

Restorative Power

By Deb Wandell



San Franciscans Lynne and Bernie Butcher, who bought the Tallman Hotel in 2003, liked the tranquility and history of the property in Upper Lake. Photo: Sarah Rice / Special To The Chronicle

It was a hotel that waited four decades for the right visitors.

In 2003, Lynne and [Bernie Butcher](#) stood outside the decaying building on Upper Lake's Main Street. Built in the late 19th century in the Old West style, its sagging upper porch and peeling facade hinted at former grandeur.

Riffe's Hotel, formerly known as the Tallman, had been vacant since 1962 and on the market for years. The curtains someone painted onto the windows did little to make it look less neglected.

The Butchers, longtime San Franciscans who owned a home on Clear Lake's south shore, had considered opening a hotel in Lake County one day, not rescuing one.

The roof was gone. Doors hung off their hinges. The foundation had crumbled. A blue tarp covered a burned-out kitchen addition.

Another addition, built when plumbing was installed, was falling off the back of the building. "It was that, and a lot of weeds," says Bernie.

After signing a liability waiver, they were allowed inside. An inch of dust covered the 80-year-old carpeting. The second floor had eight 10-by-10-foot rooms with thin walls finished on one side, exposed studs on the other and, Bernie suspects, “the sound of a lot of mattress springs.”

It would be an epic project. But the idea stuck — especially with Bernie, a former investment banker who taught high school history at Convent of the Sacred Heart, [Gateway Charter School](#) and Lick-Wilmerding in San Francisco.

He was drawn to the story of the town and the hotel. “There was the attraction to restoring something historical,” he says.

In the early 1870s, Upper Lake was along the route for stagecoaches traveling from Ukiah. Rufus Tallman’s hotel, livery and saloon were a way station for travelers heading to Clear Lake’s mineral springs or on to Sacramento. But the hotel burned down in 1895 and was hastily, and poorly, rebuilt. After Tallman died, his daughter Winnie took over, and it evolved into roadhouse renamed Riffe’s, after her husband.

By the 1920s, the mineral springs fad had dried up and, with Prohibition, so did the rest of the town. The saloon was torn down, vineyards in the area were ripped out and orchards put in. Eventually highways diverted traffic, and Upper Lake was no longer on the main route.

By the 1960s, the once-busy town had emptied out. But the town’s sleepy character was the other part of the appeal for the Butchers.

“We thought that it offered substantial tranquillity,” says Bernie. And Lake County’s re-emergence as a wine region didn’t hurt.

The couple bought the hotel as well as lots on the rest of the block. Restoration, which started in 2004, was a team effort from the start.

[Lynne Butcher](#) brought in San Francisco interior design firm [Candra Scott](#) and Anderson, which specializes in landmark properties.

“The primary intent was to restore the original hotel. We pretty much all agreed on the plans,” says Scott, whose other projects include Portland’s Governor Hotel and the Citizen in Sacramento.

The upstairs porch and decaying additions were removed. The building was lifted and moved back from the street. A foundation and wraparound porch and veranda were added.

Throughout restoration, the goal was to salvage what they could and use reclaimed materials wherever possible. Old square nails in the staircase were removed and reinserted after it was rebuilt, and wallpaper upstairs was stripped.

The valuable old-growth redwood was removed to use as wainscoting in the Blue Wing Saloon that was being re-created by one of the team members, architect [Ian Murray](#), using an old photograph.

A diseased 100-year-old walnut tree was cut down and milled on site. The wood became the bar top and tables, a reception desk for the hotel and a table for the [Meeting House](#).

The Butchers also tapped Murray to design additional quarters on the property. Rather than stick to one architectural style and risk what Murray calls a “Knott’s Berry Farm” effect, the buildings were designed as if

they had sprung up around the property in different eras: a country farmhouse, bungalow-style home and garden cottages with gently sloping Dutch hip rooflines.

Portland, Ore., landscape designer [Tamara Crocker](#) created gardens that enhanced the rural feel around the pool, spa and the courtyard — a popular gathering place for guests and local residents.

For the interiors, Scott drew from Upper Lake's flora and fauna.

“Our inspiration is always about the history and the location,” she says. The relaxing palette of powder blue, soft greens, yellows and browns calls to mind Clear Lake's marsh grasses and birds' eggs. Birds also show up in the hand-painted mural on the dining room walls and on the lampshades and furniture, by artist [Carol Thosath](#), as do moths, bats, frogs and other creatures.

Scott furnished the rooms with her custom-designed collection of Eastlake-style furniture, inspired by the salvaged back bar they purchased for the saloon.

The Tallman's 17 rooms include four in the main hotel, fully restored with antique plumbing fixtures and mosaic tiles, as well as access to the wraparound veranda. The Farmhouse and [Bungalow house](#) four suites and one room. The four upper garden rooms have decks that overlook the courtyard, and the four lower rooms include private outdoor showers and teak Japanese *ofuro* soaking tubs kept at a comfortable 98 degrees.

“Candra really put her mark on this place,” Lynne says. “She's the one who convinced us if you're going to do this, do it right. Make it special, as authentic as you can.”

The period details belie the hotel's modern systems, which include geo-exchange heating and cooling, solar power and an electric car charging station. “We got a little bit carried away,” Bernie says. “It's an old hotel with pretty modern energy-saving features.”

The restaurant, which opened in 2005, quickly became a local draw for its upscale comfort food, all-Lake County wine list and Monday blues nights. The hotel opened the next year. To promote Lake County and its wine region, the Butchers have a busy events calendar that includes concerts, winemaker dinners and five-day wine education programs.

A decade later, the Tallman has put Upper Lake back on the map, this time not as a way station but as a restorative getaway in an under-the-radar part of Wine Country.

“Oh, you're staying at the Tallman?” asked a woman from nearby Kelseyville with a touch of envy. “It's the gem of Lake County.”

If you go

Tallman Hotel: 9550 Main St., Upper Lake; (707) 275-2245. www.tallmanhotel.com. Rates: \$149-\$249 per night.

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