

March 14, 2004---

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- The American Southwest is a slow dance between desert and mountains. Frank Lloyd Wright's magnificent Taliesin West sweeps across the Sonoran desert like a symphony at the foothills of the McDowell Mountains. Not far away, the historic Camelback Inn sits in a valley nestled between the Camelback and Mummy Mountains.

Music can be heard in the wonder of the stars and the beauty of the saguaro. The landscape makes you feel humble. And humility is a gift of travel.

I am spending a few hours at Taliesin West with my friend John Rattenbury, who studied under Wright until Wright's death in 1959. Rattenbury is one of the last direct links to Wright.

They collaborated on the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Marin County Civic Center in California. Rattenbury arrived at Taliesin West in 1950. He still lives on the property, where he is a principal architect. I mention how, during the early mornings, I can see for miles from my casita at the Camelback Inn, absorbing all that is in front of me.

"Nature was Frank Lloyd Wright's great inspiration," Rattenbury says while standing in his crowded one-level apartment. He doesn't do many interviews, but he is happy to point out an ample collection of seashells and ocean fossils.

"I have a microscope to look at things," he says. "I have a telescope to look out at the sky in the evening. I see all the planets swirling around. This is incredible."

Rattenbury is 75 years old. This keeps him forever young.

The Camelback Inn is the perfect dance partner.

When the inn opened in 1936, its motto was "Where Time Stands Still." Those words still appear in vivid copper block letters next to a clock frozen at 12:20 above the adobe-style lobby. In 1937, Wright bought several acres of rugged desert at the foothills of the McDowell Mountains and, with architectural apprentices, began construction of Taliesin West, which became his winter home. Wright and his family spent the other nine months of the year at Taliesin in Spring Green, Wis.

Now incorporating 600 acres, Taliesin West includes a drafting studio, Wright's former architectural office, a dining room and kitchen, a conference room, two theaters and pools. Residences for the apprentices of the architecture school are being restored. Wright's living quarters are also being restored to the way they looked when he died in 1959. They will open to the public later this year.

Rattenbury looks at Wright's main studio. It is finished in a soothing Cherokee red. "Long before people had concern over energy, Frank Lloyd Wright designed the studio so it would have natural light," he says. "Architects need lots of light to draw by. Sunlight is free. Fresh air is free. The inspiration for the building comes from the desert itself, the forms, the color."

Camelback founder Jack Stewart fell in love with the orange-red Arizona terrain on a lonely horseback ride through the Sonoran desert. He was a failed sportswriter from Cashel, N.D., who had moved into public relations before scoring in the hotel industry. Stewart searched out Edward Loomis Bowes, the designer of a Phoenix adobe development. They collaborated on the Camelback Inn's pueblo design that blended into the valley like a pocket full of dreams.

University of Illinois football coach Robert Zuppke, one of Stewart's friends, became the resort's first guest. Other pioneer tourists included Max Blouet, the former general manager of the Ambassador West in Chicago, and the Ed Brach candy family. This Midwestern link exists today.

Camelback general manager Wynn Tyner there's a great Southwestern name says that during peak season 40 percent of Camelback's clients come from the Chicago area. Between December and April they fill up the 453 casitas that meander across 125 acres of desert. The property's flora and fauna include red and yellow honeysuckle and the mesquite tree, which natives of the Sonoran desert called "the tree of life" because it supplied food (bean pods), dyes and medicine. Arizona jackrabbits, mourning doves and quail also embrace the area.

By the 1940s, notables like Clark Gable and Jimmy Stewart had discovered the Camelback. John F. Kennedy recuperated from his PT-109 accident at the Camelback, and J. W. Marriott Sr. was an early visitor. He purchased the resort in 1967 from Stewart. The Camelback became the first Marriott resort property.

Every year Bill Marriott Jr., Marriott Corp. chairman and CEO, celebrates his birthday at Camelback. Tyner says, "It is his favorite property out of 2,700 properties. You have privacy here. You're not walking down corridors or looking at guests on an elevator. When it was a Hollywood hideaway, people would take the train Santa Fe here. Once here, you would ride horses through the desert to the front door of the resort. There was not a single building in the area. It was by itself."

The isolation within nature is also what shaped Taliesin West, about 12 miles northeast of Camelback Inn. More than 120,000 people visit Taliesin West annually. Taliesin (tally-ehssen) means "shining brow" in Welsh, the nationality of Wright's ancestors.

Rattenbury says, "The city of Scottsdale didn't exist in the 1940s. It didn't even exist when I came in 1950. I remember one night around 1955 we had a presentation in the theater. Afterwards, Mr. Wright came out and some of us followed him. He went out to the point on a cliff. He carried a cane, not because he needed it to walk with,

but because it was such a useful tool. He could move things around with his cane. He started counting the city lights with his cane. He got up to about 10. Then he said, 'Time to move on.' He didn't want to be surrounded by architecture of other people."

During the late 1940s Frank Lloyd Wright wrote for Arizona Highways magazine. In a 1949 article he expressed concern about Taliesin West becoming a tourist attraction. He wrote how the fellowship created a code system to distract sightseers: "We put up our own private markers in steel paint to show the way only to those who knew what the 'red square' meant. We tried to be kind to all interested strangers. But if we were going to work and plan buildings there as we intended, we couldn't be a circus act or a tourist camp at the same time."

Rattenbury stops at a red square near Wright's studio. "See the initials, FLW?" he asks. "Every time I come through here, I take my little red pen and clean this up." Rattenbury pulls a pen out of his pocket, bends over and adds more red to the steel square. He smiles, ever so gently.

This is a man of distinction at work. The Camelback Inn is a place of distinction at play. They share a landscape limited only by the imagination.