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The Old Baker Hotel The New Baker Tower

By ANGELIKA OLSEN

The Oregon Trail is seeing a rebirth, not in the form of horse drawn wagons, but the new millennium's version: the information highway. In June of this year, US West now Qwest, announced the arrival of level-three fiber optic lines in Baker City, Oregon.

Timing is everything. This month the recently renovated ground floor level of the nine-story Baker Hotel will be occupied for the first time in at least six years. Over the past 12 months the Baker Hotel has undergone a thorough interior renovation. Phase I and II are complete and Phase III has begun with the repair and painting of the exterior. It's like a metamorphosis from within. Every floor has undergone serious demolition to remove a 1970s remodel and what will emerge is a building restored to near its original splendor.



The Baker Hotel (Tourtelotte and Hummel, 1929) in 2000.

The Baker Community Hotel, built in the late 1920s and financed publicly, was constructed by the Multnomah Hotel Chain, a Portland based company of the time. It is one of a series of three hotels designed by archi-

tects Tourtelotte and Hummel; the other two hotels are located in Boise and Ashland. Boise's Hoff Building was reconfigured and is currently serving as a vital office building a stone's throw from the State Capitol. The Mark Anthony Hotel in Ashland is undergoing extensive remodeling by its current owner, WestCoast Hotel. The art deco architecture of the Baker Hotel, as it was later renamed, is notable for its octagonal, tenth floor cupola and is adorned with decorative scrolls, garlands, urns perched on parapet walls, and four foot eagles guarding the entries.

Troubled financially from the start, The Baker Hotel changed hands frequently. Its opening preceded 1929's Black Thursday by just a few

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Baker Hotel

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months and over the decades its success has roller coasted with Baker City's boom and bust economy. It finally closed its doors as a hotel in the late 1960s and thereafter floors three through ten were converted into apartments, while the main and second floors housed retail businesses, offices, and a restaurant. With the changeover, 25 very livable and largely sought after living spaces were created. Remodeling took the trend of the time; decorative plaster moldings were covered up by dark veneer paneling and moon rock (aka moon mesa) in an effort to "modernize." An aluminum and glass swinging front door and metal awning completed the 1960s period look.

During the 1980s, along with the rest of Baker County, the building again suffered financial troubles and was sold. In the early 1990s, investors from out of state received a \$500,000 Federal Community Block Grant for the hotel. Their efforts focused on weatherizing the concrete and steel building. However, for various reasons, the Baker Hotel Apartments, as they were known, earned an unfavorable reputation and was credited as the most frequent police call destination in town. The building fell deeper into disrepair, the investors defaulted, the building went into foreclosure and again, a new owner was sought.

Timing is everything. Taking a huge chance and a large financial gamble, new owners Shayne and Angelika Olsen saw the potential buried deep under a layer of moon rock and shag carpeting. We thought, "It's just such a beautiful building and the potential is enormous how can we let a chance to revitalize the tallest building east of the Cascades slip by." For the most part the units were in horrible shape.

Tenants had trashed the hallways, left behind unwanted belongings, the elevator jammed regularly, the plumbing was faulty, and winter freezing had taken its toll. It seemed clear that the only way to tackle this project was to start over.

In July 1999, workers began the demolition, removing all the cabinetry, worn carpeting, the discarded furnishings, refrigerators, stoves. Everything non-historic came out, filling 38 giant-sized dumpsters and leaving just a



The lobby of the Baker Hotel restored to its original 1929 splendor.

shell in its place. The removal of the moonrock that had covered the main hallway plaster walls and cove decorative plaster molding unveiled a much more airy atmosphere. Transoms that had been paneled over allowed more light to stream in. Some of the original splendor has been restored.

The Hotel's original lobby is once again lit by uniquely designed, six-foot art deco style chandeliers and matching wall sconces. The hot pink and teal (what were they thinking?) paint was stripped off the brick, marble,

plaster molding and fireplace, the foam-backed, low-grade commercial carpeting scraped off, and the terrazzo floors refinished and polished. Missing and broken marble base moldings were replaced in kind.

On the outside, with financial assistance in the form of a grant from Historic Baker City, the 1960s moonrock that covered the face of the building was removed, the plaster and concrete up to the cupola repaired, the surface prepped and repainted to simulate the original shade of concrete gray. The main floor windows and sashes and have been recreated with custom windows handcrafted and built on site. The clear fir, double front doors with nickel plated hardware invite you in.

Today, the main floor offers six commercial/retail spaces of varying size; two already spoken for. Phase IV will be a continuation of work on floors two through nine plus the famous cupola with its endless views of Baker Valley. Upon completion, the new "Baker Tower" will offer of 25,000 square feet of class A office space with high speed fiber optic capabilities wired in and ready to go. It is perfectly poised to house a new millennium business, where the information highway intersects with the Oregon Trail.

For more information or to follow progress of the renovation, please see our website at www.bakertower.com. The Baker Hotel is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Angelika Olsen is one of the proud owners of the historic Baker Hotel.

