

# Cloud of Suspicion

THE CLOUD NINE RESTAURANT MIXED FINE DINING WITH GEOLOGICAL TOURISM IN THE PHOENIX MOUNTAIN PRESERVE. TODAY, ITS RUINS ARE SHROUDED IN MYSTERY.

**P**HOENIX IS CHOCK FULL OF fascinating archaeological sites, thanks to the Hohokam Indians, whose canals made the desert bloom more than 500 years ago before the tribe mysteriously vanished. Yet, judging from Internet blogs and library inquiries, their ancient sites don't attract as much curiosity as ruins a mere half-century old near the summit of Shaw Butte in the North Mountain Recreation Area.

Hikers in this popular part of the Phoenix Mountain Preserve just north of Sunnyslope encounter the ruins alongside Shaw Butte Trail No. 306. Concrete stairs descend to a cement floor with a stunning vista of Phoenix. These are the remains of the swank Cloud Nine Restaurant that flourished in the early 1960s.

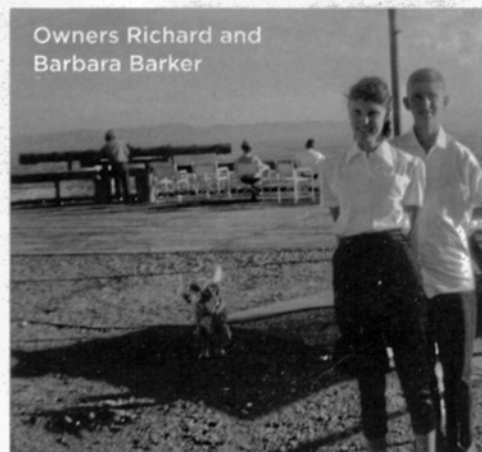
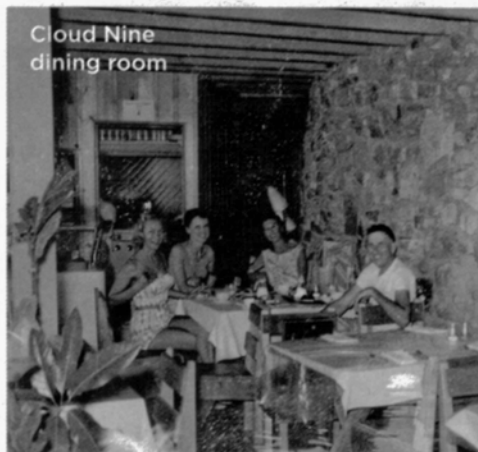
Whether measured by elevation or adventure, the elite restaurant offered an extraordinary dining experience in Phoenix. Even 45 years after its demise, Cloud Nine remains the subject of intrigue not only for its spectacular location but also for the aura of mystery that surrounds it. Factor in powerful patrons such as Barry Goldwater and Carl Hayden, allegations of illegal gambling and its mysterious fiery destruction, and Cloud Nine's buzz factor shoots off the charts.

The restaurant's story begins in 1957 when Richard Barker and his wife, Barbara, purchased 40 acres on the south side of Shaw Butte. Barker was a mechanical Renaissance man who, besides running a lumberyard, operated businesses repairing everything from televisions to airplanes. "He was a very eccentric person - high energy with a short attention span," says one of Barker's three sons, who requested anonymity from *PHOENIX* magazine.

Barker's original intention was to construct a house overlooking the city. Using a Harley Davidson motorcycle and liberal amounts of dynamite, he built several steep, winding roads from where 15th Avenue ends to a small peak he had leveled just below the 2,149-foot summit of Shaw Butte.

By early 1958, Barker was ready to build his dream house. However, not everyone was convinced the white-knuckle roads that rose 500 feet in elevation over half a mile were safe to drive.

The owners charged \$1 to drive up to Cloud Nine.



"When the first cement truck filled with concrete showed up for construction of the house, Dad had to buy the concrete - and the truck - with a cashier's check on the spot and drive it himself to the building site," says his son. After Barker proved the road was navigable, company drivers handled future deliveries.

The house, an amazing showpiece, was featured in a 1959 *Arizona Republic* article in which Barker was quoted as saying, "We didn't move up here to look down on people. We just like to live up high."

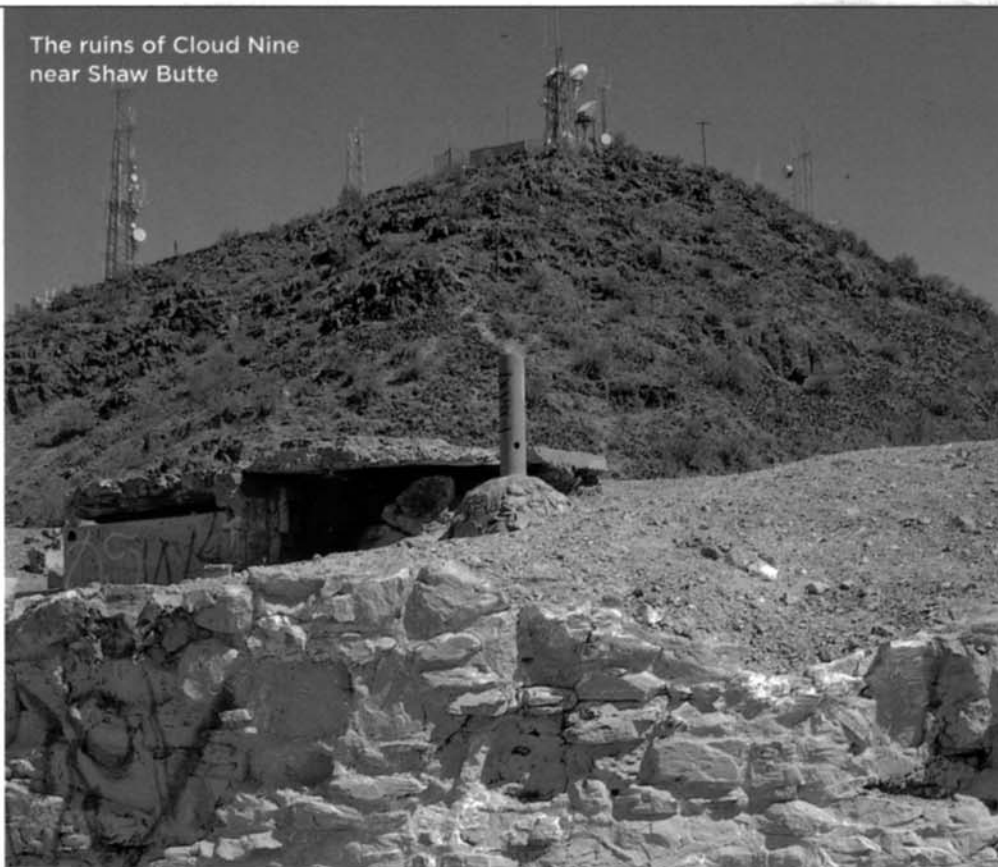
With the publicity, Barker started charging cars to drive up the paved road to a pic-

nic area he had created on the butte northwest of the house; motorists would return via a dirt road. "Usually the gate was kept locked at the bottom but, especially on the weekends, it was opened," recalls his son. "We [kids] were told to collect a \$1 fee when vehicles drove by the house, and we got to keep 50 cents from each transaction."

With his family still living in the west side of the house, Barker's "Cloud Nine Dining Room" had its grand opening on January 21, 1961. The restaurant was open from 5 p.m. to midnight and featured steak, seafood and a BYOB policy. Proceeds from the

continued on page 42

The ruins of Cloud Nine  
near Shaw Butte



*continued from page 40*

first weekend of sales went to the March of Dimes charity.

The restaurant's sign, a large, illuminated "9" atop a 50-foot-tall steel pole, could be seen for miles. Customers would park on 15th Avenue at the bottom of the hill, where Barker's sons waited. They would then summon Barker from the restaurant via an intercom. He would shuttle customers up the paved road to Cloud Nine in a Land Rover or Mercury Voyager station wagon. Customers debarking at the restaurant were greeted by a sign that perhaps only semi-humorously warned, "No Parking: Low Flying Airplanes."

Frequently, the food – and even the view – was overshadowed by other occurrences at the restaurant. Rattlesnakes were common visitors, which Barker would grab with a stick and fling down the mountain in full view of startled diners. Shuttle rides could get exciting too.

"Once, on the way down, the Voyager's fuel hose broke and began shooting flames three feet high from the sides of the vehicle," says his son. "Dad couldn't stop until he reached 15th Avenue, whereby he leapt out of the vehicle with a fire extinguisher and put out the flames."

Today, hikers exploring the Cloud Nine site walk through a flat gravel area until coming to a staircase. To the west are the masonry remains of a waterwheel and a small pond that once contained goldfish; to the east is

the base of the pole that once held the Cloud Nine sign.

Descending the stairs from the former roofline, there's a Cold War-inspired bomb shelter to the left, followed by the restaurant at the bottom. Its stone interior wall and concrete floor arc in a semi-circle 120 feet long and 18 feet wide. The latter features a filled-in stone bathtub and a triangular downdraft fireplace. The glass front had doors on the southeast side that led to a swimming pool. "My father salvaged the glass tops from pinball machines for the windows," Barker's son says.

When the restaurant business boomed, Barker added a second story dance floor to Cloud Nine and moved his family to another house in Phoenix. He also began construction of an aerial tramway from the parking lot – the support tower of which still stands – to the restaurant.

On November 8, 1964, however, a fire destroyed the restaurant. Cloud Nine was never rebuilt, and Barker moved on to other projects.

"I didn't see any poker games or slot machines at the Cloud Nine, but I was only there on weekends at the end," says his son, who was a child at the time. "As for the fire, I don't remember the cause, but there had been vandalism problems before the blaze," he muses. It seems the Cloud Nine, like the Hohokam, doesn't give up its secrets so easily.

— Douglas Towne