

Dunafon Castle

Photos and story by Ellen Nelson



Once upon a time, or about 75 years ago, Marcus Wright built a beautiful castle nestled along Bear Creek northeast of Kittredge. The fourteen-room stone masterpiece featured turrets, battlements, a waterwheel, and even a moat. But the castle and its grounds became neglected over the years, and it took a team of men who were rebuilding their own lives to bring Dunafon Castle back to life.

Mike Dunafon credits Step 13 with the dramatic restoration of the overgrown property that had fallen into disrepair, especially following the tragic deaths of past owners Bill and Tasmin Barnes, along with their daughter, Paula.

It took Wright, the owner of a Denver engineering and manufacturing business, and his friends eleven years to complete Castle Springs Ranch. "Marcus Wright was a genius," Dunafon added.

Wright directed water from Bear Creek to his nearly 22-foot tall overshot waterwheel, which connected to one of the two hydroelectric plants on site. The 40-kilowatt and 60-kilowatt units supplied free electricity and hot water heat to the entire castle. "It is said the free electric power this place produces would cost over \$20,000 per year if purchased from an outside source," Wright wrote. Electricity also powered the 18-gauge miniature railroad that ran along one-half mile of rails around the property.

Wright used stone quarried on the 17-acre property for the exterior of the 13,000-square-foot, Grecian-style castle. "The castle was actually Scottish/English/Irish design,"

Dunafon said. "But the crusades reached all the way to Greece, where the castles were similar [to Dunafon castle]. Dunafon is an Irish name. I like to think that the Irish castle now has an Irish name to go with it."

Inside, light fixtures shaped as miniature metal castle towers illuminate the monolithic terrazzo floors, spiral staircase, and arched doorways. Custom hardware and doorknobs, designed as curled maple leaves, are visible everywhere. Wright took great care to preserve views from every vantage point and installed arched, double pane glass windows that were free of mullion bars.

Wright's description of the kitchen illustrates the forethought he placed in the entire castle design, with such new innovations as a built-in dishwasher and home telephone. "Everything is built in of steel. Six plate, double oven, electric range of steel. Cupboard work consists of fourteen large steel drawers, three small steel drawers, six swing-type drawers, and two circular sliding shelf enclosures (under sink). Large dumbwaiter from wine or fruit cellar. Electric refrigerator with eight special steel drawers built under same. General Electric dishwasher was built in. Two stainless steel sinks with three faucets each for cold, hot, and boiling water. Telephone, which can be used either in the kitchen hallway or living room, is enclosed in neat stainless steel circle top with door compartment. Incinerator built in and large enough so no cleaning out need be done but once a year. Concealed built-in laundry chute from kitchen and hall. Door

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The castle today



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Above: Dining room

Right: Wine cellar

Below: Gargoyles illuminate to guard the castle



Photo by Steve Crisillius



doubt, one of the most picturesque views that can possibly be imagined.”

“You couldn’t see the creek from anywhere on the property,” Dunafon recalled when Step 13 began clearing the estate last summer. “There was overgrowth and trash everywhere.” Dunafon was determined to bring the castle back to its original grandeur.

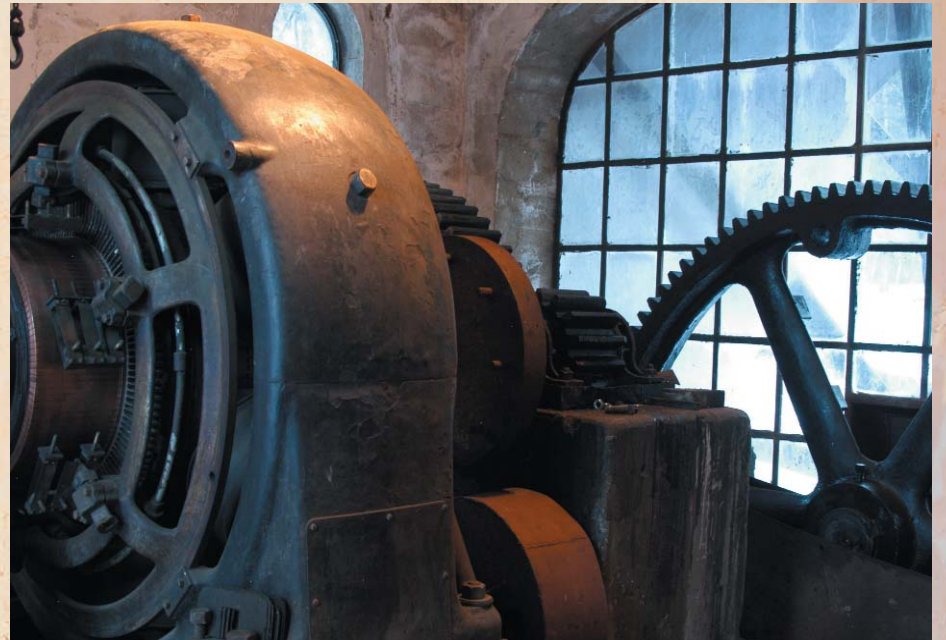
When Wright died, the castle went into a trust. For the next several years, the castle was intermittently empty, rented out, and was even reputed to having been a gambling hall and brothel. William and Tamsin Barnes purchased the castle in 1969 and renamed it the Barnes Castle. “When the Barnes family bought it, the castle and grounds were in terrible shape,” Barnes wrote. “The roof leaked,

water was running down the inside walls out of the conduit, about seven of the special castle light fixtures were gone, only 30 percent of the electrical wiring worked, the power house was inoperable, and the grounds and lakes were overgrown like a jungle.”

Barnes made sweeping changes to the castle, cutting down the scrub trees and willows that choked the three ponds and moat. They carpeted most of the rooms and glued Astroturf to the terrazzo floor on the back porch. The all-steel kitchen was

gutted except for the custom steel table built into the floor of the breakfast nook. An island covered the laundry chute and dumbwaiter. The huge four-car garage was converted to an entertainment room, with kitchen and full-size gambling equipment installed. Barnes intended to build a pool on the terrace outside the game room.

But his plans were shattered when Barnes, his wife, and daughter boarded the EgyptAir Flight 990 en route from New York City to Cairo on Halloween morning, 1999. The Boeing 767 reached a cruising altitude of 33,000 feet, then mysteriously dove into the Atlantic Ocean, about sixty miles south of Nantucket. The transcript of the recovered



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cockpit voice recorder quotes Relief First Officer Gamil El Batouty as repeatedly saying, “I rely on God,” while the pilot, Ahmed Mahmoud El Habashy, tried desperately to bring the plane out of the nosedive. His last words were, “Pull with me.”

Controversy still surrounds the tragedy that killed 203 passengers and 14 crewmembers that day. And it put future plans for Barnes Castle into a tailspin.

“It must have been pretty overwhelming to maintain the castle after that,” Dunafon speculated, “after losing your parents and sister.”

Attempts to sell the castle fell through, until Mike Dunafon and Debbie Matthews saw its potential in 2004, nearly five years after the accident.

Once again, the castle was in significant disrepair. Dunafon realized that his biggest challenge to restore and maintain the castle was securing a reliable labor force. He contacted Bob Coté of Step 13, the nonprofit transitional living program for addicted homeless who are motivated to become productive members of society.

“I had met Mike through Ed Thomas on the Denver City Council,” Coté said. “Mike

is Deputy Mayor of Glendale. He started to use men from Step 13 here and there, and he was satisfied. He told me he needed ten to twelve guys to come up and help him with this castle. I came up to see it, and I thought, Boy, this guy is crazy; this place has been abandoned for years!”

Dunafon knew exactly what he was doing. He devised a restoration plan based on existing blueprints, photographs, interviews with surviving members of the Barnes and Wright families, and recommendations from professionals and artisans with period knowledge. He hired engineer R. A. “Skip” Campbell, an expert on the knob and tube electrical wiring and ancient plumbing used throughout the castle. “This was an industrial-sized project,” Dunafon laughed.

The men from Step 13 began cleaning immediately, cutting trees, hauling garbage, sanding, painting, ripping up carpet and Astroturf, and rebuilding walls. “It was a win-win situation,” Coté added. “It gave [the Step 13 workers] a purpose in life. They got involved; there was a lot of self-pride. They took ownership in what they were doing.”

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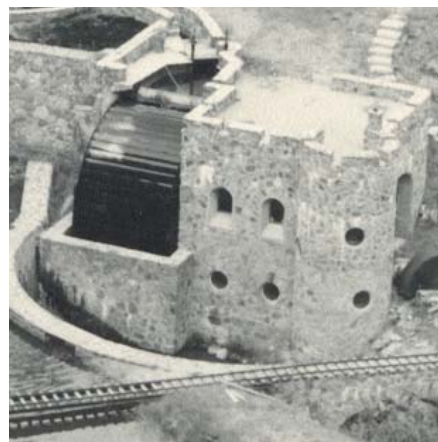
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Water wheel, after 1941

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Perhaps their biggest challenge was the power plant. "The waterwheel had been stuck in the mud for fifty years," Dunafon estimated. "And the powerhouse was calf-deep in trash. The Step guys sifted through the dirt and trash with screens like [an archeological] dig. We sifted out everything we could find—bolts and small parts—to put the turbine and the generator back together. All of the bolts had to be refurbished. You can't even buy bolts like these anymore." Step 13 men sanded years of paint and grime from the hydroelectric generator, uncovering the name "Ralph" painted on the metal. When the power plant began to take shape again, Campbell made a startling discovery.

"Skip came to me one day and said, 'Do you believe in life after death?' " Dunafon recalled. Campbell had compiled a book, researching the origin and engineering of the overshot waterwheel and power plant. "He had a picture of an identical waterwheel, the Campbell Waterwheel on the East Coast, and the man who designed it. That man was Skip's father's uncle ... and, like the name on the generator, Skip's first name is 'Ralph.' "

It's hard to imagine the castle in a rundown condition now that the walls are freshly painted and elegant paintings of the castle and grounds, painted by Dr. Robert Cloyd, grace the thick, arched walls. "I love it here," caretaker Jesse Bissett of Step 13 said. "It's like working in a fairy tale. How many people get to work in a castle?"


Dunafon is now focusing on sharing the advantages of the scenic and serene location. "The castle is occasionally used for charity benefits. Proceeds from events go to support the continuing success of those in Step 13, Central City's Opera program for youth, and the YMCA," Dunafon explained. "The castle ponds have been restocked, and a plan to promote the development of fly-fishing programs for youth in conjunction with the Colorado Fish and Game Department, local fly-fishing organizations, and through a generous donation of fly-fishing equipment from Eagle Claw is under way."

"It's not about us," Dunafon concluded. "We need to take care of the castle, because it's a legacy. It's a peaceful place." 📷

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