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The Finest Little Hotel in America: Pilot Butte Inn



The Pilot Butte Inn, named "The Finest Little Hotel in America" by author Irving S. Cobb. Located on the corner of Wall Street and Newport Avenue, this colorized postcard shows the hotel at the height of its storied past.

Author Irving Cobb called it "The Finest Little Hotel in America." Former presidents, movie stars, skiing legends, local dignitaries, lumber buyers, and even a sitting First Lady walked through the doors of Pilot Butte Inn during its storied past.

Gone from Bend since the demolition of the Swiss Chalet-style hotel in 1973, just mention the Inn by name

to an old-time Bendite and stories about weddings, birthday parties, and all-night dancing celebrations are recalled.

Visitors and new Bend residents may not even know the hotel ever existed. Today, a modern apartment building with restaurants such as Super Burrito on the first level, sprawls out over the lot that once housed the premiere hotel of Bend.

Few know that the 1917 hotel was the third iteration of the Pilot Butte Inn. The original hotel was built in 1902 by B. F. Zell and looked like any clapboard shack in a small rural town. Only two years later, the hotel was moved to a lot on the other side of Wall Street and received a major upgrade. Built by Ralph Lucas, the second Pilot Butte Inn was added on to in 1909.

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What most old-time Bendites remember as the Pilot Butte Inn came to be in 1917. Inspired by European ski hotels, the Inn ran the entire length of the block from the intersection of Wall Street and Newport Avenue towards the river, coming to a stop ahead of the area where the old Bend Elks Hall is today.

The three-story hotel was the inspired design of well-known Portland architect, John E. Tourtellotte. The Vancouver, Washington firm of Phil Brooks and Frank Sullivan were the original owners. Brooks was a relative of the Brooks family of Brooks-Scanlon Lumber Company.

Due to the size of the hotel, the City of Bend, Brooks and Sullivan, the Bend Company, and the Bend Water Light & Power agreed to a land swap, "equal in value, so that no cash is involved." The hotel, and what would eventually become the steel-spanned Newport Bridge, were part of the negotiations in early 1916.

The first architectural plans were revealed on September 23, 1916 on the first page of the Bend Press, a short-lived competitor to the Bend

Bulletin. The lower part of the hotel featured a lava rock front, while the upper two stories were made from 3-inch-thick, hewn pine timbers, both materials plentiful in Central Oregon.

In the article, Mr. Tourtellotte is quoted saying, "In the preparations of these plans Mr. Brooks has borne in mind that an ideal hostelry should strive to create an atmosphere which the guests instinctively feels comprises mother, home and heaven."

He continued. "In planning this hotel the builders have endeavored to make it truly a home, a haven of restful unostentatious comfort. A place where the stockman from the plains and the rancher from his broad acres, the Knight of the Grip. The tourist, the clerk or the millionaire could meet on common ground, around an enormous fireplace, the great leveler of mankind, the open fire."

Bend was experiencing a building boom in 1917. Aside from the Pilot Butte Inn, plans were also made for the new \$30,000 O'Kane building on Minnesota. A. H. Horn of the Bend Brick and Lumber Company told the local newspaper that he was ready for the onslaught. His brick machine had a daily capacity of 60,000 bricks.

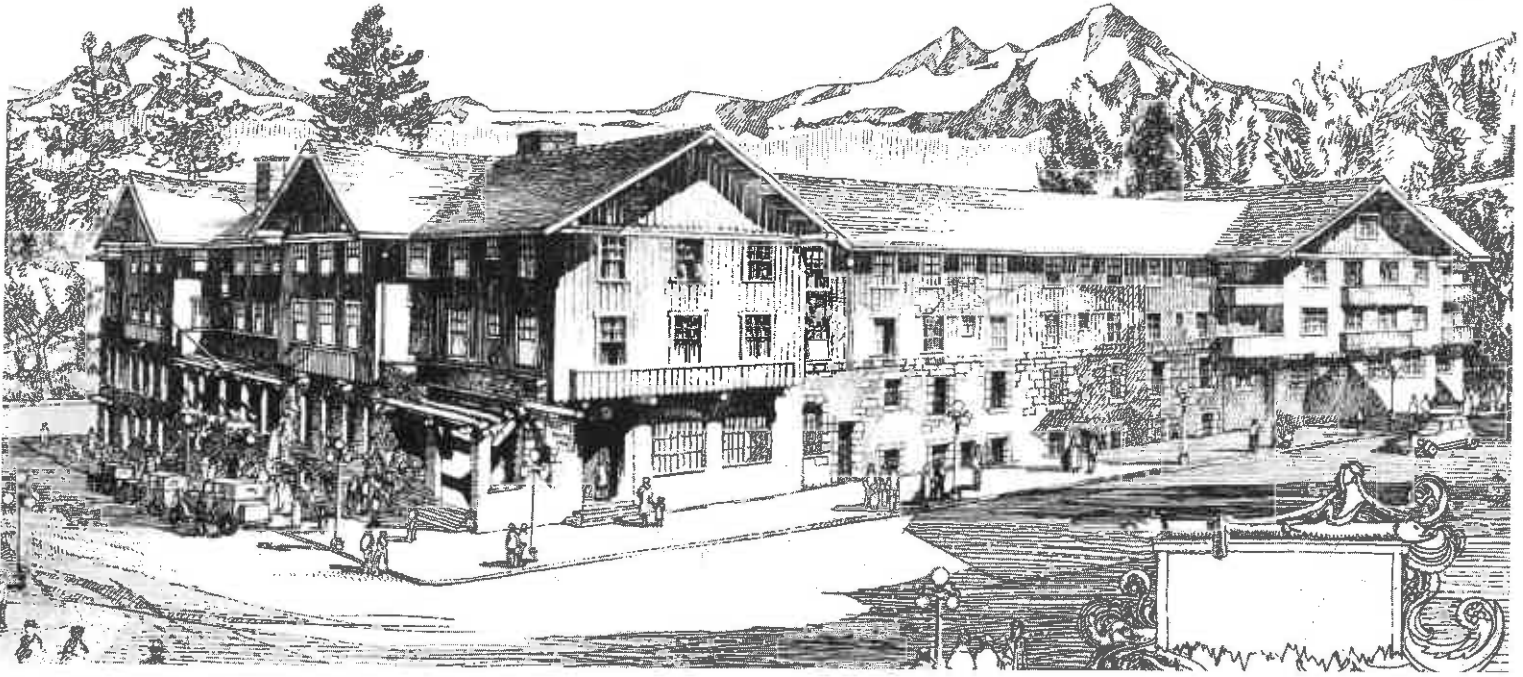
After six and a half months of hurried construction, with cost coming in between \$60,000-\$80,000, the Pilot Butte Inn was formerly inaugurated on March 19, 1917. The hotel featured 60 guest rooms and three rooms set aside for staff. Five days before the big event, the first meal was served, and the Inn Manager Birdsall's first point on the agenda was to rebuke a nasty rumor that the restaurant had hiked the per plate price.

Taking to the pages of the Bend Bulletin, Birdsall commented, "We aren't running any Jesse James Game and I should like to have it understood that this talk about \$5.00 per plate is absolutely false. A charge of \$1.50 a plate will be made."

The grand opening was an all evening affair. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon, Sunday, March 18 the doors swung open. The hotel had received capacity booking for the dinner and the staff had to set up for two servings between 6 and 10 o'clock. After dinner was served, dancing ensued with music furnished by Wiley B. Allen Jazz Band of Portland. At least 100 couples were seen dancing the night away. The festivities did not end until 4 o'clock Monday morning.



The two previous iterations of the Pilot Butte Inn. Left: Built three years before Bend attained city status in 1905, the first hotel was built by B. F. Zell. The second Pilot Butte Inn was built in 1905 and later expanded in 1909. Renamed the Colonial Inn in 1930.



An architect's drawing of the "Finest Little Hotel in America" the picture shows the Pilot Butte Inn with the second and third addition in place. The hotel was added on in 1925 and the third addition stood ready in 1930. After the final phase, the hotel had 150 guest rooms, dining rooms, kitchen, and a spacious lobby with a huge fireplace. The capacious basement even contained a hidden wine cellar.

It was a promising grand opening. Bend took a step up in status as the Central Oregon vacation destination and the small rural town in the middle of Oregon was never the same again.

Sunday dinners at Pilot Butte Inn in the 1920s left little for want. The late October 1922 menu included Fresh Sea Food Cocktail; Major Grey's Chutney Chilled Celery; Chicken a La Reine; Baked Toke Point Oysters, Kirkpatrick; Glazed Virginia Ham in Champagne Sauce; Roast Alaska reindeer a la Chasseur, Frozen Egg Nog, Candied Alabama Sweet Potatoes, Tiny Garden Peas, Au Buerre; Artichoke, 1000 Island Dressing; and Nesselrode Ice Cream.

The Pilot Butte Inn survived Prohibition with no remarks from the Bend Police. If there were any illegal alcohol to be had in the bar at Pilot Butte Inn, it was probably served with the understanding that the police force would never raid the hotel.

The new Pilot Butte Inn quickly outgrew its costume. In 1924, Phil Brooks started planning a second ad-

dition to the hotel along Wall Street. The second iteration of the Inn had been used to house overflowing guests, but now it was time to do it right. After moving the older hotel further down Wall Street towards Portland bridge (approximately where the River Point One building can be found today), enough room was made available for the second addition. In early July 1925, the expanded hotel was inaugurated.

The Pilot Butte Inn was the first choice for out-of-state mill owners coming to Bend on their annual inspections. The Shevlins and the Brooks were frequent visitors, as was former general manager at Shevlin-Hixon, J. P. Hennessy, as he took up the same position at the company's McCloud, California mill.

As the country was thrown into the throngs of the Great Depression, the guest list included more out-of-state dignitaries, most of them from a part of the society that had money to spend. On vacation from the hub-bub of Washington D.C., First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt stayed a night at

the Inn in August 1934 together with journalist Lorena Hickok.

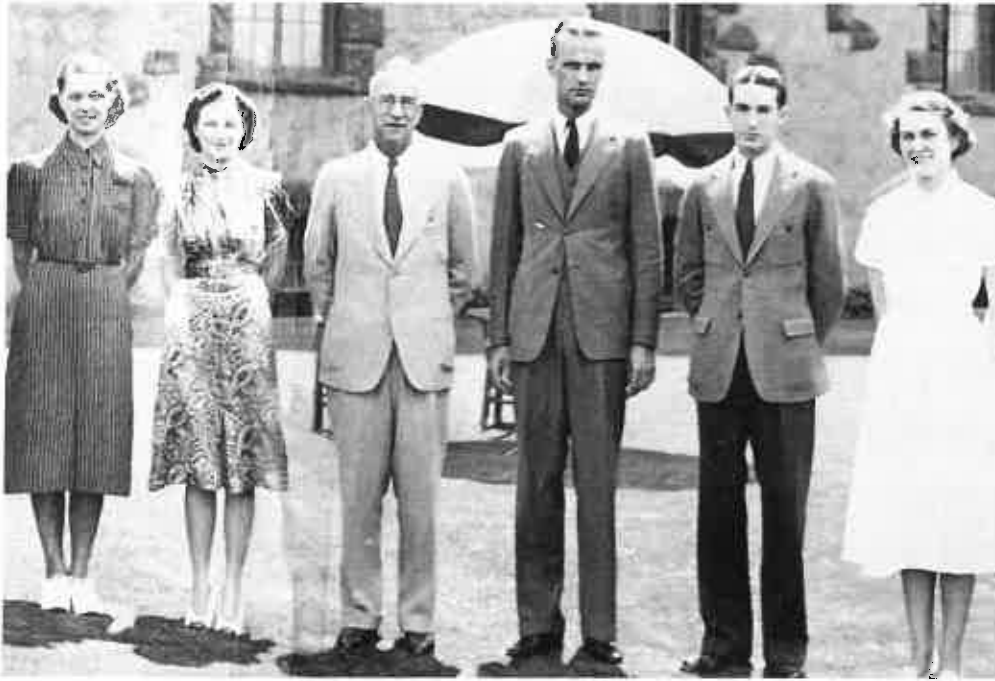
Actor Humphrey Bogart stayed at the hotel in June 1940 together with Mrs. Bogart, who at the time was Mary Methot. Bogart was yet to star in film classics such as High Sierra, The Maltese Falcon, and Casablanca.

Author Irving Cobb, the man who perpetuated the rumor of a small "lava bear" species living in the Central Oregon country, was often seen at the Pilot Butte Inn. Radio and screen star Jack Benny passed through Bend in August 1938 and had lunch at the Inn.

In a 2010 interview, Collena Gales, née Spangler, remembered working as a bread girl at the Pilot Butte Inn during her high school years.

"I would serve bread at dinner," said Gales. "The bread came out of the kitchen hot. I had a tray so I could carry the bread. I would walk around the individual tables and serve [the guests] bread."

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Pilot Butte Inn staff from left: Telephone operators Margaret Deboer, and Collena Spangler; hotel manager R. M. Wood; room clerks Bob Johnson and Chuck Painter; and unknown.

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After graduating high school, Gales was promoted to the front desk as a telephone operator. She worked behind the big desk in the main lobby answering phone calls.

"There were a lot of interesting people that would stop at the hotel," said Gales. "The hotel was the place to stop and stay overnight."

After losing the 1933 election to Franklin D. Roosevelt, former president Herbert Hoover was a frequent visitor at the hotel.

"I remember Herbert Hoover stopping there in a big black limousine with a chauffeur," said Gales.

An avid fisherman, Hoover favored the Upper Deschutes River. Hoover told the Bulletin reporter, "Let's forget politics, I want to know where to catch the big ones." In July 1940, the editorial writer quipped, "Herbert Hoover returns again and again for fishing in central Oregon. Franklin Roosevelt, we suppose, will never come here. He can't ride a navy cruiser up the Deschutes."

The original architect had envisioned the hotel as a gathering place for ranchers and millionaires alike. Gales remember the splendor of the hotel.

"The hotel had a big entrance. As you came in through the entrance, into the main lobby, there was a huge fireplace," said Gales. "And the big

picture window in the dining room overlooked the Deschutes River."

The famous picture window was imported from France.

When Bend took a step into the radio age in the late thirties, the local station KBND was housed in a newly renovated area in the basement of the hotel. Owned by the Bulletin, the station transmitted local student orchestras, interviews with notable locals, and discussion programs. The 175-foot steel mast at Pilot Butte Inn made sure KBND programming was heard as far away as Brookings, Oregon.

As it had survived Prohibition and the Great Depression, the Pilot Butte Inn went unscathed through the World War II era. After the war ended, many servicemen celebrated their wedding receptions at the Inn. One was Leon Devereaux, who married his bride Marion in 1946.

"We had our reception in the Sun Room," said Devereaux. "It was a good size room in the basement of the hotel and we had a pretty good



The reception area with the grand fireplace, which now can be found at the Athletic Club of Bend

crowd in there, 45-50 people. We served cake and ice cream to the guests.”

The Sun Room was eventually turned into a bar called the “Hide-away. Later still, the room functioned as a Gold Star Mother’s memorial.

The “parade room” in the hotel was the Blue Room. A Bend Chamber member, Devereaux has fond memories of attending chamber meetings in the Blue Room.

As time wore on, things were changing in Central Oregon. The timber epoch was coming to an end in the early fifties; the forest could no longer support two large mills. The remaining sawmill couldn’t offer the once brisk business that had flowed through the hotel.

The Pilot Butte Inn fell on to hard times in the sixties. Owners replaced each other in quick succession.

Grand plans for re-opening the hotel were made, but in the end, the new owners were not able to raise enough cash to make good on their promises.

Competition from motels, a chronic lack of maintenance, and a long string of lawsuits also made it impossible to put together a feasible plan to renovate the hotel. While the legal wrangling kept going, the hotel fell deeper into disrepair. The doors closed for good in early December, 1965.

The final rescue operation for “The Finest Little Hotel in America” was put together by Bend furniture designer Michael Shannon, who was the driving force behind the Central Oregon Resource Development Company (CORDCO). The group raised \$30,000 to stake out a new vision for the Pilot Butte Inn and create a large community center in the surrounding area. A young architecture student, Jean Anderson, was working



University of Oregon School of Architecture student Jean Anderson and a scale model of the downtown revitalization project dubbed, the Bend Center. Visible in the lower left-hand corner is the representation of the Pilot Butte Inn as a community center.

on her thesis when the Pilot Butte Inn project caught her eyes. The project started in 1968 when she was a fourth-year student at the University of Oregon School of Architecture. During her project, she was heavily involved in the CORDCO committee’s work.

In the introduction to her thesis, *The Pilot Butte Inn, 1968-1973*, she summed up the state of downtown Bend during the late sixties.

“Downtown Bend is threatened by the ubiquitous by-pass strip development. These kinds of developments are the same everywhere in any town. Downtowns need to preserve their unique identity.”

The CORDCO project was foremost a downtown revitalization plan. The hotel was only a small part in a grander vision. The Pilot Butte Inn was going to be turned into a community meeting center with a shopping mall, restaurant and bar on the main floor; a second-floor area with

conference rooms and offices; and a basement bar where the Hideaway had once been. Further away from the hotel, a sprawling area with offices, apartments and public space would spill out in front of the Court House. The new area that was called the Bend Center.

In the end, the grand plans for a downtown revitalization project fell on deaf ears and the hotel was doomed for destruction. In an era long before the appreciation of cultural landmarks, the Pilot Butte Inn passed into memory in late June 1973.

Remnants of the Pilot Butte Inn are still around. The grand fireplace is on display at the Athletic Club of Bend. The Deschutes Historical Museum has a display case with mementos from the hotel, including the carved boar head that was once part of Pilot Butte Inn on Wall Street.

— Tor Hanson, Gazette Editor