

## A Site To Be Seen

# Resurrection in the Rogue Valley

By Vickie Mitchell

*Small Market Meetings*

The nine-story hotel at the corner of East Main and First streets in Ashland, Ore., is hard to miss. Built in 1925, it was the tallest building in town then, and it still is today.

Originally known as the Lithia Springs Hotel, the vintage property reopened three years ago as the Ashland Springs Hotel with new owners, a new look and a new image.

Doug Neuman, a California transplant and developer, had eyed the hotel for some time before he bought it at a tax auction in 1998. His wife, Becky, recalls that "every time he drove by the hotel, he'd say, 'Becky, I'd like to buy that hotel!'"

Instead of wincing at the work that lay ahead, his wife threw herself wholeheartedly into a project that she saw more as public service than as a profit-making venture.

### *Living up to long-but potential*

Together, the Neumans led a \$12 million, two-year restoration that has allowed the hotel to live up to the potential it lost long ago.

"I love Ashland, and I love the Rogue Valley," said Becky, "so the most important concern in resurrecting the hotel was not to try to reinvent it but to resurrect it — to let it become what it had always wanted to become."

If ever there were a hotel confined about what it was supposed to be, it was the Ashland Springs. In seven decades, the hotel had passed through many hands, undergone many changes and sported many names.

Today, thanks to the Neumans, it has a distinctive identity, built on Ashland's past, and a seasoned staff schooled in service.

That staff has been a blessing to busy association executives like Joyce White, head of Grantmakers of Oregon, an association of foundations.

She's the only staff person on site when her organization's members meet, so "I don't get a lot of sleep," she said. "I have to be working with people I can

totally depend on. The people at Ashland Springs never let me down. There has never been one detail that has not been attended to."

She has held two meetings there so far; the hotel has already been booked for next year's meeting.

"They are so, so good to work with," White said. "It's the simple things, like if the room is cold, 60 people sitting there won't have to wait a half an hour for someone to come and fiddle with the thermostat," she said.

The hotel even turned away another piece of business out of concern that the group might cause noise problems for White's group.

"They said, 'We are going to save the room next to you in case your numbers grow,'" White said. "They want to create relationships, not just serve someone's overnight needs."

Like its staff, the 70-room hotel has some extraordinary features.

The Neumans, working with a design firm that specializes in historic properties, took rather average meeting rooms and turned them into enlightening and enlivening spaces.

What was once a piece of concrete slab next to the ballroom is now an enclosed conservatory, with a tile floor,



*Courtesy Ashland Springs Hotel*

Born on the Lithia Springs Hotel in 1925, the Ashland Springs has fewer guest rooms but more pizzazz and more interesting meeting space than the original.

wicker chairs and leafy palms. Ballroom windows look out upon the airy space, which was destined to be called "prefunction space" until Becky Neuman put her foot down.

"I told them, 'I'm not going to call

this glorious room a prefunction room. I'm going to call it a conservatory.'"

Next to the conservatory, where a typical square hotel pool once sat, is an outdoor English garden. The conservatory's large windows look out upon a custom-made gazebo entwined with roses and bistro tables and chairs sheltered by large umbrellas.

The space is popular with leisure hotel guests, and it is also used for receptions, parties and dinners.

White's group enjoyed a respite in the garden spot.

"During our meeting, we took our box lunches outside on the terrace — the challenge was getting them back in," White said.

### *Three spaces quell balance and harmony*

The three contiguous and complementary spaces — the ballroom, the conservatory and the garden — give meetings balance and harmony, Neuman said.

She and her husband put themselves in a meeting-goer's place. "We thought, 'Wouldn't it be lovely to walk out of a meeting into a lovely garden with a fountain and bird song. How fresh



*Courtesy Ashland Springs Hotel*

The hotel's collections are tucked into display cases in the lobby and other public spaces.

would that be?"

Ashland's past was the starting point for much of the hotel's decor.

Neuman and designer Candra Scott studied the town's history. Some locals suggested giving the hotel a Shakespearean theme to celebrate its long-lived and much-admired Shakespeare festival. Instead, the pair focused on nature and on the Chautauqua series that brought visitors to the city in the early 1900s in hear lectures of all types. Learning and discovery became overarching themes.

Unusual collections — bird nests, seashells, old love letters — fill glass cases in the lobby.

#### Maps and globes add adventure

Oregon themes individualize what would otherwise have been two typical meeting rooms. Photos of female aviators who trained at the Tex Rankin School of Flying in Portland in the 1920s hang in the Pilot Rock Room. The wall area is papered with aviation maps, given a rosy patina by a coat of red varnish. Antique globes on tabletops add to the sense of adventure.



Courtesy Ashland Springs Hotel

An English garden adjoins the hotel's second-floor meeting space.

The Gristly Peak Room honors a local nature photographer and artist. It is decorated with his artwork and collections of birds' nests and eggs.

The idea in the meeting space and throughout the hotel is to give guests "things you want to look at and read about," said Neuman. "I find that beauty and character are inspirational."

And, she adds, "It's fun to have

surprise around every corner."

There could be more surprises in store for future guests with inventive owners like the Neumans, as well as with the new general manager, who is an alumnus of management teams at such historic properties as the Heathman Hotel in Portland and the Drake Hotel in Chicago.

Mary Arnsad became the hotel's general manager in April, and already, she is pursuing additional corporate and association meeting business for the hotel.

Based on her past experience, Arnsad knows that community involvement pays off. In March, she'll join the Oregon Shakespeare Festival Board. She's a new member of the Crater Lake National Park Trust and serves on the Oregon Tourism Commission.

The hotel is already reaping the rewards. Crater Lake National Park held a meeting at the hotel in December; the Shakespeare Festival Board will meet there this year and has also booked 24 major donor functions.

Because the hotel is so new, little is planned in the way of changes, save for general upkeep and repairs. Wireless Internet access will be extended throughout the hotel in the coming year; a new chef will take foodservice up a notch.

The focus will be meeting business, Arnsad said.

#### Rates drop in shoulder season

The hotel has some definitive advantages. During its shoulder and off-seasons, roughly late October through early spring, groups' rates can be as much as 30 percent lower. The Neumans' purchase of Lake of the Woods, a lakeside resort about 30 miles away, makes it possible to plan off-site events like a houseboat trip on the lake or hikes, followed by a campfire.

Arnsad's strategy for capturing the business-meeting market is simple: do a good job, and make sure that everyone — especially the business executives who are in town for a weekend of Shakespeare — sees the hotel's meeting space.

## A quick look at the Ashland Springs Hotel

Ashland Springs Hotel  
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(541) 488-1701 fax  
[www.ashlandsspringshotel.com](http://www.ashlandsspringshotel.com)

**Recognitions:** 2001 Excellence in Historic Preservation Award from city of Ashland; called "Best New Old Hotel" by *Southern Living* magazine (2001) and profiled in *House Beautiful* (January 2002) and *Architectural Digest* (June 2002)

**Rooms:** 70 guest rooms

**Meeting space:** More than 5,000 square feet of meeting space, including a 300-person grand ballroom that adjoins a palm-filled conservatory; two 40-person meeting rooms; and a private dining room for up to 70 people.

**Location:** Ashland Springs is 15 miles north of the Oregon-California border, off Interstate 5. The hotel is on Main Street, two blocks from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

**Amenities:** A bistro, a lounge, afternoon tea each Sunday; an English garden, complimentary continental breakfast, limited wireless Internet access and high-speed Internet access in guest rooms.

**What's new:** Wireless Internet access will be installed throughout the hotel this year; a complimentary weekend wine reception is being tested, and changes are in the offing with a new chef at the helm.

"We need to step up our reputation with the pin-striped-suit brigade," Arnsad said.

The hotel must also battle guests' tendencies to think of it as a place reserved for special occasions. For the Ashland Springs to thrive, it must also be viewed as a beautiful place to do business.

"We will be reminding people that the hotel is not a silk slipper, but a very good Johnson and Murphy wingtip," said Arnsad.

## Much ado about a lot to do in Ashland

ASHLAND, Ore. — Seventeen years ago, Rocky Neuman and her family were seeking "that sweet little town, where you can walk everywhere."

They strolled across the foot-friendly streets of Ashland, laced up their sneakers and never left. In her adopted hometown, says Neuman, "you park your car and never have to get in it again."

There's a surprising amount of activity in this town of 20,000, and the Ashland Springs Hotel, resurrected by Neuman and her husband two years ago, is in the middle of the action.

Walk two blocks from the hotel, buy a ticket, and take a seat at Ashland's best-known attraction, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. In June 2003, *Time* magazine selected it as No. 2 among the top regional theaters in America. Plays are performed in repertory from Feb. 20 to Oct. 31.

Or, if you prefer picnics to plays, find a quiet spot in Ashland's 100-acre Lithia Park, next to the festival grounds, where swans skim the surface of two duck ponds and lithia mineral water still flows free for tasting from two fountains.

Out the hotel door in the opposite direction is the Oregon Cabaret Theater, where comedies and musicals are performed in a cool nightclub setting.

For a relaxing break from a stressful board meeting, visit the hotel's next-door neighbor, the Ashland Springs Spa. At this beginning-of-the-20th-century retreat, patrons soak in antique tubs or revitalize their tooties in peppermint footbaths after afternoons ambling around town.

Finding an interesting and appetizing meal is no challenge in Ashland, where nearly all of the 100 restaurants are local creations. Chateaufort has been serving French food with flair since 1973. Wash down organic pizza pies with mugs of microbrew beer at Cosmic Pizza. Tapas tantale at Tabu. Good and natural are bywords at Off the Grid Wetles and the Greenleaf Restaurant. The fish served at Kal Wok is flown in from Hawaii.

The sensory experience doesn't end when the last crumb is consumed. For a visual treat, visit Ashland's many art galleries. They're all open on the first Friday evening of each month for Ashland's Gallery Art Walk.

Examine sand paintings at American Trails Gallery, or buy the works of Ashland artisans at Thrown Stone, a local cooperative. See many objects made of trees — including a full-size bicycle — at Ashland Hardwood Gallery. Bone up on beadwork at Looking Glass Beads and the Bead Studio.

Ashland Chamber of Commerce  
(541) 482-3456  
[www.ashlandchamber.com](http://www.ashlandchamber.com)



Foot-friendly streets lead to theater, shopping and good food.



The Pilot Rock Room has a high-flying theme. It salutes Oregon's early female aviators.

Courtesy Ashland Springs Hotel