

Many Glacier Hotel unveils 13 years of renovations

Posted: Sep 13, 2017 7:06 AM MDT

By Jack Ginsburg [CONNECT](#)



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GLACIER NATIONAL PARK - The Many Glacier Hotel, one of the most historic structures in Glacier National Park was nearly closed down in 2004 before a group of architects and park enthusiasts began a renovation plan that ended up lasting 13 years.

The hotel was built by the Great Northern Railroad Company which was seen as a gateway to Asia for all the business they did overseas there. The Anderson Hallas Architecture company has worked to renovate the hotel while still holding onto the history of the 1920's building.

One of those major projects was restoring the lighting in the lobby and the main dining room.

The new light fixtures are modeled from the original Asian style paper lanterns that were in the original lobby -- and architect Nan Anderson says they are her favorite part.

"When the lights go out in nature they come on here in the space and it has a sparkle and a magic that not many spaces have, certainly not many spaces that are built today have."

The biggest and possibly the most time-consuming project was the recreation of the helical stair case that was taken out in the 1950's in order to make room for a gift shop.

Anderson says they had some help from the past allowing them to recreate the staircase almost identical to what it was before.

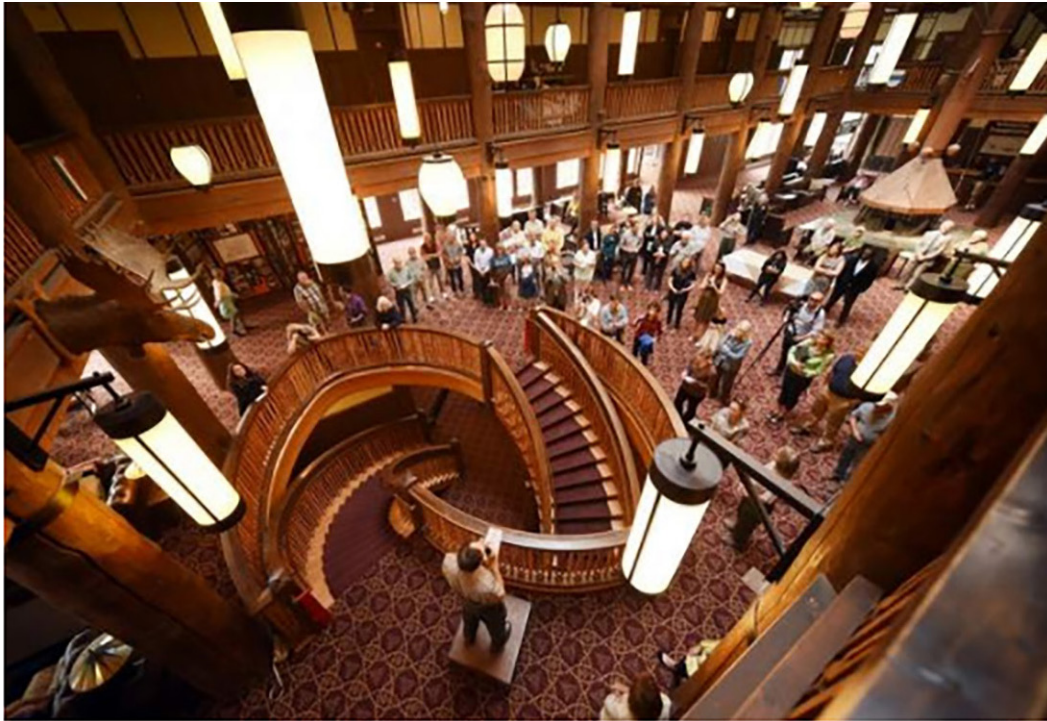
"It presented some interesting challenges because the original was not built to Code, we have to design to Code today, but the benefit was that we had the original drawings, so we worked with those original drawings to create essentially almost exactly what was here historically," Anderson said.

Anderson added they are not fully done with the renovations but said the most important thing is that the building is secured and will continue to be a historic icon in Glacier National Park for many years to come.

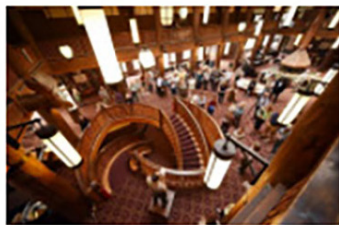
Seven rooms at the Many Glacier Hotel were fully renovated back to resemble how they originally stood in the 1920's.

NEW LIFE FOR THE 'GEM OF THE WEST'

September 13, 2017 at 5:28 pm | By MACKENZIE REISS Daily Inter Lake



Superintendent of Glacier National Park Jeff Mow gives opening remarks at a media day which celebrated the years of renovations completed at the Many Glacier Hotel on Tuesday. (Brenda Ahearn photos/Daily Inter Lake)



In the late 1990s, the fate of the Many Glacier Hotel hung in the balance.

The 211-room guesthouse situated on a rocky ledge on Swiftcurrent Lake in Glacier National Park was structurally unsound and afflicted with a host of health and safety problems. Integral components such as the foundation, walls and floors of the building were failing and a few unwanted guests like asbestos and bats called the historic landmark home.

But over the past 17 years, the hotel has undergone \$41.85 million in renovations to bring the Swiss-style icon up to modern code. On Tuesday afternoon, the

parties behind the historic facelift gathered around the double-helix staircase in the main lobby to celebrate the culmination of years of hard work.

“These are the family jewels of this nation and they really do deserve protection — and protection sometimes needs to come in the form of dollars,” said Barbara Pahl, of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The restoration of the hotel was made possible with funding from Congress, the National Park Service, and public and private philanthropy, including \$358,251 from the Glacier Park Conservancy.

Many Glacier Hotel houses an average of 46,000 over-night guests per year and 500,000 daytime visitors. But the Park Service considered closing the hotel in 2004 due to dire interior conditions, including a rotting wood structure, potentially flammable knob and tube wiring and a clogged fire sprinkler system. The hotel had also earned a spot on the National Trust's "America's Most Endangered Places" list in 1996.

In 1999, the park came up with two solutions: Seek funding to repair the hotel or keep it open until deterioration or safety issues forced its closure. But support for saving the hotel was high, so the park pursued the first option.

Some of the earliest improvements included reroofing and re-siding the building and restoring the windows, said Anderson Hallas principal architect Nan Anderson. "We turned 'stagger alley' into 'swagger alley' .. it still leans a little," she said, of an uneven hallway that once led to the hotel bar.

The biggest achievements aren't visible from the surface — but improvements such as leveling the foundation and walls, and updating plumbing, wiring and replacing a 50-year-old fire sprinkler system will help the structure live on for the next generation.

Other updates are hard to miss: the double-helical staircase, which was removed in the 1950s, was recreated to comply with modern code standards, as were the original Japanese lanterns, which were constructed using sustainable materials and energy-efficient lighting. The dining room was also restored to its former glory based on a combination historic photos and forensic investigation. Many Glacier Hotel's "flying friends" or brown bats, which had moved into the dining hall during the 1940s, were relocated to custom bat homes of the eaves of the hotel outside.

The interior rehabilitation was completed by Anderson Hallas Architects over a 13-year period, while Northwest Cabinet Works of Kalispell constructed the staircase and Swank Construction, also based in Kalispell, handled the remodeling of the lobby and south annex.

"Why is this place important? It's because it tells so many uniquely American stories," Anderson said. "These are places that belong to none of us and all of us and they weave us together as a great nation." Many Glacier Hotel's legacy began in 1915 when it was built by the Glacier Park Hotel Company, a subsidiary of the Great Northern Railway. The rail company, hoping to lure more passengers aboard its trains, invested in a number of hotels, including Many Glacier, said longtime park interpretive ranger, Diane Sine.

Company president Louis Hill was the visionary behind the Swiss-style guesthouse. "He was trying to attract clientele used to going to Europe for their summer holidays," Sine said. Hill was also part of a group of tourism businessmen that developed the advertising slogan, "See Europe if you will, but see America first."

"Louis Hill capitalized on that and thought well, he would provide the Swiss Alps right here in the Northern Rockies of Glacier National Park," Sine said.

He also introduced Japanese lanterns illuminating the main lobby, which have since been recreated and modernized as part of the renovations. The lanterns, some round and others cylinder-shaped, were covered in Japanese characters that conveyed messages of good fortune and prosperity. Some also carried an homage to the rail company, reading "Big North," Sine said.

In the late 1950s, the railway decided to bow out of the hotel industry, which hadn't turned out to be as profitable as they'd hoped.

Construction contractor Don Knudsen was named general manager of the Glacier Park Hotel Company and went on to lead a major renovation of the hotel which some dubbed the "reconstruction" or alternatively, "the reign of terror," according to the Glacier Park Foundation. The helical staircase was torn out during this period and original hardwood flooring was replaced with tile.

Once the renovations were complete, Great Northern sold the property to Glacier National Park.

In 1961, manager Ian B. Tippet's passion for the dramatic arts ushered the hotel into a new era. Tippet recruited drama students from across the country to work in Many Glacier. Choirs sang in the dining room during dinner hours or performed in the lobby, while Broadway productions were hosted every August for 23 years.

Sine herself is a product of that period.

"I came here as an 18-year-old cellist to work as a singing waitress," she said. "I've been here ever since. ... There's something about this valley and this view and this place."

As the ribbon-cutting ceremony came to a close, the crowds filed out and lobby foot traffic resumed its usual ebb and flow.

The hotel was, and still is, a melting pot of visitors and locals of all ages. Despite wildfire smoke hanging over the lake, the deck chairs were nearly full. An older woman pored over a hardback novel while a young man pointed a telephoto lens at the vast landscape before him. And on the lake, a pair of kayakers slipped over the water's surface in brightly-hued boats, all under the shadow of the "Gem of the West" — the Many Glacier Hotel.

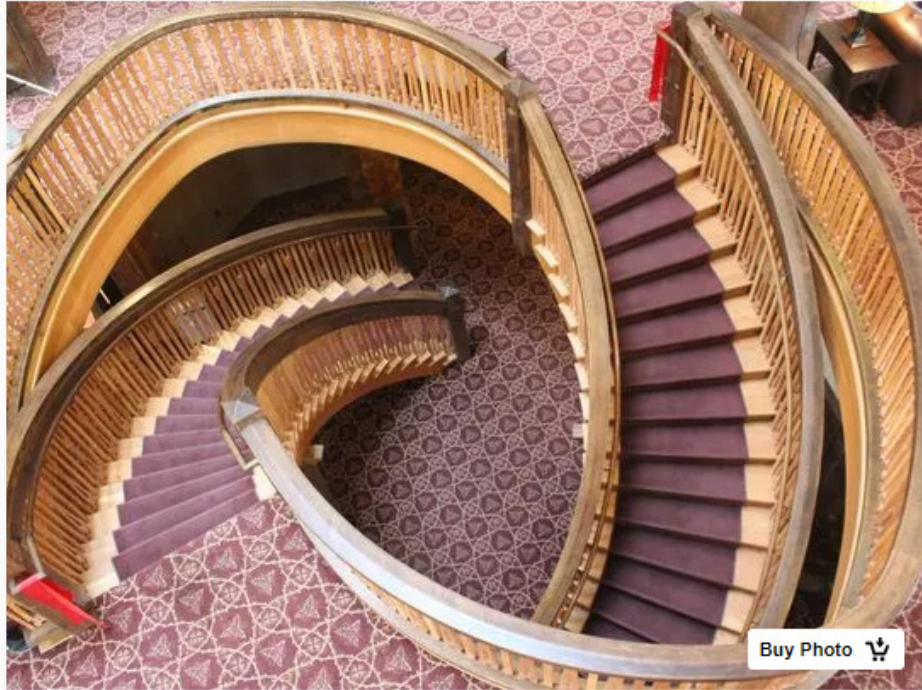
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Published 11:55 a.m. MT Sept. 14, 2017 | Updated 2:30 p.m. MT Sept. 15, 2017



(Photo: Photo courtesy of GNP/Andrew Englehorn)



The original helical staircase was torn out of the Many Glacier Hotel in 1957 to make room for a gift shop. The completion of the new helical staircase marks the end of the major rehabilitation efforts in the lodge. (Photo: Tribune Photo/Sarah Dettmer)

See America first, but put Many Glacier Hotel at the top of the list.

After 16 years of rehabilitation, the 102-year-old lodge has been restored to its original grandeur as the “Gem of the West” in Glacier National Park.

The multi-partner, multi-million dollar effort reached its completion this summer with the unveiling of the helical staircase, the final major rehabilitation project.

The original helical stairs were removed from the hotel in 1957 when the hotel’s concessioner decided it would be better business to put a gift shop in its place.

“There were some hideous things done to this place in the ‘50s,” Nan Anderson, principal with Anderson Halls Architects, said.

Anderson’s firm spearheaded the design and restoration of Many Glacier Hotel. It took years to undo the damage of time, weather and seemingly clever business decisions of the past. With the help of the Glacier National Park Conservancy, Pendleton and several other donors, the stairs are back in their rightful home.

The winding stairs reach from lake level into the lobby beneath dangling glass lanterns that replicate the 1915 vision of keeping world-class vacations in the United States.

“It really all began with the passion of one man, Louis Hill,” Diane Sine, GNP ranger, said. “Louis Hill took a real personal interest in the building of these hotels and, in particular, the Many Glacier Hotel.”

Louis was the son of Great Northern Railway founder James J. Hill, also known as the “Empire Builder.”

But before his son became the president of the railway, James literally laid the tracks for his work in Glacier National Park.

James built the nation’s fifth transcontinental railroad across the northern part of the country, stretching from Minnesota to Seattle without governmental subsidies. Then, he threw his efforts into convincing Congress to establish Glacier as a national park. In 1910, the park was born.



Photo Credits: Before Glacier National Park After Tribune Photo/Sarah Dettmer

Together, James and Louis set out to make Glacier National Park the “playground of the west.” The father and son duo pumped money into the park and built the European-style lodges, chalets, and trails the park is still famous for today.

“Give me snuff, whiskey and Swedes, and I’ll build a railroad to hell,” James is remembered saying.

Before James died in 1916 at the age of 78, he and his son had built an empire, the gem of which being the Many Glacier Hotel on the banks of Swiftcurrent Lake.

“So many things from this hotel come personally from Louis Hill’s passions,” Sine said. “The Swiss architecture — the man was into Swiss architecture — part of that was great marketing at the time. He was trying to attract clientele used to going to Europe for their summer holidays...he would provide the Swiss Alps right here in the Northern Rockies of Glacier National Park.”

The lodge was an icon for the “See America first” tourism campaign intended to keep American money in the states. Though, Sine said, the full slogan is often forgotten. In fact, the campaign slogan was actually, “See Europe if you will, but see America first.”



(Photo: NPS Photo)

The original lodge design was magnificent and took design notes from across the world. Towering logs support wooden beams and white accents in the Swiss style. Paper lanterns imported from Japan hung at different heights from the ceiling bearing characters for fortune, prosperity and symbols reading “Big North.” And, of course, the helical staircase twisted up into the lobby.

Anderson used Louis’ lanterns as a model for the lobby redesign and mimicked their placement with paper lantern-inspired glass fixtures. The new lights were given to the hotel by an anonymous donor.

“The Great Northern eventually wanted to get out of the hotel business,” Sine said. “By the late 1950s, Louis Hill had passed on, there wasn’t quite that passion and these hotels never really made money for the Great Northern. The Great Northern was looking for someone to take over these businesses.”

The Great Northern then turned to Donald Knutson, a hotel manager from Minnesota, to take over Many Glacier with the hope that he would eventually buy it.

Knutson had dramatic changes in mind and started implementing new ways to make money under the slogan, “This is the year we melt the glaciers.”

Knutson rationalized that the helical staircase wasn’t going to make him any money, so away it went. In its place, Knutson expanded the hotel’s retail with a new gift shop.

But the hotel was never sold to Knutson. Instead, it went to Don Hummel, owner of Glacier Park Inc., in 1981 and was managed by his company until 2013. Today, Xanterra Parks and Resorts Inc. holds the park’s visitor services contract.

In 1996, Many Glacier Hotel was listed as one of America’s “most endangered” historic places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The iconic lodge was in rough shape after years of weather, tricky terrain and high use on the old building.



This historic photo shows the double helix staircase that was original to the Many Glacier Hotel. The staircase was removed in the 1950s but will be restored to the hotel beginning this year. (Photo: T. Hileman Photos courtesy Glacier National Park.)

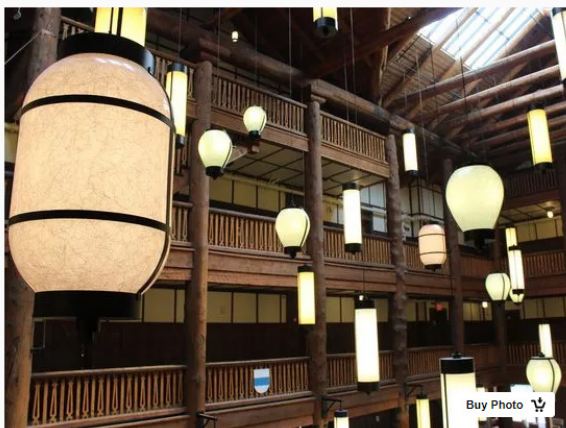


The Ptarmigan Dining Room had a low drop ceiling installed in the late 50's. During the rehabilitation, the drop ceiling was removed, the fireplace was reinforced and a pergola was installed with the same color and style of the original. (Photo: Tribune Photo/Sarah Dettmer)

In 2001, Anderson and her architecture firm were brought in to address all of the problems and bring the hotel back to life. Anderson laughed remembering she estimated the job would take \$20 million. By the time it was all said and done, the project's cost more than double her original estimate, reaching \$41.85 million over 16 years.

Many Glacier Hotel doubles as a dam against the water flowing into Swiftcurrent Lake. However, the hotel was built using real wood logs as supporting beams. Beyond the bats living in the walls, the dangerous knot-and-tube wiring and shoddy plumbing that Anderson said proved to be "a showroom of what not to do in plumbing repairs," the building itself was being held up by rotten logs.

The entire foundation of the hotel was jacked up on hydraulic lifts while steel beams were driven into the logs. More support beams were added to the foundations of the hotel.



When the Many Glacier Lodge was built, Japanese paper lanterns were hung from the ceiling. Designers mimicked the lantern and their pattern with modern lighting fixtures during the rehabilitation of the lodge. (Photo: Tribune Photo/Sarah Dettmer)

In the Ptarmigan Dining Room, an icon of fine dining in the park, crews discovered the large stone fireplace against the far wall was the only thing holding up that side of the building.

The low drop ceiling, installed in 1937, was removed to expose the room's original cathedral ceilings and steel rods were driven into the fireplace to reinforce everything.

Beyond the major safety work, Anderson had her work cut out for her. At one point, everything in the hotel was painted white.

"I don't know if they thought it would make it brighter, or what," Anderson said.

Now, the 215-room Many Glacier Hotel is restored back to its former glory and meets modern safety codes. So far, seven of the rooms, all located on the North Bridge of the hotel, have been restored to reflect the original finishes. Anderson said the rooms will be used as models as money becomes available to restore the remaining rooms.

Many Glacier Hotel is open for reservations until Sept. 18. It will close for the season at 11 a.m. on Sept. 19. There are still rooms available this year.

Reservations are also available for the 2018 season from June 8 to Sept. 18.

Many Glacier Hotel, Glacier National Park, MT | Glacier National Park Lodges

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 Published 11:55 a.m. MT Sept. 14, 2017 | Updated
 2:30 p.m. MT Sept. 15, 2017



Nan Anderson, principal architect, stands beside a poster depicting the changes to the Many Glacier Hotel's hallways. (Photo: Tribune Photo/Sarah Dettmer)

History saved: Renovations completed on historic Many Glacier Hotel

PERRY BACKUS perry.backus@missoulian.com Sep 17, 2017



Current Glacier National Park superintendent Jeff Mow, Left, and former superintendent Kym Hall cut the ribbon on the new double helical staircase that stands in the same place that the original did when the Many Glacier Hotel was built in 1915. The ribbon cutting signified the completion of the restoration of the hotel that has been ongoing for the past 20 years.

Photo — TOMMY MARTINO, Missoulian

MANY GLACIER — Nan Anderson will tell you the 1950s weren't kind to the interior of one of Glacier National Parks' historic gems.

"In the '50s, some pretty hideous things happened to this hotel," Anderson said, as she stood in the newly renovated interior of the Many Glacier Hotel during last week's grand reopening celebration.

By the 1950s, no one could have said for certain that the 211-room five-story architectural masterpiece built along the shoreline of the stunningly beautiful Swiftcurrent Lake had much of a chance of standing the test of time.

By then, its builder and greatest promoter, Louis Hill, president of the Great Northern Railway, was long gone.

With its short 100-day tourist season, it was hard for anyone to make a buck there. Even in its heyday when the railroad made a point of luring tourists from all over the world, its operations had to be subsidized by the industrial giant.

After a fire in 1936 threatened Many Glacier, hotel employees sent a telegram to Great Northern headquarters with the exciting news that they had saved the hotel from the flames. The reply was a single word. "Why?"

So when it came to any remodeling, finding ways to make an extra dollar or two was always a driving force.

It was probably an easy choice for the concessionaires back in 1957 to tear out the double-helical staircase that wrapped around a handmade waterfall in the hotel's



Over the course of more than 20 years and two different phases, the cost of returning to the building's original interior and exterior totaled \$42 million. None of that would have been possible without the work that began back in the late 1990s and early 2000s that included stabilization of the structure.

Photo — TOMMY MARTINO, Missoulian

lobby to make room for the gift shop. And the Japanese lanterns that for generations had provided the great interior expanse an interesting ambience had to go, too. There certainly wasn't any need for guests to see the artistry of the huge logs that served as roof beams inside the dining room. Those were hidden for decades by a drop ceiling that eventually was buried in guano from the bats who made their home in the rafters.

For an architect with an eye for beauty of the past, the modifications made to this historic icon over the year were horrific.

Anderson would spend much of her professional architectural career working to return the building's interior to its original grandeur.

She wasn't alone.

For close to 20 years, a public and private partnership spent about \$42 million to first shore up the hotel to ensure that it wouldn't crumble into the lake, and then restore the hotel's interior as close to possible to its historic roots while incorporating current building codes.

Last week, many of those people who have been involved in the restoration project gathered at Many Glacier to celebrate its completion.

Anderson of Anderson Hallas Architects can remember what she and others from the firm found when they first toured the building back in 2004.

"We discovered all sorts of interesting issues," Anderson said. "Wiring had charred some of the rafters. The structure was severely in distress. There were bats in the walls. It was a showroom on how not to do plumbing."

And when the staff charged up the fire sprinkler system, the entire space turned into a fountain.

A week after the company's architects and engineers returned to Colorado to begin drawing up reports, they received a call from the National Park Service with a request for a cost estimate — by the end of the week — for the repairs of the Many Glacier Hotel.

Anderson said they pulled out their dart boards and put together their best guess that it would cost about \$21 million.

"Little did anyone know that would have to stretch out for 13 years," Anderson said. "That would have been a different calculation."

That number proved to be incredibly close.

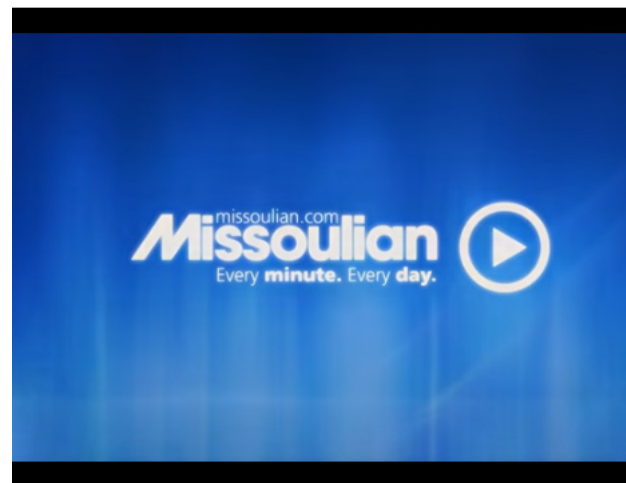
Over the course of 13 years and two different phases, the cost of returning to the building's interior to something more akin to what people first fell in love with when its Annex opened in 1917 came in at \$22.5 million.

None of that would have been possible without the work that began back in the late 1990s and early 2000s that included stabilization projects that launched the process to save the historic hotel from an early demise.

At one point, the building was found to be leaning forward toward the lake and had been pulled back into place using massive cables and a good deal of engineering know-how.

One spring when the staff came here to open up the building, they found the balconies were all tipping off the building. They all had to be pinned back on to allow the hotel to open.

"It's the teamwork that made this project possible," Anderson said. "Not just our team. The park. The vendors. The Denver Service Center. Congress. It takes a village and it took a village."



https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=29&v=__-MuO5M-co



Co-owner of Northwest Cabinet Works Tony Dawson, left, talks with Glacier National Park's lead interpreter Dian Sine at Many Glacier, at the base of the double helical staircase that Dawson and his company built for the hotel. In 1957, the stairs were removed by the concessionaire and the large hole in the lobby floor was covered over to make room for a gift shop.

Photo — TOMMY MARTINO, Missoulian

The preservation of the Many Glacier Hotel can trace its roots back to human waste at a pair of Glacier's backcountry chalets.

When officials began to ponder closing the Sperry and Granite Park chalets because of the challenges the park service faced addressing the issue of human waste, a group of people came together to do whatever it took to save them. The "Save the Chalet" group reached out to the National Trust for Historic Preservation for help spreading the word.

The trust brought the nation's attention to the two backcountry chalets and the other historic buildings constructed by the railroad by adding them to its list of most endangered historic places back in the mid 1990s.

That's how Barb Pahl of the Trust first became involved in helping spread the word for the need to preserve these uniquely American pieces of history.

"My experience working with the federal government — it starts off being a lack of will and then it's a lack of funding," said Pahl. "In this case, there were a lot of champions to help save this building, including the park superintendent."

The park superintendent back then was Dave Mihalic. Pahl said it was his idea to include all of the historic structures on the Trust's most endangered list after she inquired about the future of the chalets.

His support back then, just like the current superintendent Jeff Mow's support today, is crucial in preserving the historic buildings that remain in the park, Pahl said.

In 1999, Congress appropriated \$3 million to address waste management at Sperry and Granite Park chalets. More funding followed to begin the needed stabilization of the Many Glacier Hotel.

"The Park Service has an immense collection of historic places and these are the family jewels of this nation," she said. "They do deserve protection. Protection sometimes needs to come in the form of dollars."

Deferred maintenance in national parks is about \$12 billion. (In Glacier, it's about \$184 million.) The 700 buildings, of which more than 400 are designated historic, have about \$31 million in deferred maintenance.

While most of the funding to restore the Many Glacier Hotel came from the federal government, a number of private entities working through the Glacier National Park Conservancy stepped forward to fund specific projects like the new double helical staircase and the lighting that mimics the old Japanese lanterns.

Nearly \$1.5 million in philanthropic funding has been spent so far on the project.

The private funding for the restoration doesn't stop there.

The concessionaire that operates the hotel, Xanterra Parks and Resorts, chipped in about \$4 million for a variety of upgrades that run the gamut of new carpet to room restorations.

"It's been really nice to see this public/private project come together as well as it has," said Marc Ducharme, the hotel's general manager.

Visitors have noticed the difference.



"We discovered all sorts of interesting issues," Nan Anderson of Anderson Hallas Architects said of her initial visit to the hotel. "Wiring had charred some of the rafters. The structure was severely in distress. There were bats in the walls. It was a showroom on how not to do plumbing."

Photo — TOMMY MARTINO, Missoulian



“It’s been really nice to see this public/private project come together as well as it has,” said Marc Ducharme, the hotel’s general manager. Nearly \$1.5 million in philanthropic funding has been spent so far on the project.

Photo — TOMMY MARTINO, Missoulian

Standing in the dining room with its impressive wooden trusses that soar high above the tables, with windows that offer views of mountains that seem to go on forever, Ducharme said returning guests are almost stunned at the difference that followed the removal of the drop ceiling.

“They say, ‘Wow, it’s a totally different space,’ ” Ducharme said.

For generations, the Many Glacier Hotel has woven its way into people’s lives.

Glacier National Park’s lead interpreter at Many Glacier, Diane Sine, first saw the place when she was a child while on a camping trip with her parents. Its scenic beauty, rich history and the young worker back then who put on nightly shows for the guests would draw her back after she graduated from high school.

“I was a kid who had started playing cello,” she said. “I decided I was going to work at the Many Glacier Hotel. So my senior year in high school, I wrote to the park service and asked, ‘How you get a job at the Many Glacier Hotel?’ ”

For four summers, she and her cello returned to the hotel where she worked as a singing waitress, playing her cello in the pit orchestra for the Broadway musicals and performing chamber music in the lobby at night.

“It was quite an extensive musical calendar,” she said. “We would work hard and play hard. It was a very bonding experience.”

Along the way she developed friendships that have lasted a lifetime and found a career that has placed her right smack in the middle of the place that she loves most.

“It’s been fun to see so many people come back this summer and be excited to see how it looks now,” Sine said.

Sine has been there through it all. There were tough times as the construction stretched out over the years.

“For years, I would show the public pictures of the historic circular staircase and tell them stories at how it was removed and really lament that,” she said. “It was this dream that it could come back someday, but no one really thought that could ever really happen.”

And that wasn’t all.

When Sine first started working at the hotel, there were doors that people could see from the outside that led to nothing. There were balconies that had fallen down and were gone. Other balconies were being held up by cables.

She remembers the years when people wondered if the building could survive. Everyone knew it was going to take a lot of money to restore it and people with a passion to make that all come together.

“The whole place was just very tired and wearing,” she said. “And now to be able to look into the future and see that now it’s not just this old historic decrepit building, it’s vibrant and alive and it has a future. It’s exciting to think about what’s to come.



Nan Anderson shows off the restored dining room. Visitors also will notice a massive change to the hotel’s dining room. The dropped ceiling has been removed to reveal wooden beams above the tables and large windows that offer views of mountains and surrounding Swiftcurrent Lake.

Photo — TOMMY MARTINO, Missoulian



Matt Edwards looks out over the mountains near the front entrance of the hotel donning Lederhosen in line with the traditional Swiss theme of the hotel. "The whole place was just very tired and wearing," Sine said. "And now to be able to look into the future and see that now it's not just this old historic decrepit building, it's vibrant and alive and it has a future. It's exciting to think about what's to come."

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First, engineers had to shore up the hotel to ensure that it wouldn't crumble into the lake, and then restore the hotel's interior as close to possible to its Swiss Lodge roots while incorporating current building codes.

Photo — TOMMY MARTINO, Missoulian

News & Features

Magnificent Many Glacier

Glacier National Park completes 17-year, \$40 million renovation of historic Many Glacier Hotel

BY JUSTIN FRANZ // SEP 18, 2017



SHOW CAPTIONS 1 of 10

GREG LINDSTROM | FLATHEAD BEACON

MANY GLACIER — In the spring of 2000, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt was speaking before a House appropriations subcommittee about the National Park Service’s maintenance backlog when he made an off-script comment about Glacier National Park’s rundown Many Glacier Hotel. Babbitt said the 84-year-old hotel on Swiftcurrent Lake had deteriorated so much that the only solution involved “a can of gasoline and a match.”

A week later, before a U.S. Senate appropriations committee, he reiterated, “This is a building that really ought to be torn down.”

Montana’s Washington D.C. delegation and legions of Glacier Park fans were enraged at the thought of tearing down the hotel once called “The Jewel of the Rockies,” but there was no denying the building’s sad shape. The pillars that held the building up were rotting from the inside, bats infested the walls, and the entire structure was slowly starting to fall into the lake.

Seventeen years later, if Babbitt were to walk into the lobby of the Many Glacier Hotel, he would hardly recognize it. This year, the National Park Service completed a 17-year, \$40 million renovation of the Many Glacier Hotel. But it did not come easy.

“This place was a showcase in how not to do plumbing and electrical work,” said Nan Anderson, an architect who has been involved with the project for more than a decade.

The Great Northern Railway built the Many Glacier Hotel in 1915 as part of its effort to increase visitation to Glacier and encourage more people to ride its trains. Railway President Louis W. Hill dedicated much of his time to developing the park’s lodges and chalets, even focusing on minute details like the type of soap that would be stocked at Many Glacier.

“Louis Hill was passionate,” said interpretive ranger Diane Sine. “He was president of a massive corporation that controlled a railroad, mines and steamship companies, and yet he left most of that to others so that he could focus on micromanaging the development of Glacier Park.”

For decades, the Many Glacier Hotel weathered fires and floods in the northeastern corner of Glacier Park. But by the 1990s, it was falling apart. The state of Glacier Park’s historic structures were so dire that the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the park’s buildings on its list of the 11 most endangered historic places in America.

In 2000, the Park Service started working with Anderson Hallas Architects and concessioners to refurbish the hotel. Anderson said it was an especially challenging project because the work seasons are short and the Park Service and its concessioners — first Glacier Park Inc. and later Xanterra — did not want close the hotel to guests. During much of the project, architects spent time behind the scenes figuring out how they would rebuild a decades-old hotel one wall at a time. The physical work came during two major pushes — in 2011 and 2012, the dining room and north annex were rebuilt, and in 2016 and 2017, the south annex, lobby and public areas were restored.

The National Park Service’s main priority was ensuring that the building was safe for visitors, while also restoring some of its more iconic features. In the 1950s, when the railroad sold the hotel to private operators who were looking to cut costs, the hotel’s classic spiral staircase was removed to make room for a gift shop. The ceiling in the dining room was also lowered to reduce heating costs, covering up the beautiful high wooden ceiling.

“Some pretty hideous things happened in the 1950s,” Anderson said.

In recent years, the lobby of the hotel was a poorly lit space taken up by a cramped gift shop. Now, the gift shop has been moved downstairs and the spiral staircase is back, with the help of a large donation from the Glacier National Park Conservancy. The Asian-inspired light fixtures that were once a key feature of the lobby — a subliminal advertisement for the Great Northern’s Oriental Limited passenger train — have also been restored.

Glacier National Park Superintendent Jeff Mow praised the work of the architects, contractors, National Park Service, Glacier Park Inc., Xanterra and the conservancy for all playing a critical role in getting the project over the finish line.

“It really takes a team to pull off a project like this,” he said.

Guest rooms were also upgraded, with seven restored to how they would have appeared in the 1910s, a project that required extensive research. While there were black-and-white photos of the rooms, no one knew the exact color scheme of the space until someone opened up a long forgotten maintenance closet that had the original wall colors. Anderson said the seven refurbished rooms could serve as a model for future restoration efforts.

Officials said visitors will now not only have a comfortable place to stay at Many Glacier, they’ll also get to experience the park as it was a century ago.

“Most historical objects get put under a glass display case, but because of all the work that has gone into this building, people will be able to enjoy it the way it was intended,” Sine said.