

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

The rise and fall of Apple Valley's Hilltop House

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Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

A column in the Los Angeles Times in 1950 read, "Just to prove there are other resorts besides Palm Springs, your reporter drove to Apple Valley a few days ago and spent a couple of nights at the Inn ... and now will somebody kindly prove that there are other resorts besides Apple Valley! We're sold."

Apple Valley was a completely planned community and the "sparkplug of the project is a jolly fellow named Newt Bass. And in dreaming it up he stopped at nothing.... For example, while building the inn he needed timber for roof and ceiling beams. Out he went to find them and came upon an abandoned railroad trestle with the proper timber ... (he) was told he'd have to buy the whole railroad to get them." And so he did.

Bass and his partner, Bernard "Bud" Westlund, founded the Apple Valley Ranchos Land Development Co. in 1946.

Having to disassemble a railroad trestle for timber wasn't the only hurdle for the company. At the inception of the Apple Valley Inn, the telephone company refused to run telephone lines from the main lodge to its surrounding guest houses. How could one order room service without telephones?

One newspaper account reported Bass' solution: "In each of the 50 or so rooms, Bass stationed a caged carrier pigeon. For room service, pick up your pigeon, strap your order to its leg and release outside your window. The orders were received at the roost back in the main building. When the room service waiter appeared, he carried not only the order but a fresh pigeon to take over the duty."

Architectural historian Steve Vaught noted that Bass was a fascinating and intrepid man. "A self-made millionaire who had been raised on an Indian reservation in South Dakota, Newt moved to California at the age of 18 and became a roustabout in the burgeoning oil fields of Long Beach's famous Signal Hill and down at Santa Fe Springs. By 31, the enterprising Newt had begun drilling his own wells and by the time he was 40 he'd amassed such a fortune he was able to retire. It was his search for a perfect place to have a cattle ranch that led him to Apple Valley."

Entirely enamored with the valley, Bass and Westlund first built the inn, which almost immediately became a popular vacation destination for Hollywood celebrities including Bob Hope, Marilyn Monroe, John Wayne, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. Bass and Westlund would eventually build a country club, golf course, hospital and other civic buildings.

The surrounding housing subdivision started off slowly but soon made them many more millions by the sale of individual home lots where the living was easy.

Bass watched over his empire from a spectacular modernist house built on a 20-acre site situated high above the Apple Valley Inn. Appropriately named Hilltop House, it featured panoramic views for hundreds of miles into the Mojave Desert. "A view so vast," wrote Pictorial California in 1960, "that outer-space high is the feeling when standing within." Bass hired prominent Mexican modernist architect Francisco Artigas to design his showplace home. The young and daring Artigas designed a sleek, elongated glass box perched on the hill surrounded by a garden designed by Palm Desert's Tommy Tomson, as Tomson had been part of the master plan of the entirety of Apple Valley.

Inside, the fireplace wall was made of stone from the



The recently demolished Hilltop House perched above Apple Valley as designed by Francisco Artigas and landscaped by Tommy Tomson. PROVIDED BY THE MAYNARD PARKER PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION AT THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY

mountain. A massive boulder interrupted the interior space, hinting at a separation of the dining area from the living room. The pool was bisected by a retractable wall of glass that was the only thing separating the living room from the outside. Further, Artigas explained that electric push buttons opened sliding panels above, becoming skylights, "to coax indoors the sunshine by day and the stars by night." Pictorial California mused, "At night what a sight it must be – for Apple Valley and the Mojave have the most brilliant of stars."

Hilltop House was indeed lavish, costing some \$250,000, and was Apple Valley's most prominent landmark until a suspicious fire nearly destroyed it in 1967.

The circumstances of the fire were unclear. Two bandits ransacked the house, stealing silver and collectible guns. They threw the television into the pool and started a fire in the master bedroom next to a massive mahogany bed said to have been a stage prop in "Gone With the Wind." There had been previous incidents at the house involving minor thefts, raising further suspicions. Though who exactly did it, and why, remained a mystery. In 1961, the Hilltop House had been breached when someone swam underwater through the indoor/outdoor pool. That same week, Bass' private plane was stolen and flown to Mexico, necessitating Bass' private pilot traveling down to fly it back up.

Then in 1967, Hilltop House burned to the boulder-strewn ground. Artigas was not hired to rebuild it; instead, Tommy Tomson was given the assignment.

Tomson transformed it from its iconic modernist aesthetic into a Spanish one in a riff on the hacienda he designed for himself in Royal Carrizo in Mountain Center at the same time. That house was supposed to resemble a Spanish ruin in some ways. But the obliteration of Artigas' design was incomplete; Hilltop House still retained some of the original elements in a strange amalgamation that would fall into literal ruin. Perhaps the mashup of styles would have been satisfactory to Artigas. According to writer Travis Boyer, Esther McCoy — the architectural historian who worked with Julius Shulman (the photographer who most defined midcentury modern architecture) — wrote of Artigas: "In an effort to understand the needs of Mexico, (Artigas) accepted the lessons of colonial builders...naturally eclectic, his form of expression did not evolve but rather expressed parallel trends in time and separate in space."

Hilltop House was subsequently used as an office and then mostly forgotten after Bass' death in 1983. The wreck of the house stood abandoned for decades until last week. For years, the town of Apple Valley sought to buy it and have it restored, but those plans never came to fruition. Last week, the decaying skeleton of Hilltop House was finally demolished. The city now plans to build an observation deck on Bass Hill, allowing the public to enjoy the same views that first captivated Newt Bass almost 80 years ago.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun.