

Adventures in McCloudland

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Chapter 9

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An architect came with the purchase of the hotel; it seems he's part of the deal. He had worked with several previous owners and developed plans for them, only to have the projects never materialize. I called Ron Stevens, A.I.A., in Mt. Shasta just a few days after our offer is accepted and introduced myself.

I told him we want to restore it as a hotel, only better.

He asked something about us, and he got very quiet when I mentioned that Lee is an architect. I understand his shock and disappointment, and quickly respond that we have no intention of acting as our own architect and will need the services of a local architect. The fact that he was already familiar with the building and had worked with the local building department is a big plus for us. He had actually served on the County Planning Commission. This is good news.

We talk about Lee's experience as a construction administrator for large projects for over 30 years and that they will probably make an excellent team. Lee and I had already discussed hiring an architect before I had made the phone call. We had decided that we wanted to play an active role in the design and building process. But we also recognized that Lee had not done any drawing in those same 30 years, and we would need a local architect as well.

We consider ourselves lucky that Ron came with the hotel. A few weeks after Heritage Days, we met Ron at the hotel for a closer inspection. We were both impressed with Ron. We liked his sincere and soft spoken manner. He and Lee will make a good team. Ron has an office in Mt. Shasta and another in Southern California "to support my Mt. Shasta habit" he says.

We begin a walk through and closer look. It's clear from the beginning that Ron knows a lot more about this building than we do. We had pulled some of the boards off the windows and had a couple of strong lights with us so we could see more than ever before. When we descend the stairs from the rear lobby we noticed three doors on the landing, two on the right and one on the left. The first door on the right is a large square room with concrete walls that contain a laundry sink and a couple of very old rusty coin-operated washing machines. The room smells damp and musty. We slowly open

another door out of the north side of the laundry room. It's the crawl space under the north wing of the building. We gingerly step onto the slightly mucky dirt and notice you could stand at this end, but it gradually sloped up to almost meet the underside of the building at the far north end. But the most amazing feature is a huge canister-shaped tank 6' in diameter and 8' long suspended from the ceiling on broad, rusting metal straps about 15' into the space. We all know at once that the grimy white stuff all over it is asbestos. Ron says the previous owner had had an inspection from a certified hazardous waste handling company. Their bid was "\$8,000 to remove it. It needs to be cut in pieces and hauled out."

Also in this crawl space are 5 or 6 discarded old water heaters, and miles off wire strung to some previous phone and electrical systems. Water pipes are in a maze over our heads probably from the steam heating system, and later additional water pipes winding their way to the added bathrooms. But worse is the smell, not just damp, but damp with cat urine. The crawl space is a giant litter box that our crew would later learn to hate.

Back out on the landing we enter the room next to the laundry and next to the main space. It's filled with wood trim boards and various scraps from remodeling projects. Good, we might need some extra trim.

The third door across on the other side of the landing opens to a room which curves back under the stairs we had come down and contains plumbing and electrical odds and ends on shelves hanging on hooks. It adjoins another room on the south with 10" thick concrete walls. The ceiling consists of railroad rails set in place and filled in with brick to enclose the whole room like a tomb, or vault, or wine cellar. We can't imagine. Not a vault, because the doorway had no evidence of ever having had a door. No hinges, or latch. The room was quite cool, so I figure it might be a good place to store fruit and wine.

Back out on the landing we enter the double wooden doors into what had been the town library for many years. Ron doesn't know what the high green wooden chairs were for either. By the piles of debris, it's becoming clear that folks had been breaking into this building and partying down here. How lucky we are that the hotel hadn't burned down.

Back up on the first floor, we critically appraise each room. Paint is peeling in every guest room. Many ceilings show evidence of prior water leaks. Some ceilings have big irregular dark mildew stains; others have strips of old fashioned wallpaper hanging like moss hanging from big trees in the Bayou. The remnants of an old hot water heating system encircled the rooms at the floor and pipes ranging from 1/2" diameter to 4" seem to be rising everywhere, in every corner. In the end rooms the pipes are covered with asbestos. Many of the wood floors had been painted, some had glued down carpet, others vinyl tiling. In several rooms, the beautiful clear sugar pine moldings and panel

doors had been painted. A few doors had been badly damaged. One had a hole cut in the bottom panel for someone's pet kitty. Most of the window sills had not been painted but many are wobbly and soft. The halls, stairs and lobby floor are covered in old linoleum with a battleship gray mottled pattern. The landing at the top of the stairs has worn through and bare wood is showing through. Several places have been patched.

Originally there were just two community bathrooms per floor. Each contained three sinks, two toilets, a urinal and space for a claw foot tub. Only two tubs remain in the building and one of those is badly damaged. Sometime in the 30's small bathrooms had been added to some of the rooms. These baths were truly deplorable. Most are very small, poorly laid out and badly deteriorated. In several of them it would be possible to sit on the toilet, soak your feet in the tub, and brush your teeth over a sink at the same time. There is nothing salvageable in them but the little glass shelves with nifty brass brackets in each bathroom.

Six guest rooms on the first floor north wing on the street side have been converted into equally distasteful apartments. We decide that the whole wing would have to be gutted.

The beautiful wide staircase to the second floor is a showpiece. The broad, unadorned staircase rises midway to a spacious landing with a beautifully aged honey pine wall rising the full 20 feet to the ceiling. The stairs then turn 180 degrees and continue to the second floor. Although the banister shows wear and tear from nearly 80 years of heavy use, we consider it character. And we are determined to preserve character where ever we can. The stair treads, however, are troublesome. Each tread had been covered with a masonite-type board and a metal strip applied at the edge. We suspected that the original pine treads had been badly worn and this was an attempt to give them a new lease on life. We aren't sure what we can do with them.

The second floor south wing rooms had been painted in psychedelic, outrageous colors. Two were vibrant purple, chartreuse green and another hot pink.

We approach the end of the hall and room 227. We open the door somewhat cautiously and again noticed the rocking chair is moving. This time the windows are not open. It must have been the wind we created when opening the door.

The staircase to the third floor is behind a door which looks like any other guest room door near the main stairwell. It's a dark narrow staircase with beaded wainscoting on the side walls. The third floor hall is narrower than the first two floors and it only has one bathroom for all 30 rooms. There are doors on either end of the 100' hallways leading out to end balconies. The views are wonderful. From the north balcony we can see Mount Shasta although somewhat obscured by trees. The south end view overlooks Main Street. Back inside the hall we notice at each end of the hall hangs a huge square box housing a heater fan.

Each of the third floor rooms has a window and a dormer with a slanting ceiling. Eventually, we could remove every other wall so each new guest room would consist of two side-by-side windows flanked by two dormers. We could enclose the area under one dormer for a new bathroom and use the rest for the guest room. The slanted dormer would be fun to decorate and paper.

The ceilings in the rooms are badly damaged with huge gaping cracks. We were told the winter of '92 was the worst ever. With no heat in the building, snow must have built up on the roof to the point where it was just too heavy for the roof and structure not to give way. Again we hope there is no permanent damage to the roof and we can just add some bracing and repair the damage.

In the middle of the building the hall widens out to a large open space off of which were four guest rooms on the front and four on the back. Each had access through French doors to a front or back balcony with a breathtaking view. They'll make spectacular suites

Three of the center guest rooms on the back have doorways cut between the rooms resulting in three rooms adjoining each other. These three rooms will make fine work rooms where I can make the curtains and dust ruffles we'll need. I didn't remember they are unheated and without power.

Ron and Lee wander down to the end of the dark hall to examine the huge heater hanging from the ceiling. I'm day-dreaming about decorating dormers. "Let's see, I need to find a magazine or book with those cute farm houses with dormers and get some ideas for contrasting wallpaper treatments."

Out of the corner of my eye, down the hall where the men are, I glimpse something fly out from the heater unit. For a second I thought it must be a bird. It kind of swoops and swerves ... and it was heading for mefast. It's a bat! I let out a full scream and try to duck into one of the rooms. Too late. It swoops right past my head. I hear it and feel the breeze as it flutters by. Lee and Ron run down the hall to rescue me. I feel really silly and can't account for my shaking and sense of panic. I'm not a screamer, and I've never screamed at a mouse or a snake in my life. But this is different. I still shudder when I remember that thing coming down the hall full speed right at me. I didn't go back up there for weeks. And I never went up there again without a careful look down the hall to see if something was hanging around.

We continue our tour and move to examining the outside of the building. It looked like the windows had been originally lined up directly under the dormers as we can see the faint outline of rectangles the same size as the typical window. But they are now in a random order around the building with small square windows also scattered in no particular pattern. We decide the windows must have been moved and small ones

added when bathrooms were added in the 30's. It also appears that there had been porches on both ends of the building on the first and second floors which had been enclosed to provide additional rooms. That would account for the slightly sloping lopsided look to the ends of the building. The rooms had been built on porches which sloped to allow water to drain off. Ron says we are probably right but that none of the previous owners had indicated they wanted the windows and porches restored. We agree that the building looks somewhat strange with these changes and decide we want to consider reversing it to the original design. Later we found pictures of the original construction which clearly showed the windows lined up symmetrically under the dormers and wide verandas on both ends of the hotel on the first and second floors. We know we were on the right track.

Lee asks, "Can we do that, move the windows around, given it's an historic landmark?"

"You can do anything you want," was Ron's reply. "There are no architectural standards in town. In fact McCloud is not a town. It is administrated by the County. The local Service District manages alley maintenance, water service and trash pickup. The County manages everything else. So the only design codes you are required to follow are the ones set down by the County Building Department. The fact that the hotel is an historical landmark will give you some leeway with the codes. You will be entitled to some variances, like keeping the central stairwell. The designation will allow you a tax break if you remodel the building using the Department. of Interior's Standards."

We've heard of these standards and believe that because we would be restoring the exterior to its original configuration and making decisions based on maintaining the integrity and spirit of the building, we would have no problem qualifying for a tax break.

We also knew about the Historic Building Codes. It meant that designated buildings would have an easier time of restoration, and not have to adhere strictly to today's codes. The hotel's big open central stairwell is something that would not pass today's code as it provides a way for fire to move quickly through the middle of the building. But historic buildings are permitted to retain this feature if adequate exits and sprinklers are provided. We also know we'd have to cover the transoms over all the guest room doors. Again, it was a fire hazard. How we chose to cover it would be a decision we thought we could make.

We feel confident that the changes we want to make and the plans we have for the hotel would be applauded by the County. After all, when the hotel reopens, not only would the County benefit financially from the 8% room tax and increased tourism, they could take pride in having helped save a special place.

Ron, Lee and I conclude our walk around the building and head down to the Soda Shoppe. We sit over coffee making some preliminary estimates. We believe we can

just restore the first floor with 5 guest rooms and our residence, and complete the other two floors later. Ron reminds us we are going to need new plumbing, new electrical service, new heating and fire sprinkler systems throughout the building. "It's going to be expensive and I'm not sure 5 rooms will be enough to cover the costs", he said. So our projections increase and we decide to try to restore the first floor with five enlarged rooms and our residence, as planned, and 1/2 of the second floor with five rooms and one suite. Ron estimates we can complete the project with the proceeds from our house. He thinks we can finish for just under \$300,000 if we take an active role in managing the project and shopping for materials.

As we walk out of the Soda Shoppe Ron commented in a sincere and serious tone, "I sure hope you two can do this. I'm getting tired of taking this walk around the building with new owners."