





The Return of Shore Lodge

written by Doug Copsey





It seems that the little stretch of beach on Payette Lake near the mouth of the river has always been a kind of gathering place. Bannock Indians used to stop over every summer for a couple of weeks on their way to Whitebird to take advantage of the annual salmon runs. By the 1930s and 40s it was known as Shellworth Campground, where travelers could set up their tents for 50 cents a week or rent pre-built frames for their canvas wall tents for a dollar. Consequently, a lot of folks didn't take kindly to plans for a fancy lodge on their favorite campsite, even if it did have slot machines and a roulette table.

Construction began on Shore Lodge in the summer of 1947 and continued until an October storm dumped three feet of snow into the still-exposed basement. When a late spring in 1948 threatened to delay the planned opening day, Executive Manager Virgil McGee cobbled together two rentable rooms with gravel floors and opened a hastily assembled bar to all comers. By the time everything was completed in the fall, the lobby casino was supplemented by a shopping arcade. The presence of a beauty parlor, dress shop, sports shop, combination doctor's and dentist's office, and drug store (complete with soda fountain) caused townspeople as well as guests to gather at McCall's newest hot spot.

That summer Johnny Runnals had shown up with a string of horses and asked if he could start up a riding stable that also offered pack trips for hunting and fishing. His moonlight steak fries quickly became one of the most popular draws at the lodge. After the two-mile ride up to Moorehead Flat, where massive steaks sizzled over an open fire pit while beans and baked potatoes kept warm nearby, guests were seated around a campfire and invited to sing along with the local vocal talents like Chick Sorenson and Dorothy Beyerle. Then Runnals and his faithful horse Skeeter would entertain the crowd with an amazing repertoire of tricks until the dinner bell rang.

Throughout the summer months motorboat and canoe rentals, along with tennis and shuffleboard, helped keep guests occupied. For those who craved a little more excitement, water skiing was all the rage,



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and there were even contests, including a ski jump for the truly adventurous. Payette Lake had held its first organized water ski competition the summer before, and the popular activity continued to draw crowds into the mid-1950s, with prizes awarded in three events—slalom, tricks and jumping. Sheri Phillips of Boise won the first women's trophy, while lodge assistant manager Jack Numbers took home the Diamond trophy in the men's slalom.

Numbers celebrated by marrying his University of Idaho sweetheart Patricia Barnes at the lodge the following year, helping cement a tradition that runs deep in many Idaho families to this day. Their daughter Julie and her husband Chuck Smith honeymooned at the lodge in 1981, and returned not long ago to celebrate their 25th anniversary. A multitude of marriage stories like these have become treasured pieces of lodge lore and created an even deeper connection to McCall's most notable icon for hundreds of Idaho families.

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June of that year, lodge manager Harry Grabow was succeeded by Bruce Perry, who had previously been with the Hotel Boise for 20 years, most recently as manager. Although facing the loss of gambling revenues, lodge owners were confident that Perry's personal showmanship and flair for entertainment would keep the resort in the black.

The Fourth of July weekend brought a bevy of beautiful girls to Shore Lodge for the Idaho portion of the Miss Universe Pageant. Throughout the weekend Perry displayed an uncanny ability to be everywhere at once, making sure everything ran smoothly. Then in August he brought in the Travelettes from Boise's Howdy Pardner Drive-In. In addition to an all-girl orchestra, the entertainment included dancers, singers, a ventriloquist, an impersonator, a twirler and a cowboy yodeler. Both events drew locals by the score, and though there was no admission charge, they all did their part by supporting the bar and a midnight breakfast served in the dining room.

The following winter Perry organized a series of snowplane races on the frozen lake to try to generate some business during the slow months. The often dangerous contraptions were mostly built in barns from salvaged parts, few had brakes,

Shore Lodge.





and required considerable skill to operate. Even though large crowds gathered for the noisy but exciting event, they dissipated quickly afterwards, and Perry was forced to explore ways to cut expenses. By 1959 his enthusiasm had waned, and after six years as manager—the longest tenure of anyone to that time—he decided to retire.

As luck would have it, a plainspoken young Englishman named John Edwards was visiting friends in McCall at that time. Warren Brown, president of the lodge, took a liking to Edwards, who was fresh off a job at the prestigious Savoy Hotel in London, and offered him the management position. The walls and ceilings of the 55 guest rooms badly needed painting, floors in the hallways and dining room were cracked and worn, and the outdated plumbing and wiring weren't in much better condition. Lodge stockholders were selling their shares for ten cents on the dollar. But none of this seemed to faze Edwards. His eye had already been captured by a beautiful young redhead who taught swimming lessons at the lake. By year's end, Ann Lloyd Williams had become Ann Lloyd Edwards, and John was the new manager of Shore Lodge.

"The Lodge was very run down," Ann remembers, "but when you're young and ambitious and have a challenge before you, it's an exciting time."

Edwards wasted no time. With no budget for repairs, he recruited a young local named Jim Lyons (who would stay on to become his long-time assistant) and together they tackled the multitude of chores necessary to prepare the lodge for the spring season. They painted every room, cleaned and scrubbed the carpets and floors, and even built rock walls around the parking lot.

"He spent a lot of time talking to contractors and looking over their shoulders to see what they were doing," says Ann of her new husband, "and then he'd go back to the lodge and do it himself. I used to accuse him of having an affair with the heater because he was always going down at three in the morning to fix it."

A year after Edwards took over, Brundage Mountain opened its doors to skiers, and another lodge tradition, the Ski Week, was born. People came from all over the Northwest to spend a week at Shore Lodge. That kind of business during the long winter months was a salvation for the lodge as well as the



town as a whole. By 1970 Edwards was also managing Brundage and bringing in additional winter business through conventions and charter groups, for which he provided lavish lunches brought to the top of the mountain by snowcat. By the time the sawmill closed in 1977, and McCall was struggling to make the transition from a lumber town to a tourist destination, Shore Lodge had become the town's primary gathering place, and the loss of Shellworth Campground was all but forgotten.

"People look out onto the lake and ask, 'How do I make a living in McCall?'" Edwards once told the Star News. "My advice is to watch the squirrels. They work their ass off in the summer and gather nuts, and then they chew on them all winter. Business is very fragile in resort communities. You have to be conservative unless you have a sugar daddy . . . but Shore Lodge never did have a sugar daddy."

Edwards managed the lodge for 30 years, until it was bought by San Diego developer Doug Manchester in 1990. Realizing he would need all the local support he could get as he turned the gem of their tourist industry into a private resort, Manchester kept Edwards on as a consultant for another four years. Manchester spent millions renovating the hotel and building a golf course, but the idea of a private club was more suited to resorts like Sun Valley or Vail. Folks in McCall didn't take well to the idea, and not many joined. It was as if the heart

of the town had stopped beating. Locals could no longer enjoy the Sunday brunches on the patio that had been a tradition for the past 40 years. They couldn't go out for a nice dinner in the dining room, or even order a beer at the bar. The lodge was relegated to the status of a members-only clubhouse, and there weren't enough members to keep it alive. After ten years, Manchester threw in the towel.

Among the many friends Edwards made during his long tenure with Shore Lodge was a young man who worked for him driving boats and teaching water skiing during his high school summers. Joe Scott had gone on to become a successful businessman, and when word got out that Doug Manchester was trying to sell Whitetail, his interest was piqued.

"I got involved for probably the worst reason you could have for making an investment," Scott says with a grin. "It was purely sentimental. I just love Shore Lodge. I have fond memories of driving their boats up to North Beach barbecues on Saturday nights, and working on other special events. And I thought the world of John Edwards. My interest in being involved with the lodge again was to try and revive some of the things I remember liking so much, and I was lucky enough to find a partner who had the same values and ideas about what Shore Lodge ought to be."

That partner was Rich Hormaechea, whose family had been a fixture in McCall almost as long as Scott's.

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“Joe and I chatted about it,” says Hormaechea. “Wouldn’t it be great to have Shore Lodge back the way it once was. It used to be so much fun, a place to gather. It was what McCall was all about.”

Along with a third partner, John Sabala, they bought the Whitetail Club in July 2008, and the first thing they did was haul the old Shore Lodge sign out of storage and put it back in place. That one, simple act reverberated across the entire state. It was as though the citizens of McCall had awakened from a decade-long sleep. The town had continued to grow and prosper. People from across the region who thought of McCall as a second home kept on coming there to enjoy the lake, the mountains, and all the amazing outdoor amenities that make McCall a gathering place like no other. But something had been missing. The new owners got a pretty good idea just what that was when they held an open house party for the town last October to celebrate the return of Shore Lodge.

“We got great response from the public and the press,” Hormaechea recalls fondly. “We had people with memories like you can’t imagine.”

His favorite was a woman in her eighties who presented him with an original receipt from a Ski Week she and her husband attended in the late 1950s. The total bill for a week’s lodg-

ing, including breakfasts and ski passes and lessons at Brundage Mountain (where lunches were also part of the package), came to \$200.

“And she still skis,” he laughs. “She told me she skied 60 days last year.”

Dennis Nighswonger had been General Manager barely a month when the change in ownership occurred, but he had known both Scott and Hormaechea for several years through his club management work in Arizona and California.

“The positive nature of what’s going on here makes it fun for myself and the staff to be a part of it,” Nighswonger beams. “People walk in here and they’re excited about it. The rooms are nicer, the food tastes better, all because of this positive environment that’s been created.”

But there’s a lot more to this story than a name change. Reduced room rates began bringing people back almost immediately, and a new chef has kept the dining room buzzing. In less than a year, bookings have nearly tripled, and that’s during the winter.

“We just don’t have enough dates for weddings,” says Jocelyn Kidd, Director of Marketing. “Everyone remembers all these great stories of people being married at Shore Lodge and now their kids want to get married here, too. People are saying, ‘I’ll get married on a Wednesday, I don’t care.’”





A renovation completed in June transformed the lobby and dining room back to the less formal feel of a Northwest mountain lodge, and added a gift shop and café as well. The new owners are just as excited about the revival as everyone else.

"We have a lot of plans based on what worked well in the past," says Scott. "We've more than doubled the patio space, which allows us to do things like weekend barbecues in the summertime. It's just such a great setting down there to sit next to the water and have great food service. We want to restore Shore Lodge to the glory days and bring back some of the special events that it became famous for."

"... the Sunday brunches, the ski weeks, and more activity on the lake," adds Hormaechea. "Some of the old, fun things the lodge was known for. We're trying to bring back some of that local, family stuff, and at the same time re-attract some of the smaller convention and group business that used to come here for those same reasons."

With 77 rooms, the lodge is considered a boutique hotel, and both owners and staff want to make service a priority.

"We had discussed with the old ownership whether or not we wanted to achieve four-star status," recalls Nighswonger, "but the new owners' philosophy is that it's not as important to be four-star as it is to be friendly, warm, inviting, and make sure that every guest feels welcome, that they're well taken care of, and that they have a great experience. The thing I try to impress on the staff is that the word no is not in our vocabulary."

The transfer of ownership included considerably more than Shore Lodge. Whitetail golf course and the housing development surrounding it were part of the package, as was a commercial property across the street next to Lardo's. While the immediate focus is on strengthening the hotel business, planning continues for the other amenities.

"It can be confusing," Scott admits, "because we do have a kind of semi-private club in Whitetail that mostly revolves around the golf course. We have residential lots for sale and around 90 members. Part of their membership package gives them rights to beach access through the lodge, so the public and private entities are kind of intertwined."



Membership in the golf club no longer involves owning a lot, and guests of the lodge can now share the golf course with members.

"Our philosophy is to keep dues and assessments down," explains Scott, "and frankly, we had to generate more business in order to do that. Once we explained that to the members, they agreed it made sense."

All in all, the new owners head into their first summer season with high hopes for their investment, but they all agree that its real success will be measured in real estate sales.

"We're going to put a big emphasis on the Whitetail side this summer," says Hormaechea. "We think those properties should have a better balance of price points. Some smaller cabins, maybe some townhouses. In this market it just isn't feasible to do all high-end. We're going to try to appeal to a lot broader spectrum of buyers, and we'll put a lot of emphasis on family because we think McCall is a family kind of place."

"I think one of the most unique features I've experienced here is the sense of ownership that

people in this state feel for Shore Lodge," Nighswonger adds. "We had about 1,300 people show up to the opening party last fall, and, literally, people stopping you and giving you hugs, many times with tears in their eyes, telling you how pleased they are to reclaim it. The history, the family gatherings, everyone has a story. It's been remarkable to experience this total turnaround to where the people once again own Shore Lodge."

It is rare in this day and age to see the relentless engine of progress stop, take a breath, and redirect itself back to a calmer, more comfortable time when people were not so rushed, so frantically driven to move forward continually, no matter the consequences. Shore Lodge will never be exactly the way it was. Too many other things have changed since then, and those days are memories. But memories can live again when people with heart and vision want them to badly enough. And when that happens, it's nice to realize that, every once in a while, you really can go home again. ●