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The Downings chose snow-plowing over punching time clocks.

SOSU Grads In Love With The Rockies

By Kate Jackson Lewis

Editor's note: At the time this article was accepted for publication in 1984, the subjects, the Charles Downings, were owners of Trailin' Inn of Creede, Colorado. They have now worked into other occupations.

Their first romance developed within the walls of Southwestern Oklahoma State University (SOSU), where both were students. No sooner had the courtship reached fruition and the vows been exchanged than an added love began to develop—an attachment to the Rocky Mountains. Nor, to this day, has either ardor given ground to the other. The two flames seem destined for eternity.

When Charles and Jane Downing, formerly of Weatherford and Binger respectively, packed their belongings and moved to Creede, Colorado, their relatives and Oklahoma City friends chided them for abandoning home, profession, and kin for what seemed like a gamble—a trout hatchery-RV Camp management endeavor. But the couple's dream of a life in the Rockies

dated back to earlier times when they had dug for gem-laden stones and camped at Trailin' Inn, which they now operate. It was here they met Merv and Edna Hartman, proprietors of the place then called "Hartman's Hideaway."

"Why couldn't we own and operate such a place?" the Downings wondered.

It wasn't that the venturesome pair disliked their Oklahoma City employment where Jane was an elementary teacher and Charles a medical technologist. Each held a Master's degree, drew a better-than-average salary, and enjoyed esteem in the workplace. However, they didn't enjoy punching a time-clock and fighting the traffic to and from work each day.

Charles and Jane desired a different lifestyle for themselves and their

children—Dawn, 13, and Sean, 10. Too, they were in love with the Rocky Mountains—the cool, clean air, blue skies, and clear streams. So they schemed and waited for a time when the mists would clear away and their dreams would become a reality.

Back in college when they met at a Wesley Foundation youth meeting in which they both became consistent workers (Charles was president one year and Jane the next), Jane's avocation was music, and Charles' was football. "One of my passions now is OU football, but I have been a rock-hound all my life," he said.

Charles graduated from SOSU in 1962 with a degree in Biology and Chemistry and then enrolled at Oklahoma University and Medical School where, in 1963, he received a degree in

Medical Technology. In 1972, Charles was awarded a Master's Degree in Epidemiology, while Jane received a degree in Elementary Education from SOSU. Later, she received a Master's in Reading.

Married in August, 1963, the enterprising duo moved to Oklahoma City where Charles worked at Northwest Laboratories in his chosen field and Jane taught at Western Heights before moving to Wilson School in Oklahoma City.

After ten years spent battling the complexities of city living, the Downings decided that though their present cash income outweighed what they could expect to earn in an endeavor such as Creede's Trailin' Inn, their living costs would be much less. Too, they felt that, economically speaking, they had "peak-



Sean Downing

ed" at their Oklahoma City occupations. Furthermore, they looked forward to greater security in a land investment in a Colorado Resort area.

Consequently, when the Hartmans decided to retire from Trailin' Inn and offered the place for sale, the ambitious Oklahomans took over its management. The Downings knew that their adventure was not a cinch for success and would take years of hard work, sacrifice, and ingenuity; so they set in to learn all the skills needed to operate their newly acquired business.

When their former SOSU colleagues and instructors learned of the move, they expressed doubt that the couple was fitted for such an undertaking.

They just couldn't see the soft-voiced, ladylike Jane and Charles, a college professor's son, fighting a wilderness in waist-deep snow and -20 degree up to a record -50 degree weather.

Only time would reveal the outcome of the undertaking. However, the determined speculators proved their fortitude when, in January, 1977, they moved into a tri-walled, chocolate-colored stucco house, banked by snow five or six feet deep, and discovered only a few sticks of wood for fuel. Plenty of Aspen trees were available, but they required cutting and hauling down the mountainside and, because of their greenness, wouldn't burn readily.

By nightfall, the family had a moderately warm house with electric blankets on their beds. Upon going to bed, they discovered that the blankets were operating well as covers, but their mattresses remained like blocks of ice. It was hours before the family enjoyed any degree of comfort.

Surely, during that long, bitter-cold night, they entertained some misgivings about the wisdom of the move!

The Hartmans stayed on to teach the neophytes tricks for offsetting the low temperatures, as well as to operate the trout hatchery in all its phases and how to manage the RV Camp during vacation time.

"We couldn't have made it without the Hartmans," Charles said. "It's unbelievable how much they taught and helped us learn about living here and running the place."

Now that the Downings have adapted to an entirely new lifestyle and have learned to cope with the Rocky Mountain climate, how are they faring?

At this writing, it's 1984. On September 5, 1984, Jane will begin teaching Kindergarten in Creede Schools. Dawn, 19, who finished high school in 1983, is getting work experience in the area. High-school Junior Sean, 15, spent the summer as Assistant Camp Manager to his father, but will now be attending the local high school.

Prior to this time, Jane has donned her chest-high waders (a Christmas gift from Charles) to help her husband to seine ponds or perform other man-sized jobs around the camp. At the same time, the efficient lady took care of home duties and necessary book-keeping for registering campers and conducting them to their assigned sites.

A lover of outdoor activities, Jane has always enjoyed outings to private



Dawn Downing

high-country lakes to help with netting trout for eggs and sperm for the reproductive process. Again, the couple combined work and pleasure as they spread a picnic lunch in a setting that Charles describes as "absolutely beautiful." When snow was deep enough to require skis, the converted mountaineers had fun skiing from pond to pond to feed fingerlings deposited three months earlier.

Without his family's assistance, can Downing wear all the hats needed for running Trailin' Inn?

Charles looks forward to his busiest year since coming here, but with the RV business virtually closed down until next June, he will devote most of his time to trout management. He will busy himself with cleaning and preparing the hatchery for the eggs which he will secure at spawning time.

Since Downing takes trout eggs and sperm from the area guest ranch ponds and streams, he assumes the trout management process for them. They, in turn, buy fingerlings from him for restocking depleted ponds for next year's tourists--another good-neighbor "swap-out."

In preparation for winter, the neighbors, as well as Charles, must secure an adequate supply of wood. So, they agree on a day, pack picnic lunches, take their wood-cutting equipment, and enjoy an outing. "It's not such a chore when we combine work and fun," Downing said. His brown eyes sparkled under his brown, gaucho-type hat as he continued, "We cut the wood,

eat together as we laugh and talk, and then haul home our winter fuel. Lots of our work is shared. We couldn't make it without our friends."

The friendly fellow went on to enumerate other ways that the area people share the work. At Thanksgiving and Christmastime, when the Downings go home to Weatherford to visit relatives and friends, Glen Hinshaw, nearby game ranger, oversees their home, even to building a fire in the stove and turning on the blankets just before they return home.

"In return, we help them by watching their place when they have to be away." He added, "During hunting season, whoever kills an elk shares the meat with his fellow-hunters for addition to our deep-freezers."

However, food preparation for winter really begins in spring with planting a garden. "Again, planting and caring for the garden is shared with early campers," Downing said. "Later arrivals may want to hoe a while if they wish to gather summer vegetables."

They drive to Alamoso for larger amounts of fruits and vegetables than the garden furnishes. A Chickasha friend brings a dressed and packaged beef which finishes filling two large deep-freezers. "We eat very well during the winter and seldom go to the grocery store," Charles said.

Throughout the summer, campers get together for Pot Luck Dinners. On these occasions, the Downings provide tea, coffee, and entertainment-sometimes an area speaker, but most enjoyable, a slide-presentation of Charles' Rocky Mountain photography of scenery, animals, birds and flowers, synchronized with suitable music ranging from "Tales of the Vienna Woods" to

selections from *SOUND OF MUSIC* and *CAMELOT*.

Of the several sources from which the Western Oklahomans derive income, the fishing industry is the most lucrative and their campground with its eighty-two hook-ups next. Lesser amounts come from the sale of rocks, jewelry, and photographs. Most of the rocks are dug on an excursion to the mountains, a diversion they "dearly love."

Both Charles and Jane, knowledgeable on rocks and minerals, were rock-hounds for years before moving to the area. They love to search for rocks to sell or for jewelry-making. Charles dreams of owning his own full-fledged rock shop. He declared, "It's a passion of mine. During the long winter evenings, I cut and polish stones for Jane, a skilled silversmith, to fashion into jewelry for sale to summer tourists."

As if the mountain enthusiast didn't have enough time-consuming jobs, he is a volunteer EMT (Emergency Medical Technician). He is on call at any hour, day or night, to drive an ambulance to a mine cave-in or to rescue some foolhardy tourists who went into the mountains poorly prepared and had car trouble or an accident. Fortunately, most of the incidents turn out to be minor mishaps, but some are disastrous and require a helicopter-lift and flight to a Denver hospital. Often, the on-duty EMTs lose an entire night's sleep caring for critically injured people.

Well liked by his fellow townsmen, Charles is active in Rotary Club, taking his turn as a presiding officer or wherever needed. His family also attends a local church and participates in church activities.

After spending some time at Trailin' Inn with the Downings, most of the


RV'ers return year after year to fish in the Rio Grande, which skirts a large part of the camp, or to feast their eyes on the magnificent Rockies which completely surround the camp. One camper said, "The Downings give so much of themselves to make our stay enjoyable; Charles even took most of his family time one night to teach me how to operate my 35mm camera."

How does the benevolent man regard his time dedicated to campers? His explanation was, "I like to feel that after a camper leaves here, I've made a friend."

AUTHOR'S NOTE--When my husband and I returned to Trailin' Inn last summer (1986), we were saddened to learn that the camp had reverted to its former owners. I dreaded to make the necessary visit to hear the Downings' account of the change that took place. But, as usual, the ever-positive-minded Charles smiled as he explained:

"When we took this place, we knew it was not a cinch for success. So when we got short of money, we countered by 'rolling up our sleeves' and finding work around town. Janet took a cashier's job; Sean became a stocker at a grocery; and Dawn took employment at the *CREEDE MINER*, a local weekly newspaper."

Charles commuted 75 miles to Adams State College at Alamosa to take Education courses leading to a teaching certificate in Biological Sciences.

In September, 1986, Charles and Jane both started the year as teachers in Creede School, and Sean enrolled at Adams State College. Dawn is now married and living in Creede. 

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