

Drama about Mott's Holiday House a Raging Success

by Owen Blickensderfer

It's ironic how we take certain things for granted until they are gone.

The Mott Hotel, also known as the Holiday House was like that. When the Hotel was destroyed by fire back in November of 1989, the community lost more than an historic landmark. Mott lost a convention hall, restaurant, community center, apartment building and recreation center. Last weekend on September 17 and 18 the Mott Hotel came to life again, if only for a few hours.

I was honored to be part of the production of "Memories of the Hotel" directed by Joyce Hinrichs. Over thirty people from the Mott area were pulled together from all walks of life to tell a powerful, emotional story. It was the story, not of an old building, but about the ebb and flow of life in a small community. I must confess that the concept of the play had me scratching my head for a long time. Cemetery? Singing spirits? Ever-present card players? What kind of production was this going to be? Lanny Johnson, stage manager, assured me that it all would come together and make sense, so I showed up for rehearsals. Joyce Hinrichs, originally from San Francisco, had her hands full. Joyce has had extensive experience directing plays in Iowa and Minnesota, but that was more than ten years ago. She had nearly forgotten what it is like to deal with the kind of headaches that small-town talent can dish out. Conflicts with football games, inexperienced actors, actors like me who can't remember lines. I think the poor woman had ulcers before the last week of practice. Fortunately, Mott's very own Margaret Blickensderfer was willing to provide professional music support on the piano and violin.

The Hettnger County Writer's Enclave, a loose-knit group of amateur writers from Mott, Regent and New England, was kicking around the idea of a drama presentation during their weekly meetings. A story about "Going to the Hotel" written by

Pat Schwartz many years ago and shared during one meeting sparked a flurry of memories of the Hotel. The idea of writing and producing a play about the Mott Hotel was born. Because she moved to Mott after the grand old structure was gone, Joyce Hinrichs had no memories of the hotel, but inspiration hit Joyce like a house a-fire (pardon the analogy). The idea for a full-scale drama production wrote itself in her head. You could say that Joyce provided the skeleton and the other members supplied the skin.

The crowd grows quiet as the house lights go down. The spirits in the cemetery just below the stage in the school gym come to life and sing "The way we were." The narrator, Doug Wegh, comes forth and introduces himself. A paper boy comes through to sell a paper. Headlines announce that Hettinger County is hit harder than anywhere else in the state by the flu epidemic of 1918. The curtain comes up and Doctor Maercklein is finding it impossible to tend to all the sick people in the county. Finally, a floor of the hotel becomes a hospital so that the good doctor can cut down on his house calls. The curtain closes.

Doug introduces Frank and Lorraine Masad who are in the audience. Frank and Lorraine live in Bismarck now, retired.

The stage curtain opens and we see three men playing cards in the lobby of the Holiday house. Outside, at the front of the hotel, some older men sit on a bench, biding their time, reading newspapers and visiting as cars pass on main street. Ray Bieber, playing Frank Masad, and Martha Ottmar, playing his wife Lorraine, approach the men and introduce themselves as the new owners of the hotel. The year is 1958. The men need a fourth player and Frank joins them. Within a short time we see a wedding reception, a ladies study group, a TOPS Halloween party and a Lion's meeting. This is just the beginning as numerous community groups and activities swirl around Frank and Lorraine. All the while Frank serves coffee and welcomes customers. Music and singing from the spirits in the cemetery thrill the audience as the tapestry of small-town people interacting with each other reminds us of why we live here. You can ask anyone who used to frequent the hotel. Frank had a gift

of hospitality. He knew everyone by name. You knew you were welcome the minute you walked onto the premises.

The curtain comes up on the card players for Act II and a school boy comes in to sell café concert tickets. "A dollar for a ticket," exclaims one card player. "I can buy two gallons of gas for a dollar!" Various Mott residents from the past come to life and tell stories about the hotel. And then, the stage is cleared so that photographs of the fire can be projected across the screen at the back. Photos of firemen shooting water at a building where everything inside is flames. It is obvious that it is a losing battle. More photos flash on the screen and the audience is silent. The eerie strains of "Yesterday" waft from the stage speakers. The final photo shows a pile of rubble on the corner of the city block.

The lights go up on a lone man at a table. It is Dean Johnson. He is penning the last lines of a poem. It is the morning of the fire and he is nearly ready to go to church with his wife. Lanny Johnson, Dean's son begins reciting from backstage in a low voice.

"The Spot"

**Twas a night in November when the Heavens are bright
that the Town of Mott was awakened in fright.
A most dreaded and awesome, fearful thing would occur
That will be remembered year after year.
As the Chief of Police made her rounds up and down
checking streets and alleys and buildings around
she spotted what shouldn't be right on the street
a building on fire - being consumed with heat!
Wisps of smoke, flash of fire, flickering flashes of light
The Holiday House was on fire that night!
Beepers beeped, - sirens wailed, - telephones rang - the news
spread.
All the people who heard were filled with dread.
Heroic endeavors were common that night**

as firemen and townspeople fought this monster of light.
All residents were rescued but ambulances wailed
Neighboring businesses were emptied - acrid smoke inhaled.
Twas an awesome sight when I reached the scene
with the sky flashing crimson instead of its usual serene
smoke billowing heavy - windows crashing from heat
Burning embers and charred fragments drifting down on the
streets.

Relentlessly it burned - floor by floor - front to back
till nothing was standing but the chimney stack.
A pile of rubble - snarled wire - twisted pipe
ashes and concrete - a most heart wrenching sight.
When the sun came up as it eventually would
all who surveyed the damage quickly understood what a loss
this would be for miles around
as the Holiday House was the Hub of the Town.
Precious memories and pictures are all that remain
of this Grand old Building located on Main
But if you ask a resident who lives in Mott
They will tell you this building was really "The Spot".

Dean Johnson