



The Natural History of Ashland's Landmark Hotel

By Becky Neuman

Just six years ago in November 1997, the old Mark Antony-Ashland's neglected landmark hotel, originally known as the Lithia Springs Hotel and once the tallest structure between San Francisco and Portland- closed its doors and was boarded up. It was a cold winter that followed and the spirit of the vacant hotel just about disappeared. It sat deserted and ignored for nine months until one fateful July day in 1998 when the magic hand of good fortune was waved over those old bones and its bright spirit called back to be resurrected. The hotel was 72 years young at that time.

The rebirth however was not an overnight facelift. It would be a deep full-on basement to parapet transformation. All the systems had to be reworked- electrical, plumbing, heating and air. All surviving original trim, flooring, and lighting were to be restored and retained. Bathrooms and guestrooms were redesigned and detailed consistent with the original character of the building, kitchens and service areas reconfigured; ballrooms, dining room and restaurant were recreated. Public spaces were shed of non-historic elements and returned to historically compatible designs and the gray concrete slab with a pool would be blasted out to make way for- the dream- to revitalize the spirit of the hotel and resurrect it to its original 1925 grandeur. The hotel would be authentic- true to itself and its birthplace and embrace its history yet return in style.

The hotel's original bones were still glorious; a grand two-story lobby with a mezzanine and beautiful stained glass in the windows gracing the Gothic and Beaux-Art structure. The lobby floors were the original terrazzo and the fireplace mantle and lobby pillars were still intact. Stunning light fixtures still graced the ballroom and the original glass windowpanes remained for the most part in all the guest rooms.

What was needed was more entertaining space- a conservatory to compliment the natural light ballroom and the creation of an enclosed garden

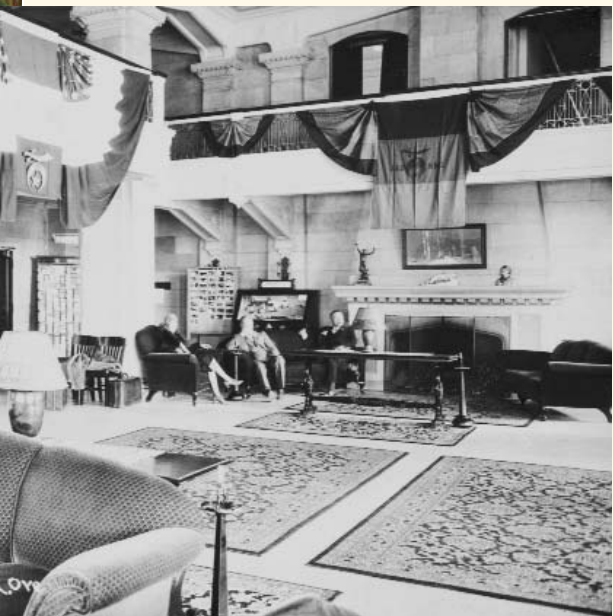
with old-fashioned English roses, a wrought iron gazebo, fountain and faux bois bench. So be it. And the magic hand was waved. And what era would the hotel invoke? A simpler time-

time when the Portland architectural firm of Tourtellotte and Hummel were building the hotel- possibly emulating the 1906 Grand Dame of the Northwest- the Empress Hotel in Victoria BC, but coming forward in time to Ashland, Oregon 1925.

In the 1920's Lithia Park was an auto park by the creek where folks would come from far and wide to hear the popular Chautauqua lectures and entertainment in the large canvas "beehive" dome where speakers from all over America would come to enlighten, educate and enthrall. Classes were also given in such things as nature study, elocution and physical training, chorus, cooking and painting. Travelers and locals alike would hitch up their buggies and camp out in the park. The scenic beauty was also a draw as well as the nearby mineral springs, which were a source of recreation and wellness. The water from Lithia Springs contained lithium and was said to induce levity and a sense of increased well-being and a myriad of other cures. The Rogue River Valley, the Siskiyou and the Cascades inspired naturalist interests with their wide range of flora and fauna. Birds and birdsong abounded. So the historic landmark was dressed in this era- where "wonder" cabinets would display curiosities from the world of nature and collections from far away places. The hotel pillars would display bird engravings. Collections of pressed leaves and turn-of-the-century herbs would adorn the guest rooms and elevator. The attire would be elegant, but not stuffy. Refined and reflecting the tastes of an earlier time, but comfortable with a relaxed ease. It would be a place to linger, look, discover as well as celebrate and relax. It would rise again and reopen in December 2000- not as Mark Antony Roman warrior- but as Ashland Springs- a Grand Dame with an interest in nature's wonders and who is turning 80 years old in 2005.

And in celebration of that important birthday, Ashland Springs Hotel has become a member of the Historic Hotels of America located within the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington D.C. All members of this 213 hotel consortia have faithfully maintained their historic integrity, architecture and ambiance. Members must be located in a building at least 50 years old and listed in, or eligible for, the National Register of Historic Places or be locally recognized as having historical significance. The hotel member must have a full service restaurant on premise and provide meeting facilities.

Ashland Springs Hotel was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978 and now a new dream has been realized in its association with Historic Hotels of America (HHA). Its spirit is proud- proud of its historic significance, its town, its place in the community and its recognition as one of America's resurrected historic beauties at the gateway of a great state. And what was said at the opening of the hotel in 1925 still holds true today, "Come to Oregon, where life is best, the land where dreams come true."



left: Lobby 2005 right: Lithia Hotel lobby circa 1920