

THE HOUSE ON THE HILL

There she stands - empty windows staring darkly out behind the overgrown greenery which now hides the Elegant Lady from passing views.

In her maiden days she boasted bright white railings and posts which reminded many of New York tycoon John Jacob Astor's summer house. Her "opening" on April 3, 1899 was an occasion of great celebration. J.J. Palmer, owner of Marble Bay Mine, was now able to enjoy the full view of his extensive operations from the front deck of the "Astor House". The building was comfortably heated by steam from the mine boilers below.

Through the decades the Lady provided shelter to many families while also serving her corporate masters. J.J. Palmer vacated in 1902. Some forty years later the Beale family owned the house which then became part of the land package sold to Ideal Cement Company in 1956. As the "Ideal Guest House" she hosted visiting VIP's from the Colorado headquarters who were often treated to salmon fishing trips and oyster barbecues. She also served as the first Ideal company offices and a site of many staff gatherings. Boxing Day eggnog parties hosted by manager Pete (and Monica) Stiles were the highlight of the holiday season through the sixties.

The Lady's "unique" topiary was planted and coiffed (originally with machete) by Joe Kempe who was hired as caretaker in 1948. The seedlings he lovingly nurtured, now grown tall, would host garlands of colourful lights every Christmas. Joe would labour alone, climbing the 20-foot ladder each year until he was well into his eighties. In 1991 Richard Olfert brought his Texada Singers choir along, joining Joe to celebrate the tree-lighting with carols and hot chocolate - a tradition that has continued to this day. Joe was thrilled with the turnout and many were moved when he joined the choir in singing "O Tannenbaum" and "Stille Nacht" in his native German. As the community gathered in song, the Grand Lady shone beautifully and proudly in the multi-coloured lights reflected by the snow.

Whatever her future, the 114 year old matron on the hill continues to evoke treasured memories from the past.

Peter Lock

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