

RESILIENCE: Sisters weathered fire, flood, and hard times

Continued from page 1

broad Central Oregon landscape. The name of Whychus Creek, which runs right through town, comes from a Sahaptin phrase, “The Place We Cross The Water.”

You could date the founding to 1888, when the area post office moved from Camp Polk to Sisters, or perhaps more solidly to July 10, 1900, when Alex and Robert Smith platted the town, with many of the street names still in use today.

Any way you define it, Sisters was a pioneer town, the hub of a small homesteading community and for a while the only town between the Cascades and Prineville. As a pioneer town, operating in relative isolation and conditions we would consider primitive, Sisters had to be self-reliant and resilient.

Those qualities have continued to be a hallmark of the community.

The resilience of Sisters was severely tested in 1923 and 1924, when two separate fires nearly destroyed the town. Ray Hatton recounted the terrible events in his history, “Oregon’s Sisters Country”:

“On May 11, 1923, fire broke out in an untenanted garage, spread rapidly and leveled one entire block of town ... The fire destroyed 10 buildings — some businesses, some residences — within 15 minutes after the first alarm.”

All that was available to

fight the fire was a bucket brigade of eight or 10 men, because most folks in town were away at a track meet in Redmond. The men had to carry water 200 feet from an irrigation ditch, and all they could do was douse properties that had not yet caught fire.

The Hotel Sisters, standing in the center of town, was scorched, but survived.

“The next year, late in the afternoon on September 11, fire once again broke out and raced through parts of Sisters,” Hatton recounts.

The Bend Bulletin headline read: “Half of Pioneer Town is Leveled by Flames.” Once again, the iconic Hotel Sisters was scorched but survived.

Hatton notes that, “within a sixteen-month period, fire had destroyed sixteen buildings valued at \$50,000 in Sisters.” A raw inflation calculation makes that \$769,000 in today’s dollars — but, given the real estate market of 2021, the loss of 16 buildings in downtown would surely calculate out far higher than that.

The town rebuilt.

The town would reinvent itself in the 1970s and 1980s. In the ’70s, there wasn’t a whole lot to the place — for those other than the 500 or so residents, most of whom worked for Barclay Logging, the Forest Service, or businesses that serviced those entities, Sisters was pretty much a highway pit stop for travelers. That changed when Brooks Resources, the developers of Black Butte Ranch, decided they needed a place for prospective residents of the nascent resort to shop.

In a 2015 *Nugget* story

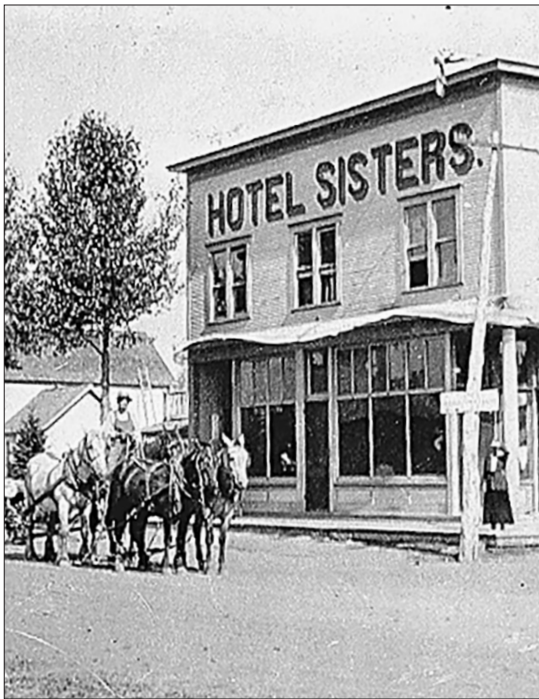


PHOTO PROVIDED

The iconic Hotel Sisters was a survivor, twice escaping being burned down.



PHOTO BY JIM CORNELIUS

Sisters Saloon in the Hotel Sisters building is now a landmark of downtown Sisters.

headlined, “How Sisters became Sisters,” correspondent Bonnie Malone recounted:

“The colorful Harold Barclay, a friend whose company supplied logs to Brooks Scanlon Mill, said simply, ‘Let’s buy Sisters.’ This was not an absurd idea at the time, Smith said, as a highway frontage lot could be purchased for \$10,000. Barclay’s idea was to purchase all existing businesses and revamp them into an inviting adjunct to Black Butte Ranch outdoor amenities.

“Brooks Resources President (Bob) Harrison envisioned an alternative plan. Brooks would offer a \$5,000 grant to build false storefronts of Western theme to any existing business in Sisters, or to new construction that honored the theme. This would give Sisters a unique image and enhance its attraction. If a business

owner kept the Western theme frontage for 10 years, the loan would be forgiven.”

The idea caught on, and Sisters developed a strong identity that began to attract tourism.

Brooks Resources also undertook the restoration of the venerable survivor of two conflagrations, Hotel Sisters.

As Malone recounts, “Again, Brooks Resources stepped in and gave financial assistance to the varied group of the building’s owners to assure that the integrity of the historic pearl of Sisters was not compromised. The restored building was later purchased by Bill and Jan Reed, to reopen as a

restaurant in 1985.”

That pioneering spirit was also in evidence in the mid-1990s, when the Sisters School District could not fund a sorely-needed expansion of Sisters Elementary School. Local contractor Curt Kallberg asked a simple but profound question: What if the community simply built a new wing?

In a community-wide effort that resembled an old-fashioned pioneer barn raising, the community pitched in to gather materials and expertise and got the job done. The effort was so singular that then-Governor

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