

THE KOOTENAI LODGE: COPPER BARONS HIDEAWAY MAKES A HOME FOR NEWBORNS

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COPPER KINGS
to **CRADLES**

BY KAY BJORK

*Mark and Debi Rolfig write another chapter
of the historic Kootenai Lodge*

To read more about the historic
Kootenai Lodge, visit their website
at www.KootenaiLodge.com

Kay Bjork photograph



Christmas neared along with his two-month birthday, and baby Will was still without a family.

Will's foster mother, Debi Roling, was drawn to attend mass that Sunday morning in spite of the challenges of bundling and transporting the baby 10 miles into Bigfork on a snowy two-lane highway deep in the Swan Valley.

Roling arrived at St. Catherine's Catholic Church, in Bigfork, with Will swaddled in his snowsuit and warm fleece blankets. During the mass, Father Sodja made the somber announcement: Baby Will needed a family.

After mass, the women of the congregation gathered around the baby. But it was a man standing patiently outside the throng who caught Roling's attention. The crowd of women eventually dispersed, and the man stepped forward to greet her. "Would you like to adopt him?" she asked.

Kirk Penrod nodded and replied, "Could be."

That "could be" became "yes" after Penrod talked the adoption over with his wife, Charlene, and their two teenage daughters. The Penrods had recently committed themselves to reaching out to a child through adoption, and now all the signs from above said they should bring this baby into their home.

Will was delivered into the Penrod family's arms in time for Christmas, and the adoption closed another chapter in Roling's life as a foster mother.

The timeless days she spends caring for a baby are a long way from the fast-paced, business-suit days she spent as a real-estate broker and developer in Maui, Hawaii, for 25 years. After experiencing phenomenal success in her career, Roling came to a turning point. "I wanted a smaller life," she says.

She found that smaller life when she was introduced to the idea of serving as a foster mother. Nurturing comes as naturally to Roling as breathing. Her life had been full of success, friends and family, but she'd found herself looking for something more — something she discovered in the simple, pure pleasure of caring for a baby.

The first "angel baby," as Roling calls her, arrived in March 1999, and she said she knew then that "It is what fills my heart." The little girl was with her for just over two weeks. Next came Patrick, whom she cared for for nearly three weeks before he was adopted. Will, or



Debi Roling embraces "God's Will," who was the third foster baby to begin life at the story-book Kootenai Lodge.

Kay Bjork

ON THE COVER: A canoe provides a lake view of the Florman cabin at the historic Kootenai Lodge on a glassy Swan Lake.

ABOVE, FAR LEFT: Employees enjoyed the Kootenai Lodge during staff picnics and outings.

ABOVE, CENTER: Artist Charles Russell was a frequent visitor at the Lodge. He is pictured here (top, right) with hunting buddies. Also pictured (top, second from left) is Montana writer and politician Frank B. Linderman.

ABOVE, RIGHT: Swan Lake became a boater's thoroughfare for the elite summer colony that evolved when other lodges were built by Anaconda Copper Co. associates.

Vintage photos courtesy Kootenai Lodge

"God's Will" as he was affectionately called, arrived in October.

While waiting for adoption, newborn infants begin life in the embrace of Roling at the Kootenai Lodge, nestled on the north shore of Swan Lake where the Swan River flows toward Bigfork.

The first to roam the Swan Valley's forests and shores in search of its shelter and its bounty were members of the Kootenai, Flathead and Blackfoot tribes. They lingered here long enough to enjoy the land's offerings — hunting; fishing; and setting up sweat lodges, where they experienced physical and spiritual cleansing.

Then came the slow but powerful wave of settlers that moved West in the 1800s. The Kootenai Lodge property was homesteaded in the 1880s, changing hands several times until a visit from Anaconda Copper Mining Co. attorney Lewis Orvis Evans in 1905.

Swept away by this mystical place, he introduced it to friend and partner Cornelius "Con" Kelley. The two purchased the property, and it became a summer retreat for their families. At first the Kelley and Evans families shared a lodge, but over the next 20 years the simple fishing camp developed into a magnificent retreat, including 2,700 acres, 14 cabins, a grand hall, a 31-stall barn for their thoroughbred horses, polo grounds and a six-car garage for their Pierce Arrow and Dusenberg limousines. There were two tennis courts, a billiard room and a playground for the children. The lodge was largely self-contained, with a greenhouse and carpentry and blacksmith shops. A powerhouse on Johnson Creek made them the first in the area to have electricity.

The construction of the lodge was led by local craftsmen Ward Whitney and Fred Kitzmiller, and the architecture was closely patterned after the 19th-century Adirondack camps of upstate New York. Large slabs of Virginia slate were used for the porches, and local rock was collected for the nearly two-dozen fireplaces at the lodge.

The Kelleys' tremendous main lodge, with a 30-foot ceiling, was designed by Kirkland Cutter, the architect of Lake McDonald Lodge, in Glacier National Park, and the Conrad Mansion, in Kalispell.

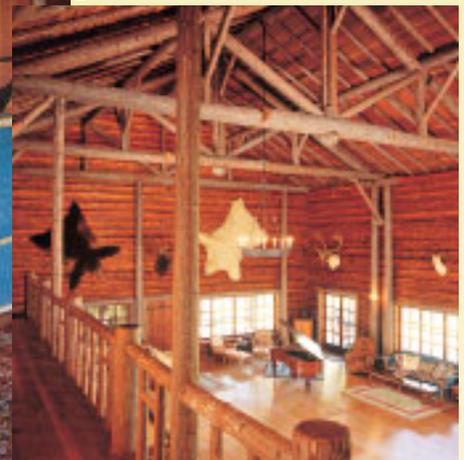


LEFT: The main lodge was designed by architect Kirtland Cutter with massive larch timbers, unpeeled cedar logs, a walk-in fireplace and a 30-foot ceiling.

BELOW, RIGHT: The Kelley and Evans children were said to have recited prepared speeches from this balcony in the main lodge.

BELOW, CENTER: This unfinished painting by Charles Russell created a mystical scene that existed before the white man arrived, when local tribes camped at the foot of Swan Lake.

Roger Wiede Photos



The main lodge includes two wings with six bedrooms, each with its own bath. In the center is a Moorish courtyard with a fountain centerpiece. Stick etchings created by Western artist Charles M. Russell are set in cement and are located throughout the courtyard. In addition to Russell, other well-known visitors to the Kootenai Lodge included aviator Charles Lindbergh, industrialist and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, Irish tenor John McCormack, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands and humorists Will Rogers and Irvin S. Cobb.

The main lodge remains locked in time; not much has changed since the grand days of the copper kings. The 1903 Steinway piano remains in perfect tune, while original wicker furniture and decorative lamps are scattered throughout the grand room, which is adorned with trophy mounts collected by Kelley. You get the sense that Kelley might enter the room at any moment puffing on a cigar. Bavarian china, Steuben crystal and imported wicker furniture found homes in the rustic log buildings.

According to Art Whitney, who served as a chauffeur, there were as many as 70 employees during the height of the Kootenai's popularity. The staff included chauffeurs, butlers, cooks, maids, a lifeguard and nannies to attend to the Kelley and Evans children and their numerous friends who romped around the immense estate. Even maintaining the stone fireplaces at the lodge required a full-time worker.



Courtesy Montana Historical Society

The golden days of the Kootenai Lodge faded with the stock market crash and the death of Evans in 1931. Evans' share was sold to Kelley, but the Evans family continued to spend time at Kootenai Lodge until they built a summer home on Lindbergh Lake, farther south in the Swan Valley.

Use of the Kootenai Lodge all but discontinued after Kelley died in 1957. His heirs sold the property in 1968 to the Stoltz Land and Lumber Co. of Columbia Falls. Prime timber was harvested from the estate, and the land was subdivided into what is known today as Swan Sites.

Sigurd and Mary Brekkeflat bought the lodge in 1969 and 42 of the surrounding acres. This was a quiet time for the lodge. Brekkeflat was frequently mistaken for a caretaker rather than an owner because of his simple dress and manner. For nearly 12 years, the Brekkeflats advertised the sale of the lodge worldwide. They fielded many offers but insisted on waiting for just the right buyer.

After Mary Brekkeflat died in 1981, Sigurd placed the lodge into a trust for the Yellowstone Boys and Girls Ranch, a Billings home for neglected and abused children. The estate was again put up for sale, awaiting the next chapter in its life. Meanwhile, neighbor and local contractor Dennis Thompkins had been taking walks through the grounds and became enchanted with the majestic place. He envisioned the buildings filled with light and people once again, and in 1982 Thompkins put his vision into action when he and some



Roger Weide Photo

LEFT: A 31-stall barn was erected and a polo field maintained during the flamboyant days of Con Kelley. Today the field serves as a driving range for Mark, a golf commentator for NBC Sports.

BELOW: The first Native American newborn to receive "cradle care" on the healing grounds of Kootenai Lodge arrived during Indian Summer of 2000.



partners established a private club at the lodge. After several million dollars were spent in restorations, the project ended in bankruptcy.

Nevertheless, the club existed long enough to stage a variety of memorable parties, and the millions of dollars spent on renovations allowed it to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Plans by prospective buyers to develop the property into a casino or an RV park threatened the glorious legacy of the Kootenai Lodge. Then Rolfing and her husband, Mark, arrived on the scene, smiling, shining, exuberant and eager to make their dreams of owning the lodge come true.

Debi remembers fondly the sunny July morning in 1990 when she first visited the Kootenai Lodge. After a brief tour, she phoned Mark in Maui, and with his blessing she made an offer to purchase the property. Within a few weeks, they were the proud new owners. With them has come a new sort of Camelot for Kootenai Lodge.

The couple exemplifies the American dream. Debi found early success in restaurant management for J.W. Marriott. After opening two hotels in California, she took a well-earned break on the coast, with a stop in Carmel. Her life was about to take an enchanting turn.

Meanwhile, Mark returned to reside with his parents on the first green of the

famed Pebble Beach Golf Links after playing professional golf in Europe and Asia. Upon his return to Carmel, he met Debi. Three months later, they were engaged to be married and headed to Maui to celebrate. They stayed 25 years.

Together the Rolfings started a sports marketing company, developed The Plantation at Kapalua, bought and sold the Kapalua Bay Hotel and increased their investment in the Kootenai Lodge.

The Rolfings still make their home in Maui but retreat to the Kootenai Lodge whenever they can break free from their busy schedules. A string of days spent fishing or simply enjoying a slower pace of life on Swan Lake brings a welcome change. Family and friends often join them.

While Mark pursues his interests in the world of sports, Kootenai Lodge continues to be Debi's project. But her focus has shifted away from the lodge's being an investment property to one that is guided more by her heart.

She thinks the Kootenai Lodge may have come to her because of a divine reason. Looking back, she feels the signs were all there. Seven years ago, Agnes Kenmille, an elder from the Kootenai tribe, visited the property to deliver a blessing. She presented Debi with a buckskin cradle board. At the time, Debi said she simply thought, "Isn't that cute?"

Today the beaded cradle board has found its place in the nursery at Kootenai Lodge, which is also decorated with photographs of the nine babies who have since been in Debi's care. In her eyes, this is the real reason she discovered Kootenai Lodge that summer day 10 years ago.

She now knows that there is something profound here, something that drew in the Native Americans, the early homesteaders and Montana's copper kings.

Debi thinks it is the land's healing touch—something about the warm embrace of golden sunlight; a full moon spilling its light over a glossy Swan Lake; and the lullaby of the gentle waves, which soothe newborn babies beginning their lives in this spirit place known as the Kootenai Lodge. 🌿

— A former reporter for the *Bigfork Eagle*, Kay Bjork writes from her home on *Swan Lake*.