

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

# ROOM 332: CHARLES E. SCHUMACHER

## WHAT WAS HE DOING AT THE STRATER HOTEL?

Charles E. "Charlie" Schumacher is a "genius," according to Strater Hotel owner Rod Barker. He is a skilled woodworker who can make anything out of wood. He began his career as a painter, much like his father and grandfather before him. Charlie has been working on the Strater for longer than most of us have been alive. He loves the Strater, and he loves Durango. Here is his story:

*"I was born on November 18, 1927, right here in Durango. I have lived in this town my entire life. I started working for my father when I was eight years old. By ten, I had my first wallpaper contract. I made fifty cents a day. I even bought my own bicycle."*

*"I did other jobs as well. I remember when my brother and I painted the Animas City school house (which today houses the Animas City Museum). They*

*had a 44 foot extension ladder to paint the outside, but it wasn't tall enough, so we went and bolted half of a 36 foot extension ladder onto the top of it making it a 62 foot ladder. We climbed to the top of that ladder and it was funny because the ladder had a HUGE bend in the middle."*

*"I started shop in the fourth grade, making little wooden gadgets," Charlie remembers. "Then I took shop all through high school...with my brother's help, we built most of the furniture for my folk's house out of solid walnut—all hand done until the last couple of years in school when we could use power tools. I recall*



*that the lumber came rough sawn at 60 cents a board foot. I'd plane it down and make furniture out of it."*

*"I came home from the Navy in 1948. My brother and I bought out my dad, he was getting tired of painting." Several years later, Charlie got lead poisoning from the paint he worked with, and subsequently lost some teeth, so he decided to become a wallpaper hanger instead. After selling the painting business, he worked as a carpenter, then foreman for a local building contractor who had a contract to do some remodeling at the Strater Hotel. Charlie developed a great relationship with Earl and Jentra Barker in 1974, and was later invited to stay on as head of*

maintenance when the contractor had finished his job. Ten years later, Charlie began work with third generation hotel owner Rod Barker, as Rod needed Charlie's diverse skills to begin the hotel's restoration and renovation of the grand Office Spiritorium, the Mahogany Grille Restaurant, the Pullman Room (downstairs) and the granite and marble lined public restrooms. "If it was done here, I did it," Charlie said proudly. He even helped renovate room 220 which was a finalist for Lodging Magazine's prestigious Gold Key Award. When you look around this hotel, you will see the spirit and hard work of a true artist, who was not just a talented and skilled man, but a third-generation Durangoan.

## OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Charlie worked with Earl Barker Sr. when he started at the Strater. The first job he had was painting the dining room where today we have the Mahogany Grille. Charlie said that "Earl Sr. wanted the room all painted with white enamel. He wanted it painted between midnight

*and eight in the morning. He didn't want to lose any business." Though he couldn't recall what year this was, he knew that it was before 1956, when it was called The Coffee Shop. He also did the work on the Diamond Belle Saloon some 50 years ago. While working*

with Rod Barker in the '80's and '90's, Rod desired that the double sized beds be converted to queen size. This required that they be lengthened as well as widened. In order to bring the Victorian hotel furniture up to 20th century standards, many of the full size headboards

needed to be widened to accommodate queen-sized mattresses. *"I just added a post at each corner and refit the longer side rails to them. I doweled them on and used good woodworker's glue, not hide glue like they did when it was made."*

*(continued on next page)*

## OLD IS NEW AGAIN, CONT.

Charlie learned how to execute faux finishes in paint, many of which can still be seen throughout the hotel today. In the Diamond Belle Saloon (photo below), one can admire the balusters on the railing that guard the balcony seating. "I marbled those back in the fifties when our painting business was hired. All done with oil paint and a turkey feather. That's how you get that look. Like real marble, ain't it? Then, that bar back there. Looks like mahogany, doesn't it? It ain't. I did all that with stale

beer and oil color pigment."

Without hesitation, Charlie went on to briefly describe his technique.

"First, you paint everything a solid color [base coat].

Then you take a

bottle of beer, one that's been opened and left out overnight [flat] and mix it with dry pigment color and spread it on.

While it's still wet, you stipple it with a brush and draw the grains on. With a badger-hair brush, you blend it. If you don't like it, take a wet sponge and wipe it off



and do it again until you get it the way you want. When it's dry, varnish it in, and it's there for 50 years!"

Rod Barker remembers his many enjoyable years working with Charlie. "He has a German disposition to most people, but Charlie and I always got

along just great. There wasn't much room for fluff, but that is really the way that I like to work. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to design anything that I wanted to design from furniture to elaborate Victorian interiors and then have it made. Charlie didn't always know how to do things at the beginning, but with enough time he would always figure it out. Especially if I would declare that it was probably impossible to accomplish. Then there was nothing that could stop him."

Charlie and Rod liked to improvise with the Victorian design to fit the needs of the hotel. They made an authentically designed American Victorian walnut TV stand. "Those were always hard to shop for," declared Barker.

**"The Strater Hotel has the richness of a Victorian cameo, thanks to Charlie Schumacher's 35 years of caring craftsmanship." - Wood Magazine**



## HOW HIS GRANDDADDY DID IT

Charlie reflected that "The whole world has changed today. You go to the store and buy a special primer for a stain or something. My granddaddy used to go to the slaughterhouse with a gallon bucket and he would get blood from a slaughtered animal and that killed the stain right away. He would paint the blood over the stain, let that dry and then he could paint over it and the

stain would not bleed through...It's the same with gold leaf, my granddaddy used to use egg whites to glue gold leaf on." He recalls his grandfather buying white lead by the 100 pound keg. "We'd break it up and mix linseed oil, turpentine, and pigment with it to get paint. For flat paint, you'd add a ball of beeswax. Yep, beeswax—a ball about the size of a wal-

nut thinned to liquid with turpentine added to a gallon of paint. To make the paint shiny, you'd add varnish."

To this day, Charlie claims that there is nothing you can't do if you set your mind to it. And that, folks, is 100% pure Charlie Schumacher.



## HAND MADE TREASURES AT HOME



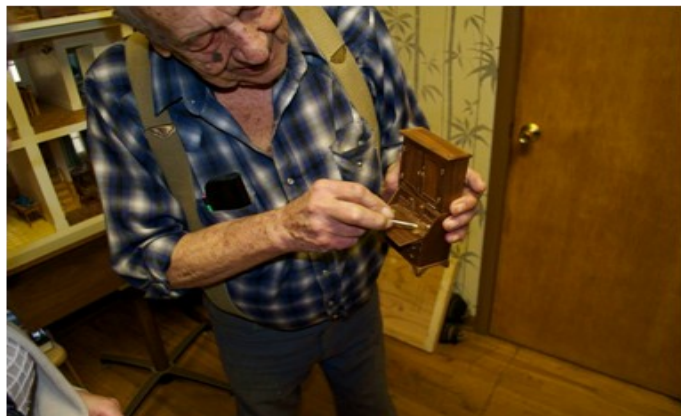
Don't ask Charlie how long it takes him to make such detailed things, as a tufted settee made for a Thumbelina sized doll, or a secretary that has

secret compartment behind the tiny doors and drawers that really work. Charlie will

tell you : *"It takes until it's finished, or until you get through."* The doll furniture is the tip of the iceberg...there are other remarkable items in curio cabinets and on shelves, making this house a museum to the creativity and passion of this couple. Charlie and Dorothy's home is near downtown, and they have added on to it over the years. Charlie built everything in it, from the kitchen cabinets to the chest of drawers in the master bedroom. In the curio cabinet in the living room, there is a tiny cello, maybe six

inches tall, that has a bow with real horse-hair. When asked if it plays, Charlie said, "What good would it be if it didn't play?" It is impossible not to be awestruck by the detail and the craftsmanship of everything one sees in this house. Charlie was asked about the dollhouse furniture, and how he built it so small. He replied, *"It's just like building real furniture!"* For mere mortals, it's hard to imagine having such talent. But Charlie says *"Anyone can do anything, if they really want to."*

THE  
REMARKABLE  
DOLL HOUSE,  
AND IT'S  
INTERIOR  
FURNISHINGS.



Dorothy built a strong and well-made doll house, and Charlie built the furniture for it. Above, right: the detail on a number of his pieces. (The drawers all fit perfectly and they work, too!) Dorothy and Charlie are very clear: This house is not a toy!



Photos, from left: The lower level interior of the doll house, a hand-made and fully operational miniature carousel, and an earring with a sharp little knife blade, all made by Charlie's hand.

## THE MASTER & THE APPRENTICE

Standards are high when you are living up to the expectations of a legend. Tom Hahl, who moved from Denver to Durango with his family seven years ago, had this to say about Charlie: *"I moved down here to learn from Charlie, and boy, did I! The first thing I learned was how little I knew compared to what I thought I knew. Then I realized how dull and abused my tools were."*

Tom recalled that he had to be a fast learner. *"Charlie would remind me when he had*

*already showed me something once already."*

When it came to doing it right, Charlie was a task-master: *"When he (Charlie) makes an error, don't ever call it a mistake, its to make it look hand-built. When I make a mistake, its because I wasn't paying attention to ten things at once, or thinking several steps ahead, or I was just being stupid again!"*

To fully appreciate Tom's lighthearted tone, one must know that he is remarkably fond of Charlie, and even for

his minor grumblings, is grateful for this unique training. Tom reflects with a smile, *"It got so that when I finally did something up to his standard I put a hash mark on my door. I am on my seventh year here, and I have nine hash-marks and a gold star."* When asked what the gold star was for, Tom replied, *"The highest praise I have ever received from Charlie was when he said: 'You have come a long ways since you got here.' That was for the gold star!"*

The two are obviously friends, and its comforting to know that these unique skills and expert know-how are being passed along. When asked what his title is at the Strater, Tom jokingly calls himself the Victorian Restoration Artist, as he modestly believes that he is without a real title. The truth is that the Strater has indeed given him a title, and it is *Master Carpenter*. A fitting name for someone who is carrying on such an important tradition.



## THE MASTER CRAFTSMAN

Charlie has been able to do amazing feats at the Strater that are authentic and are completed in the same way and fashion as they would have been done back in 1887, when the hotel was brand new. That is of course, with the exception of the lead paint. The beautiful fireplace in the Office Spiritorium is Charlie's work (*see photo, below, center*) as is the solid cherry front desk in the Strater Lobby. Regarding "The Office" fireplace, Charlie said: *"I built it in my garage, mirrors and all."*

Wherever you go in the Strater today, you can be certain that Charlie has been there and that the beautiful wood work you see throughout is the result of his gift.

In his life, he remembers that he was a happy kid and that he enjoyed himself. His father, Elmer, was a housepainter

and his mother, Mary, enjoyed gardening. He recalls that she loved to fish, and was a great mom. She belonged to a gardening club and numerous quilting circles. He had two brothers, Roy and Jack.

He met his wife, Dorothy Moore, when he was 16 years old. Dorothy was from Wichita Falls, Texas. She came to Durango because her father was a traveling repairman for Sears. She later made beautiful costumes for the Diamond Belle waitresses, and for the melodrama theater. Together Charlie and Dorothy had two daughters, Jackie (now

deceased) and Gerrie Chamberlain.

Charlie always believed in hard work, and thinks that his work as a youngster paid off. *"The biggest mistake this country has made is not letting kids work. At fourteen they can learn, but at eighteen they know more than you do. I really believe in that."*

We wish to thank Charlie for his many years of hard work, and for giving the Strater Hotel new life, as well as the ability to boast that it is one of the foremost renovated Victorian hotels in the world. Thank you, Charlie, for a job well done!

### SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- Charlie volunteered with the Durango Railroad Historical Society to build wooden parts for train models, including the Emma Sweeny.
- Together with Rod Barker, Charlie restored an 1890's vintage John Deere grain wagon that can still be viewed today at Wagon Road Ranch.
- Charlie has trained a number of woodworkers, including Rod Barker's brother-in-law, Tom Hahl, who currently works at the Hotel.
- Charlie is also a locksmith, a jeweler, and builds scale model miniature wagons and carriages. He built a fully operational scale model WWII Corsair Bomber.



*The Office Spiritorium. Fireplace, mantel, mirrors...all Charlie!*

*Below, a watercolor of the Strater Hotel painted by the skilled hand of artist Charlie Schumacher.*



HUNGRY FOR HISTORY? WANT TO READ MORE ABOUT CHARLIE? FIND MORE INCREDIBLE STORIES IN THE BOOK **THE STRATER HOTEL STORY**, AVAILABLE AT THE FRONT DESK.