

## The Thunderbird Story

By Joe Hudgins

The story begins in Fort Lauderdale about 1958. Joe Hudgins a World War II Navy Veteran was just finishing a project developing Cypress Creek City, one of the first modern "mobile home" communities in South Florida. He had been employed by Gene Montgomery as Vice President of his company, Montgomery



Joe Hudgins

Paving Company, to develop the mobile home park along with an adjoining strip center. The project was now finished and Joe took time off to vacation with his family in the mountains of North Carolina.

The Hudgins family, Joe, Eunice, daughter Kaye and son Bill were enjoying the lake and mountains at Fontana Village Resort and happened to meet an acquaintance, Jack Barnes, who was a concrete contractor in Fort Lauderdale and who was in the Carolinas looking for property to purchase. Jack had located a property and asked Joe to look at it with him.

The property was a 125 acre peninsula running into and surrounded by the beautiful Lake Santeetlah and located at the entrance to Joyce Kilmer National Forest.

Jack was in negotiations with the owner and had a tentative offer in mind. With the Joe's approval and interest in participating, they made an offer, which was accepted. The offer was for a total purchase price of \$50,000 with a down payment of \$5000.

Joe attempted to interest Montgomery in the project but he was too involved in Fort Lauderdale development. Joe then agreed to put his full time into developing the property. He and Jack together entered into the purchase agreement for the property and name the development Thunderbird Mountain Club. Joe then returned to Florida to raise development capital.

Joe had earlier joined an old friend, Art Nichols in opening a real estate office in Fort Lauderdale so he brought art into the development plan as a partner he was issued a 10% interest. Our introduced his friend, John Warner, who then introduced Barch Case, a retired investor who agreed to invest \$60,000 and his creditability for a 15% interest. Warner was given a 10% interest as a finders fee. The company now had five partners and incorporated as Thunderbird Mountain Resort Inc.

The partners and officers were: Joe Hudgins, Pres., developer, Jack Barnes, VP, Sec., art Nichols, Treas., C. B. Case, Director, John Warner, Dir.

One of the first things Joe did was to engage a model builder to create a model of the entire peninsula with proposed lodge, cottages and other resort facilities shown just as he envisioned. This model became the working plan for the layout of Thunderbird Mountain resort.

Joe previously had experience with mobile homes so he visited with a manufacturer in Eastern Tennessee, who was experimenting with 10 foot wide sectional cottages which could be assembled on site as two section (double wide) cottages, providing a 20 foot wide home.

With the company's \$60,000 capital and Case's guarantee, Joe ordered six cottages to be shipped to the Thunderbird site. He then hired a local bulldozer operator to prepare sites for the units. When the units arrived each unit or section was then chained to the bulldozer and backed down the mountain, dodging between the trees to its site and placed on concrete block foundations. Decks were then attached.

A main two lane road was cut through from the entrance, around the mountain and small side parking areas or side roads were cut to the building site. Plans were established to provide a lake view or lake frontage to each site. The six cottages were sold almost as soon as they were set. This established the potential success of the project and encouraged moving ahead with plans already in place for a full resort development.

Joe applied for development funds with the local bank without success since the company had no prior experience. He then went to Associates Discount Corporation who was then financing mobile homes at 6% add on interest rates. This was extremely high interest but with the assurance of success from the early sales the partners borrowed \$400,000.

With funds available, Joe engaged an architect to design a large building with a full restaurant, kitchens etc. Joe took his dozer operator, who was then hired as a full-time employee, to Knoxville, rented a larger bulldozer and a pan. They then rented a heavy duty truck and towed the equipment around the mountains to Thunderbird and then the dozer operator cut down a small hill and cleared a large area at the entrance to the Peninsula to house the new Lodge building and motel units.

Joe located a builder in Gatlinburg to build the Lodge building. He then use some of the borrowed money to buy a used D8 Caterpillar tractor to use in constructing roads and in placing future cottage units.

Joe then went to a large, mobile home manufacturing company Knox homes Corporation in Thompson, Georgia. This company was experimenting with manufactured homes. Working with the company designers, Joe designed sexual units that could be shipped to the site and then erected as double wide units to provide single units or double wide units with one, two or three bedrooms. They were to be built of housing materials, not like trailers. The exterior walls were of standard housing wooden lap siding. The interiors were of decorative wood panels. Rumi interiors were 10 foot height. Windows and doors were of housing quality. Full-size kitchens

were planned with housing size ranges and refrigerators, etc. They each had pitched roofs and provided for building large deck additions on-site after placement on concrete foundations.

Using availability of the financing capital and company guarantees, Joe ordered over 1/4 of a million dollars worth of the units to be delivered as soon as possible. In addition to the cottage units ordered, a total of 18 motel room units were ordered. He then returned to Thunderbird to prepare sites for them.

The first double wide unit was delivered to Fort Lauderdale as a demonstration model. A location had been leased directly in front of Fort Lauderdale's first mall on N. Federal Hwy. The large wooden deck was added on and the location was beautifully landscaped. The public was invited in an over 15,000 visitors came to admire both the cottage and the many photos of the great Smoky Mountains and lakes.

This was Florida's winter season. Eunice put their home on the market and they came to Atlanta to find a home close enough to the resort and have a place for the kids to attend school. Joe is busy with the construction of the Lodge and restaurant.

It is important to know that at this time, the Thunderbird property was located in Graham County, which had a total population of about 800 residents in addition to a few Indian families scattered here and there. The only town in the county was Robbinsville, 9 miles from the entrance. In Robbinsville, there was a courthouse, a small bank, a grocery store with a gas pump, one elderly semi retired attorney and one younger attorney who was also a state senator. These two handle all legal affairs of the county including recording all property records etc. There were also several small shops and a gas station. Mrs. Phillips had a small motel and café were good food was available. Her son was a partner in Phillips and Jordan heavy construction. They were road builders and worked all over North Carolina, building and paving the main highways. Snowbird Lodge was located nearby on Snowbird mountain.

At the courthouse and jail, the high Sheriff and his office and one telephone. The only public telephone in Graham County was located in a ramshackle phone booth on the corner in front of the courthouse.

Joe spent many an hour, sometimes up to 8 to 10 hours, sitting in the phone booth or in his car, waiting to get a call through. There were no suppliers or contractors located in the entire Western North Carolina area. The nearest was Knoxville or Gatlinburg. Also the manufacturer of the cottage units was in Thompson Georgia. Joe's family was either in Florida or in the process of moving to Atlanta.

Eunice located a new home in Decatur Atlanta which they purchased and then made plans to move into. But first it was necessary to move the model cottage from its distinguished location at the Fort Lauderdale Mall to Thunderbird. Now "this ain't easy." Joe flew to Florida, hired a crew to take things apart, and located a trucking outfit that agreed to haul both units to the mountains.

The decks were removed. One unit was moved to place the two units in line and the two were welded together and wheels were attached to its steel frame. A heavy duty trailer hitch was welded in place and the truck was hooked to the hauling units. The whole thing was then pulled to Joe and Eunice's home in Pompano Beach, which had now been sold. There all of their furniture and boxes were loaded in the units. A local builder was hired to become the construction superintendent at Thunderbird and he planned a quick move with his wife to the mountains.

Eunice had made plans to move to the new home in Decatur as soon as the moving unit was ready. The heavily overloaded truck then took off for Decatur. It was expected to take about two days travel time. After about four breakdowns over five days the driver had arrived about 15 miles south of Atlanta and had broken down again, he phoned and said "I quit." He just parked alongside the highway and walked off. It took about 10 days to locate a driver who finally got it to Joe's new home and unloaded his furnishings and then hold it to Thunderbird where the units were again separated, moved to a beautiful lakefront site and reassembled with new decks etc. it's it was quickly sold to a Florida resident as a second home in the mountains.



**Thunderbird Resort Main Office 1960s**

As soon as the moving units were loaded in Pompano, Eunice took off with the kids expecting to move right in the new home and get the kids in school. However, the delays in getting the furniture required a change in plans. They stayed a few days in a motel and then made friends with the neighbor near the new home who loaned them a few pieces including a card table to eat on, a couple of folding chairs and some cots, etc. they moved in. The car that drove them to Georgia was loaded with things like their good Crystal, and silverware, lamps and some are close for the kids. But it was getting cold so she was forced to shop for warm clothing before she could enroll them in school. For about 10 days she, Kay and Bill ate out on expensive crystal where for dishes, and using the best silverware. Every day brought promises of "tomorrow" as to the day of arrival. This went on for about 10 days.

Eventually the truck arrived. Everything, such as the family boxes and furniture including the clothing, dishes, cookware, etc. were unloaded. Then the truck took off for the North Carolina mountains. Eunice had real fun, all by herself, sorting out everything and getting settled with the kids finally in school. Joe was, of course, busy at Thunderbird getting the lodge built.

As previously decided, the family would live in Decatur with the kids in school. The resort would close during the winter but Joe would commute to Thunderbird while work was in progress. The family would move to the mountains after school was out and stay for the summer,

returning to Decatur at beginning of the school term. This lasted about two years, until the resort was going strong and then the family moved to one of the cottages.

There were many problems that occurred during the early construction phase. The Lodge and restaurant building went up quickly with crews brought in from Knoxville and Gatlinburg but the Lakeside swimming pool became a real problem when word got out in "Yeller Creek" that the pool contractor from Gatlinburg employed black laborers. At the time there had never been a black located in the County and mountain people were up in arms. The word went out that several men would be stationed around the mountain with high-powered rifles and they would fire at any blacks seen in the area.

Joe was in Florida at the time and he was quickly called by the construction superintendent. Several long-distance calls to the pool contractor changed plans and schedules and construction got underway with all white employees imported from Knoxville.

Thunderbird Lodge was built, several cottages were erected and sold. The restaurant had been planned to be managed by a former club manager from Florida who supposedly knew all about running a restaurant. He ordered supplies, lots of steaks, equipment, etc. When he was expected to arrive and take over, it became obvious that he was not qualified and he quit. This naturally caused the restaurant to fall into the hands of Eunice, who had never worked in a restaurant, to take over and get it open for the first season.

Eunice did not know a T-bone from a sirloin but she dug in and went to work. She found large pieces of meat in the freezer that needed to be cut to stake size. She had no cooks or helpers but she recruited some locals who could cook and clean and with some guidance from the local butcher, managed to put things in order and opened for business in Thunderbird's a beautiful lake view restaurant. She served great steaks fried chicken and lots of good vegetables. She even had great pies for dessert.

It was evident that help was needed, especially to look after the kids. Eunice recruited her mom and dad. They moved to a small apartment over one of the shops in Robbinsville him, North Carolina, and eventually to one of the early cottages at the resort. Mom was put in charge of the kids. Pop manage the resorts community store and gas station. He also became the escort for cottages coming from Georgia but that's another story.

Let me return to the cottage units ordered from Thompson, Georgia. At the time of placing the order North Carolina had a rule that no units wider than 10 feet could be moved over the highway. However, Georgia and Tennessee permitted 12 foot widths. Since it had been evident that 10 foot width was not desirable, Joe decided to gamble on sneaking 12 wide units into North Carolina. He actually gambled 1/4 of a million dollar purchase on his ability to get them in.

Joe contacted the high Sheriff of Graham County and he agreed to look the other way when the caravan of units went by, since going by one route, required only about 10 miles through North Carolina. Pop was now the escort.

All went well until the caravan consisting of some 30, 12 foot wide units, arrived at the Santeetlah dam bridge. The caravan arrived in North Carolina from Tennessee. It came down a steep steep hill on a 2 lane highway about 10 miles to the bridge. The bridge was an old railroad bridge and was exactly 12 feet wide. The units were only 11'8" wide so it might have worked except that the highway made a sharp turn right at the bridge entrance. The truck and units could not make the turn to line up for the bridge approach. Pop had to have the entire caravan backup almost the 10 miles and come around through another county directly in front of Fontana Village and another county. The trip was then over 50 miles through North Carolina and passed through the town of Robbinsville, right in front of the high Sheriff's office to get to Thunderbird. They arrived safely without further problems with pop holding his breath all the way.

After a number of cottages were sold, it became evident that many would be occupied only as vacation homes. It was decided to offer a cottage rental plan, which most owners used when they were not at the resort. Since cottages were located all over the 125 acre peninsula. It became a real problem getting housekeepers to them. The problem was solved when the company purchased 10 electric golf carts and two way radios. Each house beekeeper carried mops, brooms, vacuums, and other cleaning materials. Each was dispatched by the head housekeeper using two-way phone under direction of Eunice who was responsible to the owners. Eunice hired all of the restaurant and housekeeping staff and they worked under her direction.

Most of the employees came from Robbinsville or were from a nearby village known as "Yaller Creek". You took your life into your own hands when you ventured into "Yaller Creek". It was like Dogpatch. You had to know someone to even be let in, and you are likely to be greeted with a shotgun and a big dog. Once you got acquainted, the folks were good workers. Two brothers who worked hard were Phood Williams and his brother Needmore. They had a rattletrap old flatbed truck and used it to haul creek stones. They built stone walls, foundations for cottages and stone walkways. Phood was hired with his truck as Thunderbirds garbage man.

Myrtle was the head housekeeper. When Eunice hired Myrtle, she told her that she was responsible for all the crew. She told her "if something goes wrong I'm looking to you." The bulldozer operator was Dempsey. There was a little he could not do with that dozer. When he first started to work for the resort, he had been clearing up mountaintops for road building company. He would hook a heavy cable to a giant tree and then literally walk the dozer down the side of the mountain pushing trees and rocks.

Dempsey worked alone most of the time. One day his dozer lost a bolt on a track so we left the motor running and got down to get the track back in place. At that time, the engine slipped and the track ran over the two fingers of his left hand. He was held down by the track and could not

get loose. He finally, after some time, yelled to a passerby and directed him to get on the dozer and told him what gears to move to move the track off his hand. He was back on the job in about two weeks -3 fingers.

The cottages were delivered to the main road at the entrance. There Dempsey welded a heavy duty trailer hitch to the unit and then backed the unit and dozer down the mountain to a preselected site where a crew would build a level concrete block foundation under it. Then the second matching unit was delivered and down the mountain to line up with the first. After they were joined together and permanent foundations constructed, large wooden decks were built on site to complete the construction. Dick sometimes had as much as a 60 foot drop from the deck to the ground with the rear of the house unit resting at ground level.

It was almost forbidden to cut down a tree at Thunderbird. So the units had to be juggled through the trees and down the mountain to its site. All cottages were shipped from the factory fully furnished with carpets, drapes, beds, and kitchen equipment all furnished and installed. Dishes and utensils were placed after erection.

Let me tell you about Thunderbird Mountain. It is located just off Highway 129 in Graham County, North Carolina. The hundred 25 acre peninsula juts out into the 3000 acre Lake Santeetlah, one of the TVA lakes created during World War II to create power for the atomic energy program at Oak Ridge Tennessee. The lake and Thunderbird was surrounded by the beautiful Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, a game and forest preserve and a great hunting and fishing area.

Before beginning to build Thunderbird, Joe brought Jean Montgomery up from Florida on a great bear hunt. He brought two rifles and other gear and was ready for the big game. The local bear hunters had staked out a big bear and her cub along Fontana Lake and planned to meet at dawn at the boat docks. They had several jeeps and many hunting rifles and they were ready. The Jeeps deposited each great hunter at strategic points around the surrounding mountains and then the point men started to flush out the bear. Well they chased her up and down the hills all day, but she outwitted them and swam across Lake and got away. But late afternoon brought a spate of gunfire so everyone thought that success was at hand. As sundown all gathered again at the boat docks and waited for the Jeep to arrive with the bear carcass. The Jeep finally arrived with the 100 pound bear cub spread out on the hood. Needless to say, Jean Montgomery was unimpressed.

At the beginning, Robbinsville was the only town in the county, about 9 miles to the east. Fontana village, and established lake resort, with large number of vacation cottages was about 17 miles by the back roads or about 50 some miles by direct paved highway. These cottages were originally home for workers who helped build the TVA lakes and dams our system. About 10 miles west was Santeetlah (sic Cheoah) Dam with a small resort complex of a small restaurant a few motel rooms and gift shops with sightseeing of the dam and power plant.

Thunderbird was a narrow mountain, only about a city block wide. It was shaped like a mountain with the high point running down the center from the entrance to the point, and into the lake. The land sloped very steeply from the peak down to the high point of the lakefront on both sides of the Peninsula. There were over 2 miles of lake frontage. By placing the cottages at random from the main road built all the way around the center at the level of the main highway it was possible to have 3 to 5 levels of cottages with each one having a beautiful lakefront view and most with lake access. The whole area was heavily wooded. Lake Santeetlah had about a 10 foot drop in elevation according to the wet or dry season.

The Lodge and restaurant were located at the main entrance just off the highway. There was a small convenience and gift store alongside and a total of 18 factory built motel rooms located just a short distance away. Both the lodge and motel had a spectacular lake view from expansive decks. A huge rock enclosed swimming pool was built below at the lake level with access from the lodge and motel. Boat docks and horse stables were later added.

The first year was getting acquainted and experimenting with the first six cottages and then planning the move to Atlanta by the Hudgins. Then came the design for the lodge and finding someone to build it. A contractor from Gatlinburg was hired and it went up quickly. Then came the motel units, laying out roads, placement of the first cottages, getting power to the resort, and opening the restaurant and motel for business.

Since there was no city water available, it was necessary to employ a well driller to find drinking water for the lodge, motel, and the homes. This became a continuing problem. It was necessary later to install a great water tower on the highest point of the ridge. Dempsey and his Tractor were put to work in getting the tank up the mountain. The tank was loaded on its side on a long trailer frame about 60 feet long. Both a trailer hitch and heavy chains were used to hook to the dozer and secure it to the trailer. Then Dempsey walked the whole thing as far as he could maneuver around the narrow, curvy road to the far point of the mountain. It was necessary to back the rig up the mountaintop to a preselected site on which a concrete foundation had been constructed. The whole procedure took over two days and was a sight to see. Giant tank was pushed backwards up the side of the mountain and raised from its side to its foundation. There were many tense moments with cables and ropes holding it in place.

After the Lodge was built, the motel units placed and ready for business in the first 30 cottages were placed, the resort was ready. Joe stayed in the motel until school let out and Atlanta. Then Eunice brought the kids up and settled in one of the first three bedroom cottages. Pop and mom soon followed in the new resort crew was trained and ready to go. A number of the first owners arrived for the summer. Joe oversaw the work crews and also handled sales. He bought a 20 foot pontoon boat with a top cover and benches. With its outboard motor, it could carry up to a dozen or more passengers.



Prospects were shown the potential cottage sites from the lake. Once a site was selected, Joe would take the buyer to the site by jeep or golf cart. The lot was staked out according to the amount of land that was needed for each cottage and where it was going to be located. Of course, a number of cottages were already located and were ready for sale.

Graham County did not have a licensed surveyor. However, the milkman who delivered milk to the area weekly had been a surveyor in another county. He was engaged by Joe to draw up a metes and bounds description of the staked out lot. This was then taken into Robbinsville to the aged attorney who then drew up a deed and had it recorded at the courthouse.

Smith Howell was vice president and manager of the small bank in Robbinsville. He was approached at the time of locating the first cottages, but since the developers had no experience, he was not interested. However by the second year when the Lodge, restaurant and motel was open and a number of cottages already in place had been sold for cash, the bank changed its policy.

As progress was made the bank made many loans to cottage buyers the schedule became: A site was selected and the lot was staked out. The buyer signed a purchase agreement for his lot, cottage, furnishings etc. The milkman surveyed the lot. The buyer paid 50% of the total purchase price as a down payment. Joe then took the contract to the bank and got a loan for the buyer of the other 50%. Joe got the whole hundred percent cash at the time of sale. The cottage was placed on the lot already fully furnished and decks were then built. Of course the bank charged a heavy 6% add-on interest. Many of the units were sold for cash and paid in full at the time of purchase.

The owners used the cottages periodically. Some moved in permanently but many were interested in the cooperative rental plan which was developed by Joe. The plan simply called for an agreement by the owner and the company allowing the company to maintain the cottage when the owner was absent by prior arrangement for dates. Rates were agreed upon per site and model unit. The company handled all housekeeping, cleaning and rental contracts etc. The company retained one third of the rental since they maintained the cruise and handle the rentals. The owner furnished kitchen utensils and linens but the company handled cleaning and laundry. The cruise traveled the mountain roads by battery powered golf cart and were dispatched by two-way radio.

Graham County was dry but permitted brown bagging. However it was a long way to the nearest ABC store and many visitors and owners came to Thunderbird without provisions. Myrtle was the friendly bootlegger. When a visitor in the restaurant was in need of libation, the manager could always find a brown bag under the counter in an emergency. Myrtle was often called upon to pick up something on her next trip to Raleigh. She usually had a number of orders on her weekly trips and a full truckload on her return. Of course it was against the law to have it on hand in your car but that did not bother Myrtle.

Since the lake had a seasonal drop and water level in the area best suited for a boat dock was shallow at low ebb, the boat facility was planned to provide docs on floating pontoons. Steel drums were used with a deck built above the drums and connected together to provide docks and walkways.

Many of the owners and visitors brought boats of all sizes and dock them there. Lake senti was a wonderful boating and fishing area so there were all sizes and types on hand.

In addition to the company pontoon sales boat, Joe bought a 20 foot speedboat, which was often used to show off the surrounding National Forest. Joe and his son Bill often took the boat for rides together with Bill as pilot. During the winter when there were no residents or guests, Joe and Bill often kept busy with the boat since it was docked close to their home on Thunderbird Point.

Thunderbird developed over the next few years from a wooded mountain lake area into a full-fledged resort as roads were finished and paved, as the Lodge was built with its restaurant, motel, swimming pool. Riding stables and boat docks were soon added. There were numerous cottage sizes from the popular black bear one-bedroom to two-bedroom and then three bedroom models. Most were sold from model units on display and placed after sale. Many owners added to their cottage with extra decks, storage facilities, and other add-ons. Many had fireplaces. Soon some purchasers wanted larger, more elaborate units and some were built as large as a five bedroom home.

Owners came from Florida at first but soon were added folks from all over. Two top Sears executives bought homes. Adam Green was a district manager from Cleveland who built the biggest home on the mountain. The district manager of the Atlantic District soon followed and a top executive of K-Mart bought one of the first three bedroom units. All three retired to live at Thunderbird.

Of the five original owners of Thunderbird, Joe ended up as the full-time developer and manager. Jack Barnes continued his contracting business in Florida and acquired additional land in North Carolina. During his return from a Florida trip, he was killed in an auto accident about 100 miles from Thunderbird. Shortly after, John died of a brain tumor. Art Nichols continued as Treasurer and handled the bookkeeping for the resort from his home and office in Fort Lauderdale. March Case and his wife lived in the resort during summer and return to their home in Jupiter Florida for the winter. They were never involved in any management or other work responsibilities.

After about five years of growth, the resort boasted of 159 permanent homes and cottages that were used as vacation homes and rental units while the owners were away in addition, to the 18 motel rooms. All were occupied almost constantly from early spring to late fall. This meant that as a resort, the guests and owners needed to be entertained. Of course, there was boating, swimming, fishing activities then there was horseback riding, boat sightseeing and picnicking by

pontoon boat to favorite spots along the miles of lake frontage throughout the Joyce Kilmer national Forest.

At the lodge there was plenty to do with artists showing off their works, games in the recreation room with ping-pong and billiards, card games, etc. At night the guests and owners congregated on the spacious decks at the Lodge and were treated to a full-length black-and-white movie. The projector was located on the deck with a large screen suspended from a tall tree. Lookers set on the decks or in deck chairs or on the grass just under the decks.

The movies were another invention of Joe's. He found a movie rental source in Atlanta where thousands of old classic movies were available. Several titles were picked up on Joe's visit to the city when he returned the used ones. Sundays found many owners and rental guests at the Lodge recreation room. It was opened after breakfast and arranged as Thunderbird Community Church. The minister was from a small church in Robbinsville who served as guest minister after his early service in town. On one

Mr. and Mrs. Case, one of the original partners, made a gift of a beautiful Hammond organ. It was placed at the center of the Lodge where it could be enjoyed by guests of the restaurant and by opening a separator wall could be enjoyed as entertainment for the Lodge and also provide music for the church services as well as music for frequent dances.

Joe was at home in Decatur one cold, snowy winter Saturday when he got a call from a Miami resident who was in the area and who was a prospect for second home at Thunderbird. He insisted that Joe meet him at the resort to discuss it. Joe called Baxter, the maintenance man at the resort and had him warm up two of the motel rooms. He then drove up from Decatur for the weekend to meet with Bill, the prospect. They both arrived in late afternoon. It was "colder'n a catfish" with snow all over everything. Joe showed him the Lodge and the restaurant and when he saw the Hammond organ he insisted that he be allowed to try it out. Of course the Lodge was unheated and the Hammond was locked. After he kept insisting, Joe finally located a hacksaw and they sawed open the lock. Big-band rhythms were heard all over the mountain for well over three hours with Joe, Bill and Baxter with his wife in their cottage as the audience. Bill was convinced and his family enjoyed many nights of organ music while staying at their Thunderbird cottage.

The neighboring Fontana village, which was well-established and much larger than Thunderbird, had regular square dances that drew an audience from miles around. Soon after Thunderbird got fully underway, Joe hired a square dance instructor from Fontana. At first he only worked for one night a week but was eventually hired as recreation director for Thunderbird.

Wild boar and black bear were hunted widely in the forest surrounding Thunderbird, especially during the late fall and during the winter months. Joe and son Bill found bear tracks in the snow along the lakefront just below their cottage on the point during a snowy winter when the only

occupants of the resort were Joe, Eunice and Bill with Baxter, the maintenance man and his wife who lived at the entrance about a mile away.

There were hunts planned for several people, plan by and run by locals. The guests were usually housed in Thunderbird motel, a few rooms of which Baxter kept heated and available for occasional an unexpected drop-ins.

Many of the owners participated in these hunts and many wanted to see how bear meat tasted. After much persuasion, Eunice was finally drafted to prepare a feast of bear meat in the restaurant. It was early fall and about 50 or more owners and a few renters were on hand when the great hunters brought in a catch. One of the local hunters butchered the bear and brought steaks and roasts enough for the Thunderbirders. Eunice with her crew of mountain cooks got busy. First they marinated the meat for hours, then they slow cooked it for a long time. It was covered in a spaghetti sauce to disguise the taste. The kitchen stank with the odor but the sauce helped.

Eunice thought that the guests might taste the meat and then want dinner so she had the cooks prepare fried chicken dinners for all of the reserved guests. She was totally surprised to see that all the prepared bear meat was eaten along with the vegetables while the chicken was left.

It is important to note that at the time, Thunderbird was really isolated. It was located 9

miles from town, 10 miles to the next small resort Santeetlah (sic, Tapoco) dam. The property was surrounded by National Forest and Lake. Joe made friends with the High Sheriff and he appointed Joe a special deputy for Graham County. Joe was the only law for miles around. However there was little crime going on so Joe had little cause to show his official police pistol and badge. However there was one crime of mention at Thunderbird. At night after the Lodge and kitchen closed everyone turned in for the night. On one occasion, the Lodge office was locked up, and in the office was huge bank type safe weighing a ton. It stood over 5 feet high, all heavy steel. That night was a Fourth of July weekend and all the money taken in from the rentals and restaurant was in the safe. When the office opened the next morning, there was no safe.



Restaurant Dining Room



Dining Rooms

Someone had backed a truck into the Lodge entrance and loaded that heavy safe, money and all. The safe was never found. It was decided that it now resides at the bottom of Lake Santeetlah.

The owners and guests all became good friends and often would pitch in to help the crew if things got too hectic. It was a common sight to find five or six of the owners in the dining room helping with the serving are acting as busboys.

Thunderbird restaurant could seat over 100 and was a favorite hangout from breakfast till night. It was a huge open room opening to wide decks on each side. The kitchen was spacious with a beautiful copper covered counter and wide copper hood over an open grill. Steaks and other items were grilled and served from the grill. Chicken was cooked in the kitchen along with fresh vegetables and homemade desserts. A chicken "broaster" fryer was added later as demand for chicken grew. Kitchen service was delivered over the copper counter to the tables.

Director case suggested the first manager before the Lodge was finished and he helped order equipment and foods for the opening. It became obvious before opening the restaurant that much of his experience was a myth and it became evident that he was not qualified. He was persuaded to quit, before the opening. Eunice was called upon to step in and take over. She hired several local people as cooks and between them they all learned the restaurant business together. The plans for the kitchen and dining room had been laid out and had turned out beautifully with the big copper covered open grill is the focus of attention. The addition of the Hammond organ made the whole room really attractive.

Eunice found that the cooks knew how to cook good country food and together they learn how to prepare and serve steaks and especially fried chicken. One of the cooks was good at making pies in the dessert tray became a favorite. Of course there were many learning mistakes but Eunice soon learned how to cover them up. One big one was how to cook and serve large quantities of chicken. She discovered one busy day that the chicken being served was not fully cooked. This quickly resulted in the purchase of the "Broaster" chicken fryer. This type unit was then being tried by Kentucky Fried Chicken and really solved the chicken problem.

Mountain trout was a favorite, so Eunice discovered a local who had a trout farm down the road. So trout was now served on a regular basis. They were served with the head on and Eunice who has never eaten fish of any kind was squeamish about serving these trout. They soon became a favorite.

The company tried to find a replacement manager for the restaurant to relieve Eunice but they were hard to come by in the mountains so she continued as manager especially during most of the season, but she did hire assistants, some of whom worked out okay but some became a problem. One kept acting intoxicated during the day but no one saw him with anything to drink. Finally Joe followed him one day to the outside lobby restroom and after he left, found a quart bottle half-full of moonshine hung by a string in the water tank of the toilet.

Joe and Eunice took off one day and night and return the next afternoon to find all the waitresses outside the building crying while the restaurant was almost full of customers. The restaurant had been left in charge of the assistant while Eunice was away. An argument had occurred between the assistant and the help and he had chased one of the cooks through the restaurant with a meat cleaver.

Moonshine was a common item in Graham County. On many evenings, you could see smoke rising in the mountains and around the lake. The high Sheriff would make raids and destroy a still and the next day another would be an action in another location. It was not uncommon to find a worker with a quart bottle, which he would consume during the day. This stuff was truly liquid lightning.

With the resort going strong with 159 cottages built in either on rental or occupied by the owners the pressure began to build for both Joe and Eunice who had been working day and night to get things to this point. But lots more needed to be done. Repairs to cottages, roads needed paving, decisions as to opening the second side of the mountain, need for capital to continue the growth, plans for new advertising campaign etc. etc. By this time it became necessary to either raise additional capital or slow down the progress so out of necessity, some stock was offered to a selected few owners. Then these owner stockholders began to question many decisions that had all been handled up to that point by Joe. One major decision was on the table that could change the entire future for the resort. This became a real problem for Joe.

The state road department had offered to take over responsibility for future roadwork including paving. This could save the developers a great deal of money but doing so would require that all roadwork on the mountain would require compliance with state regulations.

Joe felt that the real beauty of Thunderbird was its reluctance to widen the roads and to eliminate the many trees, especially on the as yet undeveloped eastern side. Several owners wanted to immediately turn it over to the state regardless.

Adam Green, the retired Sears executive who had built the largest home and who had bought some stock in the resort wanting to run things. He had caused many squabbles over small issues and offered to take over management. Finally Joe agreed to retire and leave it all to the new stockholders. He was offered a one-year salary to just walk away. Green became the new president.

Joe had been developing several new types of cottages and wanted to build one of the new all steel homes being offered by US steel homes Corporation. He had already decided that his family needed to develop roots away from the every minute responsibilities of the resort and had purchased a home site in Maryville Tennessee, about 50 miles away from Thunderbird. Close enough to provide easy access to the resort but also desirable for good schools for Bill and a family atmosphere for the family during the off-season.

The first US steel home in Tennessee was quickly erected. The site and foundations were ready and the entire home, walls, roof trusses, floor system, windows and doors, interior walls, cabinets, plumbing and wiring already installed in the wall sections and the entire kitchen with full kitchen cabinets and appliances etc. all arrived on to factory trucks. Everything was unloaded directly on the foundations and the entire structure was in the dry within two days. Finish work included finish paint etc. was completed in the home was ready for occupancy within six weeks. The home contained three bedrooms, 2 1/2 baths with the large living room with fireplace, full kitchen, dining room, then and lots of closets.

The Hudgins moved in and had just begun getting acquainted when the problems that Thunderbird began to get serious. After he decided to resign his position at Thunderbird, the new home was put on the market and quickly sold.

It did not take long for the family to decide to move back to Decatur and another U.S. Steel home model was ordered. It was the first to be built in Georgia. The home went up quickly and Joe and his family moved to Decatur where he became a management consultant. It was over six months before Joe returned to Thunderbird to see how things were going. By this time, the state had taken over, widened the existing road and was busy tearing up the entire east side of the mountain, destroying the entire plan for development originally foreseen by Joe. Development had stopped and the company was almost bankrupt. A committee of cottage owners offered Joe a full half interest to come back but he declined. His shoestring had been broken.

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