

Adventures in McCloudland

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Chapter 7

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We leave on Saturday for a return trip to McCloud. The house will be open again tomorrow. (It was a pattern that would be repeated for the next six months.)

We arrive for Heritage Days, and stay with our new friends Roger and Annette Spitsen. Theirs is a large two story Victorian house with a white picket fence and three teenagers. The oldest, Raymond, is getting ready to leave for his first year at college; the two girls are in high school. The house is located across the railroad tracks on a slope overlooking town. We get our first history lesson and love every minute of it.

1975

Roger and Annette had come to McCloud to start their married life after a Midwest upbringing. Roger was to be the coach at the local high school. It was 1975.

Annette recalls their first few nights as noisy and strange. Bells, whistles and horns seemed to be going off at all hours. And then the bells would start the dogs barking. "It was like a chorus," she recalls. "One dog would start and others would join in. It was like a wave you see in a stadium; only the sound would move around the town,"

"We didn't get much sleep in the beginning," she said. She asked some local folks about the bells and whistles and was told there was "a whistle for the shift change, and another for breaks, and meal time.: Then there was a series of bells with their own sort of Morse Code alerting different mill officers that they were needed and even the nature of the emergency". "Each street had its own code for alarm."

It was a time of transition in McCloud. The McCloud River Lumber Company had sold the mill to Champion Lumber two years before. Things felt unsettled and folks were a bit apprehensive about the town's future. Lots of friends and families were leaving or splitting up. The mill had downsized and many left to find better jobs elsewhere.

The hotel was still operating as a residence hall for mill workers and teachers. It was also providing rooms for square dancers who had begun to frequent McCloud Dance Country.

Like other businesses in town, the hotel owners struggled trying to heat their building. When the mill sold, the unlimited steam heat flowing through a labyrinth of pipes from the mill to many buildings was stopped. Most residents had a wood burning stove to cook on and heat their houses, but many were replacing the old stoves with modern electric units, and added new wood burning units designed to heat a space more efficiently, often without permits.

The system of bells and alarms the Spitsen's were hearing were a critical part of the town's fire alarm system and there were lots of fires. Flue fires happened every week with someone's attic going up in flames. Almost every house in McCloud has charred timbers in their attic from a long-ago flue fire.

Much later we were to find evidence ourselves in the hotel of a fire in the ceiling joists; not from a flue fire but from overloaded wiring. We shudder when we think of how close the hotel came to burning down.

Social life in McCloud during the mid 70's mirrored what it had been under the controlling hand of the mill. Most of the mores and social structure remained, including social divisions.

Ethnic groups were little nations, each maintaining their own culture in separate neighborhoods only coming together on the job. The Italians made up the largest single ethnic group. Their influence is still great in McCloud, but at the time they were the most recent immigrants, still seeped in their own traditions. They were often given the toughest job of stacking timbers and singled out for cruel jokes and harsh treatment. Even Mother McCloud treated Italians differently and, instead of building their houses, would deliver the lumber for them to do it themselves. Ironically, Mother McCloud saw that the Italian community had grapes for wine and space allocated to raise sheep and vegetables.

These small mini-farms were fenced and gated, and spawned a tradition called "Gate Night." On the evening before Halloween, town folks, in the name of mischievous fun, would circle the area known as Tucci Camp and pull down the gates releasing the animals and causing great noisy havoc. Years later it evolved into a night of pranks and petty vandalism.

Even today "Gate Night" is an evening of some apprehension and influences one of our first decisions. We had contacted a local glass dealer the first week we took ownership in mid-October to replace the 250 broken panes of glass in the hotel. We changed our mind when we were advised that Gate Night was coming up and we elected to wait until it had passed.

Railway work accounted for two groups of immigrants: The Chinese and Mexican workers. Both had worked on the rails before coming and received tough treatment from the community. A Chinese family managed the laundry in the Mercantile Building for many years. And Little Tijuana was the area nicknamed for the group of Mexican workers who lived there.

The home office of McCloud Lumber Company was located in Minnesota and large groups of Swedes migrated to McCloud and provided the skilled labor force. The town is still called home by the Toreson's, Rich, and Angie. A Swede usually held the most respected of the skilled labor positions, that of sawyer, who'd run the huge saw blade. He was top dog.

The men would work side by side but the women had little opportunity to interact with other groups. Wives often lived here for 40 years and learned little English. The traditions they had brought with them, they kept.

It had been a wonderful evening of learning fascinating things about this unique place. The next day, as I move about town, I notice the buildings in a new way, in context.