

Ouray Alchemist

Largest Colorado Pharmacy Museum



Compiled by Darlene "Dar" Furda

Vacationers who visit Ouray, Colorado will become fascinated with the boom and bust history of the silver mining era that began in 1875 in the San Juan Mountains. Jeep tours are a favorite way to view some famous silver and gold mines like the famous Camp Bird mine, while tour guides fill tourists' ears with the exciting past. There are interesting folks in Ouray, like rock hound Robert Stoufer who owns and runs the Buckskin Booksellers on the first floor of the historic Beaumont Hotel.

In July 2011 Robert was responsible for walking Ken Lawler and me north of the Beaumont, on Main Street, to introduce us to Curtis Haggard, the owner of the Ouray Alchemist Pharmacy Museum. The museum had been open for seven days at that point. Robert left us and Curt started talking about how he got started in life and told of how he came to Ouray in 1971 as a newly-graduated pharmacist from South Dakota. He detoured in Denver on his way to a job in Florida and never left Colorado. In 1994 he moved to Ouray and happened to rent a place on Main Street that was located across from an empty lot. He also started collecting pharmacy-related items that same year.

From an introduction to Curt in July 2011 and during another July trip to Ouray in 2012, I managed to finish interviewing him. I learned from him that there had been a Village Pharmacy also located across from the empty lot that had gotten his attention. In 1994 he said Mr. Hendricks, owner of that pharmacy, was retiring and selling the contents. There was an opportunity for Curt to purchase his first sizeable collection of pharmacy bottles. Much of what he acquired he eventually stored in the garage of the home that he and his wife purchased in 2003. In addition to the original purchases Curt made, the owner's son has donated, for display, two large labeled cobalt bottles to his museum (one reads TR. Valerian and the other, TR. Ipecac).

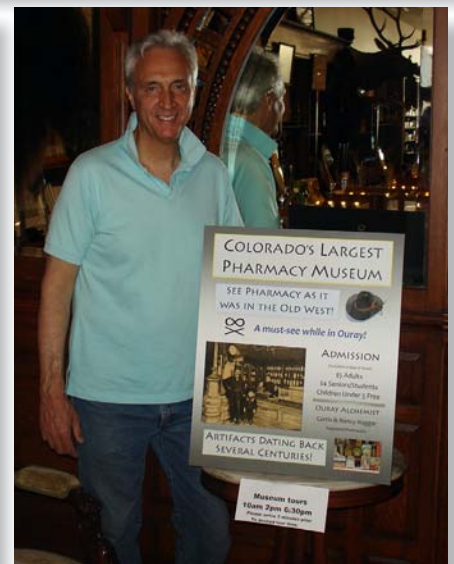
The empty lot that was part of Curt's mountain-view for eight years was



purchased by he and his wife in 2007. In 2008, he started his drawings for his building. According to the pharmacist's wife, Nancy, he had a vision and was able to put it on paper and take it to Architect Doug MacFarlane. Curt mentioned that "it took about four years from beginning to end to get the building up." The Internet provided him sources for his internal tin ceiling. A kidding remark Curt made was that "he wasn't sure if it is his new tin roofing or his new hardwood flooring that becomes of first interest to most folks who drop in."

The story goes that he got his start buying pharmacy bottles at one of the Las Vegas club's bottle shows long ago. Perhaps based on this acquisition opportunity, Curt's theory became "that one is one, two is a pair, and three is a collection."

The project of getting the inside of the building in shape to create Curt's further vision of a retail store and museum took some time, design effort and involved traveling around Colorado. He looked for items to purchase that were critical for holding the contents of the boxes he had stored in his garage. He ran across the type of fixtures he was looking for to use in his museum. There were oak components for the front entryway of the museum plus the two apothecary wall shelf units; however, the owner of these fixtures wanted \$65,000 for them. Curt offered \$3,000. The owner rejected that offer, claiming that he was sure he could get his price from someone in New York. Five years passed before the owner ended up selling everything to Curt for \$2,000, but the fixtures were now in many pieces and were stored in a semi trailer. Then there would be restoration costs to consider. Curt figured he could get the restoration of these pieces done for \$25,000 to \$30,000, but instead, ended up spending \$40,000. He had hired Rocky Mountain Millworks to





complete the task.

All the pieces had to be stripped, soda-blasted, sanded and re-stained. The mirrors had to be stripped and re-silvered, among the multitude of other things that had to be done to prep the pieces and reassemble them into the way they had originally appeared in the Aspen Drug Store in Aspen, Colorado. As you read further, you will realize more facts about this drug store connection as related to Curt and his vision. It took Curt several years of making trips back and forth using a 20-foot trailer, to get everything moved to Ouray. He also had pieces restored in Olathe, Colorado and Luverne, Minnesota. Curt really had to extend himself on a long-term basis to coordinate all efforts necessary to get his vision finally in place in Ouray.

Additionally, when designing the building, Curt had to decide where to place his purchases within the building. The decision was made to divide the room into two different areas. The front would be the retail store while the back would become the museum. Wall to wall oak paneling that included a stained glass window in the museum entry door became the room divider. As Curt invites you to walk through the stained glass doorway to tour the museum, you become immediately aware of all of the work that went into planning and selecting the correct items to display. Curt identified the fixtures that flank both sides of the museum as once residing in the Aspen Drug Store in Aspen, Colorado (c. 1888). I was told that the drug store operated from 1888 to 2002.

Curt has over 700 labels-under-glass in his collection. His goal is to have 1,000. As you examine the pictures that accompany this article, you can readily determine what some of the various items are that are placed in an orderly manner within the cases. You will notice that there are various patent medicines as well as other interesting artifacts. In the back case of the museum he has an 1880 LEECHES porcelain jar and a SYR. SENNAE jar that he mentioned is from 1790. He is especially proud of his LEECHES jar. Curt validated the statement in the museum brochure that "The collection reveals a time capsule of artifacts dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries, even to as early as 350BC."

There is a large Toilet Articles container on display that has reverse painting on the inside with gold leaf. I was also impressed by the 1909 Oliver typewriter that was used to type physicians' prescriptions. Curt had mentioned another favorite and that is what he calls "an original 1907 oil painting of Teddy Roosevelt shooting a buffalo in a herd with his pistol." Another one of Curt's proud possessions is an original Henry Jackson photo dating back to 1895 of National Wholesale Druggists Association members standing by a train that was used for the ride from Denver to Georgetown, Colorado.

To put it in Curt's own words, "He had three Holy Grails. One was to have a pristine LEECHES jar. The second was to have a 1910 Cigar Store Indian that had never been outdoors." He admits that it is apparent that he has accomplished two out of the three. His third and final quest is to find a c.1880s marble soda fountain.



Being the determined type of fellow I think he is, I am sure that he will acquire one at some point during his lifetime.

There is a sign in the front window of his building that advertises the Ouray Alchemist "A Must-See while in Ouray. See a Pharmacy as it was in the Old West." There are intricate details that you will learn from taking a tour of the museum that are too numerous to include in this article, plus to hear explanations straight from Curt is the best way to have an 1800s Western Colorado pharmacy experience.

The retail store in the front of his building has some interesting history to it, as well. The 18-foot-long oak prescription counter was acquired by Curt from the Aspen Drug Store. This was a "working" counter and dates to the 1940s. If Curt, now recently retired, takes his thinking further, he may one day return the counter to an operational "working" pharmacy counter. He says that when he found the counter in Aspen there was a woman pharmacist manager working behind it and that she became his wife. A framed picture exists that shows his pharmacist wife actually working behind the counter. With a broad smile he said, "You can say that I married the woman behind the counter." He further delights in stating that if he does decide to make the front of his building into a working pharmacy his wife will once again become, "the woman behind the counter." Judging from this man's tenacity and continuing passion, I would say that this could possibly happen.

Another revelation by Curt is that if he ever had a working pharmacy that he "always wanted to look at a saloon." A late 1800s restored Brunswick-Balke saloon was made in Denver, Colorado and sits directly across from the pharmacy counter! (I understand that it spent its years in Silverton before Curt purchased it and had it restored) While in the front of the store you should note the Wall Drug of South Dakota old car on display. If you don't discover its location on your own, ask about it. There is a story of the 1931 Depression era connected with this car. The once small town of Wall can boast of having the largest drug store in the world due to another man, like Curt, who acted with dogged determination to "grow a drug store" even during "hard times." Curt tells an interesting story as to why he has a plastic water bottle in the front window of his building that is related to the Wall Drug Store saga. It is well worth hearing.

While I have barely mentioned Curt's wife, Nancy, she is in the background taking care of all the necessary details it takes to keep things running smoothly. In addition to those details she is in charge of the rental unit located on the top floor of the





building, “A Romantic Haven Atop The Ouray Alchemist Building at 533 Main Street, Ouray, Colorado.” Nancy says renters are mainly those who want to celebrate a special occasion and can range from age 30 to 80. If you are a renter, it appears that you can check out the great view of the San Juan Mountains from the rental’s windows. There are stories of the moon flooding the bedroom while appearing over the mountains. If you are curious and want to get information on the rental, you can visit: www.vrbo.com and type in Listing #330308.

As I walked throughout the back and front of the building with Curt he threw a little “home-brewed” philosophy at me. I will use his words to describe his feelings: “My goal is to be the oldest working druggist at 100 and to go into the Guinness Book of World Records. I also want to ‘will’ the museum.” I believe he wants it to be in good hands, after he passes, so that it will become more meaningful as the contents and the overall idea ages. After all his hard work and sacrifices he doesn’t want it to die with him. It is important to him that people continue to have access to it throughout the coming years.

There is so much to see in detail, in both the museum and the retail store portions, that I could not possibly put my arms around every single item of interest in that building. Nor would I want to dull the edge of anticipation one feels as they enter the store or the museum for the first time.

Curt is currently a FOHBC member. He renewed his membership in 2011. He kept expecting to find an article about the museum to appear in an issue of the 2011 Bottles and Extras. The reason it did not appear then was that when I returned home I realized that I did not have sufficient information for an article. It was then I knew that another trip would be necessary. He did not know I was coming back and, when I walked in, he was genuinely glad to learn that I had not forgotten about him and his story of the birth of the Ouray Alchemist building.

Curt sandwiched both our 2011 and our 2012 interviews in between his “minding the store” and discussing museum tours with tourists who ambled in off the street from time to time. Thanks not only goes to proprietors Curt and Nancy for their interest and cooperation during the interviews, but she also forwarded some pictures that retired pharmacist Steve Traudt took and had turned over to them after visiting the museum. Steve’s pictures I used are: One close-up picture of the patented medicines in their original boxes; the singular picture of the SYR . SENNAE, the Toilet Articles container sitting on a counter, and the exterior of the Ouray Alchemist building. Nancy also provided additional pertinent background information not initially included during the interviews.

I’ve come to the conclusion that any of you who appreciate history would enjoy a “Western Colorado in the 1880s” experience. By the way: Curt and Nancy Haggard are the friendly and happy looking couple in the picture taken in the sunlit doorway.

Whether you live a state or two away, or further, you might consider making a stop in Ouray on your way traveling either “to” or “from” your destination. Also, you folks who belong to antique bottle and collectibles clubs anywhere around Colorado may also entertain the thought of a visit.

If you have any questions, you can contact either Curt or Nancy as follows: The phone number is 970-325-4003. Their email is ouray_alchemist@ouraynet.com by the way: Check out the “whimsical gargoyles “atop the building!” x

