



Feb. 26, 2006----

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- In 1956, parents of both teen idol Natalie Wood and actor Robert Wagner stayed at the Hotel Valley Ho in downtown Scottsdale. When Wood and Wagner got hitched on Dec. 28, 1957, the elder Wagners suggested they have their reception at the Arizona hotel to escape Hollywood paparazzi.

"They had a private train car to go to Colorado for their honeymoon," recalled former Hotel Valley Ho general manager Mike Doherty during a conversation in the hotel lobby. "They stayed a little long at their reception. Of course, trains don't wait. The train took off -- and Wood and Wagner got in a car and started chasing the train through Phoenix."

The kids were after dreams in the sun.

Now there's a metaphor for Chicago Cubs fans. And after a \$70 million renovation, Hotel Valley Ho reopened on Dec. 20, 2005 -- 49 years to the day that it first opened -- and now is one of the hottest spots to stay in during one of the hottest years of spring training.

Scottsdale offers the best old-school atmosphere in the Cactus League. The current Scottsdale Stadium was built in 1991, but it carries an intimate 1961 feel. The stadium has undergone a renovation, too, which includes new practice facilities and a reconfigured right-field viewing area with a stunning view of Camelback Mountain along the left-field line.

The Cubs stayed at the Ho in Scottsdale for spring training between 1967-69. Manager Leo Durocher always requested Room 103 because it was close to the lobby. The hotel is within walking distance from Scottsdale Stadium, where the Cubs played in the late '60s.

Before the Cubs' arrival, the Boston Red Sox trained in Scottsdale. The late Ted Williams stayed at the Ho. (Ironically, what's left of Teddy Ballgame remains frozen in a cylinder at the Alcor Life Extension Foundation lab in Scottsdale.)

In fact, in 1956 the Red Sox became the first team to train in Scottsdale. The Scottsdale Baseball Club recruited Boston, who stayed in the desert sun until 1965. The Scottsdale Charros (Spanish for "Gentleman Riders") were formed in 1961 as an arm of the chamber of commerce and held their initial meeting at the Hotel Valley Ho. In 1967, the Charros brought the Cubs to Scottsdale, and since then the nonprofit group has helped organize and promote spring training events.

Mike Murphy, afternoon host at WSCR-AM (670), has one of the most brilliant baseball minds in Chicago. He was an original Bleacher Bum who made the 1968

and '69 spring pilgrimages to Scottsdale. Most Cubs fans are 90 percent scar tissue, but Murphy is still 90 percent heart.

"We hung around the Ho, but we didn't stay there," Murphy recalled. "The Bleacher Bums had no money. We'd stay at the Safari motel next door since razed, sometimes 10 bums to a room. At the time, the Ho was the high-roller place in the Sun Valley. There were very few resorts, other than the Biltmore. And even though Mr. Philip K. Wrigley owned the Arizona Biltmore and the Cubs, he wasn't putting the guys up there.

"The Bums could walk to the Ho from the ballpark after a game. I remember on the grassy area in front of the first-level rooms, there was a miniature golf course in the middle of the Ho complex. It was unbelievable for Chicago kids because the course wasn't on concrete. It was actually on grass. You'd see Ron Santo or Glenn Beckert out there putting. We'd be out there with our cans of beer, putting."

Former Cubs pitcher Buddy Schultz (1975-76) is now a Scottsdale resident and executive director of Arizona Baseball Charities. In a separate interview at Cowboy Ciao restaurant in Scottsdale, he said, "Remember, we didn't have cars back when I played. We were limited to the area we were in. We had to walk to the stadium, the Pink Pony steakhouse in downtown Scottsdale. And spring training has grown in proportion to the number of teams we have in southern Arizona.

"When I played, there were six teams; now there's a dozen. You have that many more people coming out here. Scottsdale population 234,900 is no longer a small city that shuts down at night."

But what the heck is a ho?

"There's many connotations," said hotel manager Doherty, "but it is an Indian word meant to be that you're very welcome -- it's a friendly place. Over the years, it became, 'I'll meet you at the Ho.' It's been a great landmark."

The hotel property retains its Frank Lloyd Wright vibe in the way the architecture blends in with the Southwestern landscape. The mid-century-modern design incorporates all glass walls that open to patios. The refurbished "O" swimming pool is cast in a perfect circle. The hotel itself is linear and feels close to the earth. Original natural concrete balcony brick has been restored and specified to the design of original architect Edward L. Varney, who was from Scottsdale.

On May 16, Trader Vic's will open a 200-seat restaurant, bar and patio on the northeast end of the property. The Ho currently features Cafe ZuZu, a mid-century American diner serving comfort food such as chicken noodle soup, beef stroganoff and Yukon gold mashed potatoes. Back in the day, the diner was called Summerfield's.

Robert and Evelyn Foehl built the hotel, which was one of the first year-round

resorts in Scottsdale. Before opening the Ho, the Foehls managed the Lake Arrowhead Resort near the San Bernardino Mountains of Southern California. Lake Arrowhead was a getaway for Hollywood stars.

"The Foehls brought in all the celebrities," Doherty said. "They knew Marilyn Monroe, Bogart, James Cagney. Jimmy Durante played in the lounge here. He'd go out to dinner at night, come back at 11 o'clock and just play the piano for three or four hours until they kicked him out. Bing Crosby would get up and take a walk around the grounds with his corncob pipe." And, dahling, Zsa Zsa Gabor was a regular guest, and her daughter, Francesca, enjoyed horseback riding around Camelback Mountain.

"When the hotel was built, it was Frank Lloyd Wright-type architecture, which was most unusual for us," said Jo Ann Handley, vice president of the Scottsdale Historical Society and a lifelong Scottsdale resident. Some locals called the Hotel Valley Ho "The Baby Biltmore" in reference to the Wright-influenced Arizona Biltmore in Phoenix.

In 1973, the Ramada chain took over the Ho. The hotel became known as the Ramada Valley Ho Resort, which it remained until it closed in 2001. It then took two years of planning and two years of construction to restore the hotel.

The south end of the original Ho has been torn down to make room for condominiums. A tower atop the hotel features 37 luxury condominiums that sold out, with prices up to \$1.5 million. The Ho retained 194 hotel rooms which create a "Jetsons"-in-the-desert flavor. Rooms have terrazzo tile baths, 32-inch LCD flat-screen TVs and wireless Internet access throughout.

"What they've done here is incredible," said Doherty, one of the original officers of the Doubletree Hotel chain. "They kept the Frank Lloyd Wright facade. And they kept a great number of guest rooms the same. They redid everything, of course, but when they built hotels in 1956 they built big guest rooms. They kept the concrete block and just put in the new retro stuff. Even when I was here the historical society was constantly visiting, wanting to know what we were doing and wanting to make sure we kept the place intact."

Doherty looked around the lobby and into the swinging lounge where the past hit on the present. "The lobby is about the same as it has always been. The crowd has changed. Before, it would be the same old people sitting in the bar every night. This is a much younger and seemingly hip, Los Angeles crowd. But you still get the warmth."