



By Patty Fuller

A RUSTIC RETREAT WITH A COLORFUL history, impressive renovations and Yosemite next door – no wonder the Evergreen Lodge draws visitors from around the world. And Tuolumne County is fortunate enough to be home to this hidden gem.

“Unique,” co-owner Lee Zimmerman agrees, barely begins to describe the newly revived lodge and its cluster of cabins just outside Yosemite National Park’s western border.

After all, this place built in 1921 to house workers constructing the nearby O’Shaughnessy Dam in Hetch Hetchy Valley, was also once where moonshine was brewed and one cabin doubled as a brothel — at least according to lore.

Today, the Evergreen’s 22 off-the-beaten-track acres include 90 cabins amid old-growth forest stands, a newly renovated main lodge, restaurant, tavern, a plaza featuring a 1,200-square-foot sun deck, kids play area complete with Me-Wok shelters, a theater, and, ahhh, an open-air massage cabaña.

The venerable inviting lodge and other buildings as they stand today represent the vision owners Zimmerman, Brian Anderluh and Dan Brown had upon purchasing the property in 2002. The business, off Highway 120 on Evergreen Road, then had 18 cabins and was operated seasonally.

“It’s been transformed into a very special resort,” Zimmerman said of the \$15 million-worth of additions and upgrades he and his partners undertook. “It was a little motel. ... Most people don’t know about what it is today.”

The owners acknowledge that transforming the lodge into a get-away-from-it-all place offering peace, quiet and modern amenities while preserving the property’s old-fashioned charm and history, was an ambitious challenge. But the three – with backgrounds in hospitality and business – knew the Evergreen was one of a kind. Its rich history alone made the project worthwhile, they say.

In its first years, the Evergreen amounted to a post office, restaurant and general store with close-by cabins – including those two that housed a brothel and where bootleggers made their brew. The main lodge that still stands today was built



Clockwise from far left—Guests gather at dusk in the plaza at Evergreen Lodge. One of the new cabins at the Lodge, and the sundeck dining at the Main Lodge.



after Roy and Stelle Thornton bought the property in the late 1920s. Dan and Angie Rovero, once owners of the Groveland Hotel, bought the lodge property in the late 1930s and capitalized on the Hetch Hetchy dam project by drawing many of its workers to the Evergreen tavern – where three illegal slot machines were also posted. The Roveros also added a Standard Oil gas station. The pumps are long gone but the original station still stands.

And posted in the lodge restaurant entry is a photo of Katherine Garrison holding a gun. She and husband, Jack, operated the place from 1952 to 1971 and were known for the small orchestras they had play in the lodge patio area during the summer months.

John Bargmann took over the lodge in 1975, after it had been closed several years and was in a state of disrepair. He revived the business and added eight cabins. He met wife, Kay, there and they devoted their lives to the lodge and its visitors until selling to current owners Zimmerman, Anderluh and Brown.

“As owners of the Evergreen, we feel lucky to be stewards of such a special place, and we are committed to making sure the Evergreen continues to create lasting memories for another hundred years,” the three note on the lodge website.

Beyond making the Evergreen a must-go vacation place, the co-owners have taken on another unique effort. They have launched an employment program that allows young adults, ages 18 to 24 and from urban backgrounds, to live and work at the lodge during the summer, experiencing the wilderness and learning job skills in the process.

The Evergreen’s youth program has since been featured in such publications as the *New York Times* and *Forbes Small*