

Outside with Charlie: Sorenson's a new experience

By Charlie Ferris

Sorensen's has a long and colorful history.

It's been a place to rest since the Washoe first started roaming the area an untold number of years ago. It's a large, flat spot on the West Fork of the Carson River, at the western edge of Woodfords Canyon — the top of a steep climb out of Nevada.

Coming out of that canyon headed west on foot, horse or wagon, was an arduous trek. It still is. Nowadays it's a climb usually done by cars, trucks and bikes. What's remained constant is taking a rest at the top.

Part of Sorensen's history is its journey from just about complete abandonment and ruin to the first-class resort it became when John and Patty Brissenden bought it from Johan Hultin back in 1982.



Sorenson's Resort, now owned by Wylder Hope Valley, now offers yurts at a nearby campground. Photo by Ren Fuller

Sorensen's recently changed ownership again. John Flannigan and Chet Pipkin bought the resort in September 2019. And now Sorensen's enters its next era.

From its beginnings as a few rough cabins to the postcard-perfect resort it is today, everyone who's owned the place has been driven by an entrepreneurial spirit.

They didn't have backgrounds as innkeepers, past experience in the hospitality industry or much for business skills but each owner believed they could make something more out of the unique place.

That belief holds true for Sorensen's new owners who this time around *are* experienced in business and hospitality.

Flannigan's first job, at age 15, was washing dishes at a pizza place. His journey from there to founding Wylder Hotels wound through jobs as a waiter and bartender. He was a fan of Julia Child, "Great Chefs" and Emeril Lagasse on TV. "I just loved the craft," Flannigan said.

Flannigan graduated from the State University of New York, Cobleskill in 1993 where he studied restaurant management. Then it was off to the Pennsylvania State University School of Hospitality Management, graduating in 1996.

Degree in hand, he landed a 6-month internship at a resort in St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. That was just the beginning. From his dishwashing start he excelled in his field, serving as chief operating officer at Proper Hotels for two years, president of JRK Hotels for six years and general manager of The Roger New York for four years.



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And there's more. Flannigan held management positions with Wyndham Hotels for four years in San Jose, Los Angeles, New Jersey and New York. He was the opening general at Ace Hotel in New York for a year, then general manager at Hotel Giraffe, also in New York, for three years. Flannigan has been in the hotel business since he graduated from hotel school in 1996. He founded Wylder Hotels in 2016.

Chet Pipkin and Flannigan are business partners, introduced by a mutual friend. Pipkin's path to Soresen's is a bit different.

Pipkin was attending the University of California, Los Angeles. He saw an opportunity that was beginning to take shape in the consumer electronics and communications arena in 1983. He left school and set up shop in his parents' garage in Hawthorne.

In that garage he created a company you may have heard of that manufactures consumer electronics, specializing in connectivity devices. That company is Belkin; it's international in scope.

Pipkin has always been a fan of the outdoors, kayaking, paddle boarding, cycling, hiking, skiing (cross-country and downhill) and snowshoeing. He's also a committed community service devotee.

Pipkin is a founder of the DaVinci family of charter schools in Hawthorne. They focus on STEM, design and communication for students in kindergarten through eighth grade. DaVinci also sponsors youth camps for children with diabetes.

Flannigan was in South Lake Tahoe, looking to add to his Wylder Hotels brand. After hearing about this place called Sorensen's that was for sale it was off to Hope Valley for a look.

"It was love at first sight," Flannigan said.

"Sorensen's defined everything Wylder strives to be — in spades."

That was 2016. The process took from then until September 2019 when he and Chet became the new owners.

Their vision is now focused on the guest experience. It's a "perfect launch and landing pad" for all there is to do in and around Hope Valley, Flannigan said.

Recent improvements include restoring the General Store at the campground where “the great baking tradition” will continue, according to Flannigan. (That’s music to this writer’s ears, or taste buds rather, that are all too familiar with the delectable baked offerings at Sorensen’s.)

Other changes include adding seven custom yurts and a vintage, fully restored Spartan trailer to the campground. More improvements are on the way.

All of the cabins at Sorensen’s, one at a time, are being refurbished with new oak floors and the pine walls are being restored. Kitchens, plumbing, electrical and bathrooms will be brought up to date. Custom furniture has been brought in from local artisans featuring sustainable and natural materials.

Sorensen’s Cafe will benefit from upgrades as well. Count on time-honored favorites to continue to grace the menu like the beef burgundy stew or berry cobbler.

Asked about future plans, Flannigan said they are “ ... intently focused on our first season,” and excited to show what they’ve accomplished. They intend to preserve the heritage of Sorensen’s, bring new experiences or as Pipkin said, “Lighting up additional experiences.”

The entrepreneurial spirit that Flannigan and Pipkin have is well suited to Sorensen’s. Wyder Hope Valley is the name that now encompasses all that is Sorensen’s.

What’s next will add to the legacy of Sorensen’s. A new chapter has begun.

Sorensen’s is currently open. Flannigan said they are following all state and county COVID-19 guidelines and taking precautions to keep visitors safe.