

## **Don M. Burton, Master Adobe Home Builder--Escondido, CA**

Don M. Burton designed and constructed mid-century modern adobe homes in the Las Palmas neighborhood, at the height of the Escondido and North County adobe home construction revival. As a custom adobe home builder, Don Burton teamed up with father-in-law Hyrum Arrowsmith on some construction projects, and would later be assisted on occasion by his son, Mike to build 26 adobe homes between 1956 until the mid-1970s.

Don Burton started in construction as a concrete worker for a large company in Los Angeles. At the time of his employment, the company had been building a large school auditorium. His son, Mike Burton explained that his father, Don, saved this contract from a major disaster. "When a form on a pour- in place wall blew out, the other workers jumped back, but he grabbed some lumber and hydraulic jacks, and saved the pour, the wall & thousands of dollars of the company's money." Soon after, Don earned the position as a foreman and somewhere along the way, he began to work concrete jobs with this father-in-law, Hyrum Arrowsmith.

Mike Burton wrote: "My grandfather was a carpenter in Salt Lake City Utah who hauled coal in the winter. It was the depression and there wasn't much work around." Mike's mother, Marion Beth Arrowsmith was a young child at the time. The family "almost starved...so they moved to San Fernando Valley" where Arrowsmith secured a job as a carpenter, building movie sets at MGM studios. Don Burton was raised in Burbank, where, in 1940, he met Mike's mother, Beth. "After my dad & grandfather started working together they also built homes separately in Burbank, Playa del Rey, Palos Verdes Estates before coming to Escondido in late 1955, and that's when the adobe construction started." Mr. Burton explained, "vacant lots in the Los Angeles beach areas became too expensive for them to make a profit". Also, the area was becoming crowded and heavy with traffic since the expansive LA freeway system was not yet constructed. Land in Escondido, by comparison was inexpensive.

Following the pattern of many home builders in California and parts of the United States, the Arrowsmith-Burton team were *spec* builders. "All of the homes but three, were built for speculation." Hyrum Arrowsmith and Don Burton bought subdivided lots in Longview Acres (Las Palmas neighborhood) from L.R. Green, purchased building materials (1), and constructed adobe homes primarily from the designs Mr. Mike Burton describes as from "my family's style." When Don Burton

started adobe home construction in Escondido, most builders such as Sherman and Paxton and the Weir Brothers had favored the architectural design of the California Western Ranch house popularized in the late 1940's by *Sunset* magazine's publication on the subject. According to Mike Burton, his father had started to build his homes with mid-century modern design elements that took a traditional long, low ranch style home and extended the eaves 35-48 inches. On occasion, Mr. Arrowsmith hired an Escondido draftsman, Phil Gaudet, to draw up house plans, however, Mr. Burton drafted his own designs and plans. Many of his homes incorporated materials reclaimed from older buildings, such as massive beams sourced from an old warehouse. The size and quality of the materials were unavailable elsewhere. More whimsical elements included glass bottles incorporated into a fireplace built by the 19 year old Mike as his first solo project. Mike still has his father's wood working tools, drafting table and machinery.

The Las Palmas adobe home construction project did not start off well for Mr. Burton. His son, Mike explained that "dad got really sick in 1956. He stepped on a rusty nail and got hepatitis, so that 2625 Las Palmas took a year and a half to build." It was very hard work, "but they still did it all themselves." Other challenges arose throughout the home building projects. Adobe construction was very labor intensive and back breaking work. Many times, while Hyrum took on this strenuous construction work his wife, Martha would lend a hand to help with various finishing work. As a result, Mr. Arrowsmith developed heart problems and at times was in poor health. His son-in-law had often pitched in to finish construction projects.

Don Burton was an "extremely talented craftsman" who did all of his own construction work: concrete, block work, framing, electrical, cabinetry, finishing and even turning 8 x 8 posts on a homemade lathe. Mrs. Burton came to the job sites every day and would also help with painting and odd jobs. "They were a team." In 1975, Don built his last adobe home for the couple's retirement years. The beautiful solid wall post and beam adobe home is located east of Bear Valley Middle School off Canyon Road. Mr. Burton passed away in 2013. The home is still in the family and is owned by their son, Mike.

(1) Adobe blocks were purchased from the *Adobe Block Co.* (later dba *Caladobe*) which was started in Escondido in the late 1940's by L.R. Green owner of the Green ranch & developer of Longview Acres. According to Mike Burton, product manufacturing was influenced by the Hans Sumpf Co., adobe block manufacturer in the Fresno.

Hans Sumpf perfected the oil emulsified adobe block which replaced the traditional Mexican adobe block. <http://www.tileheritage.org/THF-ENews2-06.html#Hans>

**Biographical Source:** Mike Burton email correspondence November through January 2016 to Alexa Clausen, volunteer, Adobe Home Tour, 2016