

*Elmer Long, Bottle Tree Ranch*

Bottled Memories

Written by Brenda Rees. Photography by Martha Benedict

Memories, whether soothing, painful or poignant, are often conveniently shoved into the psyche's back vault, padded with protection, hidden away from daily life, and brought out sparingly like holiday decorations from the attic.

For Elmer Long, however, memories are meant for constant display, omnipresent reminders that colorfully glisten and reflect in the blue high desert sky, perched atop prized relics in a defiant pose against time and forgetting.

Since 2000, Long has honored his personal past, creating a handmade folk art repository at his home in the Mojave Desert that he openly shares with travelers who make the pilgrimage on Route 66 to wander among memories and mementos. It's called Elmer Long's Bottle Tree Ranch; Long says it's "like walking in a forest of trees."

"I was 6 years old in 1952 and grew up in Manhattan Beach.

My dad and I would come up into the desert on camping trips and we started finding things in the old dumps. Treasure hunting. The desert was loaded with bottles, some dating back to the 1800s. We brought the stuff back and he kept it.

I went into the military in 1964 for four years, got out and came up here in 1970 to work, married in '72, raised three sons and they left.

In 2000, I got the bottle collection from my dad, because well, he's 80-years-old and not long for this world. He gave most of 'em away, and was going to give the rest away the next day, but I got 'em. I told my mom, 'That's part of my life.' So I got 'em, brought 'em back and started building.

I had a ton of stuff and didn't know what to do with 'em so, well, I started putting them on pipes just to get 'em off the ground."





The resulting visual cacophony of colored bottles welded with rusted tools, car parts, jawbones, telephones, typewriters, bedsprings and other junkyard finds is artistically mesmerizing...and infinitely expanding. Long says he's got plenty of room and materials to add to the 200+ trees currently on his desert property. He points to a tree adorned with the Lionel train he unwrapped at Christmas decades ago. Over there, his first fishing pole. So many treasures he found with his father.

"Here's my advice, if you're going build a bottle tree, make it special to you. Put something on it that your parents gave to you. That's what I got here...everywhere. It's inspiration. Put something you had as a kid that was important. Take that stuff out of boxes and put it up and out in the garden."

Determined and self-reliant throughout his life, Long spent many of his early years alone, living in a van while he worked at the nearby cement factory. After two years of that lonely life, he thought, "It's time to get your life started," and he found Linda who allowed him the freedom to be who he was. "She never tried to stop me. We have 44 years together," he proclaims.

"I let very few people into my circle. I can hide out in my room and listen to the Hi-Fi for hours. I know how to live alone. Am I lonely today? No, I get thousands of people coming here. Sometimes I come out, sometimes I don't. That's just how it is."

Long isn't happy when thieves steal old glass insulators from the trees, tools from his shed, or break into his donations box. "They'll be taken care of, not my job" he says. "I wouldn't sacrifice my soul for that." Still, he brings his tools in nightly and has set up security cameras. By defending the ranch, he's protecting memories.

Long waits for the bottle tree muse to call him to work again on his ever-growing forest. Living priorities are overshadowing his time in the welding shed, since winter rains have wracked havoc on the piecemeal house he shares with Linda. Even so, the inconvenience doesn't ruffle his feathers much.

"I'm at a standstill right now with the bottles. I got a roof that's leaking and a ceiling down. I gotta get into town for some tarps. Those walls inside are all cobbled together. But it's only a house. You see, your real house is inside of you, it's not the outside. It's not what you live in; your house [pointing to his chest] is in here."

