



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

Shoulder Season in McCloud

Dr. Gloria C. Duffy

President and C.E.O.

Last year, we arrived at our house in the mountains to find a small painting of our home, wrapped in Saran Wrap, propped on a table on our front porch. There was no note or explanation with it. I framed it and set it on the bedside table in one of our bedrooms.

The wonder of an artist who would pass through town and leave the gift of a painting behind is an example of why my husband Rod and I like to spend time in a tiny town in Siskiyou County. Not only is the scenery beautiful, with conical, snow-covered Mt. Shasta gleaming above the town, but things happen in McCloud at a different pace and in a different way than they do here in urban California.

Locals and tourists still gather in the only café in town, now restored to its 1920s style with brass fans and faded red leather-covered stools at the counter, for breakfast in the mornings. Our next door neighbor Jean comes to the fence between our houses for a chat. A couple of years ago, during one of these conversations, she convinced us to take home a stray cat from the neighborhood for the winter, who has become our household pet Tuxedo. We bring Jean and her husband Jim roses and citrus from our garden in Santa Clara, and they look in on our house during the winter when we are away.

On our last visit, in April, the great room in the old mercantile center in town was filled with two dozen women at long tables, each with a sewing machine and a miniature ironing board, and each working to make a beautiful quilt. It was an updated version of a quilting bee, with the quilters consulting one another about sewing challenges, sharing their techniques and hanging the finished quilts on the walls for display.

The town abounds with characters. One of my favorites is “Arthur Einstein,” whose real name is Arthur Schuman. I first saw him pull into town 20 years ago, riding in a small cart pulled by a goat. A tiny man with a wispy white goatee who smells pleasantly of lemon balm, he set up shop as a gardener. We enjoyed Arthur’s running commentary on topics as varied as space travel and cancer cures, despite his weed-whacking away the bark on Rod’s slim fruit

tree saplings, until he fell out of a tree and was no longer able to garden.

Then there was our dear friend Janet, the town’s bookseller, who lived in the former Episcopal Church, until she sadly passed away from cancer more than a year ago. In her memory, her son carved an archway in polished wood over her garden gate, with mystical figures of a man and a woman stretching to meet one another at the top of the arch. Since her death, a former Catholic priest who lives in town, Father Joe, uses the house/church as a grief counseling center.

It’s “shoulder season” now in McCloud, that sparkling time between winter and spring when we cross-country ski on the mountain in the morning and plant flowers in our garden in the afternoon. I should say that we actually not only plant flowers, but fortify the beds with slate liners and wrap the root balls of plants in chicken wire, in our annual war against the gophers.

Things happen in McCloud at a different pace and in a different way than they do here in urban California.

Despite the scenery and its idyllic qualities, all is not well in this small town. To the relief of most residents, the Nestlé corporation has withdrawn its plan to build a million-square-foot water bottling plant in town, ensuring that the town’s water supply and the downstream water flowing into the Sacramento Delta are protected.

But then Jeff Forbis, the owner of the Shasta Sunset Dinner Train, which served meals in Victorian dining cars while rolling along the base of the mountain, shut the train down in February, forced in part by the recession’s negative impact on travel. Jeff is trying to sell the railroad, while the town suffers the loss of the tourists the train brought to its inns, shops and restaurants. If he cannot sell the train, the rumor is that he will sell the dining cars and locomotive, then pull up the tracks and liquidate them for the value of the steel.

So jobs in McCloud are scarce. A group has formed, “McCloud Local First,” to try to boost the economy through organizing local industries. An example of the kind of business they are promoting is Panexotic, a company that collects, processes and sells fresh and dried mushrooms, and makes truffle oil at its base in McCloud from the mushrooms found in the surrounding forests. Panexotic is the largest “wild edibles” processing plant in the West, destroys no natural resources and exports its products worldwide.

Let us hope that more such ideas arise. Ω