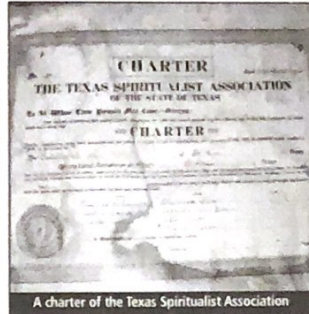


One facade of Montealeone's is sculpted in the shape of a classic '20s-era car.



A charter of the Texas Spiritualist Association



A saloon-style corner of the restaurant.

HOLLYWOOD, HASH AND HAUNTINGS: THE STORY OF MONTELEONE'S

BY CHERI PEARSON

Many a savvy El Pasoan is familiar with Montealeone's. The Italian restaurant, located on Gateway West facing I-10 near the Piedras exit, has a front facade with a giant mobster's face, grizzled and striking.

Anyone driving past might think its designer has a story. Anyone would be right. From El Paso to Hollywood, from set design to Italian cuisine, from marijuana to ghosts, eccentric restaurateur Gary Montealeone's tale is worth hearing.

The walls were closing in on 30-year-old Montealeone. He had been a banker in El Paso for 13 years and was itching to pursue his dream of designing sets in Hollywood. With no formal education or experience, he packed his bags and gave himself a year to become successful.

He landed at Universal Studios, where he took on any job he could — mainly sweeping floors and working in restaurants. He checked the board for openings every day. After six months, a position for prop and set designer went up.

"The only reason the position came open was because they caught the guy smoking marijuana in the back and they are very strict about those things," Montealeone says.

Odds were stacked against him, but the boss was willing to give him a shot.

"He gave me a project to do within 48 hours," he says. "I had to make a futuristic ATM machine."

Montealeone pulled it off and was hired. He entered the world of Universal Studios' famed Property House, a 100,000-square-foot, three-story facility boasting more than 400,000 items.

He spent the next six years working on the set of the popular Craig T. Nelson TV series "Coach" and several movies; the most notable was "Back to the Future II."

"The Pepsi machine that shoots the bottle out was a big thing for me," Montealeone says. "It wasn't just something used in the background."

A big earthquake hit California and frightened one of the actresses enough to compel "Coach" producers to relocate the series to Florida. Montealeone had no desire to move there, so he returned to El Paso, where he eventually settled close to his folks and married a neighborhood girl.

"He needs to be constantly doing something," says his wife, Laura. After they purchased their Westside home, Montealeone needed an outlet and threw his creativity into it.

"It was the place to party in the '90s," he said of the house, which has a different theme in every room. Laura says she feels like she lives on a movie set: There's a Disney Room, a 1930s Chicago movie theatre, a bar room with a dance floor and a 1950s diner kitchen.

His home was not enough. "After you have been in that environment, it gets in your blood," he says. "I was missing the building and designing."

The couple eventually purchased a property nearly condemned by the city and opened Montealeone's. Its Chicago gangster theme allowed Montealeone to showcase his talent.

The inimitable building is packed with authentic memorabilia from his Hollywood days: the original facade from the movie premiere of "Planet of the Apes"; Johnny 5's buddy from the movie "Short Circuit"; and one of E.T.'s prosthetic heads.

But from the beginning of the renovation, reports of supernatural phenomena kept pop-

ping up at the speakeasy-styled spot. One construction worker insisted he saw a ghost and refused to work alone. Employees heard whispers and felt touched.

Upon expanding into the adjacent building, Montealeone found a small, walled-off area with pictures and a 1922 charter for the Texas Spiritualist Association church under the floorboards, he said. He moved it to show customers, and that is when the real trouble began.

There was pounding on the walls, chimes ringing without the doorbell hooked up, sightings and a customer's small child who kept her eyes covered while pointing in a particular direction and whimpering, "He's over there." One evening while locking up, Montealeone saw a withered arm snaking through the door and he left in a hurry.

Things quieted down when he moved the charter and photos back, but that last incident scared him. The Paso Del Norte Paranormal Society was called in. After spending an evening in the restaurant, Henry Flores of the Paranormal Society declared it to be haunted.

"It was an incredible night," Flores says. "Some of our crew were touched, while others felt nauseous. The most activity was when we took the charter to the other side of the building and in the mobster room, we heard someone saying 'This is my house.'"

Flores says he has disproved a few places rumored to be haunted, but not Montealeone's.

"We did our research on the Texas Spiritualist Association (the charter unearthed in the restaurant) and found that it was a former church where seances and mediums were conducted as a way of connecting with the dead — it's very earth based," he says, adding that the association is still around.

In other words, the ghosts knocking on the walls are now practicing what they preached and probably just wanted their charter back. Local psychic Diana Calamia assured Montealeone the energy was positive during the filming of Jackson Polk's DVD, "Ghost Stories of El Paso."

Regardless of haunting or Hollywood, Montealeone is always eyeing other projects to put his mark on. Over the years he has collected items during travels, garage sales, online auctions and antique stores.

"His nickname is 'Looky Lou,'" says his wife with a laugh. "He finds all kinds of things I would never imagine, but he puts them together and people are impressed."

DETAILS

MONTELEONE'S
3023 Gateway West
(915) 566-4320

PHRESH-ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS

SPOOK-TORKULA @ Tork Bar

SATURDAY OCTOBER 30TH
9:00PM

- \$100 Prize for Best Costume
- \$1 Voodoo Shots
- \$2 Octoberfest Ale/\$3 Jäger
- No Cover for Ladies
- \$2 Cover for Guys in Costume
- \$5 without
- Bottle Service Available
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