

Remembering Apacheland

By Tom Kollenborn © 2004

on Valentine's Day, 2004.

Apacheland burned to the ground for the second time in its forty-three year history on Saturday, Valentine's Day, February 14, 2004, as flames leaped three hundred feet into the night sky near King's Ranch about 6:30 p.m.

The fire reportedly began somewhere near the restaurant in an electrical box. Some twenty-five patrons in the Apacheland restaurant escaped the fire unharmed, but once again a devastating fire had become a part of this movie set's history.

The fire only left a few buildings standing. Ironically, the little white chapel used in Elvis Presley's film "*Charro*" survived for the second time. The Apache Junction Fire Department was still putting out hot spots on Sunday morning.

The fire was devastating to Ed and Sue Birmingham and their employees. They have always prided themselves so much in preserving the movie history of the area. Apacheland was a special place to many people. A place where memories of our silver screen cowboy heroes came alive and reminded us of how important their impact were on our lives.

Television series such as *The Rifleman* with Chuck Connors, *Wyatt Earp* with Hugh O'Brien, *Wanted Dead or Alive* with Steve McQueen, *Have Gun, Will Travel* with Richard Boone, *The Virginian*, *Rawhide*, and several episodes of *Little House on the Prairie* produced television heroes for many us. Audie Murphy, Ronald Reagan, Kenny Rogers, Elvis Presley and Jason Robards were just some of the silver screen feature length stars who performed for the cameras at Apacheland.

Apacheland was first planned to be an amusement park and film studio late in 1959. Original construction on the set began on February 12, 1960, and the groundbreaking ceremony was held on March 19, 1960, with Will Rogers Jr. being on hand.

William W. Creighton was the man behind the dream when he came to Apache Junction in the late 1950's. Spencer D. Stewart helped make this dream come true by providing the financial backing for Apacheland. The movie set was originally constructed for Dick Powell's *Death Valley Days* and originally starred Robert Taylor and later, Ronald Reagan. A large sound studio was constructed on the western end of the lot. The walls of this studio were about forty feet high. Winds have since toppled this massive sound stage.

My first involvement with Apacheland was when my wife, Sharon, and her friend purchased a hundred shares each of the first stock offered for sale to the public by Superstition Mountain Enterprises, Inc. in July of 1960. We all sat in the Cowboy Steak House at Apacheland and signed the papers for the stock. We walked the streets of Apacheland and admired our investment in the future. Superstition Mountain Enterprises, Inc. once more offered stock for sale on August 4, 1961. The Federal Securities Exchange Commission authorized the sale of two million shares at two dollars and fifty cents a share. I have found no figures on how much of this stock actually sold in the early 1960's.

William W. Creighton had dreams of a large hotel for the stars in Apache Junction. This idea became a reality when the Superstition Ho Hotel was completed in 1960. Creighton also brought the Houston Colt 45's baseball team to Apache Junction for spring training at Geronimo Park in 1961 and 1962. An economic slump in 1964 brought the development of Apache Junction and Apacheland to a halt.

The fifty-four acre western town Apacheland was sold at sheriff's auction on January 29, 1965, to satisfy a loan held against the movie set by Home Savings and Loan. The Superstition Mountain Enterprise had finally failed and Apacheland had gone into receivership. John Porter Manufacturing Co. took over Apacheland after purchasing it at the sheriff's auction. Spencer D. Stewart owned the John Porter Manufacturing Company.

On July 13, 1977, Vernon Piehl purchased the studio, according to local newspapers, from Spencer D. Stewart. At this time Apacheland was renamed Superstition Studios. Artist Ted DeGrazia was involved with the studio for a short time, but later opted to do his own gallery near the base of Superstition Mountain east of Apache Junction.

On Labor Day 1977, Vernon Piehl planned a big new grand opening for the Superstition Studios, but Piehl could never make Apacheland go as Superstition Studio so the property remained in the hands of Sue Schilleman, the daughter of Stewart Spencer.

In January of 1981 the old movie set was put up for auction. An offer of four hundred thousand dollars was turned down for the movie set. During the spring of 1981, the 7th Confederate States Cavalry did a reenactment of the "Battle of Gettysburg" at Apacheland. A large crowd was on hand for this reenactment, but Ed and Sue Birmingham closed Apacheland in 1984.

There was another attempt to open Apacheland on January 3, 1990, by a group called Apacheland Tours and Chuck Wagon Dinners. Charlie Graves came down from Colorado looking for a new place for his chuck wagon dinners and theater. This venture also failed after a season or so.

Sadly enough, a lot of historical artifacts and materials were lost in these two fires. The first fire claimed Levis Brown's collection early medical instruments that belonged to Dr. L. M. Tompkins of Gilbert. Many of the instruments dated back to 1910. Many photographs autographed by Hollywood were lost in both fires. Ben Cole possessed one of the finest collections of photographs autographed by Hollywood stars.

The film *Charro* starring Elvis Presley was made at Apacheland when he was at the peak of his career in 1968. The small white church that still stands after to fires was actually blown up by canon fire in the film.

The following spring, the first fire occurred. Jack McGill and Don Hunt discovered the first fire at about 11 p.m. on May 25, 1969. This fire burned into the morning of the next day. Howard Jones, the Apache Junction Fire Department's chief at the time took the call at 12 a.m. Cliff Russell, chief engineer, helped fight the fire. Cliff said he had a truck on the scene within twenty minutes of the call.

After this devastating fire Apacheland was rebuilt in time to start shooting of *Death Valley Days* on July 25, 1969. Also at the same time Dallas Adair moved his riding stable down to Apacheland from Lake City, Colorado, to help out during the filming of *Death Valley Days*. Dallas told me one day he had moved down just in time for the fire.

Early in 1993, Ed and Sue (Schilleman) Birmingham began to restore Apacheland to its original movie set condition. Hard work, sweat and tears helped to build the movie set again. They opened a restaurant and saloon on April 16, 1994, that became very popular in the Apache Junction-Gold Canyon area. Ed Birmingham revitalized an old movie set and found filming companies interested in it. HBO filmed *Blind Justice* starring Armand Assante.

The Birmingham's worked closely with the Arizona Film Commission and the Apache Junction Film Commission. Ed and Sue helped sponsor the "Elvis Lives" festival two years in row. The restaurant and streets of Apacheland once again attracted people from around the country and the world. The Birmingham's were involved in many charitable community events at Apacheland, and did everything at Apacheland with class. Apacheland had found new stars.

Those who have enjoyed working at Apacheland and those who enjoyed visiting all know how important the values of our silver screen cowboy heroes have always been. Apacheland reminded us of the past and that good always won. This was part of the value of this wonderful place called Apacheland.



Photos by Dennis Judd



Photos by Jill Jones