

"One Final Makeover"

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Opinion by Bonnie Henry

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She knew her way around a powder puff and a party - many of them held right here in Tucson. It began in the early 1920s when a 5-foot-2 dynamo named Merle Norman began concocting cosmetics in a coffee pot on her kitchen stove, stirring the ingredients with a sawed-off broom handle. By the mid-1930s, Merle Norman Cosmetics was a national force, with headquarters in Los Angeles and 94 studios scattered throughout the country. But its founder knew how to play as hard as she worked, especially in Tucson.

"Everybody was trying to get her to move to Palm Springs," says Tom Dixon, Norman's assistant from 1951 until her death in 1972. Instead, Norman acquired some raw desert land along Wrightstown Road. On it would go a rambling ranch house, swimming pool, even a nine-hole golf course. "The pool was the water hole," says Dixon, who inherited the house after Norman died.

In 2004, he sold the home and its surrounding 13 acres to Tucson architect Diana Osborne, who is building upscale homes on the property - now dubbed "Rancho Merlita." Osborne also has brought back Norman's home to its former glory and then some - pulling up carpeting and gutting and modernizing the kitchen, but leaving the flagstone floors, the ceiling beams, the rhyolite stone fireplace.

Once construction - and its hubbub - is finished on the new homes, Osborne hopes to turn Norman's home into a bed-and-breakfast. But she also sees it as a site for corporate retreats, charity fundraisers, even symphonies under the stars. "I thought, 'Why not share this gorgeous little bit of history?'" says Osborne, whose own Southern Arizona roots go back to the early 1880s with Eugene Childs, a great-grandfather who worked a ranch in Aravaipa Canyon.

Sharing her home was also a priority for Norman, who bused in her employees all the way from Los Angeles for her annual Fourth of July parties. "There were hundreds of people there," says Dixon.

"They were just great, big huge parties and she'd pay for all the people to come," says Cele Peterson, who met Norman after she came into her Downtown shop. "She was 5-by-5, and I had to find her clothes," says Peterson, who traveled to Los Angeles to do just that. "She was just a fun-loving, darling person, full of energy and vitality." And maybe a little bit of devilry.

"The home was finished in 1950 and I came in 1951," says Dixon, who arrived right at rodeo time.

"Merle Norman met me at the airport with a limousine. I had on this glittery cowboy outfit.

"We were riding along Wrightstown Road when these vigilantes pulled alongside the car. They blindfolded me and threw me into another car. "I thought they had kidnapped me. I tried to

remember dips in the road. I remember going up a cattle guard and a long driveway." At the end of the driveway was Merle Norman, welcoming him to her home.

After Norman's death, Dixon, now 89, kept up the same open-door policy, inviting different charities to use the grounds and the pool. But eventually the upkeep proved to be too much. Several buyers approached him about selling the place. He picked Osborne. "I could tell she was the right one for it." A former real estate broker, firefighter and teamster, Osborne, 53, earned a degree in architecture from the University of Arizona in 1989. In 1994, she branched out on her own with DKO Studio, specializing in residential work.

One of her first tasks after buying the Norman property was removing a huge Aleppo pine that was falling over on the house. "I had three large tree companies come out to see if they could salvage it," she says. "They couldn't. It cost me \$7,000 to cut it down." She also had the pool redone, tackled a back porch that was collapsing and a patio wall that had. The roof also was redone, and a new air conditioner and furnace were installed. Left alone were some of the bathroom tiles and fixtures.

"I do sneak out there occasionally," says Dixon. "She is doing a great job."

As for the empire that began with cosmetics simmering on the stove, it's still in the family. Norman's great-nephew Jack Nethercutt II now runs the company, whose products are sold through 2,000 independently owned Merle Norman Cosmetic Studios in the United States and Canada.

Did You Know . . . Diana Osborne's great-grandfather, Eugene Childs, served as an Arizona territorial representative, opened up a mercantile in Mammoth and later moved to Tucson. Cosmetics mogul's home was and will continue to be open to lots of guests.

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- Bonnie's new book - To order Bonnie Henry's new collection of writings about Tucson's rich history, call 573-4417. "Tucson Memories" is \$39.95 plus tax, shipping and handling.