

GREAT LODGES

OF THE NATIONAL PARKS, VOLUME TWO



BY CHRISTINE BARNES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRED PFLUGHOFT AND DAVID MORRIS

THE COMPANION BOOK TO THE PBS TELEVISION SERIES





Wallowa Lake Lodge



Wallowa Lake is one of nature's sweet surprises. Created when ancient glaciers crept from the mountains, the five-mile-long gorge of water is cupped by moraines so perfect that they seem engineered. Jutting up at the south end of the lake is a crescent of peaks that include Mount Howard, Mount Bonneville, and Chief Joseph Mountain, part of the Wallowa Mountains that cast long shadows across the glassy waters. A 144-acre pocket of land to the west is Wallowa Lake State Park, and on the east side of the lake the Wallowa Highway, once a dusty buggy track, grips the shoreline. Trails along the Wallowa River splay into the Eagle Cap Wilderness part of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. For an aerial view a tramway transports visitors to the top of the 8,150-foot Mount Howard.

Tucked back from the south shoreline, surrounded by towering ponderosa pines and red fir trees and a rolling lawn, stands the chocolate-brown Wallowa Lake Lodge and Cabins. The three-story



frame lodge strikes visitors as charming in a no-nonsense, Eastern Oregon kind of way. This is ranch and farm country, where early pioneers founded the nearby town of Joseph and made their livelihood supported by community bonds and hard work. But there was time to play, and the cool, clear waters, fishing, hunting, and stunning scenery drew visitors to Wallowa Lake. With them came ferryboat

service, camps, amusements, resorts, and big dreams.

Neither its remote setting in the northeastern mountains of Oregon nor its short summer season deterred those who saw this as a wonderland: a potential destination resort to rival the Canadian Rockies' Lake Louise and Banff.

There are no room phones or televisions or Internet service at Wallowa Lake Lodge, and for devotees of the lodge, that is just how they like it.

In 1926, a three-story addition was added to the lodge; today the exterior of Wallowa Lake Lodge looks much as it did then.



LOCATION: WALLOWA-WHITMAN
 NATIONAL FOREST, GATEWAY TO
 EAGLE CAP WILDERNESS, OREGON

OPENED: 1923

BUILT BY: JAMES AND CLYDE AMEY
 AND J. ROSS LESLIE (1923 LODGE);
 W. C. KELLY (1926 ADDITION)

HISTORIC DESIGNATION: NONE

🌀 In 1912, tourists enjoyed cruising Wallowa Lake on the Aneroid.

▶ The first phase of Wonderlake Lodge was completed in 1923 and offered a destination for later visitors.



The use of Wallowa Lake for a summer camp was nothing new. The Nez Perce enjoyed the cool surroundings, abundant fishing, berry picking, hunting, and nearby grazing land for their horses for decades until they were forced from their land in 1877. The name “Wallowa” came from *wallowas*, the Nez Perce fish traps used to catch sockeye salmon as they migrated from the ocean to the streams. Folks tried other names: Spalding Lake, Arabella, Silver Lake, and Joseph Lake, but the Native American name, Wallowa, finally stuck.

Early pioneers coveted the lake area for the same reasons the Nez Perce enjoyed the freshness of summer and the natural bounty found there. Early sportsmen packed horses and mules around the lake along the original trail, and the Nez Perce asked them to find other fishing grounds, since they believed that the white man’s presence would frighten the fish away.

The first pioneer “resort” was the Ellis House on the east moraine, followed by the two-story Reel House constructed around 1900 at the north end

of the lake. But it was the south end, shaded by the lofty peaks and trees, that was the jewel of Wallowa Lake. Photos from 1888 show the *Alpha*, a ten-horsepower steamboat, carrying passengers from one end of the lake to the other. The *Lavena* and *Aneroid* also began hauling their cargo of giddy tourists around the lake.

Entrepreneurs, church groups, and fraternal organizations laid out plats and constructed a variety of cabins, camps, and docks with bathing facilities to meet the needs of the touring public. One of the earliest efforts was Wallowa Lake Park, started in 1906–7, where a lodge, small cabins, dance hall, restaurant, corrals, and even a two-lane bowling alley drew visitors. Early operators like J. Ross Leslie, W. R. McInturff, and J. C. McPherson were pioneers in the lake’s tourist development. The construction of the Wallowa Falls Power Plant in 1921 made future development easier.

By the spring of 1923 the local newspaper reported plans under way to improve four current ventures at Wallowa Lake prompted by the anticipated completion of the valley highway. McInturff, the most experienced of the resort operators, owned Wallowa Lake Park, and he announced he was doing away with tent cabins and constructing new frame cottages with kitchens, electricity, and cook stoves on each porch. The Methodist Assembly, south of Wallowa Lake Park, expected throngs of campers that could warrant construction of some permanent buildings. The Elks Clubhouse was under construction with lots for sale around the new building for B.P.O.E members to build their own cottages.

A new project, Chief Joseph Resort, reported plans to “erect a commodious hotel, dance hall, restaurant and other buildings” on its 260 acres. The newspaper reported that Leslie, J. S. Amey, and his son, Clyde, were sawing lumber for the new



*W*allowa Lake is located
at the end of the road in the
Wallowa Mountains.

*You have to go out of your way
to get here, and that makes
it a bit of a hidden treasure.*

—Don McCully, former manager

buildings and “. . . about finished logging and are employing a portable mill to reduce this to lumber and timber.” The hotel under construction, actually situated on Tax Lot 200 of McInturff’s property, would become Wallowa Lake Lodge.

The summer brought flocks of tourists and residents who enjoyed the new dock and diving platform, bowling alley, wooden swings, and picnic



◀ *The Nez Perce made summer camps along the banks of Wallowa Lake, and visitors continue to enjoy fishing, hiking, riding, and the simple serenity of the lake and surrounding wilderness, above.*

tables, creating a “holiday spirit” at the park. The two-story frame hotel was called Wonderland Lodge. The Ameys and Leslie erected the hotel as many buildings were constructed at the time: no foundation or insulation and using a straightforward design. Yet there was care in the details such as the peaked dormers, first-floor windows with additional transoms, and plank siding artistically placed from the ground up, first vertically, then horizontally, then at a diagonal, and back to vertical.

During the winter of 1924 Leslie began an ambitious plan to form a new well-financed company that would take over Wallowa Lake Park and the Ameys’ Chief Joseph Resort. The sudden death of Clyde Amey on December 3, 1923, likely gave Leslie added certainty that the merger would work. The newspaper reported that J. S. Amey and his wife, who held title to the Chief Joseph Resort

property, “wished to be free and they might get away.” By February, Leslie, a longtime proponent of a modern resort at the head of the lake, had options on both properties and investors from La Grande, Oregon, lined up. Leslie returned to Joseph, where he met with friends and business associates in the community, offering stock subscriptions to locals, and then moved on to nearby Enterprise and other Oregon towns to pitch the new company. In addition, Leslie had secured a letter from the general passenger agent of the Union Pacific railroad that when “sufficient facilities” were provided, the railroad would advertise the resort on a national scale.

The deal was finally closed in April 1924, and Wallowa Lake Wonderland, Inc., was formed with prominent men, mostly from La Grande, on the board. On May 5, McInturff sold his resort to the Wonderland company. Tourists arrived that summer

via the new highway, and Leslie reported that the park “cannot take care of all the visitors.”

Visitors of another ilk were soon to appear in this quiet corner of the state. By the spring of 1925, the area was abuzz with talk of a movie crew scouting Wallowa Lake for an Alaskan gold rush saga titled *Winds of Chance*. By April construction of the sets for a gold rush camp were underway with a crew of twenty men on the payroll. When

construction halted to wait for the director to arrive, everyone enjoyed early fishing and the lodge opened so everyone could dine in the “pretty new dining room.” The set contractor, W. C. Kelly of La Grande, provided live entertainment, dancing, and radio broadcasts that added to the atmosphere. By May the producer was calling for three hundred extras for the movie. On May 12 the *Enterprise Record* reported, “After seven days of movie excitement the


upper valley has settled down to normal life again. . . . In addition to supplying ample excitement, they had hired several hundred men and women for short periods and paid them liberally.”

That summer’s season at Wallowa Wonderland resort brought about a number of staff changes. Leslie abruptly resigned as resort manager, and L. C. Binford, a newcomer from La Grande, was appointed to the position. Binford immediately



▲ The lobby fills the first floor of the 1926 lodge addition where every inch has been restored and glows with the warmth of time. The word WELCOME was set in stone above the hearth.




*I feel like at the lodge we're
 still in a page from the past.
 It isn't real sophisticated yet,
 and probably will never be.*

We all hope.

—Gail Swart, lodge pianist

announced plans for new cabins and an auditorium. No sooner had Binford begun making his plans, he retired and stockholder McPherson took charge. Leslie had declined an offer for his old job, and by July the longtime local resident and man who spearheaded Wallowa Lake Wonderland, Inc., left Wallowa Lake to pursue other projects.

Beginning in 1924, according to county clerk records, Wallowa Lake Wonderland, Inc., began selling off lots from the Chief Joseph Resort subdivision, apparently to finance expansion. By late 1925 construction of the hotel addition had begun, and contractor Kelly (who had built the movie set) assured Wonderland management that the lodge would be ready for the May 15 opening. Newspaper accounts called it “without a doubt the fastest building record ever made in Wallowa County and nothing is being slighted . . . Given sixty days to complete the job, it looks like that time will be shortened.”

What Kelly, under the direction of McPherson, was overseeing was a three-story addition featuring a full basement, eighteen to twenty spacious guest rooms, a beautifully paneled lobby with hard maple floors, and a twelve-foot stone fireplace—all “designed to meet the most exacting guest.” The addition was 30 x 60 feet with a pergola in the front and a porch on the lakeside of the hotel. A large opening connected the dining room and kitchen (the 1923 building) and the new addition, featuring the sun-filled lobby, an office, and the front desk. A small corner stairway led to the second floor. McPherson handmade the burl and branch furniture, many of which are still in the lodge today, over the winter.

In addition to the lodge, new cabins were planned, and a nine-hole golf course was staked out on what is now Wallowa Lake State Park. With an estimated cost of \$10,000, the golf course project was never done. While lodge construction was



◀ Handmade burl pieces like this chair were crafted during the winters in the 1920s. ▲ A few hunting trophies remain from the early days combined with a collection of antiques that create intimate seating areas within the large lobby.



Irene Wiggins (pictured with her sons, Bob, Duane, and Lee) bought the lodge in 1945 and the family operated it until 1987.

underway, McPherson was busy trying to get tourist agencies interested in putting Wallowa Lake Wonderland as a stop on their tour packages. McPherson was confident that this jewel of a lake would be another great destination resort. That plan would need capital.

In November 1926 the Wallowa Lake Wonderland, Inc., board of directors held a special meeting. The subject was whether to recapitalize the company stock from \$50,000 to \$150,000 or sell. The directors were well-known and respected men, and on December 22, 1926, recapitalization papers were filed in Salem, Oregon, and a month later recorded at the Wallowa County Clerk's office.

With plans and money in place, it looked like growth was a given, but the national economic

disaster of the Great Depression crippled business. In 1930 John McCarthy purchased the lodge and property and then leased it from 1943 to 1944 with an option to buy to Tom and Helena Williamson. The Williamsons declined the purchase, and the property fell into the hands of a mortgage company. It wasn't until 1945 that Wallowa Lake Lodge got an owner with the temerity to hold on.

Irene Wiggins, a recently divorced schoolteacher from Pullman, Washington, with three boys, turned out to be just what the lodge needed. With the money from her divorce settlement, she made a down payment on the lodge, various cabins, and buildings on 250 acres. After some negotiating, Wiggins bought the lodge and east side property for \$20,000 with a one-year option to purchase the west side land for \$10,000. Her sons were thrilled.

Irene Wiggins had first fallen in love with Wallowa Lake in 1929 when she, her then-husband, Roy, and two sons, Bob and Lee, vacationed there.

They returned annually, and every visit only reinforced the charm of the place. "If I ever leave our rolling Palouse hills, it would certainly be to that beautiful land," she remarked.

The Wiggins family owned and operated the lodge until 1987, and the extended family returns to the lake each summer. Irene Wiggins passed away in 1993, but the family's personal stories and an unpublished memoir Irene Wiggins had written keep the Wallowa Lake Lodge story alive.

The Wiggins chapter of this story is one of optimistic determination. Not only was the lodge in desperate need of loving care, but heavy snow had crushed the dance pavilion and small bowling alley on the west side of the river. Irene Wiggins summed up the rest of the property like this: "... the old store and lunchroom, the miserable buildings of the corral area and about eight or nine hovels of cabins were still usable." In May 1945 Wiggins and her middle son, Bob, set off on the new adventure. Lee was in the military and her youngest son, Duane, joined them when he finished high school classes.

The boys were thrilled at the prospect of diving into the resort business, and they "swore by everything holy that they would help Irene 100%," and they did for more than forty years. That first season, the family began with the basics of repairing the lodge, hiring a staff, figuring out menus under war rationing restrictions, and learning the ins and outs of resort business. By the end of the season, Wiggins took all her summer profits and every other bit of money she could scrape together and purchased the additional land on the west side of the river.

Duane Wiggins remembered it well: "My mother was a very gutsy lady in the respect that she was a schoolteacher, but for her to do what she did showed a lot of guts. It wasn't stupidity; it was guts to say, 'OK, we'll try it.'"

There was more than a lodge and cabins to run: the enterprise also included stables, a store, and boats, and Wiggins made business agreements with others to keep the supplemental interests rolling. By 1947 the Wiggins family decided to sell fifty acres of the lakeside property west of the river to the Oregon State Park Commission for funds to upgrade their facility. Six years later they gave an additional fifteen acres of land to add to the state park, recalled Duane Wiggins. Those decisions gave the state a placid place on Wallowa Lake and the Wigginses ideal neighbors who restored the landscape.

As the old cabins were sold off and moved, the Wigginses built a series of new cabins between the lodge and lake on the east flank of land. The first was Honeymoon Cabin, now called Sugar Cabin. Bob and Duane Wiggins built the cabins, and their new brides took care of the decorating. "We were

both home ec majors," said Jane Wiggins of herself and her sister-in-law, Jean. They found plans in *Sunset* magazine for two-by-four frame furniture, and in 1953 and 1954 their husbands built the couches still found in the lodge's main lounge. Jane Wiggins took care of the upholstery, and both women made the drapes. Until they built their own homes, the Wiggins families lived in the cabins during the winter and moved into the lodge during the summer season.

Running the lodge operation was a family undertaking, and over the decades everyone, including the grandchildren, took on a series of jobs. In 1980 Irene Wiggins's only granddaughter became the manager, and at eighty-six Irene Wiggins slowed down a bit.

The Wiggins and Wallowa Lake saga continued until 1988, when the family sold the lodge and eight



surrounding acres to the Ladum family of Portland, Oregon. With a change in ownership, codes had to be met, and the lodge property was about to once again be resurrected. Robert Ladum hired JoAnne Harrison to manage and oversee the renovation. A January 28, 1988, article in the *Wallowa County Chieftain* outlined the \$350,000 renovation plans with little about the owner, except Harrison saying, "It's a little like working for Howard Hughes." Harrison did spell out that there would be no alcohol served or smoking on the premises at the request of the new owners. The one-time and

◀ The attic of the original lodge was transformed from employee housing to gracious guest rooms, many with lakeside balconies. ▲ Each lodge guest room is unique, and the original sinks remain in some rooms.



▲ Dozens of restored antique mirrors, wired kerosene lamps, ceramics, and polished period furniture fill the hallways.

sometimes rowdy basement Nez Perce Bar would not be reopened.

Renovation plans had been drawn up beginning in November 1987, and they included transforming the third floor over the dining room in the 1923 portion from staff quarters to finished guest rooms with extended dormer windows and balconies on the lakeside. Bathrooms were reconfigured from the “end of the hall” design to individual baths with the new rooms. The bedroom suites over the 1926 portion retained the design that featured shared bathrooms adjoining two guest rooms. New insulation, windows, wiring, and plumbing were all needed. According to the project contractor, work began in October 1988 and continued through the winter until June of that year. What workers found was a lodge “kind of put together” that no longer met code.

The main-floor lobby, stone fireplace, reception desk, and office retained their original configuration, as would the dining hall, and a 24-x-38-foot kitchen addition was completed in 1988. Foundation was built under the 1923 portion, and a long deck was added to the lakeside of the lodge.

Local engineers, contractors, and laborers were hired, but as renovation was under way, Ladum ran into legal difficulties. The property was sold in 1990 to MEZ Corporation, a family corporation formed by Portland attorney Marc Zwerling, his wife, Nancy, and their longtime friend Steve Larson as shareholders. Instead of an end to the restoration, the work continued under the ownership of MEZ with Larson in charge of on-site renovations.

With a solid foundation to stand on, a new kitchen, insulation, plumbing, wiring, and windows, and a third floor with guest rooms rather than a “bat haven,” the new owners began adding to the lodge’s charm in the details. And it was Larson who met the challenge. “I started out 100 percent clueless,” he



*As guests glance around,
they'll be surprised to see
what they're looking at, because
everywhere are mirrors that offer
a hidden peek into some sort of
experience that they otherwise
might not have seen.*

—Steve Larson, lodge proprietor

explained. He began by collecting things he liked from the Goodwill, thrift stores, and antique shops. Then he met Chuck Scougale, a Portland antique frame restorer. “That began my education process,” he said “Over time he sent me out with an idea of what to buy.” And buy he did. Larson estimates that Scougale worked on five hundred pieces for the lodge, including an exquisite antique mirror collection with each mirror placed to frame and reflect individual scenes. Paintings and photographs, each restored, line the hallway along with antique furniture and accessories.

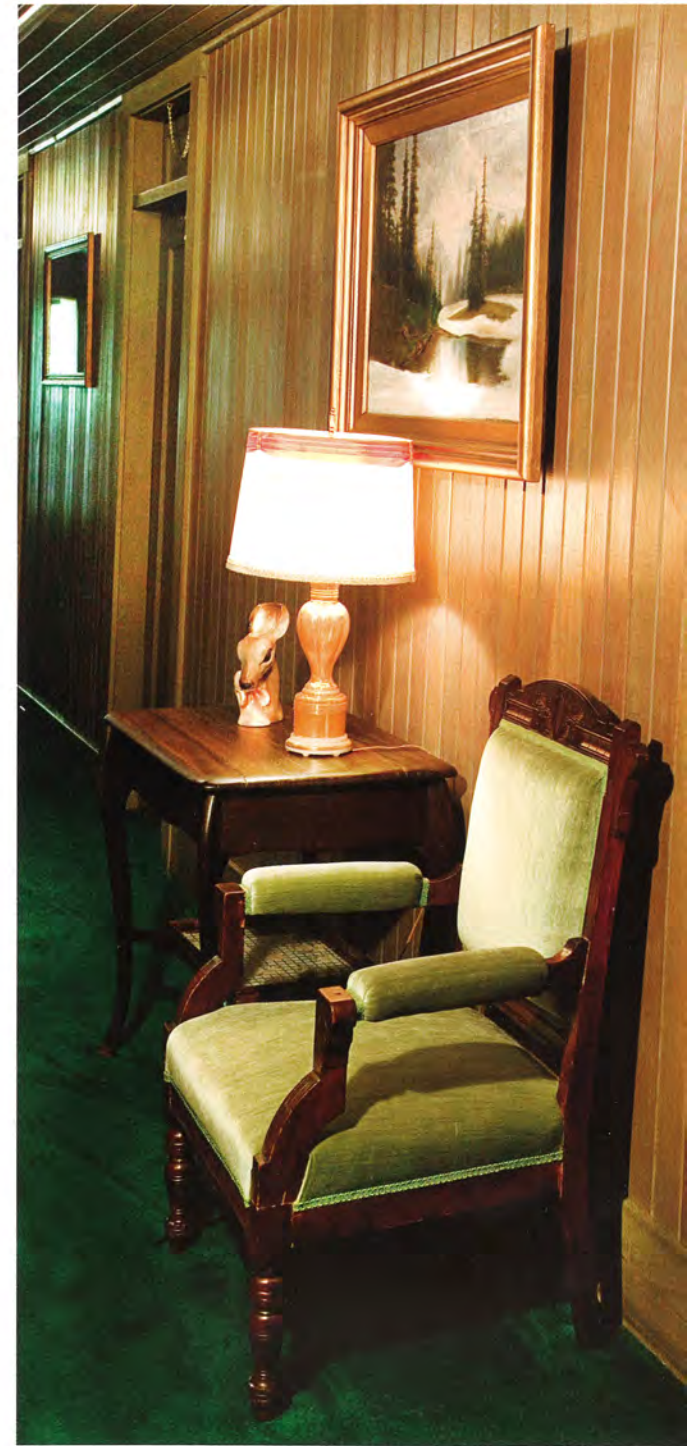
That would prove to be only the beginning. Enter Don McCully and Gretchen Weeks, who were visiting the lodge in 1993. McCully, a contractor, geologist, and “Renaissance man,” had some ideas about what to do with the place, and Larson was ready to listen. McCully and Weeks would end up spending eight years managing and working at the lodge.

The lobby’s maple floors and paneled walls and ceiling were refinished and restored, and the original fluted glass light fixtures were rehabilitated. Additional sofas were built in the same style as the *Sunset* magazine design, with area rugs, antique floor lamps, and the original handmade furniture that remained showcased.

“Gretchen and I touched and worked on every single wall and surface, and most of the items that are in this lodge,” recalled McCully. “Every physical thing attached to this building, we pretty much worked on.”

“The lodge is nicer now,” said Duane Wiggins, who returns to their home by the lake with his wife, Jane, each summer, “but we had a lot of good years.”

➤ *A Victorian chair offers a spot to stop and take in the gallery of restored paintings and photographs that fill the walls.*





▲ The beauty of the interior decor is in the details: the simple burl handrail of the stairway; an oak and burl pedestal game table; original mail and room key slots, and the renovated dining room.



*There's not a day that goes by
that I am not in awe of where I live.*

*We have all this beauty, and
we don't have to do one thing
except look at it and, hopefully,
take care of it.*

—Gail Swart, lodge pianist

The lodge once featured a hunting lodge theme, and the 1927 Taft's shed elk antlers are mounted to one side of the fireplace with a moose head on the other side. But it is the centerpiece stone fireplace that says it all about the lodge: as the mason set the perfectly positioned stones, he added the word "WELCOME" in an arch above the mantel.

The reception desk counter was replaced, but the lodge still uses old-fashioned room keys and the original cubbyholes in which to store them. What was once an unwieldy ponderosa log table was made into a bar across from the reception desk and next to the stairway with its tree-limb banister and balustrade. A tiny phone booth provides the only public telephone at the Wallowa Lake Lodge and Cabins.

The music of Gail Swart, who has played at the lodge since 1992 and as a teenager worked as a summer waitress, enhances a weekend dining experience. "That was getting paid for having fun," recalled the retired music teacher. Swart still has fun playing requests to what she describes as an international clientele.

The dining room, once the main space of the original 1923 lodge, had been partially renovated, but after insulation was added, Weeks saw more potential in the window-flanked space. The original batted ceiling design was retained, but the wood-slate bats were removed from the upper portion of the walls and replaced with drywall and a perfectly positioned Arts & Crafts–design frieze between the transom windows. The lower board bat paneling was refinished and antique mirrors were placed between each window. A series of antique High Lakes photos hangs next to the piano near the dining room entry.

Upstairs, guests will find two floors of perfectly decorated rooms, each with its own individuality. The two ends of guest rooms are different, with the 1923 portion over the dining room carpeted while



On weekends Gail Swart plays the piano in the lodge dining room. Above the piano hangs a series of High Lakes paintings, part of the lodge's historic art collection.

the 1926 section features wood floors and area rugs. Many original dressers, each hand-refinished, easy chairs, lamps, and side tables complete the rooms. The hallways are galleries of period art and furniture.

The five 1940s-era one- and two-bedroom cabins covered in precut half-log siding offer knotty-pine paneled homey spaces with kitchens, stone fireplaces, bedrooms, and baths along with outdoor decks to barbeque or just take in the view. (Only the tiny Sugar Cabin is without a fireplace.) The three 1950s-era cabins also feature knotty-pine panels with fireplaces and lake views. All cabins were remodeled in 1995.

What visitors find today is the resort J. Ross Leslie had so wholeheartedly promoted back in 1925. Wallowa Lake may be nature's sweet surprise, but stepping into Wallowa Lake Lodge brings its own bit of wonder. Or perhaps the dreams of Wallowa Lake Wonderland, Inc., simply live on.