

Chapter I

Whose Fault Was It?

I blame my wife mostly for getting me into this profession! From the award winning movie "On the Waterfront" with Marlon Brando as Terry Malloy, I think of these lines: "You don't understand. I coulda had class. I coulda been a contendah. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am, let's face it. . . ." While I never had any union mobsters forcing me to take a fall and become an innkeeper, there was my wife. (As Henny Youngman put it, "Take my wife...please!")

But when I stop and think about it, I'm at times inclined to wonder which union mob she got her orders from. Seriously, though, I give her credit for all the positive experiences we have had since we became innkeepers—both of them! We have met the most incredibly nice, caring and loving people, who we'd never in our worldly travels have dreamed were possible. Oh, my! This is paining me! My side hurts. I'll cease with the jokes . . . for a second or two.

Let's get down to reality.

I'm my own man, and I make all my own decisions. I don't take falls for nobody, not even my wife. In marriage, we were and still are in this together. Decisions we made in our years of innkeeping were never one-sided. It was always a joint decision. However, the pain and suffering, I believe, much less balanced.

While this compendium suggests that the hospitality industry, both guests and employees, consists of nothing but weird, unmanageable (and at times even murderous) people, for the record, I find it necessary to state that the overwhelming preponderance of humans we came in contact with somewhat resembled God's intentions when he created Adam and Eve . . . or maybe it was more like the beasts of the field and every living creature.

We have experienced this amazing journey, sometimes through a blurred spectrum of up and down events that could stretch the imaginations of even seasoned innkeepers. There is no escaping the fact that this industry involves people, and lots of them. The more people, the more blurred the spectrum becomes, even challenging the definitions of sanity. The defective end in the distribution of conscious and semiconscious populations does rear its ugly head from time to time in this business. I can honestly say that we have met some people who deserve only their own company, and should never be allowed into the rest of the world. I'm being kind.

This continuum of characterizations aptly covers the good, the bad, and the ugly in people; with that knowledge in hand, a person would have to be insane to even consider sharing a home with them. And then, cleaning up after them. As an owner of a "quaint little bed and

breakfast" you slave for them in one form or another, for the mere pleasure of taking their abuses and money. *Whip me, beat me, tell me you love me.*

I don't want you to misunderstand me. I was not always like this. It didn't just creep up on me, either. One day I opened up my doors and "wham!" there they were. Gobs of them, sometimes resembling green slime, the Thing or the Blob. I have repeatedly questioned my decision to risk self-immolation by signing on to the hospitality business, as it does run counter to my God-given personality, such as that existed. Serving people confirmed my suspicions. One of the two species had some serious flaws.

My ramblings in this book may not reflect the true or entire aspects of the hospitality world but rather a look at mostly what I see as the comical (and perhaps bizarre) side, but all of it's coming from the viewpoint of a country boy's upbringing. All events surrounding this business have a

profound effect on people. That should not be lost here, either.

After probably the first hour of officially becoming an innkeeper and hosting our very first guests, I knew right away that I needed to keep a journal of the experiences that were to become a part of my life, because people would not believe most of them. Even though I did not do that, those astonishing experiences are forever etched into my brain; some I wish I could shake from their permanent resting places and share here with you. The task of recall has actually been made easier by the many times my wife and I have entertained guests, and gone long into the night, recalling many of the events.

I thought I was quite content trying to eke out a living in a remote part of Maine, where most available jobs were seasonal. Our town is a quiet little New England village that struggles year after year in search of growth, but about the only thing that grows there is grass and ice. Over time many town leaders have come up with ideas (logos and such to help describe our town), hoping against all odds that some more folks might be convinced to visit or even open businesses there. Many times I thought those little logos were more an act of self persuasion: convincing yourself you were living in the right place.

One slightly overused logo is "The gateway to the White Mountains" or "The gateway to Western Maine." Actually, everywhere is a gateway to something or somewhere. (Sometimes I thought our town must have been the gateway to hell.) I knew each time I walked into my barn, that it was the "gateway" to the biggest unorganized mess known to mankind. We really get caught up sometimes in titles, labels and logos. As for me, being the eternal skeptic, I tend to look behind those facades in search of the truth -- well, my truth, anyway. Many times we don't want to know the truth, and sometimes it is best that we don't, but I can't take not knowing. It's best that way.

Being isolated in a remote region can have its advantages. One of those advantages is not knowing that you could actually own a business that makes money. We were all trying to make do with what we had, epitomizing the old adage that you don't know what you're missing if you've never had it to begin with. "I coulda had class . . ." if I had known what it was.

Growing up, I had thought everything I was ordered to do was for no other reason than to keep me busy, and to make sure I didn't do all the fun things other kids did. That's not exactly true, as I had more time than I think a lot of kids my age did. In reality, if I had had more things to do, I might not have gotten into the mischief I did. How could I then have developed any character?

Maine is one of those areas where you can pick up the local paper and see advertisement headlines like, "Firewood and Cabinet Making." (Honestly, which business came first?) Or has anybody else ever wondered such things? Does this guy have firewood to sell because he screwed up so many cabinet-making projects, or does he make cabinets out of his firewood? (And yes, I read somewhere never eat at any establishment with the word "Eats" on its sign, or that also sells worms and crawlers.

Independent Mainers wore many hats, figuratively speaking -- some with visors, some without and even a few with big holes in them -- but with each hat we hoped we could catch enough in it to survive.

We also had our seasons, all four of them: Winter lasted eleven of the twelve months, or so it seemed; spring was the time when absolutely nothing happened, except black flies and mud. Summer could be an absolutely glorious couple of days . . . or not. Planning was essential, as summer was at most about a week long, and you had better hope you had picked the right week for vacation. Fall was full of colors. I liken seeing all the fall colors to taking LSD or some other hallucinogen (not that I would know, but I've heard enough stories): You're so busy looking at all the colors, you don't have a chance to think so much about the cold depths of winter soon to follow.

Growing up I remember hearing many people say that in the fall we got some of the most beautiful weather. I never could understand that statement, until one day (yes, a bit slow on the uptake) it came to me. We so seldom had any nice warm sunny days, when we got one, we remembered it, at least until next year when we wondered if it would happen again. It seemed like a day to mark on your lunar cycle chart.

That's enough complaining about the weather. The jobs were seasonal, which really meant you had work from Christmas vacation week to Easter with the ski industry, from July the Fourth until Labor Day weekend with summer tourists, and then two weeks in late September through early October for the leaf peepers. The remainder of the time had many labels: down time, shoulder season, slow period, mud season . . . or just plain hell.

While it diversified my portfolio, adding innkeeper to the list of experiences wasn't anything a person with any common sense would need, or want for that matter. I had chosen to be in business for myself as a building contractor simply because about the only other choice was to buy a skidder and go work in the woods. The second largest industry in the State of Maine is pulp and paper, and everyone needed a house to live in so there were my two choices: build houses, or cut down trees to make houses. (By the way, tourism has now become the leading industry in Maine.)

To me, working in the woods seemed like just way too much back-breaking toil and trouble. I'll admit it, I search for the path of least resistance, and I thought construction would be easier than dropping trees on someone . . . or worse, myself. Falling off roofs somehow seemed better. Growing up in Maine, though, you always have a dream of driving a skidder through the woods, just for the power trip. That power trip clouded my thinking. (The only other dream of driving something that I can think of was to someday drive a Zamboni! You need ask why?)

Like most businesses of its kind in the northern climates, we dealt with the elements all year round, and we had a very small window of time when the ground was not frozen, when we could build. The rest of the time it was trying to find some remodeling work, or maybe picking up a job or two with your buddy doing some painting -- indoors, of course. When winter rolled around, it was a difficult task to keep working but we managed somehow.

Working in the woods presented problems as well. Sometimes there would be too much snow to work in the woods and then in the spring there would always be a period of time with too much mud. Everything got shut down. Loggers would many times sell firewood to supplement their incomes or whatever sideline they could do to generate funds to live on. When you were busy (which wasn't often), the money was good and you had no time to enjoy life and the rewards of your labor; when you had the time, you were flat broke.

Oh, you might be asking yourself already if this guy ever had any happy times. Actually, life was and still is grand. I am a realist, though, and I never try to paint pictures that are not an accurate description of what took place. It was flat-out a tough area to work in and make a living. I chose, as I do now, to see life through the pane of glass my parents and circumstances created for me, with few complaints. That often involves a lot of bitching and complaining, but just as often it's about finding the things in life to laugh at and enjoy. They say a happy man is a bitching man. If that's so, I am one happy dude.

My wife and I were very fortunate in many ways, and we are both always grateful for all of life's blessings, big and small. We bought our first house in the village in the summer of 1980, I believe. It was a duplex in dire need of repairs, but it had rental income, which was the only way we could afford to own it. As my wife would often say (and later I'd come to learn exactly what that meant), there was always potential.

We worked out arrangements with the local bank, since they owned the house through mortgage repossession. We moved in and went to work remodeling while we lived there; we actually

finished the remodeling the same day we sold it, five years later. The main reason I mention this purchase and sale is because the sale of this property marked the very beginnings of our adventures as innkeepers. We made a couple bucks, and put it toward the purchase of another rundown money pit.

We had had our two children before we moved into the house in "The Park," as it was affectionately known by all who lived there. We had always had some great upstairs tenants, and we had not outgrown our house. My wife and I had just decided it was time for a change, so we began looking at other properties. (I think this was about the time in our lives when we actually began losing our minds. I had always thought this point would come at a much later time—like old age, accompanied by bed wetting and gumming my food.)

We located a nice piece of land about twelve miles outside the village, complete with a rundown shack with some windows in it . . . and that was about it. We thought we could have everything, by fixing up old houses, living in them for a time and selling them. It was settled. We agreed with the owner on a price and the terms of the sale. As soon as we could sell the house we were in, we would purchase this property with cash. (That was one of the terms.)