

More Rooms At The Inns: A restored 'painted lady' adds to the area's bed-and-breakfast inventory

By Randi Bjornstad

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Languishing in "pathetic and deplorable condition" three years ago, a 19th-century "painted lady" in west Eugene has been restored far beyond its original grandeur, now showing off its charms as one of the newest of the area's bed-and-breakfast inns.

There are more than two dozen local B&Bs, according to the county's tourism guide. Most are small, in-home businesses with fewer than a half-dozen rooms, but a few have as many as 20 guest rooms.

Most of the facilities cluster in the Eugene area, with a smattering to the east along the McKenzie River, several in Cottage Grove and the Lorane Valley, and a sprinkling in Florence and along the coast.

Although the total number is small compared with conventional lodgings for travelers, "B&Bs are really important to the overall lodging inventory," says Lisa Lawton, director of community relations for the Convention and Visitors Association of Lane County Oregon. "They offer a one-of-a-kind experience that many people want to have, one that is more connected with the local landscape."

That's what husband and wife Jack Feldman and Anne-Marie Lizet had in mind when they bought the historic Chambers House at 1006 Taylor St., specifically to renovate it as a B&B.

"I had always wanted a B&B, for the past 25 years," Lizet says with the lilting accent of her native France. "We think at one time after it was a house that it must have been a store, because it has two living areas (on the first floor), separated by the kitchen. We also think it must have been used as a boarding house once. But we thought because of (the layout), it would make a good B&B."

Even so, their first encounter with what then was a badly faded lady "was anything but love at first sight," Feldman acknowledges.

"We were just about to book a flight to North Carolina to look at a B&B there," he recalls, when their real estate agent called and told them they ought to take a look at the old house, built in 1891 as a wedding gift from early Eugene resident Frank Chambers to his bride, Ida.

"It was not in good shape - the walls and woodwork in each room had its own color scheme, one yellow, one red, one purple - and everything needed work," he says. "But I was fascinated by a historical photo of the house, which is on the national historic register."

They bought the house for \$383,000 early in 2004, county records show, and the two-year renovation - they say they don't even want to discuss the amount they've put into it - began.

They greeted their first guests last June, "and everything was really busy until after Thanksgiving, when things started quieting down a little," Lizet says. "The people have been wonderful."

Two male guests from Delaware - an opera singer and an organist - played and sang in the living room of the B&B, dominated by a Steinway baby grand piano, "and it was heavenly," Lizet says. "Another time, we had an 80-year-old couple from Chicago who were having their first

experience at a B&B - they were so thrilled, they took us out to dinner."

Other people want the atmosphere of the bed-and-breakfast without the intimacy, and the successful host must be sensitive to their wishes, she says.

"Some people like to interact, and some don't. You can tell right away, and you take your cue from that."

Having "a lot of owner space" is critical to the success of any in-home bed-and-breakfast operation, agrees Pookie Walling, who has run a B&B in her home on Eugene's College Hill for 15 years and also taught classes on the subject at Lane Community College.

"Many guests feel that they are intruding if there is too much mingling between them and the owner," Walling says. "A lot of people - especially men - don't want to feel that they have to sit around and talk, but they still like the more personalized attention and homelike comfort that the B&B can offer."

By definition, most bed-and-breakfasts are located in residential neighborhoods, and what may appeal to some won't to others.

That's one reason B&B operators tend to be supportive of each other, even referring clients to each other's homes, Walling says.

"We all know that we're not going to please everyone all the time," she says. "Every home is different, every neighborhood is different, and it's good for (the industry) for people to be comfortable and located where they want to be."

Some people need to be near the University of Oregon campus when they visit Eugene, while others want to be close to shopping or in a quiet, established neighborhood.

Feldman and Lizet chose their

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house both for its location and its unusual style. Located first at Lincoln Street and Ninth Avenue - now called Broadway - and moved about 1920 to 10th and Taylor, the two-story Queen Anne house features many of the gewgaws characteristic of its architectural style.

It has the asymmetric facade, corner tower, gingerbread trim and ornately turned stair railing and balusters, but it lacked other finishing touches such as crown moldings and wainscoting, Feldman said, perhaps reflecting the economy of the times or a scarcity of materials in the still-fledgling city.

"We restored the original features, and some we added because they were appropriate to the style," Feldman said. "I spent many, many hours at the library finding out just what a painted lady should be."

Without blueprints to go by, "we were fortunate to find local craftspeople who had the skill that comes with experience and patience," Feldman said. For example, it took four artisans to create portions of the new, wide-open staircase that replaced two narrow steep staircases from the front of the house to the second floor, he said.

The mantel in the B&B's front room came from a Philadelphia mansion that was undergoing demolition.

Because of the house's historic status, all changes to the exterior needed approval from the city of Eugene, including construction of a new garage to replace the original carriage house.

The new building, scheduled for completion next month, will have a honeymoon suite on the second floor, with a Juliet balcony overlooking the property's re-landscaped backyard.

The main house has four second-floor guest bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, desk, television and heating and air conditioning controls. The fifth room has been converted to a library, opening onto a small porch.

While Feldman and Lizet are just beginning their B&B adventure - he worked in computer support at Boeing for more than 20 years before the couple moved to Eugene seven years ago - Walling plans to end hers soon.

"It takes a real team effort to run a bed-and-breakfast, and after this long, it's time to try something else," she says. "You have to be there morning and afternoon, and you have to be available by cell phone even when you're not there. Everyone has to be on the same page, so everyone knows who's supposed to do what, and the larger the place, the more tied down you are."

Keeping a house "magazine perfect" all the time is part of the job, and the food must be appealing as well as suitable to guests' tastes and dietary restrictions.

People go into the B&B business because they love their homes and entertaining other people, not to get rich, she says.

"If you have a small home with just a few rooms, it's a good secondary income, but you don't make a lot of money," she says. "If you have a large place, you can make a living, but you will have to deal with all the other things that go with running a business, because that's what it is."

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