

Transformed: Ulysses Suites now welcoming guests on upper floors of Main Street's historic Schmohl building



The exterior of the newly renovated J.G. Schmohl building at 213-217 S. Main St.
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Posted Monday, August 31, 2020 5:52 pm



by Hillary Dickerson

hdickerson@galgazette.com

GALENA—Sitting on the couch of the Presidential Suite, the largest suite of the newly opened Ulysses Suites in the J.G. Schmohl building off Bench Street, Joan Raymond can't help but feel a sense of accomplishment. She's surrounded by beauty and hundreds of small details that set this space apart.

It's been a long, sometimes daunting, journey to get to this point, but the end results of the extensive renovation to the historic 1859 building speak for themselves. There are seven suites in all—three two-bedroom, two bath; two one-bedroom, one bath; and two studios—that Raymond and her husband, Doug, began renting out at the end of July.

The Raymonds, who live in Boulder, Colo., and have a vacation home on Park Avenue, look at properties from time to time when they're in the area. Such was the case in the spring of 2017, when Joan Raymond, who grew up in Hazel Green, followed her real estate agent, Shelly McCoy, whose shop, Isabella's, has a Main Street storefront in the building, through the Schmohl.

"It just made me sad," recalled Raymond of the years of neglect mixed with the important history.

Raymond became the self-described "crazy lady who said let's do it."

For Raymond, there are many fond childhood memories of Galena. Her grandparents lived on a farm on Heller Lane just outside town. She remembers staying the summer with them and driving into town with her grandpa to visit the Ben Franklin store on Main Street.

She'd accompany her grandma to bingo at the church. Restoring this Main Street building was a way for her to maintain that connection to her past.

The Raymonds purchased the building in April 2017 and then spent six months clearing it out. The upper floors of the building had long ago become apartments, which were by 2017 condemned.

Although Raymond is hoping to do much more research on the history of the building, she knows that it was built in 1859. Until the late 1800s, it served as storefronts on Main Street and offices in the upper levels. John Schmohl, who was once mayor of Galena, bought the building in the late 1800s and opened his dry goods store on Main Street. Upstairs became the 40-room Hotel Grant, which operated until 1933. During demolition, Raymond said, the crew found the business card of the hotel manager in one of the walls.

After the hotel closed, the upper levels were converted to seven apartments, most likely in the 1940s. Another treasure from years past, Raymond said, is a tobacco tin, in perfect condition, discovered as the building was cleared. The date was July 12, 1940.

ADVERTISEMENT



ACCORDING TO SCIENCE,
**ALCOHOL IS
A SOLUTION.**

**CURBSIDE
PICK-UP**
CALL 815-777-1000
AND HAVE YOUR
ID READY.

**9380 WEST
US HIGHWAY 20,
GALENA, IL
BLAUMBROS.COM**

BLAUM BROS.
DISTILLING CO.

BOURBON

ADVERTISEMENT

Raymond has talked to a member of the Schmohl family, who's still alive in California. The great-grandson of John Schmohl told Raymond he has great stories to share about John and his wife, Lena, who kept the store open after John's death.

Raymond would love to find more historic interior and exterior photos of the building as well.

The renovation process was slow going, Raymond said, as she worked with a historian to document the process in hopes of getting tax credits. She ended up walking away from that possibility, though, because it wasn't working out. In the end, she knows that was the right decision.

"Everything just took a while," said Raymond, listing off the improvements from all new electrical and HVAC to plumbing, walls, fixtures, masonry work and much more. She used local contractors as much as possible, including her brothers, Fred Kuhle of Top Notch Plumbing and Heating, and her brother Jack, who did all the electrical work. Other family members pitched in, including her daughter, who has a marketing background and was able to help with all sorts of details.

In addition to the suites, the three Main Street storefronts got a makeover as well with new windows, a sprinkler system and accessible restrooms. One of those spaces is still vacant.

Community members have been encouraging throughout, Raymond said. She's met several women who have recalled that the Schmohl building was their first apartment after marrying. And other people have closely followed the process, asking how work is coming along as they pass by. Local spoon carver Paul Pendola salvaged some wood from the building during demolition and transformed it into some beautiful candle holders that Raymond has on display.

"Everyone's been great," said Raymond.

When the pandemic hit, it became more and more difficult to get in shipments of items she needed to open. Finally, by the end of July, Raymond was ready to welcome the first guests. And since then, business has been good with the suites full almost every weekend and some during the week.

Having the work complete and the suites now open, Raymond is proud of all the details the new space includes. The lobby off Bench Street offers a sense of community that Raymond insisted on incorporating into the space. She's hoping to be able to host special events there at some point. One of the units has the original 1895 skylight, which was installed in the building when the facade was added to the front of the building. And all of the suites feature artwork by local artists and antique pieces that Raymond acquired in the area.

It's pretty clear Raymond has a knack for putting all the pieces together. The Raymonds, who settled in Colorado in 1985, built two houses there, one which was featured in a magazine.

"I just sort of like it," said Raymond of the detail work that went into taking this historic building and giving it new life. She worked to maintain the history while freshening it up so the Ulysses Suites will be a place people will want to stay.