

The Ashland Springs Hotel

A Historic Structure in Oregon Is Brought Back to Its Glory Days

Text by Penelope Rowlands/Photography by Tim Street-Porter



Becky and Doug Neuman bought the hotel at a tax auction in 1998 and transformed it into an eccentric mix of idyllic small-town living, European taste and the great outdoors. LEFT: The lobby has its original terrazzo floors.

DIMINUTIVE YET WITH grandiose dreams, the town of Ashland, Oregon (population 19,500), has long refused to accept obscurity as its fate. Founded during the Gold Rush and once witness to passing covered wagons, it's a place that has managed to draw crowds, by one means or another, since the 19th century.

For years it was a stop on the hugely popular chautauqua lecture circuit, which ran until the mid-1920s and brought

such speakers as Susan B. Anthony to town. Multitudes also made their way here after a dubious-tasting mineral drink known as lithia water—dense with lithium and alleged to have curative powers—was piped into its downtown plaza. Once these attractions faded, a more lasting one took their place: the well-regarded Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Founded in 1935, it draws more than 100,000 theatergoers to this Rogue

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LEFT: Built in 1925, the hotel, which draws on Gothic, Beaux Arts and Arts and Crafts architecture, was once the tallest structure between San Francisco and Portland, and it remains Ashland's landmark.



LEFT: For the lobby, designers Candra Scott and Richard Anderson brought the town's quirky past to life with petrified mushrooms, iron dragon gas lamps, stone birds and a frog skeleton. The chairs are covered in fabric by Brunschwig & Fils.

BELOW: At one end of the restaurant, which is called Elfinwood and serves food and wine primarily from the Northwest, a group of custom-made stools sits before an antique marble-topped bar, from The Butler & the Chef.

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Valley hamlet every year.

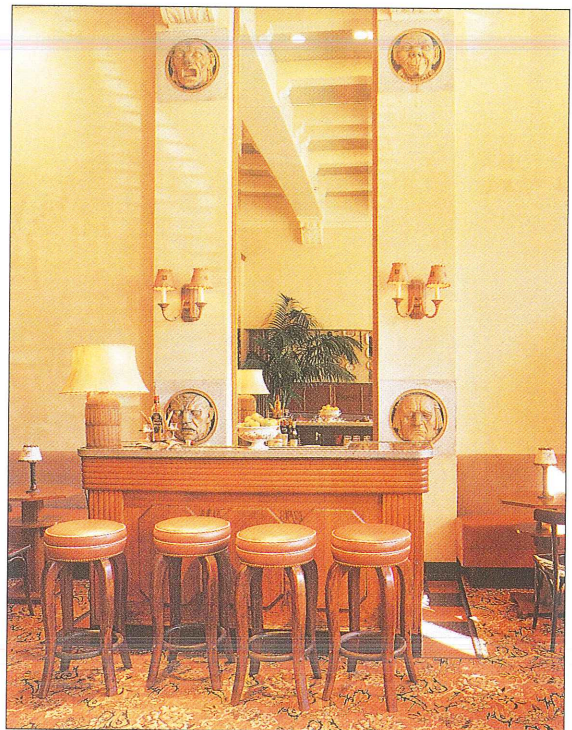
An ambitious town needs an ambitious hotel, and in 1925 Ashland got one. Built at nine stories—almost absurdly tall for the time and place—this eclectic structure was designed to call attention to itself; and it did, first as the Lithia Springs Hotel, later as the Mark Antony. In 1978 the building was included in the National Register of Historic Places, but over the last decade or so it had languished. By the time Doug and Becky Neuman bought it at a tax auction in 1998, many of its windows had been boarded up, and there was talk of transforming this former showplace into low-income housing.

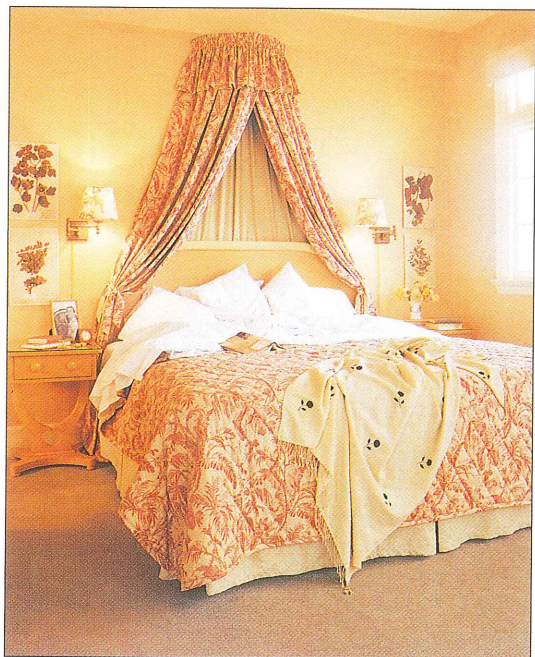
"It was always kind of a di-

amond in the rough," says Doug Neuman, a real estate developer. The façade had been painted mud brown. Ugly touches, from rickety fire escapes to protruding air conditioners, abounded. But not everything was bleak, he says: "The good news is that the lobby was pretty much intact." In fact, it was glorious—a classically proportioned two-story space that "fills with light like melted butter," as Becky Neuman puts it, thanks to enormous windows, some with stained-glass detailing.

The couple, transplanted Californians who settled in southern Oregon in 1987, began collaborating with architect Robert Seibert, of the

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FAR LEFT: Architect Robert Seibert helped reconfigure the guest rooms, where pressed herbs are displayed. Many of the design elements are derived from nature, such as the stenciled thistle found on some of the rooms' armoires (left).

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Medford, Oregon, firm Skelton, Straus & Seibert, whose father, also an architect, had worked on an earlier renovation of the hotel. Together they reconfigured the space and transformed its 93 guest rooms, some of them tiny, into 70 more generously sized ones. While Doug Neuman, who acted as general contractor, oversaw such challenges as the installation of a four-pipe heating, ventilating and air-conditioning system, his wife focused on the interiors.

When it came to choosing an interior designer, the couple were of one mind. "We wanted someone who was capable of working with the historic elements and who could do something unique rather than something fancy with a lot of marble," Doug Neuman says. "It had to be someone who had a vision," his wife adds, "and they had to understand the concept. How do you treat this beautiful, light-filled lobby?" To find out, they hired Candra Scott and Richard Anderson, of the San Francisco firm



LEFT: The swimming pool was removed during renovation and replaced with a cobblestone patio and a garden of roses, hollyhocks and foxgloves. The plant stands were purchased at an estate sale, and the iron gazebo is custom-made.

Candra Scott & Anderson, who specialize in renovating historic structures, particularly hotels.

The pair are great believers in using design to tell a story, and, after a week in Ashland—which teems with Shakespeareana, ethnic restaurants

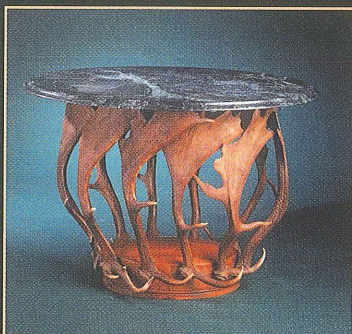
and secondhand bookshops—they had one to tell. "We decided to do this whole cabinet-of-curiosities concept based on education and travel," Scott explains. Housed in antique vitrines, the lobby's oddities, including old love letters, seashells and a puffed-

up parrot fish, reveal themselves from the minute you enter the hotel.

"Candra said, 'Dash out and find things that have character!'" Becky Neuman recalls. The things she and the designers came up with have person-

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ality to spare, including the lobby's delightfully eccentric stand-up wicker lamp and an 18th-century glass-fronted cabinet, found at a Paris flea market, that's made of wood so weathered it resembles lichen rock. "It's all about layering everything in to create a point in time," Becky Neuman adds. "We visited the past and relished it and asked, 'What was Ashland like at the turn of the cen-

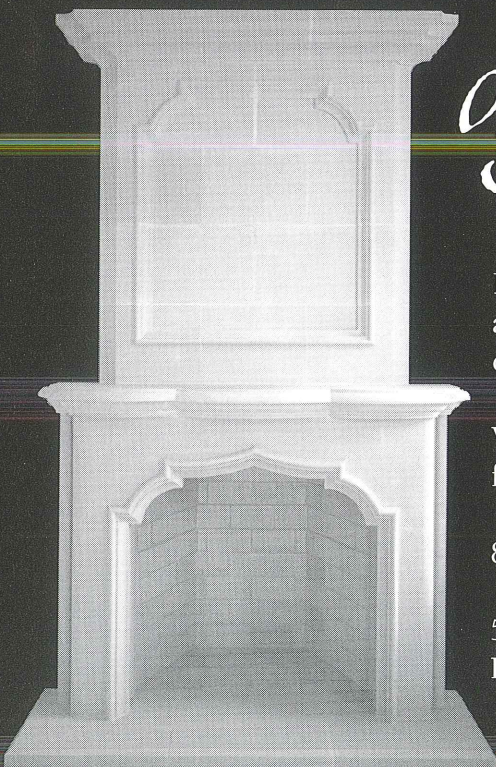
The well-regarded Oregon Shakespeare Festival draws over 100,000 theatergoers to this Rogue Valley hamlet every year.

tury?' We just went off into that world—it got so rich and so delicious."

For the guest rooms, "we talked all about comfort," she continues. And acted on it, too. They bought a large electric mangle, so that sheets could be hand-pressed, and insisted on such luxuries as feather duvets on every bed and lavender bath sachets on every pillow. "We're selling sleep," as Doug Neuman puts it.

And, like all good hotel owners, they're hawking illusion, too. They've taken a moment in time and built on it, drowning out the present. When you step into the Ashland Springs Hotel, with its big-band music and whirling ceiling fans, it feels like a respite. Even the hotel's name, which brings to mind the days when the town was famed for its flowing mineral water, seems to tug back in time. "I think we gave it a life," Becky Neuman says.

These days, the Ashland Springs Hotel takes its place in the long line of tourist attractions that have fueled this quirky, entrepreneurial and very special town. In the finest local tradition, it draws a crowd. "People come in and spend a lot of time looking at the collections," Doug Neuman notes with satisfaction. Townspeople linger, and tourists feel at home— isn't that the definition of a hotel that works? What brings them in is simple, his wife adds. "It's all in the details, the magic of the details. People love this building because it's from the heart." □



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