a one-year seat as a write-in candidate, the first ever to do so. But like her forbearers, she was born to lead — and the irony of how she ended up there was never lost on her. Though she'd loved almost everything she learned in school, civics had always been her least favorite subject. "I simply didn't want to deal with it," she says with a laugh. "And I ended up being in tribal politics. That one year turned into my life."

Her ascent to the Tribal Chairman position in the early 1980s also marked the return of a woman holding the highest leadership position in the Tribal government. In the 1950s, on that

Tribal Council her mother served on, Agua Caliente achieved recognition as the first federally recognized tribe in the United States to have an all-woman Tribal Council.

Many credit that earlier council for establishing a legal framework for the Tribe's economic growth and self-sufficiency to come. For example, by working with Congress and federal Indian officials, the Council secured the Tribe's right to lease Tribal land for 99 years. Previously, federal rules only allowed for short-term leases on reservation trust lands. This situation severely restricted Tribal members and the Tribe itself from leasing the land at all.

In other words, Gonzales Lyons had big shoes to fill — and she did.

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*You always have  
to protect the past  
and the future.  
Because without  
both of them,  
you're no longer  
here.*

**Barbara M. Gonzales Lyons,  
Former Tribal Chairman**

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As Tribal Chairman, she advocated for Tribal sovereignty over Agua Caliente land, such as in a legal case involving restrictions imposed by local officials on leaseholders on Tribal parcels. She also spoke out about a possible moratorium on bringing land into federal trust to be part of the reservations at a U.S. Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs hearing held in Southern California and continued to champion the Tribal government's right to participate in the political process, noting it was necessary, as Native Americans had no elected voice in Sacramento.

Gonzales Lyons chaired the Tribal Council at the dawn of a new era. The previous decade had seen the federal

**RIGHT:** Gonzales Lyons with the late Vice Chairman Larry N. Olinger at the groundbreaking of the Agua Caliente Cultural Plaza in May 2018. **OPPOSITE:** Gonzales, then Vice Chairwoman, at the Spa Casino in Palm Springs in 2000.

government support policies to promote reservation business enterprises, increase educational opportunities for native youth, provide better access to medical care and keep Tribal families intact.

The '80s and the decades to come were a time to put Tribal self-determination, as these new federal policies were called, into further action.

And yet, there still was the past. It was 200 years earlier that Juan Bautista de Anza traveled through Cahuilla traditional territory, which occupied the desert and mountains that represented the geographic center of Southern California.

The location and landscape shielded the Cahuilla from much of the degree of control that the Spanish and later Mexican governments imposed on Southern California's Native peoples during the early parts of the next century. For example, the Catholic Mission system, primarily focused on more coastal areas, typically touched the Cahuilla in only indirect ways.

European diseases such as smallpox and measles decimated Cahuilla villages in the desert and mountainside canyons. Outbreaks wiped out some entire lineages of families in the 1860s. The U.S. Senate never ratified treaties negotiated by federal Indian agents with Southern California Tribal leaders after California's legislative delegation asked for the documents to be locked away in the 1850s. Reservations came to Cahuilla territory in the late 1800s after the federal government, without Tribal permission, handed over every other square-mile section of Cahuilla land to the railroad as incentive to build track through



the desert from Arizona to Los Angeles.

Next, Congress set out to break up America's reservations and assimilate Tribal people by allotting communally held reservation land to individual families. A progressive turn in the 1930s to promote Tribal self-determination through the Indian New Deal was reserved when Congress in 1950 adopted a policy to terminate Tribes and relocate Tribal citizens to big cities. In yet another policy reversal, the decades leading up to the 1980s saw federal lawmakers pass bills to build on the goals set out in the 1930s to support Tribes.

The '80s offered a new promise. The Tribal Councils under Gonzales Lyons' tenure

were pivotal in learning lessons from that past, seizing on the federal reforms, and moving ahead. She was uniquely qualified.

Maintaining Agua Caliente's control over its land had been a constant challenge, as the statements by both Manuel Largo and Pedro Chino long ago demonstrated. Later, after the Great Depression, Palm Springs incorporated with much of the city plotted over the top of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation. Decades of jurisdictional battles ensued. Just a handful of years before Gonzales Lyons became Tribal Chairman, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Tribal governments were the entities to make land-use decisions on reservation lands.

Gonzales Lyons was Vice-Chairman when she chaired the Tribal Council and worked with staff in drafting and completing the land exchange agreement between the Tribe and Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Gonzales Lyons led efforts after that to make sure the city of Palm Springs understood that the Tribe had the final say on zoning but would work with city leaders, as well, when possible. Earlier, the city had too often downsized the zoning for Tribal parcels, making much economic development unfeasible. "We felt we should have the ability to zone our own reservation," she explains, adding that they reached an agreement in which the city became an agent of sorts, overseeing the permit process





**LEFT:** Gonzales Lyons continued her Tribal service beyond her term as Chairwoman.

but delegating zoning rights to the Tribe. Similar land-use agreements were established with Cathedral City and the city of Rancho Mirage, as well. Years later, in 2007, Palm Springs Mayor Ron Oden presented a certificate of appreciation to Gonzales Lyons for her service to the Palm Springs community.

Gonzales Lyons worked with the Monument Advisory Committee, a board created by BLM to manage the establishment of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument and helped create the agreement with the BLM that established the Tribe as a co-manager of the monument.

"These were two significant accomplishments for the Tribe," she said. After her first term as Tribal Chairman ended in 1983, Gonzales Lyons decided to focus on raising a family; yet she'd continue to work on behalf of

the Tribe in the decades that followed, serving on the Agua Caliente Development Authority and the Indian Health Board, as well as the original Agua Caliente Cultural Committee.

Gonzales Lyons also worked on the Tribe's Eradicate Invasive Species Plan program. One of the major invasive species is the Tamarisk trees, also referred to as Salt Cedar, that used to be all around the reservation and invaded the canyons. The trees drain water reserves and produce a powder that prevents natural habitats from flourishing. They are still along the railroad right of way. She was also involved in establishing guidelines for the Cultural Monitoring Program the Tribe has today.

While issues surrounding land-use dominated Gonzales Lyons' first term on the Tribal Council, it was the new frontier of gaming that fell at the

forefront of Tribal policy when she rejoined the Council as Vice Chairman in 1993. Gaming, she was told, could help provide more educational opportunities and better healthcare for the Tribe — both of which had long been underfunded in Indian Country.

But before they could do anything, the Council needed membership approval. "We had to decide, together, if this is something we wanted to do," she says. The potential far outweighed the risk. Their first gaming facility, which included approximately 200 class two gaming machines, created an opportunity for the Tribe to establish its economic independence.

Gonzales Lyons went on to play a crucial role along with other tribal leaders including Chairman Richard M. Milanovich in getting gaming in California

for other tribes across the state, even working with attorneys on the first drafts of new tribal-state gaming compacts, which required smoothing out all the minute details, such as revenue sharing. "One of the terms we put in there was that the revenue we shared with the state would not go into the general fund but back to the local governments," she says.

In 2000, she looked out at an Agua Caliente casino construction site and told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "It's so beautiful, so much promise. It's our baby. Our future."

A future she helped shape.

Today, across the street from that very casino stands the new Agua Caliente Cultural Plaza, a testament to generations of cultural preservation, land stewardship, and leadership. Gonzales Lyons, who visited the Hot Mineral Spring as a child, when there was only a bathhouse and no spa, still remembers what it felt like to sink her toes into the sand all those years ago.

To be able to share such a sacred experience with her children and grandchildren — the next generation of leaders — lies at the heart of everything she and previous Tribal leaders have worked for. In fact, her family members serving on Tribal Council today include nephew Vincent Gonzales III, niece Jessica Norte, and cousin John R. Preckwinkle III. "They are our future," Gonzales Lyons says. "You always have to protect the past and the future. Because without both of them, you're no longer here." 🍌

*Miranda Caudell contributed to this article.*