

Adventures in McCloudland

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Chapter 40

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Opening day

We can't seem to wipe the grins off our faces. Everything is in place and we're ready. I hope people will tour the hotel during our open house, but I have no way of knowing. The staff begins arriving wearing their white polo shirts, dark pants and ill-fitting plaid vests. Maybe I'll rethink the vests. But everyone is upbeat.

The band arrives and sets up on the porch.

There is no time for a walk through of the building or time for reflection with Lee. More gift plants arrive from friends and the lobby looks wonderful. I can't imagine it ever looking any better. It's going to be a good day. The sun is shining already. Good, no wet feet.

The tours are scheduled to begin at 9. A dozen or so folks are outside on the porch waiting for us to open. I'm relieved that at least a few people have shown up. I'd hate it if no one came.

The staff would position themselves in various rooms. Jeff would be at the front door welcoming people. Juanita would be anywhere she was needed but would hang out behind the registration desk talking with visitors. Other staff would point out things we thought would be of interest and answer questions. "The lobby's been enlarged; The registration desk is original as are the mail cubbies; The fireplace is new; The stairs are original, the continuous, gripable handrails; new." Upstairs: "The hall is the same size; The doors are in the same position and with the same room numbers they've had for 80 years; The rooms have been enlarged; The suites are three or four original rooms; We cut doors from the suites to the balcony." The buffet in one of the suites came from a local garage sale and whose owner was delighted it was going to be in the hotel. "Most of the dressers are original. The sinks have been placed in small desks that are

original.” Lastly someone else was to direct traffic out the upstairs hall doors and down the outside steps to the street. We thought it would be better to keep the folks moving rather than doubling back down stairs to the lobby. They seemed to be equally thrilled to come to tour the hotel during our open house, but I have no way of knowing

It’s 9 o’clock and we open the doors. Then it’s 3 pm and time for the guests to check in. After ushering in hundreds of people, and accepting gratitude and praise for our efforts, the line of potential visitors is still to the end of the street. At various times there has been dancing in the street, picnics across the way, visits from the local radio station broadcasting from the hotel, but all day the line has stretched to the end of the block.

Realizing that we have paying guests who expect private rooms and an orderly environment we decide we must stop the tours as planned and accept our guests. I quickly write a sign saying, “We’re sorry, but this must be the last person in line as we have guests to check in. Please come visit us another time.” I took it outside and asked the last person in line to hold it for us.

As I’m explaining our situation to this last person and asking him to hold the sign, I’m approached by several folks.

”We’ve been waiting for two hours, sitting across the street waiting for the line to shorten.”

”We were over there in the shade, we’re going to get in, aren’t we?”

”I’ve brought my father. He used to live here. He’s got to see it today.”

I let them join the line and move the sign to the new end of line. “But that’s the end. Please don’t let anyone else get behind you.”

We were filled up with good wishes. Local residents told us how they had been waiting for this day for years. And how glad they were that it was us who did this. Lou White and his Band begin playing wonderful old tunes on the front porch, and we start humming. The music by the Band is infectious and grins begin appearing on everyone’s faces. Lee especially loves band music and he can no longer contain a huge smile.

In reality, it was only the beginning of coming to a real understanding that this was not “Mayberry.” And the idealized small town isn’t here, maybe it isn’t anywhere, except in our own psyche, placed there by the repeated exposure to “Our Town,” “Oklahoma,” or James Stewart, McCloud would prove to be as difficult and as mysterious as “Wonderland.” And tough times were ahead.

Lee and I find a moment and realize that after being construction administrators, we are now innkeepers. There is no time for any meaningful reflection on the past horrific and wonderful two years, though. We have guests.

Lee, Jeff, Juanita and I had practiced the checking in routine and it goes just fine. I show my cousin, Brenda and Nick to the room they would later occupy on many visits. Thea and Hugh McLean come up from Oakland. Thea and I had worked together for several non-profit organizations. Typically I'd hire on in an administrative capacity, then bring in Thea to manage the bookkeeping. We talked that weekend that we'd probably need five years before I could ask her to work for us. She agreed. Five years later everything fell into place and Thea and Hugh sold everything in the Bay Area and joined our team here. Other friends settle in their rooms and excitedly tell us how beautiful they are and how nuts they thought we were. About a third of the rooms are occupied by guests we don't know. Several of them tell us they are square dancers and have waited a long time for this event. Others had just waited for this hotel to open and wanted to be here for the special occasion. Some were divided in their belief that "We knew you could do it" and "We never thought you'd make it."

But there was friendship everywhere. We were truly embarrassed as folks suggested we were heroes. We never wanted to be heroes, just leave something better for the world and carve out a spot for us. We had warm affectionate feelings for these people and had let go of the petty un-welcoming feelings we had experienced. This would be a fresh start.