

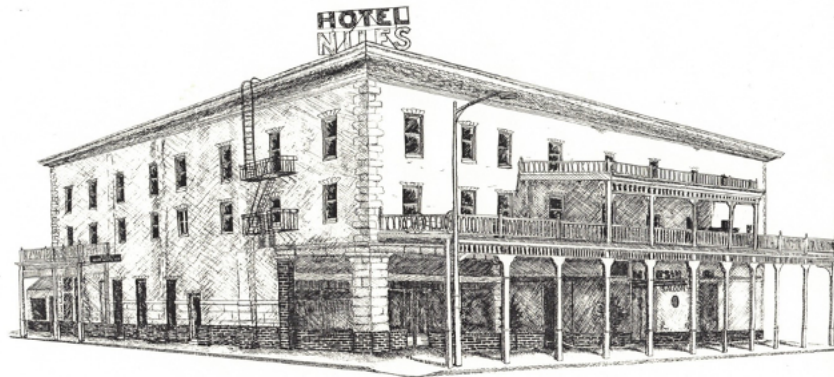
The Hotel Niles

By: Madalyn Wilcox

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1st Place Winner

The hotel Niles has had a long and rich history and still stands today as one of the most important historical buildings in Modoc County. The building has seen several major events such as four wars, the Great Depression and even outlived two other contemporary hotels, the Modoc Hotel and the Warner Hotel. With a rich history that spans more than a century, this historic hotel is well worth remembering.



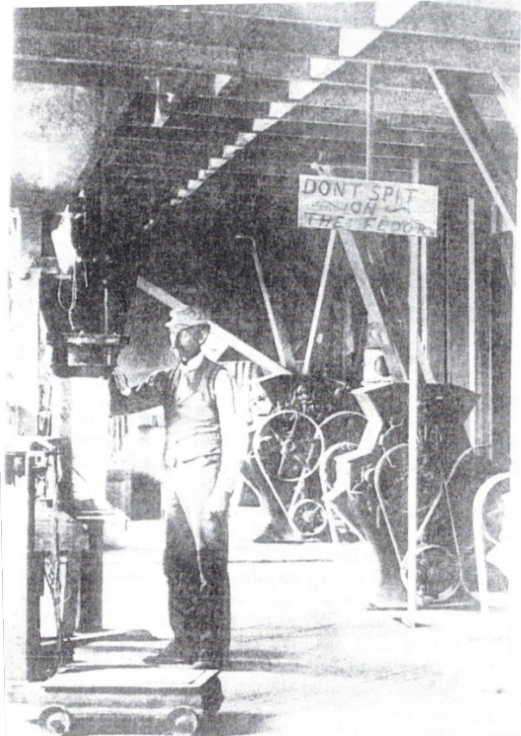
The history of the hotel actually begins in New York with Anthony Niles and his wife, Kate E. Jenkins. They moved to Clinton County, Michigan as a young couple and had two sons, Jay Eugene Niles and Elmer Niles. Only a few years after the family's move to Michigan, Anthony (also nicknamed Ant) decided to travel all the way to California in a covered wagon with the hopes of making his fortune. He brought with him his Amata violin, which would soon make him, in a way, famous. Anthony first traveled to Cottonwood, California and was known for his fiddle playing. He became a miner, logger, and also made money from his fiddle playing. He spent some time in British Columbia mining for gold and playing his violin for dances and gambling halls. He hoped to save up enough money to eventually bring his family all the way from Michigan to join him in California. Unfortunately, Anthony was robbed in Victoria, and lost all his possessions except his beloved violin. He left and came back to California to begin saving up again. Finally, after several years of hard work and saving, he was able to bring his whole family to California. The journey through the Isthmus of Panama was long and hard but the family finally arrived in California in the year 1868. Jay E Niles was 15 years old. They eventually settled in a small town in Siskiyou County called Henley and there Anthony built the first Niles Hotel. The family also contributed to the town by forming a band he named the Henley String Band where Jay played the cornet and Elmer the clarinet.



The Henley String Band. Left to Right: Angelo Yeago, Anthony Niles, Elmer Niles, Andrew Terwillinger, and Jay Niles.

In the year 1887, Jay Eugene Niles married Mary J. Helman. The couple would enjoy 60 years together. After a year of marriage, J.E. Niles purchased a flour mill in Adin with the help of Ervin Shepard. The old mill was updated, and Niles earned a reputation for making fine flour. His flour was shipped all the way to Nevada and was also sold to the leading markets within California. In *The History of the State of California and Biographical Record of the Sierras* by J.M. Quinn, the author states,

“Progressive and enterprising, the new firm of Shepard and Niles converted the mill into an entirely different kind of plant, putting in rollers, installing electric light plant and increasing its



capacity to forty-five barrels a day. As a manufacturer of fine flour, Mr. Niles has established a wide

and favorable reputation; the product of his mills, under the name of the Adin Mills Extra Family Flour..... (is) finding a ready market wherever used.”

J. E. Niles in his flour mill in Adin. The sign above him reads, "Don't spit on the floor."

He went on to purchase yet another flour mill in Adin and after remodeling it, started a planing business called J.E. Niles and Son, in honor of Sylvester, his oldest son. The plant was originally known as Groves and Knight Planing. Niles went on to establish an insurance company which was said to have "All the insurance business Modoc County has to offer." His enterprises were a success, but Adin was not growing as much as Niles had anticipated. He sold all his Adin businesses, and he moved his wife and three children, Sylvester, Edna and Myrtle to Alturas. The family moved to Alturas, and in conjunction with Reuel Laird, began construction on a massive building. When the construction on the two-story building was completed, Niles ran a hotel on the second floor, while the bottom floor was all rented offices. The building still stands today and is known as the Laird Building. This served as the first home of the Niles Hotel in Modoc County. In the same year the Niles moved from Adin, in 1908, construction had just begun on the three-story Curtis



Hotel only a little distance from the original Niles Hotel. After just a few years of running his hotel, in 1912, Jay Niles decided to purchase the Curtis Hotel and rename it the Niles Hotel.

The annual duck hunt in front of the Niles Hotel.

The main customers of the Niles Hotel were loggers, miners, railway men, and cattlemen. This proved for an interesting mix, especially in a time where Alturas claimed to have more bars in the town than any other place in the United States. Legend has it that once a man came riding into the Niles saloon on his horse and knocked his head against the fan and broke it! Other stories tell of fights between Klamath Falls engine men, who frequented the hotel, and rough ranchers. There are even some unaccounted-for bullet holes in the J. E. Niles Room ceiling, which you can see still to this day. The sixty original rooms could only be heated by a wood burning stove located in the rooms. Guests would have to go to the front desk to purchase an armload of firewood to keep warm at night. Traveling was also subject to the unpredictable train times. In a letter to his family, one of the guests writes that he has just "received the "cheerful" news that it (the train) is 3 hours late..." He goes on to state that the engine broke down on the Madeline Plains. The hotel prospered, and J. E.

Niles ran the hotel for many years. Upon purchasing the building, he completed the second and third floors. He contributed to the community greatly, just like his father had done. Jay Eugene operated the Niles for many years, but in 1929, Jay Niles decided to retire from the hotel business and sold the building. That was not the end of his career of benefits to Modoc county, though. With the help of a son-in-law, Niles purchased Modoc's Alhambra Theatre. In an interview with the Record, Jay Niles said "I have always had theatre in my blood. It's time I got back into it."

Every Saturday, Niles held an "amateur night" where people were welcomed to sing, play instruments or entertain. This doubtless made him recall his younger days as a musician in his father's band. Jay Niles also served as the director of the first ever brass band in Medford, Oregon. J. E. Niles loved the theater and even in the middle of the Great Depression in 1936, built the current Niles Theatre. He said, "I want to prove to the people that things aren't as bad as they seem." A year later, in 1937, construction was complete on the modernized theatre. The first movie to show at the theatre was "North to Alaska." It is said the Mr. And Mrs. Niles rarely missed a movie and always sat in the same seats of the newly built theatre. A first-hand account states "Old Jay and his wife seldom missed a movie. When the Niles opened, the couple would always occupy the same two seats-downstairs in the first two seats on the right hand aisle. This was also dangerous territory for the young movie goers of the day. Jay would sit there staring at the screen with his hands folded over a silver headed cane. And when a young viewer became noisy or put his feet on the seat in front of him, he could expect a sharp rap on the head from Jay and a reminder to "mind your manners". This writer survived several such raps."



Mrs. Mary Niles passed away in 1944 and Mr. Niles sadly passed away on November 16, 1947, at 94 years old. Some accounts say he was brushed by a car as he stepped out onto the street, while other accounts state he had a heart attack from a loud noise like a car horn.

Jay Eugene Niles and Mary Niles

The next owners of the famous hotel were Micheal and Elsie Jurasevich, or better known as Mitch and Babe. They purchased the hotel in 1939 and owned the hotel for around 40 years, adding many modern accomplishments to the hotel. Now the rooms had heat in the form of steam, modern private baths and the ceiling was lowered. It also boasted a water hydraulic powered elevator, the first and only elevator in Modoc County, which was sadly closed down recently. According to Liliana Vass, a later owner of the hotel, Mitch and Babe “probably never turned anyone away who was hungry. They were known for their benevolence and hospitality.”

The menu of the Hotel had a note written by Mitch that read “Years ago we were almost



strangers to the world at large, but not anymore. We are proud of our highways—thanks to the people, legislators, commissioners and the Highway Department of the State of California—which brought us so near to you all...come and share with us the ‘God’s Gift’ of health, wealth, and recreation, the Heart of Modoc....”

Mitch and Babe Jurasevich

Many years later, the hotel was neglected and sadly grew to be in such a state of disrepair from a want of care, that it was finally closed down in 1976. Later that year, in August, Stephen and Cheryl Baker bought the old hotel and dreamed of taking it back to its original beautiful state. But the couple had to wait and started with opening up the saloon, saving up money until the building could be properly remodeled. It would take over one million dollars and more than a decade to restore the hotel. Current building codes had to be complied with, and this included tearing plaster from the walls to install new electric heating. Even with all the new heat updates the best way to heat the Niles is by good old-fashioned wood burning stoves, which still are in use today. Antiques were purchased and the couple tried to restore all the rooms to their former glory. They removed false ceilings and salvaged all they could of the antique tin pressed tiles. 8,000 feet of oak flooring was purchased and installed. The fixtures had to be cleaned, polished, and then installed again to preserve the antique look. The Bakers continued to improve the Niles reputation by offering food, and the cuisine even attracted people from other states.

“Each antique piece in the room means a place or a special time to us,” Cheryl Baker is quoted as saying in an interview about the new High Grade Room. “Every time we take a trip, we come home with one antique or a load of antiques.”

Stephen Baker also commented that “You wouldn’t believe what this room looked like before we restored it. It was a pile of used brick and boulders and there was a thick cement wall covering the brick. Layers and coats of stuff had to be taken off the walls before getting down to the original



brick.” Unfortunately, due to the fact that the railroad changed its route to no longer include Alturas, the hotel suffered from a decline in business. Sadly, it closed in 1997 and fell into even more disrepair.

Stephen and Cheryl Baker. They are seated in the J. E. Niles Room.

The hotel was revived again, however, when John and Lillian Vass purchased the vacant building in 1998. John and Lillian were both hearty travelers and had been to various places while working. They opened the Mi Casa Mexican Restaurant which was located in what is now the Stronghold Room, or the coffee shop. This room was named after Captain Jack’s Stronghold after the hardware store that was once there. After several years, the hotel began to have issues such as leaky roofs and other problems, and it eventually sat empty once again.

Jim Cavasso drove past the hotel for many years and saw it slip into even further disaster as the neglect of the vacant building continued. In an interview with the “Region” newspaper, he stated “It was sad watching it decay.”

Many potential buyers arrived to tour the building, but many years passed without anyone purchasing it. Despite the roof that leaked for 12 years, and the knee-high piles of trash in the building, the bats in the ceiling, bees in the walls, and the major repairs that needed to be done, Jim and Elizabeth Cavasso purchased the hotel in 2011. They have tirelessly been working to restore it ever since. After around one month of owning the Niles Hotel, the couple hosted a Rotary Club dinner which was their first event in the building. It began the restoration; the outside of the building was painted first using hundreds of gallons of paint and over eighty windows were replaced. The antique windows were saved and used in decorating the guest rooms, giving it an antique flare. The Stronghold room was the first to be redone, and in the coffee shop you can find a selection of drinks, pastries, and handmade local products. The community got involved to help restore the landmark, and donated items, such as the piano in the High Grade Room, as well as donating their



time. The rooms were decorated by individuals from the community, and each room has its own unique theme.

The Spirit of Africa Room which was decorated by Linda Conner

Renovations are still ongoing, however, and the third story is currently being redecorated and redone. The pictures around the building are from Elizabeth Cavasso's mother and from the Cavassos themselves, and the old paintings add a sense of the building's history and old age. The brick room, one of the side entrances into the High Grade Room, was inspired by the Cavasso's trip to Italy and was made to look like a street you would see there. Elizabeth rightly stated in an interview with the "Region" newspaper "It's become a place of community. It's becoming the place where people enjoy the fellowship of each other."

The J.E. Niles Room was specifically designed as a tribute to Jay Eugene Niles in 1984 and boasts a stage and impressive pressed tin ceilings that were revamped by the Casvassos. The center piece of the room is the 1880 wooden bar with massive mirrors behind it. This room used to contain a real estate office, a mercantile and then eventually a drug store. The original checkered floor can still be seen.

Throughout generations, this amazing building has continued to stand and remind us of the amazing people who founded our community, and served, and still do serve, our town. They truly do make our town a better place, just as J.E. Niles did in 1912 when he purchased the building. We owe it to these hardworking individuals to cherish the incredible history associated with over 100 years.



The Niles Hotel in 1961

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Photos of Jay Eugene Niles and Mary Niles, Stephen and Cheryl Baker, and Mitch and Babe Jurasevich are courtesy of Jim and Elizabeth Cavasso.

Alturas-Gun-Club-Annual-Duck-Hunt photo courtesy of The Modoc County Museum.