



Finding New Life in a Historic Hotel



GETAWAYS | Caroline Wampole—April 2012

Longtime neighborhood resident Lynne Butcher was on a visit to Upper Lake in June 2003 when she saw a “for sale” sign on the historic Tallman Hotel. She had just sold her equipment leasing business and was looking for a new project.

“The ‘for sale’ sign had been there for 41 years,” she says. But the Tallman’s days were numbered. The county had just red-tagged the 1880s building and it was slated for demolition. In fact, the local fire department wanted to use it as a training ground for a controlled burn.

“We must have been the 500th person in 40 years to look at the property,” says her husband, Bernie Butcher, laughing and shaking his head. “But if you wait long enough, the greater fool will arrive.”

Most people would not consider a plunge into the hotel and restaurant business a relaxing way to spend their retirement years. But then Lynne and Bernie Butcher have always had a sense of adventure.

Before they met, Bernie traveled with the Peace Corps and coached basketball in Uruguay. During the early years of their marriage they lived in Hong Kong and London before settling back in San Francisco in 1982, where they bought their home on Pierce Street, a few steps from Alta Plaza Park, just as the neighborhood was undergoing a revival.

They also built a country home on Clear Lake and spent the next 20 years vacationing there, 2 1/2 hours north of San Francisco. Still, there is a vast difference between building a weekend home and operating a hotel.

The original complex of land and buildings contained the hotel, a livery stable and a saloon designed to serve passengers traveling to Clear Lake and the hot springs resorts nearby. It later had incarnations as a guest house, nursing home and housing for transient agricultural workers. Then it sat vacant for decades before the Butchers bought it and set about restoring its historical roots as a hotel.

“My business friends in San Francisco thought I was crazy,” Lynne admits. “They said, ‘Why are you doing this? Here you are at a stage of your lives when you can travel and enjoy life. You can’t make any money owning a hotel.’ ”

Bernie reflects on their decision: “We were too old to get jobs,” he says. “But we needed to find something meaningful to do.”

The historic aspect of the hotel appealed to Lynne’s New England roots and to Bernie’s background as an American history teacher. Bernie also saw Lake County’s potential as an affordable spot for baby boomers to retire. And there was a growing wine industry in the area just north of Napa County.



Neither could have predicted what a massive job it would be to restore the Tallman into a 17-room hotel with gardens, pool, spa and restaurant. Among other things, the main building needed a new foundation, and the adjacent restaurant — now operating as the Blue Wing Saloon and serving lunch, dinner, snacks and Sunday brunch — had to be rebuilt entirely.

There were times when the project seemed doomed, especially when their energy contractor went bankrupt six weeks before the hotel’s opening. Looking back, the Butchers seem amazed they took on such a task.

“What hubris!” Bernie says. “Talk about babes in the wood.”

It was Candra Scott, a San Francisco interior designer specializing in renovating historic hotels, who helped keep them going while renovating the property, now registered as a Point of Historical Interest. Her approach of “decorating timelessly” suited the Butchers perfectly. Scott’s idea was to augment the Tallman’s Wild West saloon facade with a series of surrounding buildings that looked like they were built over time, not all at once.

“Candra told us, ‘Don’t go western, don’t go Disneyland,’” remembers Lynne. “She’s the author of this place. Her faith and skills gave us confidence that we could turn the hotel into a real business. I couldn’t have imagined doing this without her vision.”

The Bay Area has provided the Butchers with a steady stream of creative talent to import to Upper Lake, alongside local offerings. The hotel’s calendar boasts an ambitious and eclectic range of cultural and culinary events, including a popular monthly Winemaker Dinner, regular concerts and a blues festival in August and early September. There are also literary adventures, such as this month’s writer’s retreat for 10 published and aspiring writers wishing to hone their memoirs, essays or fiction.

San Francisco is now the Butchers’ weekend destination, with the weekend redefined as Tuesday, Wednesday and sometimes Thursday. But Lynne says the neighborhood around Fillmore Street still feels like home. They still vote, take Pilates classes and get their hair cut in the city. They do their grocery shopping at Mollie Stone’s and Lynne still buys her clothes at Mio on Fillmore.

“People don’t say ‘Hi Bernie’ as much as they do in Upper Lake,” Bernie says. “Like any big city, it’s less personal. But we still feel very connected to the neighborhood.”

There are a few drawbacks to their double life. Bernie jokes that it would be nice to have a helicopter to make the 200-mile commute. And Lynne says that sometimes it’s hard to keep track of two households. “I’ll have two bags of sugar in one place, and none in the other,” she says. But otherwise, they say, they are enriched by their divided existence.

Bernie sees the Tallman project as something that will last beyond them, and something that is already making a contribution to the local community in Upper Lake and keeping a sense of history alive.