

A PLACE INN THE SUN

The Painted Desert Inn has been welcoming travelers for almost 100 years. It's been a long, sometimes strange, journey — you can't even sleep there anymore — but after a lengthy debate about its best use, the historic building will soon return to its roots, offering refreshments to travelers for the first time in a long time.

BY KATHY MONTGOMERY

Once known as the "Pink Palace," the Painted Desert Inn stands out in the landscape of Petrified Forest National Park.

John Bureham

IMAGINE HOW WELCOME the Painted Desert Inn must have looked to early motorists along Route 66.

“That building was a beacon for travelers,” says Richard Ullmann, Petrified Forest National Park’s chief of interpretation and education. “Crankin’ through the West — hot, dusty, slow going — you see this little building in the middle of nowhere. People would say, ‘Thank God there’s something out here.’”

Now a National Historic Landmark inside the national park, the former Harvey House preserves nearly a century of history. Considered by many to be its architect’s masterpiece, the inn remains one of the few surviving examples of the architecture of its era. It also contains some of the most impressive work the

Civilian Conservation Corps ever produced, as well as some of Hopi artist Fred Kabotie’s final murals. Even Mary Colter left her mark: The inn was one of the last projects the celebrated architect undertook for the Fred Harvey Co.

It’s been a long, sometimes strange, journey for what locals called the “Pink Palace,” but after extended debate about its best use, the iconic building will soon return to its roots, offering refreshments to travelers for the first time in a long time.

HERBERT LORE BUILT what became the Painted Desert Inn near Petrified Forest National Monument in 1924. Called the “Desert Philosopher” by monument Superintendent Charles J. Smith, Lore operated a curio and rock shop in

Holbrook in the early 1920s and homesteaded land in the Painted Desert. At Kachina Point, he built an inn, trading post and restaurant with sweeping views of the Painted Desert. Because it was constructed of stone and petrified wood, Lore called his place Stone Tree House, billing it as the only house in the world made of petrified wood. “Its walls are some eighty million years old!” a brochure claimed.

Stone Tree House offered dining, Hopi and Navajo arts and crafts, and lodging in six guest rooms for \$2.50 a night. Lore also built a scenic rim drive and a trail to the desert floor, where he conducted auto tours.

The National Park Service began eyeing Lore’s land as early as 1931. Officials were particularly concerned about the area

called the Black Forest, which contained an abundance of petrified wood, including a black variety found nowhere else. The public had been pilfering the forest’s vast deposits, selling much of the petrified wood from roadside shacks. Smith, the superintendent, also worried that Lore’s operation could be siphoning potential visitors from the monument.

Using Public Works Administration funds, the Park Service bought Stone Tree House and 2,500 acres from Lore in 1936. The building already showed damage from expanding and contracting bentonite clay deposits under the structure. Those deposits would plague the building throughout its history and nearly cause its destruction.

Demolishing Stone Tree House and building from scratch



LEFT: Herbert Lore’s Stone Tree House, shown in the 1920s or ‘30s, was the predecessor of the Painted Desert Inn.

BELOW: The inn, which incorporated elements of the Stone Tree House, is shown during construction in March 1938.

RIGHT: Patrons sit at the Painted Desert Inn’s lunch counter in 1947, the year the Fred Harvey Co. took over as the inn’s concessionaire.

Courtesy of National Park Service



The inn featured a popular breakfast and lunch service, along with evening banquets and programs for local organizations. A taproom served wine, beer and liquor, and the concessionaire turned away hundreds of requests for the fully booked lodging.



Restored murals by Hopi artist Fred Kabotie decorate the Painted Desert Inn's dining room.
Mark Lipczynski

made sense financially, but funding for new construction was hard to get. So the Park Service decided to rebuild instead, recruiting noted architect Lyle Bennett for the project.

But estimates exceeded available funding, so the Park Service pressed a nearby Civilian Conservation Corps unit into service. CCC camp official Harold Cole wrote that the project offered a variety of work more interesting than any camp in the West. CCC enrollees quarried, hauled and cut stone; harvested aspen poles from White Mountain Apache Tribe land; and, under the guise of forest thinning, harvested ponderosa pines from the Sitgreaves National Forest. Some workers peeled logs, cut corbels and shaped beams. Others did ornamental work: building furniture, crafting stamped-tin light fixtures and painting intricate designs on skylights. Many went on to become skilled tradesmen.

But using CCC labor presented challenges. Enrollees were young, and many had never so much as seen a saw. The CCC's six-month terms meant constant training, and only one skilled laborer could be hired at a time, so a plumber had to be laid off before a finish carpenter could be hired. In 1938, authorization for CCC labor expired, temporarily shutting down the camp for almost three weeks.

Labor wasn't the only challenge. Many of Lore's walls proved unstable and had to be rebuilt. But Bennett's design involved strengthening many existing walls, a time-consuming and dangerous process. To use available funds, materials had to be ordered far in advance. Hardwood flooring, stored for 18 months, had warped by the time it was needed.

At one point, the underlying bentonite deposit literally reared its head, raising one side of the museum-room slab about 4 inches. Cole wrote, "When the tumult and shouting died down, this writer suggested that we wait until the moisture receded ... certain that conditions would return to normal." They did, leaving only minor damage. To deal with the issue over the long term, Cole suggested a trench cutoff that the Arizona Highway Department had successfully used on Route 66, but his advice went unheeded.

The inn reopened on July 4, 1940, as the Painted Desert Inn, bearing little resemblance to Stone Tree House. Bennett's design reflected his study of architecture in New Mexico and his years at Colorado's Mesa Verde National Park: Window and door openings were made to echo old pueblo build-

ings where wet adobe was shaped by the sweeping motions of women's arms.

"A softening and decorative touch of early Spanish is introduced by the use of adzed beams and carved corbels and brackets," wrote supervising architect Lorimer Skidmore.

Enrollees sandblasted window and door frames to make them look aged. Ceilings accented with ponderosa pine vigas framed 2-foot-thick plastered walls. Decorative finishes included punched-tin lanterns, Spanish Colonial furniture, skylights painted with prehistoric pottery designs and scored concrete floors stained with Indian blanket patterns.

When it was finished, Cole wrote, "the whole interior seemed to glow."

BUSINESS BOOMED. The inn featured a popular breakfast and lunch service, along with evening banquets and programs for local organizations. A taproom served wine, beer and liquor, and the concessionaire turned away hundreds of requests for the fully booked lodging.

With the exception of a period during World War II when the inn closed, Standard Concessions Inc. of Chicago operated the facility until 1947. When the park superintendent fired the

manager, whose drinking had become a scandal, the Park Service began looking for another concessionaire.

The Fred Harvey Co. took over during the summer of 1947, and by December, business had doubled. That year, the company announced that its acclaimed architect, Mary Colter, would remodel the inn. Colter's changes included a new color scheme, an improved lunch counter and plate-glass windows to take advantage of the views. Most importantly, she hired Hopi artist Fred Kabotie to paint murals in the lunchroom and dining room.

By the time he came to the Painted Desert, Kabotie was well known and respected, with the murals Colter commissioned at the Grand Canyon's Desert View Watchtower among his notable achievements. Kabotie's largest mural at the Painted Desert Inn depicts the Hopi journey through the Painted Desert to gather salt from Zuni Salt Lake.

In 1953, a fire killed Marion Mace, the inn's manager. It started in Mace's room, probably from a cigarette. Park Service employee Clinton Harkins broke down the door and dragged Mace outside, though not in time to save her from smoke inhalation. Since then, rangers have reported smelling smoke and hearing steps and other noises when the building is empty.

DESPITE THE INN'S POPULARITY, the Fred Harvey Co. struggled to make it profitable. During the 1950s, it stopped accepting lodgers and served only lunch. By then, the roof leaked, and the bentonite deposits continued to cause cracks, including some 5 inches wide. There was serious talk of razing the building, particularly after Harvey moved its concession to the new visitors center complex in the early 1960s. The Painted Desert Inn closed in 1963, the year after Petrified Forest was upgraded to a national park.

The Park Service used the inn intermittently, but debate about its future raged for years. Writing for the Park Service's historic preservation arm, Thomas Mulhern Jr. concluded that practically every person who had faced the question had been "appalled at the thought of demolition" but "sufficiently intimidated by practical problems" of saving the inn.

He ended the debate with a strong recommendation to rehabilitate the building. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in October 1975 and designated a National Historic Landmark 12 years later.

Debate continued about the best use of the building, which underwent extensive restoration over the years and today serves as a museum and gift shop, with exhibits about Route 66 and the CCC.

In 2015, Xanterra Parks & Resorts, which acquired the Fred Harvey Co. in 1968, declined to bid for the park's concessions contract, ending nearly seven decades at the park. The new concessionaire, Ortega National Parks, plans to serve beverages, ice cream and grab-and-go sandwiches in the taproom, beginning on Memorial Day.

"I would consider this an ongoing process to bring [the Painted Desert Inn] back to some semblance of its original purpose and splendor," says Ullmann, the park official.

"I'm looking forward to having a nice, cold ice cream when that thing opens up. I want to be first in line." **AH**