

Adventures in McCloudland

By Marilyn J. Ogden

Chapter 3

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The picture of the hotel in the handout says “Grand Historic McCloud Hotel, the elegant historic showplace is available to be refurbished.” Refurbished. As in fix up the furniture and decorate. Webster agrees... “to restore to a bright appearance as in furniture.” Hmmmmm.

The ad stated the hotel was reduced to \$275,000. We looked at the picture several times. A big white building sprawling along a block with an immense front yard. I looked at the price and reasoned we could sell our house in Oakland, pay cash for the hotel, fix it up a little, have some money left over for emergencies, and be debt free forever. It seemed what we always wanted. Well. Be careful what you wish for.

Excitedly, we drive over to the campground and announced to our family that we’ve found a hotel we were going to buy. Never mind we hadn’t seen it yet. Small detail. It looked lovely. I’d have fun decorating it. It was in the forest. It was cheap. What more could we want?

That afternoon the family all started for home and we headed east at I-5 and drove the nine miles from Mt. Shasta City to McCloud. Highway 89 is a two lane road winding up an incline. We learned later the top of the incline was referred to as Snow Man’s Hill. We approached the crest and rounded a turn near the top of the hill and the view took my breath away. A wide valley opens up and it seems you could see forever. The distant trees and mountains fade into more layers of mountains in shades of gray and misty blue. The view is fleeting, though, and soon we are back in the midst of a variety of evergreen trees. As we wind down the other side we caught a brief glimpse of what appears to be a mill. It was the soul and incubator of McCloud.

Even though the road is winding, the mountain is always there on our left. It’s huge and not at all like the mountains in the Sierras with their gradual slopes. It rose in a perfect cone shape, just like you’d draw when you were in grammar school. And this August it still had snow on it. I wondered if it snows in McCloud.

We take the first turn into McCloud and wind down Columbero Road, pass the McCloud Guest House, crossed over some railroad tracks and got our first look at the hotel.

It is huge. Even today everyone's first impression is one of size. We've written our family and friends, shown them pictures and talked forever about this place and their first reaction upon actually seeing it is always, "It's so much bigger than I thought."

The three-story wood frame building is 200 feet long with a center porch and large center gable. Three smaller dormers are on either side of the center protruding from the huge roof. The building is pale yellow with white and pea green trim. The paint was peeling. Many of the windows are boarded up, and it would probably need painting.

We get out of the car and walk around the building. For sure it would need painting. We're disappointed it's not open and we wouldn't get to see inside.

Fate nudges us again.

A man leaving the Presbyterian Church just behind the hotel crosses the street and approaches us. "Did you want to see the hotel," he asks. "I'm Roger Spitzen, the agent."

He said he doesn't usually show it without an appointment but, "Oh well, I'll make an exception."

Roger unlocks and opens one of the double doors and we enter a small dark room which we realize later is the back lobby. The windows are all boarded and there is no electricity so, until our eyes get used to the dim light, we can't see much detail. The room feels cool and smells a bit musty, even on the August day. We walk along a narrow short hall along a stairway leading upstairs and enter the front lobby. It has double doors with windows, exiting out to the front porch. As our eyes begin to adjust to the nearly dark space, we turn and see the registration desk.

I don't believe there had ever been a hotel registration desk and mail cubbies that were significant in my past. Not that I can remember anyway. But somewhere, maybe from some old 40's movie, a registration desk like this had left its impact on my psyche. Maybe Humphrey Bogart had leaned up against one like this. I don't know.

I struggle to take it all in, and contain my immediate sense of awe. The desk is over 9 feet long surrounded with warm wood paneling. Even the desk top is one piece of the same wood. Beautiful. The Cubbies, or mail boxes, are also made from wood and numbered over 90. Some of the previous guest's names, from who knows when, appear on several boxes. It is totally charming.

After the registration desk, everything only serves to reinforce my instant love affair with this building. Even though it is dirty and dark, all we see is potential. We follow Roger down the hall. Room after room. Ninety three small rooms in all, some with dingy little

bathrooms, on three floors with 5 community bathrooms off the halls. As we walk on the old gray linoleum floors, I remember my grandmother's kitchen floor. I think it was that same battleship gray. I make out the underboards as ridges appear under the linoleum. Maybe it would have to be replaced.

We continue to walk through the building. Without power, though, we can't see the basement. Most of everything else is dim and barely discernible. Inside we can see that the window panes, boarded up on the outside, are mostly broken. Roger manages to open one of the four French doors to the front balcony on the second floor and we stand there, with the mountain just up the street as he tells us about the square dancers needing rooms every summer, and the excursion train that's going to begin running next year, and the ski park just five miles away and growing. We nod our heads, each with our own private thoughts.

We thank Roger, telling him it's wonderful and that we're going to "give it some serious consideration." We decided to spend the night in town and walk up to the end of the block to another bed and breakfast. We check into a modest room with the smallest bathroom I have ever seen. After check-in we sit on the bed and decide that the owner had put the bathroom where there had been a closet. The sink on one end wall, and the toilet facing it. A small stall shower had been put in the corner. We realize that the room was about the same size as the guest rooms in the hotel. We decide the rooms would need to be bigger, and have real bathrooms.

We leave the inn wander down Main Street, eat at Tommy's and walk some more. We notice that several people wave at us... We figure we must look like someone else. At one point we approached a corner from behind a hedge. A car comes to an abrupt stop when the driver sees us. He looks our way, leans across the seat, rolls down the window... and apologizes. He says he didn't see us approaching.

We think maybe we've landed in some kind of time warp.

Now, don't get me wrong, I love Oakland. It was our home for most of my life. But people in Oakland don't even make eye contact with one another. And most often the only wave they know from their car is an obscene gesture.

We stroll over to a dance hall we had noticed earlier. It's just two blocks south of the hotel and two blocks to the east. It looks like a huge Masonic hall all repainted and wonderful. It isn't stone like most Masonic halls, but horizontal wooden slats, like the hotel. It is more than two stories high with a balcony extending out over the big double door entry way. Dozens of trucks are parked out front and people are milling about. All the women have dresses with full skirts and slips that were even bigger than we wore in the 50's. They're bright colors and swish as they move. The men look spiffy and often

had ties or shirts which match their partner's bright dress. We hesitantly approach the big double doors. Several folks see us pause in the doorway and wave us in to have a seat. We get our first glimpse of square dancing. The huge room with its hardwood dance floor has two rows of elevated wood benches around the edge of the room. The support posts are brightly painted and lead our eyes to the ceiling, also brightly painted with designs reminiscent of Dutch motifs. A stage fills the far end with doors on either side leading to a refreshment area.

We stand there in amazement. A man is calling a dance from the stage and the room is filled with music and dancing. A dozen or so squares, each having 4 couples, are each moving in union through dozens of moves. I can't even understand what the caller is saying, but each dancer quickly changes direction all at the same time, like a flock of birds all deciding to turn at the same time. Everyone is having a wonderful time. The room being full of energy. Good energy. Several dancers come over to say hello as they sit out a dance. They ask where we are from and if we dance. We stay for over an hour; soaking up a new experience and enjoying ourselves immensely. Then we meander back over to Main Street.

The next morning we stop at the Real Estate office to thank the Spitsens again and ask a few more questions. We are just beginning a two-week vacation, and tell them we'd think about it and be in touch.

Our plan is to continue east on 89, work our way out to Highway 80, and head north toward Lake Tahoe and end up in the gold country. All the way to I-80 we talk about the hotel. Not what it needed, but what it could be. We talk about having the building alive again, full of lights, people, and laughter. (This image kept us going for more than a year and one we often revisited.) We imagined our life as innkeepers and like it.

So what if it needs some work. Lee's an architect who has worked as a construction administrator for large projects his whole career. He can do this. Easy. And wouldn't it be fun when it opens.

We take our scheduled left onto I-80. Twenty minutes up the road and with McCloud moving further away, one of us says, "All we've talked about since we left McCloud is the town and the hotel." "So why are we continuing with this vacation? Why don't we go back to Oakland and make an offer on the place?"

People often ask, "Whose idea was it anyway?" I honestly can't recall. No one talked the other into it. And it is probably a very good thing.

We exit the freeway, turn around and enter again going west toward home. Lee calls our real estate agent in Oakland. I went to school with Barry and his mom was the broker for whom my mom had worked as an agent. Lee gets him on the car phone and

says, "We found this hotel we want to buy. Can you call the agent and make an offer?" I hear him try to explain where McCloud was and why this makes good sense. (It would be the first of countless conversations along the same lines. Only we didn't have a clue.) Lee answered the question, "Are you sure?" several times. He hangs up the phone he says, "Barry thinks we're crazy, but we have an appointment with him tomorrow morning. He won't make the offer until he talks with us."

The three hour ride back was filled with plans and dreams. It was that magical time when we know none of the headaches and only the fantasies of bringing this place to life.

The meeting the next day with Barry is swift. We show him the ad and assure him we know what we're doing. He calls Roger and made an offer. The previous owner, a woman from Southern California (Gerry Clark), is asking \$250,000. We offer \$225,000 contingent on the sale of our house. Roger calls back almost right away. She says simply, "Yes."

Ohmygod. We're really going to do it.