

A Grand Reawakening

The Second Coming of Silverton's Historic Hotel



Above photo: "What we do is we preserve history," says Jim Harper (second from right, holding his sleepy toddler son). The whole Harper family, along with many Silvertonians, dressed in period costume to celebrate the grand reopening of the Grand Imperial Hotel last May. Photo by Ray Dileo

Right photo: The Grand Imperial hotel, with its charismatic Mansard roof and arched windows, has been Silverton landmark ever since it first opened for business in 1883. Photo by Eric Ming

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT

A larger-than-life portrait of Lillian Russell, captured on canvas by the renowned American painter Joseph Imhof in 1897, still presides over the freshly re-wallpapered lobby of Silverton's Grand Imperial Hotel.

Hemmed in by a gilt 100-by-50 inch frame, the New York stage singer's outsized likeness has gazed down on hotel happenings for decades from beneath the brim of a Gibson Girl hat — a frothy strapless gown clinging to her considerable feminine assets, head tilted beguilingly with a sideways smile as her gloved fingers brush her bare white shoulder, as if to say, "Honey, you can't surprise me. I've seen it all."

But even Miss Lillian — who may have stayed at the Grand Imperial from time to time back in Silverton's wild west mining boomtown days alongside her gluttonous paramour, Diamond Jim Brady — might bat an eyelash at the changes that have recently taken place all around her.

Under the new ownership of modern-day railroad baron Al Harper and his family, the iconic three-story hotel has undergone a dramatic multi-million dollar renovation over the past year. Crumbling walls have been shored up. Guest rooms redecorated. Bathrooms upgraded. Mechanical systems replaced. Ghosts displaced.

Gone are the '70s-era wainscoting, maroon wallpaper, green carpet, boarded-up windows and overstuffed leather-backed couches that once made the lobby feel like a dark smoking cave.

Today, it has been graciously updated with custom hand-died, and hand-pressed, Bradbury & Bradbury wallpaper and plush Pullman era furniture. Sunlight spills in through ceiling-high antique storefront windows, through which a gorgeous view of Kendall Mountain looms above Greene Street, framed by a bright blue sky.

It's a stunning transformation, yet the building still exudes loads of old-time charm.

That's just what the Harpers were after when they acquired the 133-year-old hotel for \$1.6 million in 2015 and embarked on a whirlwind restoration that concluded with a grand reopening celebration last May — replete with a street dance and fireworks.

"We did the research and looked at what the fancier frontier hotels looked like," explained hotel president Jim Harper, the eldest Harper son, who has headed up the project. "They weren't ostentatious at all. They were just nice enough. Because look where you are: You are in a frontier mining town. I think we have done a pretty good job trying to recreate that. Not too over the top, but just fancy enough."

Or, as hotel manager Paula Bradford puts it: "We're highfalutin' here without being pretentious."

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

For almost two decades, the Harpers have owned and operated the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, a historic railroad that was originally opened in 1882 by the Denver & Rio Grande Railway to transport silver and gold ore mined from the San Juan Mountains. Today, the D&SNGRR is a heritage line hauling thousands of tourists from Durango to Silverton each summer behind vintage coal-powered steam locomotives and tender cars indigenous to the line.

The rhythm and rocking of the train is womb-like, gently lulling passengers back in time as the antique engine strains up the steep grade of the Animas River Canyon, crosses an old trestle bridge and finally emerges three or four hours later into Silverton — a rugged, scrappy little mining town with Victorian pretensions, perched in the caldera of an ancient extinct volcano and surrounded by ruins of long-abandoned mines and stunning, glacier-carved wilderness.

Since the Sunnyside Mine shut down for good in the early 1990s, the train and its passengers have increasingly become Silverton's lifeblood. Few businesses in town could survive without them.

For the Harpers, running the D&SNGRR is a family affair. Al Harper and his wife Carol are CEO and president, respectively, of American Heritage Railways, the family holding company that owns the D&SNGRR along with two other heritage railroads in North Carolina and Washington state.

Jim, 3, is vice president and general manager of the family holding company (as well as heading up the new hotel company, American Heritage Railroad Hotels), while Jim's brother, John — a recent college grad

and City of Durango Firefighter — is the new general manager of the D&SNGRR. John also manages several other businesses under the Harper family Umbrella. (Four additional Harper siblings are not involved in the family business.)

"What we do is we preserve history," Jim explained. "We create an experience that is entertaining and memorable. We do that with our railroads, and the natural fit of a historic railroad hotel is something we have been wanting to explore for about 15 years now."

The family had long hoped to purchase one of Durango's historic hotels — the Strater or the General Palmer — but neither was for sale. So when the Grand Imperial came on the market for \$1.6 million in 2015, they seized the chance to finally make their vision a reality. The Harper family became the proud new owners of the Grand Imperial Hotel in April of 2015 and opened it in time for the summer season.

"Purchasing the Grand made sense for us," Jim said — both as a business model, and as part of the family's overarching vision of providing a full immersion into an authentic 1880s experience.

Over 200,000 reservations are booked on the D&SNGRR each year — a good portion of those during the frenetic summer season when up to four trains make the round trip to from Durango to Silverton and back each day. If just a fraction of those passengers were to opt to stay at the hotel overnight, the investment would quickly pay for itself.

With its 36 guest rooms and a restaurant

that seats 104, the hotel had the capacity that the venture needed. But by the time the GI was put on the market in 2015, it had about 50 years of deferred maintenance on it, and was falling into disrepair.

Yet the Harpers eagerly embraced the challenge of bringing the grand old hotel back to its former eminence while equipping it for the 21st century.

"The price was right, the timing was right, and it was something we felt passionate about — the preservation of history," said Jim, who holds a history degree from Columbia College. "We live in a time where our American history is not seen as precious or unique. And I totally disagree. We don't know where we are going unless we know where we have been. Studying history makes you appreciate what's around you and how hard folks fought to get us where we are today."

THE RENOVATION

In the fall of 2015, as the Town of Silverton rolled up its sidewalks for the winter, general contractor Martin Hotter (of Hotter Construction in Durango) and a crew of up to 50 local workers rolled up their sleeves and dug into the guts of the Grand Imperial to shore it up against time's ravages.

They were not a moment too soon. Even as they got to work, parts of the elderly building literally crumbled around them.

Like many historic buildings in Silverton, the back, north-facing wall of the brick-and-stone structure needed the most urgent attention, since that's where winter



takes its fiercest toll. In one particularly dicey spot, the plaster interior turned out to be the only thing that was keeping it all together, and the weatherworn brick exterior wall collapsed into the room when the workers stripped the plaster.

Once the back wall was stabilized, the plumbing, heating and electrical systems had to be redone, as well. All the rooms were taken down to the studs. Floors were ripped up — sometimes yielding treasures such as historic letters, newspaper clippings, and playing cards stashed beneath floorboards by long-dead guests well over a century ago — and then reinforced with a double-layer of sub-flooring.

Then came the considerable cosmetic upgrades, from shiny new bathroom fixtures to Turkish rugs, carefully chosen wall sconces and chandeliers.

The guest rooms upstairs still smell of fresh paint, and are so spic and span that they seem to sparkle. Some have antique furniture, but many are outfitted straight out of Wayfare.com, and all are equipped with 42-inch flat-screen TVs and Wi-Fi.

The project was supposed to take 18 months, but the Harpers and their crew got it done in 10 (with the exception of the cavernous basement, which will be renovated during the winter season). Remarkably, the hotel and its dining room stayed open for business most of that time.

The secret to their success? “Our family’s philosophy is to surround yourself with the best people,” said Jim. Having the financial wherewithal to make it happen also helps. To date, the Harper family has sunk \$5.3 million into the project (including the purchase price).

STEP BACK IN TIME

It may seem surreal that they accomplished so much in so short a time, but consider the fact that the entire original structure was erected in just nine months — back in the days before backhoes and power tools were invented.

The Grand Imperial Hotel was commissioned in 1882 by enterprising financial partners Dr. S.H. Beckwith — who designed and built the local Martha Rose Smelter — and William Sparks Thomson, Esq., an American industrialist from Connecticut who made a rollicking fortune on both sides of the Atlantic manufacturing

corsets, crinolines, railroad springs, smelling salts and perfumes.

The two gentlemen found themselves in Silverton on the very brink of its heyday, as anticipation built in town over the incipient arrival of the Denver & Rio Grand Railroad, ensuring that the gold and silver ore pouring out of the local mines could get to downstream smelters with their plentiful coal supply in Durango.

Silverton, on the dawn of the train’s arrival, was already a mining boomtown with 3,000 or so inhabitants, but just two hotels and no commercial or civic buildings of note. Beckwith and Thomson saw the need for a new commercial building of the highest caliber. They had plans drawn up for a three-story granite and native brick edifice with a Mansard roof and arched windows, to be built in the heart of downtown Silverton on the corner of 12th Street and Greene Street (Silverton’s main thoroughfare).

The first train reached Silverton’s outskirts on July 13, 1882. Construction began on the Thomson Block (the building that would come to house the Grand Imperial Hotel), just a few weeks later.

Upon its completion in 1883, the Thomson Block was by far the grandest building in Silverton — 32,000 square feet in size — purportedly the largest single standing structure south of Denver. The early reputation of the Grand Hotel, as it was then known, was equally outsized. It was referred to as “the finest hotel in the state, outside of Denver,” and the “Show-place of the Silver Kings.”

But when the hotel was first built, it was really more of a multi-purpose commercial structure — nothing like the fancy Beaumont Hotel in Ouray or the Strater in Durango, with their sweeping staircases and gracious lobbies and presidential suites and grand balls given by mining magnates. The Grand had modest guest rooms on its third floor and a miners’ hostel in the basement, but the second floor was originally devoted to town and county offices, while the ground floor had a dining hall, saloon, mercantile and hardware store in its original iteration. Over the years, 75 businesses have come and gone within its walls.

Early-day Silverton was rough, turbulent and violent, and offered plenty of interesting ways to die. Long, severe winters made the environment extremely harsh,



“We’re highfalutin’ here without being pretentious,” says Grand Imperial Hotel manager Paula Bradford, pictured here in the hotel lobby.

The hotel lobby has been graciously redecorated with custom hand-died and hand-pressed Bradbury & Bradbury wallpaper and plush Pullman era furniture.

Photos: www.howiestern.com



and mining was a downright dangerous occupation with few safety precautions on the part of the mine owners.

Along with the arrival of the train in Silverton came an influx of gamblers, prostitutes and con men. By 1883, the two blocks of Blair St. between 11th and 13th had become a madly flourishing red-light district with legions of lewd women, soiled doves, and fallen angels working its cribs, brothels, and dance halls around the clock.

The Grand, with its more respectable Greene Street location, was nevertheless right in the thick of the action. A bullet lodged in the antique back bar of the hotel's saloon speaks to the wilder times of the hotel's past, when the likes of Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp may well have prowled the premises, while Notorious Blair Street beckoned with its dance halls and brothels just a block away.

(Legend has it that upstanding Silvertonian gentlemen could slip through a tunnel from the Grand over to Blair Street. A subterranean sidewalk unearthed in the recent renovations may have been part of such a network.)

The hotel has endured through all of Silverton's ups and downs since those turbulent boomtown days — first as the Grand, later as the Imperial Hotel, and finally as the Grand Imperial — largely following the fortunes of the town.

Through a series of 14 owners culminating with the Harpers, it has weathered the Silver Panic of 1893, the 1918 flu epidemic, the Great Depression of the 1930s, Lake Emma's flooding of the Sunnyside Mine in 1978, the closure of the Sunnyside in 1991, the Great Recession of 2008, the invasion of recreational pot shops and street-legal ATVs, the Gold King Spill in 2015 that unleashed three million gallons of pent-up mine water into the Animas River, and most recently, the controversial Super-Fund designation and arrival of the Environmental Protection Agency to clean up the mess in the mountains around Silverton that mining has left behind. (In a sign of things to come, the EPA set up offices on the Grand Imperial's second floor last summer.)

The hotel's guest rooms, meanwhile, have sheltered a parade of weary travelers — silver kings and railroad giants, movie stars and miners, and tourists from across the globe who step across the hotel's threshold, and step back in time.

THE HAUNTED HOTEL

Like many historic hotels in the San Juans, the Grand Imperial has its fair share of ghost stories that go with the territory.

"This building is registered in the top six haunted buildings in the state," Jim said. "It is a dubious honor. But for a building that is 134 years old, there are going to be those kinds of things. It is par for the course in a building this old."

The most famous haunting has to do with one Dr. Luigi, who had a medical practice on the second floor of the hotel and lived in a room on the third floor. He was in love with a bordello girl on Blair Street, so the story goes. But after repeated attempts to ask for her hand in marriage, he shot himself in the head to escape the misery of his broken heart.

"What he didn't know was that his nurse was madly in love with him," Jim recounted. "She was the one that discovered his body. She later, too, committed suicide on the third floor." Over the years, guests and staff have frequently reported paranormal encounters in Luigi's room — Room 314.

"There is so much love and passion in this building," Jim quipped. "That's probably why we are so happy all the time. Everyone loves each other...to death."

All joking aside, Jim and his family have come to accept the Grand Imperial's paranormal residents as part of the package. "If I didn't believe before, I do now," he admitted.

One particularly spooky encounter occurred shortly before the Harpers bought the hotel. Jim was walking through the basement with the family's banker while Al was up in the lobby talking on the phone. "And as we were walking, the banker is behind me and my jacket gets pulled back," Jim recalled. "It was forceful enough you could see the jacket get pulled up around my neck. I turned around and said — 'What?' And the banker looked at me and his eyes got big and he said 'That wasn't me. It looked like someone grabbed your jacket and jerked it — like this.' We turned around and hightailed it out of the basement right up the stairs."

The hauntings are not relegated to Luigi's room or the basement. "A couple staying in one of our rooms on the second floor experienced a woman in a white nightgown, with long black hair



The Harper family's vision of providing a full immersion into an authentic 1880s experience has reached fruition. Now their guests can ride the historic Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, stay overnight in Silverton at the historic Grand Imperial Hotel, and even carouse in the hotel saloon.

Photos left and below: www.howiestern.com.

Photo above right: Ray Dileo photo



pulled back in a bun,” Jim recounted. “She had bangs evenly cut in the front. He said the best way he could describe it was like looking at Olive Oil from the Popeye cartoons. That’s the way he described her — very specific. She was standing there next to the bed, then turned and started gliding toward a doorway.”

The most notorious paranormal episode of late happened in Luigi’s quarters, shortly after renovations had begun in October 2015. “We had our crews walk off the job site. They left this building and didn’t come back for three whole days,” Jim said. “Radios were turning on and off. Lights were turning on and off in rooms. Little pieces of drywall were being thrown at them. Nails were being thrown at them. Things were being moved from room to room. They left. I had six guys walk off the job.”

The story was written up by *Silverton Standard* editor Mark Esper, and landed on the front page of *The Durango Herald’s* Halloween edition. The incident prompted the Harpers to have a paranormal team come up and do a more thorough investigation of the hotel while it was closed for a month last spring, and they made what Jim described as “some significant discoveries.”

The upshot? “They (the spirits) definitely know what is going on here, and everything meets their approval,” Jim said. He is more intrigued than worried about the hotel’s ghostly residents — and hopes that his living guests feel the same way.

“A building this old has energy,” he shrugged. “A positive energy, I think. We have an aura, and I think this building has an aura. The folks that are here still are happy with what we have done.”

BRACING FOR WINTER

The last train of the season has come and gone, the wail of its whistle a ghostly memory hanging over the caldera, and Silverton is settling in for the winter under a thin white blanket of snow. It’s hard to imagine how it was in summer, just a few months back — sidewalks full of tourists licking ice cream cones, ATVs noisily parading up and down Greene Street, old-timey piano music wafting out of the Grand Imperial’s open saloon door.

“Silverton is a totally different town in the wintertime,” Jim Harper sighs. Which

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is probably a good thing; it gives his staff a chance to breathe after an “absolutely incredible” summer season, with 49 straight days of sold-out room nights, business up over 54 percent in occupancy and 17 percent in the restaurant. All that, and record train ridership, too.

“This season was a real learning experience, and with the growth we saw in the hotel, Silverton saw the same growth,” he says. Indeed, a recent issue of the *Silverton Standard* announced that the summer of 2016 set a new record for sales tax revenues. Riding this new boom of prosperity, Silverton’s most recent bout of small town squabbles seem to have quieted down, as well.

“We are seeing a coming together, in all aspects of the town; we all have a common goal,” Jim reflects. “There is a different energy. It’s good for everybody. A high tide raises all ships.”

With its walls shored up snugly against the coming snows, the Grand Imperial is getting ready to sail into the winter season. The hotel is hosting a New Year’s Eve gala, put on by Silverton Mountain and Venture Snowboards. Jim is working hard with other community leaders to bring dog-sledding back to Silverton. And he plans to offer package deals in coordination with Silverton Mountain, Silverton’s infamous extreme ski area, to lure more skiers to stay and play town.

Miss Lillian and Dr. Luigi might not know what to make of it all.

The sprawling, three-story brick-and-stone hotel with its Mansard roof will always be haunted by its past, but with its recent renovations, the Grand Imperial’s future — along with that of the community it serves — is looking bright. **S**