

History of the Benson Hotel



One of Portland's most dynamic growth periods occurred between the 1905 Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition and the 1929 stock market crash. During those years, the local population surged and the economy flourished, precipitating Portland's evolution from a sleepy Columbia River trading post to a polished urban metropolis. The Portland Art Museum opened its doors during that period, Reed College was erected and the Rose Festival bloomed for the first time. Many of Portland's downtown buildings reflect the impeccable taste of this "golden age," an historic architectural bridge between Victorian flamboyance and Depression-era severity.

It was during this era that Simon Benson, a Portland lumber baron, philanthropist and visionary, fulfilled his dream of building a world-class hotel in Portland. The city's most prominent architect of the day, Albert E. Doyle of the firm Doyle and Patterson, was commissioned to design the building. Working with Benson, Doyle designed a grand hotel with the distinctive style of restraint and proportion so often reflected during the early 20th century. The hotel's design was influenced by the then-famous Blackstone Hotel in Chicago, which had been constructed several years earlier.

Doyle received the commission from Benson in 1912, when architects were applying historical ornamentation to commercial buildings. The Doyle approach for the 12-story Benson was in the French Second Empire style glazed terra cotta and brick exterior, arched lobby windows and a French mansard roof with dormers. A magnificent, 50-foot, glass and steel marquee considered among the grandest of the day bedecked the hotel's main entrance: It collapsed in 1937 under the weight of snow in one of the Portland's heaviest blizzards, and was eventually replaced by a similar model.

Inside the hotel, Simon Benson went even further in his pursuit of elegance. Even the best Paonazzo marble was not distinctive enough for the ornate main lobby walls and pillars, so he had them finished in rare, now extinct, Circassian walnut imported from the forests of Imperial Russia. Benson, as the story goes, was accustomed to footing rather extravagant bills; nonetheless, he is said to have almost fainted when he received the bill for the Czar's rare wood. The priceless walnut, still sleek and glossy, remains a focal point of The Benson's grand lobby. Other notable features included the classical coffered ceiling, exquisite Austrian crystal chandeliers and the cast-iron railing along the sweeping Italian marble staircase.

The hotel's degree of relative opulence can be best understood by comparing the construction costs for The Benson to its neighbor, The Multnomah Hotel: The 200-room Benson cost \$1 million to build and furnish, while the 600-room Multnomah cost about the same.

The Benson opened March 5, 1913, at Southwest Broadway and Oak, as the New Oregon Hotel, an "annex" to the Oregon Hotel next door: Heavy doorknobs engraved "OH" can still found in the hotel, harkening back to its gala grand opening. The guest list for the exclusive event included the city's most prominent citizens. The Benson, naturally, was equipped with the latest innovations of the day, including automatic door switches and circulating ice water. The ceilings were covered



Our crest: The lion represents the English influence in the early days of the hotel. Inside of the B are the Keys to the guest rooms and on the other side of the B is a cup signifying hospitality. The HB stands for Hotel Benson.

with plaster molds, and the closets in the guestrooms were equipped with electric lights. Guests of the hotel were greeted each morning with a complimentary cup of hot clam nectar, a tradition eventually usurped by coffee.

Changing Times

The lavish hotel lost money during its first 16 months of business, so Benson took over the management from the Oregon Hotel and gave it his name. An astute businessperson, Benson cut costs and improved service, and the hotel began making money, bringing in almost a hundred thousand dollars a year. Benson, however, wasn't interested in becoming a full-time hotelier. After proving The Benson could turn a profit, he sold it in 1919 to William Boyd and Robert Keller, who operated it until 1944, when they sold it to the Seattle-based, then fledgling hotel chain Western Hotels, Inc. Western and its successor firm, Westin International, Inc., operated the hotel until it was sold to WestCoast Hotels in 1988. The Benson is now owned by Coast Hotels & Resorts.

In the tenure of Western/Westin management, major changes and additions were made. In 1955, the former Oak Room was converted into The London Grill for the cost of a quarter of a million dollars. The upscale restaurant, which recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, was originally housed in another part of the hotel. Tucked just below the grand lobby, The London Grill has long been tempting visitors and locals alike with its upscale gourmet fare. With its stately décor and intimate atmosphere, the restaurant has been a Portland landmark since its inception, and boasts a plethora of coveted culinary awards, not to mention one of the most extensive wine lists in the Pacific Northwest. The restaurant features 3 private dining areas, ideal for intimate gatherings.

The 1959 addition of 175 guest rooms, built on the adjacent site of the former Oregon Hotel, doubled The Benson's room capacity, and allowed for the larger Mayfair Ballroom, which seats 400 people, as well as a new restaurant.

A \$3 million mini-makeover, completed in 1980, included the redecoration and refurbishment of the Hotel's luxurious guestrooms. At the same time, some lobby partitions were removed, and the sequestered Piccadilly Bar was replaced by an airy lobby cocktail lounge. The comfortable Palm Court now serves an all-day tapas menu and features twice-nightly happy hour. Live entertainment is featured on weekend evenings and musical guests Wynton Marsalis, Dave Frishberg and Bill Marx (son of Harpo Marx) have sat in with our regular performers.

When Mount St. Helen's erupted in May of that year, blanketing Portland in volcanic ash, visitors to The Benson were greeted by doormen wearing respiratory masks with their immaculate black suits. Impeccably polite and gallantly gracious, The Benson's doormen are easily the most chivalrous in Portland, in keeping with Simon Benson's original vision of elegance. Even now, they readily tip their top hats to ladies entering the hotel.

An extensive, year long \$17 million restoration was completed in 1991. The renovation coincided with the 140th anniversary of Simon Benson's birth, and assured The Benson its long-held status as Portland's finest hotel. Former Mayor Bud Clark declared the week of September 9 to be "Simon Benson Week," while former Gov. Barbara Roberts proclaimed September 9 to be "Simon Benson Day." Relatives of both Benson and A.E. Doyle attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Continuing a Tradition of Service

All of these changes were designed to complement the existing features of the hotel, which has long catered to celebrities, leaders in business and industry, politicians and every seated U.S. president since William H. Taft.



The hotel now has 287 tastefully appointed guestrooms, including 56 junior suites, seven penthouse suites and two grand suites. The décor varies from room to room, so frequent visitors to the hotel often have a particular favorite. Amenities are abundant, and include 24-hour room service, a fully stocked private honors bar, a state-of-the-art entertainment system and acclaimed Les Clefs D'Or concierge services.

The Benson now offers more than 16,000 square feet of meeting space, making it a favorite stop for business travelers. The handsome, wood-paneled, Regency Boardroom, located on the second floor, provides privacy and elegance for executive meetings. The lobby-level Crystal Ballroom, replete with gold leafing and crystal chandeliers, is where heads of state and international companies have held social functions. The opulent Mayfair Ballroom, on the mezzanine, features a stage area and provides the perfect setting for both theater-style presentations as well as formal banquets.

A Portland Landmark

The venerable Benson Hotel, currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is a Portland landmark, and a timeless tribute to its founder and designer. Carefully nurtured for nine decades, the stately hotel retains the opulence for which it is world-famous. A.E. Doyle's architectural talent reflective of a golden era combined with Simon Benson's tenacity, business savvy and impeccable taste; live on as the foundation of The Benson Hotel, an American classic. Some things never go out of style.

Simon Benson

Simon Benson was born on Oct. 2, 1852, in Norway, immigrating to the United States with his family at age 16. From Wisconsin's pine forests to Oregon's Douglas firs, Benson worked his way up the logging ladder, practicing numerous trades along the way. He drove his own bull teams, filling in as timekeeper and cook when necessary, and eventually formed Benson Logging and Lumber Co., one of the era's most venerable Northwest firms.

Known for his innovation, Benson built miles of railroad track in the timberlands of Oregon and Washington, at a time when most people were still using oxen to do the logging. He also introduced donkey engines, steam locomotives, chutes and log railways into the woods. To combat devastating freight rates, Benson pioneered ocean-going rafts to carry his timber 1,100 miles down the Pacific Coast to his San Diego sawmill. The famed vessels came to be known as "Benson Cigar Rafts," because they resembled floating perfecto cigars.

Benson retired at age 60 to begin a decade of public service and philanthropy. He is perhaps best known for donating \$10,000 to the city to install the 20 beautiful bronze drinking fountains that still grace Portland's city streets. Benson, a teetotaler, hoped that local loggers would quench their thirst at the bubbling fountains, that ran constantly rather than at the saloons. As the story goes, Benson himself was unwelcome at a Portland tavern one hot summer day: He had walked in and asked for a glass of water, only to be told the saloon just served beer. So he ordered a glass of beer and a glass of water, drank only the water, and left the beer. It is said that Benson considered the public water fountains the best investment he'd ever made.

The original Columbia River Highway, which for the first time allowed motorists to drive from Eastern Oregon through the Cascades to the Pacific Coast, was also the result of his efforts. Later, he helped to get the state bonded to facilitate completion of the Pacific Highway through Oregon and to build a parallel highway through Central Oregon to Hood River, hoping to lure

visitors from California. To make the trip more appealing, he built the Columbia Gorge Hotel on a rocky bluff overlooking the 125-foot Wah-Gwin-Gwin Falls. The hotel, which sprawls across 74 acres, was recently re-opened to the public.

Benson State Park is another example of his generosity, and is still among Portland's top attractions. He also gave \$100,000 to establish Benson Polytechnic High School, which is among the top-ranking vocational facilities in the nation. Simon Benson died on August 5, 1942, but his legacy lives on throughout Portland and across the state of Oregon.