

Reviving a Relic

VOLUNTEERS RESCUE A DEFUNCT TRADING POST
ON HISTORIC ROUTE 66

by Jim Ross

Many call it the crown jewel of Route 66 relics. Vacant for six decades, it haunts a forgotten, decayed stretch of the Mother Road in the shadow of the Painted Desert, east of Holbrook, Arizona. The Painted Desert Trading Post was established in this harsh environment around 1940 by cattleman Dotch Garland Windsor, who saw opportunity in the number of tourists motoring daily past his small ranch. He sold rugs and jewelry (both likely Navajo-made), sundries, and Gulf Oil gasoline. Life there was good until 1958, when a bypass alignment of U.S. 66 opened where I-40 is today and traffic at the trading post dried up like a shut-off spigot. Thereafter, tumbleweeds and dust devils replaced the flow of Detroit steel, and Windsor soon moved to Holbrook, where he died in 1964 at age 68.

In 2018, with the trading post nearing collapse, word that the property was available found its way to Route 66 preservationist “Roamin’ Rich” Dinkela. Dinkela called this writer, and within 24 hours the two of them had recruited seven others from around the country to pony up and purchase the revered icon from its owner, a California dentist. Following an on-site assessment, the owners group formed the nonprofit Route 66 Co-Op, began raising funds, and acquired a grant from the National Park Service along with eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The rescue was on.

The goals were simple enough: stabilize the building and manage access for visitors. Executing the tasks needed to accomplish them was not as simple. The structure was seriously compromised, with a sagging, rotted roof and a crumbling foundation, both of which had caused the walls to slump and bulge. Cattle bumping into the building had



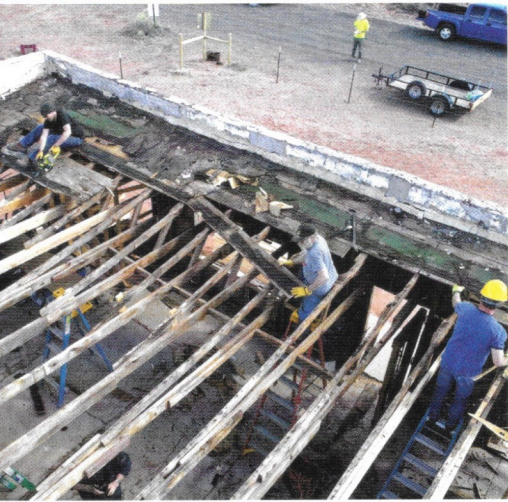
done significant damage both inside and out. After consulting with other preservationists experienced in similar projects, the group developed a plan to raise and straighten the walls, replace the entire roof structure, and replace the foundation. No attempt at complete restoration would be made; the trading post was a relic and would remain so.

The site had no electricity or water, and most sources for materials were 60 miles away. This required careful planning before each weeklong work session. Co-Op members and volunteers, who journeyed to Arizona from as far as Oregon and New York, included construction managers, engineers, and journeyman contractors.

Painted Desert Trading Post in May of 2021, after volunteers repaired the stucco walls (leaving them in a state of arrested decay) and re-created lost window casings.

None, however, had attempted such an undertaking, and improvisation soon found a place at the daily problem-solving table.

Raising the walls involved significant risk, as a single mishap could cause the weakened building to break. It was done using multiple screw jacks and timbers strategically placed beneath beams bolted to the walls and ceiling joists. Jacks were cranked one half-turn at a time, stopping at the sound of each ominous pop and crack so crew members could inspect stress points and general stability. Once a



From top left: Workers removing the old roofing; An aerial view of the post in 2018. Historic Route 66 is a National Treasure of the National Trust.

wall was elevated, a temporary shear wall was built just inside and parallel to the exterior wall to secure it in place.

With the walls raised and aligned, removal of the roof's tattered sheet metal



and decking followed. Ceiling joists were replaced next, one at a time, then the rafters. Decking and corrugated sheet metal similar to the old materials came from specialty shops in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Foundation work required complete levitation of the building. The shear walls inside, along with timber beams extended through window and door openings, held the structure aloft and allowed for the digging of a perimeter trench. Steel reinforcing bars were then added. Concrete, trucked 50 miles from Joseph City, Arizona, was then poured up to the bottoms of the walls, which had been positioned on plane with the slab floor inside.

Subsequent work sessions focused on stucco repair and replacement of window casings. As of press time, application of dry-brush paint and enhancement of the building's ghosted lettering were underway, along with the installation of eight interpretive panels. Because the property is now mostly surrounded by a large cattle ranch, visitors gain access through a gate with a smart lock and instructions to obtain entry. The trading post is 2.5 miles west of the gate on the old U.S. 66 roadway, and as long as the weather is dry, passenger vehicles have no trouble getting there.

The Painted Desert Trading Post stands as a timeless symbol of the route's glory years and the social and cultural changes brought on by America's coming of age in the post-World War II era. Likewise, its rescue exemplifies what can be achieved by grassroots preservationists who understand the value of these testaments to our heritage and take the steps necessary to ensure their continued presence on the landscape. 

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