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THE LEGACY OF HERMOSA INN

PARADISE VALLEY – The present Paradise Valley, bordered by Squaw Peak to the north, the canal to the south, Camelback Mountain to the east, and to the west, the wide-open desert, was far beyond Phoenix city limits in the 1930s. But when cowboy artist Alonzo "Lon" Megargee set his eyes on the isolated plot of land, it spoke to him – he built a one-room studio in the middle of it, and called it home.

Megargee, a native of Philadelphia, came West at the turn of the century, earning his way as a cowboy, bronco buster, stud poker dealer, commercial artist and home builder, among many occupations. He spent time chasing an idealized notion of the American Dream of ranchers, Indians and settlers that was fast fading even during his time. Along the way, his raw-boned charm snared several wives and earned him a well-deserved reputation as a ladies' man. But it was his adobe studio, set amidst the creosote that perhaps was closest to his heart.

Megargee added to the studio, to create more of a home using adobe blocks mixed and formed on site with the sandy desert soil. Working without formal plans, but influenced by the architecture he studied in Mexico and Spain, Megargee used old beams and wood from an abandoned mine, and aged the exterior walls by pouring a mixture of oil and ash over them from the roof. During the course of several years, Megargee created a uniquely Southwestern home he dubbed, "Casa Hermosa," which means Beautiful House.

To supplement his art income, Megargee began running Casa Hermosa as a guest ranch. He was a bachelor at the time, and Casa Hermosa had grown quite large. He was already hosting many of his friends who came to stay for extended visits, and it seemed natural that he turn this exchange into a side business. Most of his business was legal, but the sheriff did make several unannounced visits to check on rumors of late-night gambling sessions. Megargee thoughtfully provided guests with secret tunnels from the main house to the stables so that they could discretely disappear into the desert, if necessary.

By 1941, Megargee, in the midst of a divorce and in need of money, put Casa Hermosa, filled with his art and furnishings, on the market. The new owners, who had every intention of using the property as their private home, were surprised late one night by a taxi-full of guests, and found themselves in the guest ranch business.

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Over the years, the Inn evolved with different owners adding a pool, tennis courts and the casitas and villas. The name was changed to Hermosa Resort, and the property became the center of social life for the neighbors, who used it as an extra bedroom for their guests and swam in the pool during the summer months. But by the late 1980s, Hermosa Resort was caught in the real estate and savings-and-loan crunch that touched most of the West. In addition a devastating fire in 1987 severely damaged the main building – Megargee's old home.

In 1992, Paradise Valley residents Fred and Jennifer Unger who had become intrigued with the resort and its history, bought the property and set about to restore its original charm. The Ungers worked with builder and designer Dan MacBeth, also a Paradise Valley resident, to save the adobe walls of the fire-damaged main building, restore the charred old beams and clean up the original ironwork that graces the building inside and out. The interior of the building, which now houses a bar, *LON's at the hermosa* Restaurant and the Inn's reception area, was furnished to reflect a 1930s Southwestern ambiance, much like it was during Megargee's days. Prints of Megargee's artwork and photographs of him hang on the walls.

Known today as The Hermosa Inn, the property is one of the few remaining authentic Southwestern haciendas, featuring 35 individually decorated casitas. Its seclusion and privacy attract high-level corporate retreats and board meetings, as well as couples looking for an intimate desert hideaway. And its even been said that Megargee, who died in northern Arizona in 1960, still pays visits to Casa Hermosa from time to time.

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