10 WILDFLOWER HIKES & SCENIC DRIVES

ARIZONA HIGHWAYS
ESCAPE • EXPLORE • EXPERIENCE

MARCH 2012

OUR ANNUAL
Wildflower Portfolio

LAKE POWELL
THEN & NOW

CASA GRANDE'S HISTORIC HOTEL

WINSLOW
OUR HOMETOWN
OF THE MONTH
Revival Minister

Fred Phillips calls himself a "restoration practitioner," but residents of Yuma call him a savior. Literally. And for good reason. In the heart of their city, he helped transform 400 acres of riverfront land, which had been overgrown with weeds, trash dumps and hobo camps, back into a vibrant wetlands area.

The call of the Colorado River rings in the hearts of those who have been fortunate enough to experience its famed waters. For Fred Phillips, that call rang a little louder than most, and ultimately carved out a career.

While Phillips pursued a degree in landscape architecture at Purdue University, he developed a passion for Native American culture. That interest led to a fortuitous meeting during which he learned about the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) along Arizona's western border. He then spent a summer developing a master plan for the tribes' inaccessible Colorado River Corridor. Armed with a degree and some grant-writing experience, Phillips headed back to Arizona in 1994 with only his Ford Ranger and a job offer from CRIT to implement his master plan.

The Colorado River had once served as CRIT's lifeline, but the infestation of pervasive, non-native tarantula plants created a barrier between the people and the river. Phillips' 'Ah'ahway Tribal Preserve Restoration Plan aimed to make the river a part of pride once again and reunite the native people with this valuable resource.

After almost six years of navigating tribal, state and federal systems, and securing nearly $6 million in grant funding, Phillips transformed more than 1,000 acres of previously underutilized land into what's known today as the 'Ah'ahway Tribal Preserve. With the return of native riparian plants and wetlands restoration, CRIT has a place where locals and visitors alike can explore the Colorado River.

Phillips gave CRIT the knowledge and resources to continue the revegetation work on their own, but on a personal level, the experience inspired him to tackle other sections of the river — a waterway he considers to be "the most manipulated river in the United States."

Before the arrival of man, river systems took care of themselves, Phillips says. Enter a population of people eager to live in the desert — but needing the water, food and electricity not naturally found in the area — and you have a river that's no longer able to care for itself.

"As long as 25 million people are utilizing the Colorado River for their livelihoods, it's always going to need a caretaker," Phillips says.

He formalized his self-proclaimed "restoration practitioner" role and started Hapagstaff-based Fred Phillips Consulting, which specializes in ecosystem restoration.

If his work with CRIT put him on the map, Phillips' work with the Yuma East Wetlands project is considered his masterpiece. Ironically, it was a magazine article about the 'Ah'ahway Tribal Preserve that attracted the attention of Charles Flynn, executive director of the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area.

Yuma had a planning grant for the project, but was faced with an overwhelming 1,400 acres of riverfront land that was overgrown with non-native vegetation, trash dumps and hobo camps. Flynn needed someone who could make the river accessible again to the community, and he knew that Phillips was his man.

"Building consensus among the stakeholders, completing the design and securing all the environmental compliance took three years of work before we could even turn one shovel in the restoration process," Flynn says. "It took Fred's unswerving commitment to make it happen."

The numbers for the Yuma East Wetlands project are staggering: six years, 16 different landowners, $20 million in grant funding and the removal of 75,000 trees, all leading to the transformation of more than 400 acres into a vibrant wetlands area.

For Flynn and other Yuma residents, the project was about more than numbers. Their return on investment came in the form of native wildlife returning to the banks of the Colorado River. Once the massive tangle of invasive vegetation was gone, birds, fish and other wildlife moved back in to reclaim their habitat. Even the endangered Yuma clapper rail celebrated the return of native vegetation.

And perhaps more importantly, these elusive birds can now be found nesting and roosting in the East Wetlands.

As he did for CRIT, Phillips gave the people of Yuma something they'd long been missing — a connection to the river. What had been an eyesore is now a gathering place, a recreation haven, and a model for conservation. And this recreation is now balanced with the needs of the environment.

The idea of balance is a guiding force in Phillips' work, and while his success with river restoration has drawn him to other watersheds, he will always consider the Colorado River to be the "fertile bed" of his existence. "It has provided me with a career that I love, a place of serenity," he says. "And it's taught me so many lessons about life."

— JACOB MILLER

THE PINK PONY
Scottsdale

Because of its appeal among fans, players and managers during spring training, The New Yorker once called the Pink Pony "the best baseball restaurant in the land." Since then, it's been through a transformation of sorts, and now offers a "Savory-Bite Stretch," happy hour and an updated menu. We recently talked with co-owner Reed Gobacs, who purchased the restaurant after its legendary owner, Charlie Daley, passed away.

What's been the biggest challenge in renovating the Pink Pony?

"We're still in the process, but we're working to take American classic comfort food and make it modern. We've also added some patio doors and a large window, where before you couldn't even see the walls. The height of the ceiling has even been increased to update the feeling of the dining room."

Does the Pony still live up to its title of "the best baseball restaurant in the land?"

It still is. We miss Charlie, but we still have the memorabilia. Carl Hubbell, Sports Illustrated photos, baseball bats and jerseys, still like the walls.

Are people adjusting to the new menu?

Some of the old regulars come in, and people are trying new things like the Tomato and White Cheddar Drop shot, the prime rib and the meatloaf cupcake, which is shaped like a cupcake with potato frosting. People say we've kept the nostalgia of the old Pink Pony."

— MADDIE PINCOTT

The Pink Pony is located at 3818 N. Scottsdale Road in Scottsdale. For more information, call 480-943-0997 or visit www.pinkponyrestaurant.com.