

# IDAHO

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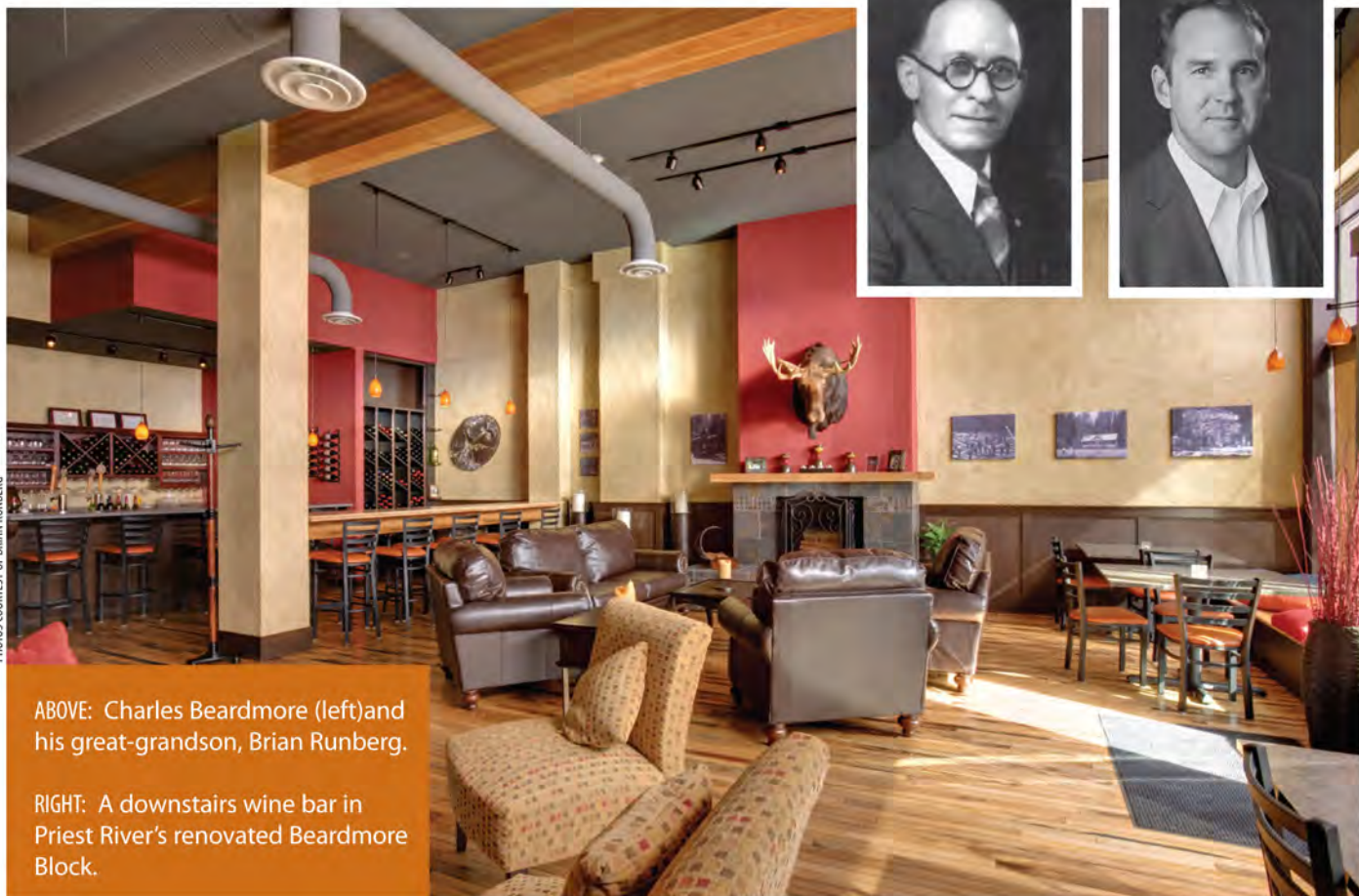
100th ISSUE

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ABOVE: Charles Beardmore (left) and his great-grandson, Brian Runberg.

RIGHT: A downstairs wine bar in Priest River's renovated Beardmore Block.

# They Built the Beardmore

The Rise and Fall and Poignant Rise of a Priest River Family's Grand Edifice

By Cate Huisman

**T**his is the story of two north Idaho men united by family ties, by their sense of place, by a woman named Vivienne, and by a building in Priest River. All that separates them is time.

The contemporary man is Brian Runberg, a prosperous Seattle architect. Although he grew up in Spokane and now lives on the west side of the mountains, home to him is Priest Lake. That's where he and his siblings, the children of divorcing parents, spent weekends and summers in the 1960s and 1970s at their grandparents' cabin by the water.

Brian's grandmother, Vivienne Beardmore McAlexander, "was living history," he says. She cooked her famous sourdough flapjacks for Brian and his sister and brothers, just as she had for loggers in her father's camps forty years earlier, and she told them of the time when Kalispel people had pitched their tipis down the beach from the cabin. In the evenings

## renovation

after dinner, Brian might take his grandmother for a boat ride around Priest Lake, and she would point out where logging camps and Indian villages had stood. He listened closely, and remembered.

Occasionally, when the family went into the town of Priest River, Brian and his siblings would be let loose in a building his grandparents owned there. The slowly deteriorating Beardmore Block, at 119 Main Street, had once been the town's grandest edifice. But now the children played hide and seek among the dusty dentists' chairs and behind their great-grandfather's safe and their great-grandmother's grand piano in the building's long-abandoned offices and ballroom. The great-grandparents were Charles Beardmore, who had built the building, and his wife Lucy. Photos of Beardmore show a man in a three-piece suit, with round glasses perched below a high forehead and above a thin, straight smile. He had arrived at the bustling and muddy stump town of Priest River on a train in 1900, when he was twenty-five years old. The family has preserved the advice his father provided as the young Beardmore left Wisconsin for the West: "Keep warm, put on good woolen underclothes, keep out of danger as much as possible, and if you buy property, keep it insured. And be sure to get a clear title to it."

Within two years of his arrival, Beardmore owned the hotel next to the station at which he had stepped off the train. He had also acquired a horse-drawn stage to take adventur-



ous travelers from the hotel to the popular vacation destination of Priest Lake, an arduous twelve-hour journey to the north. Ten years after that, he traded the stage for a "new White motor coach," which shortened the tourists' travel by several hours. By then he was also running numerous logging camps north of town, taking advantage of the miles of uncut forests between the town and the lake and the quick, if not easy, transport of lumber down the Priest River in the famous log drives during that first half of the 20th Century. Providing supplies to lumber camps added to his business, and in 1916, he bought the local lumber mill as well.

By 1922, Charles Beardmore was Bonner County's biggest employer.

Passionate about the adopted community in which he had become so successful, he wanted to build an edifice appropriate to his stature to house his numerous ventures. The result was the Beardmore Block, for which he commissioned famed Seattle architects Whitehouse and Price. The two-story structure of brown brick with white terra cotta detailing occupied the better part of a city block, and its construction cost Beardmore \$80,000.

Street-level storefronts housed the Kaniksu Drug Company, the Peoples Market, and Beardmore's own company store. A local newspaper reported that the meat market had a "modern refrigerating plant with a cold storage room and a one-ton ice machine," a rarity when most markets still relied on



LEFT: Contemporary exterior of the Beardmore Block.

ABOVE: Historical shot of the building.

RIGHT: Internal stairs of the renovated structure.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRIAN RUMBERG

ice harvested from local ponds in winter. Upstairs, in addition to Beardmore's grand corner office, there was a "magnificent lodge room, with banquet rooms and ante rooms," according to the article, along with "housekeeping apartments, modern in every respect, including hot and cold water and electric ranges."

The Beardmore Block's grand opening on March 13, 1923, was described by the same newspaper as "one of the most elaborate public functions every held in Priest River." Along with the opening of the building, the party honored Lucy Beardmore's return from service in the state legislature in Boise and the eighteenth birthday of Beardmore's daughter, Vivienne. Guests played cards in the apartments

and danced in the lodge room amid decorations in the colors of Vivienne's alma mater, Priest River High School.

Alas, Beardmore's fortune lasted little more than a decade after those heady days. The Great Depression cut deeply into his business. As the national economy marched inexorably downward into the 1930s, Beardmore's legacy began to unravel. When he died in 1935, the glory days of his grand building were already behind it. His family sold it in 1972, and it mostly spent the next thirty-five years in receivership.

Meanwhile, Brian grew up and became an architect. He has a passion for green design, for buildings that provide healthy environments for their occupants and that make minimal use of the earth's resources.

Many of his buildings are certified by the national LEED (Leadership in Environmental and Energy Design) program, and his firm has won awards for designs that consider the needs of communities and address them effectively.

Architecture has enabled him to indulge his passion for history as well. He works in a century-old building, and has stripped his office of all its mid-century changes, restoring it to its original appearance. He hopes soon to begin work on reclaiming and re-using Sandpoint's 1910 City Hall. "Every building has a personality," says Brian, "and you get into it when you start peeling back the layers." He loves the stories of changes that old buildings have gone through over the years.

"They're profound, because they transport me back to that time."

Even after he grew up and moved to Seattle, Brian returned often to Priest River and Priest Lake. Occasionally, he drove by the Beardmore Block, only to be saddened by its condition. By the 1990s, "it was mostly gutted," he remembers. Water poured in whenever it rained, and mold was eating through the wood. So, when its latest set of owners gave up on it and put it on the market once again, what happened seemed almost inevitable. "It was as if I were struck by lightning," says Brian. "The attraction was to bring it all full circle—combining my past with the present, my profession with a personal passion."

He bought the Beardmore Block in September 2006, and set about undoing the damage of the past half-century. While "the guys in white suits" spent the first month of restoration just doing mold remediation, Brian began the research that would be necessary to get the building on the National Register of Historic Places. As he peeled the layers back and the stories emerged, this time they were his stories, his family's stories. "I knew bits and pieces of it before, but to string it all together has been really profound and eye-opening," he says.

The Beardmore Block is now one of very few buildings in the country that is both LEED-certified and on the National Register of Historic Places. The original window frames are back in place, having been removed, altered to accommodate insulated glass, and reinstalled. The original toilets have

been "reporcelained" to use less water, and the cavernous basement has been converted into a cistern. Water drains from the rooftop into this receptacle, which furnishes all the nonpotable water the building needs (including flushing the historic toilets). The hardwood floors, badly damaged after decades of dampness, have been removed, planed down, and reinstalled, and the original skylights, obscured for years, once again flood the central atrium with light.

This is all the more impressive because Brian had concerns that his great-grandfather did not have. While Charles Beardmore was focused on exploiting the vast natural resources around him, his great-grandson is focused on using as little as possible of what remains, keeping costs down, and wasting nothing. Ninety-five percent of the existing building structure was maintained in the reconstruction, and much that was removed from the interior was reused or recycled. Solar panels on the roof help provide energy for the building, and a reflective roof coating reduces cooling needs in summer.

Winter provides a tough challenge. New, high-density insulation in the exterior walls and roof have dramatically reduced energy consumption, but the absence of escaping heat causes more snow to pile up on the roof. The structure had to be reinforced to handle this snow load without changing its historic character. So, Brian inserted an essential but invisible steel frame on new footings within the framework of the old structure. Were Charles Beardmore to return, he would quickly

recognize (and no doubt be proud of) his once-again grand edifice.

By the autumn of 2007, a year after Brian bought the Beardmore, crews were working feverishly to complete work so it could be used for the "first annual" fundraiser of the newly formed Priest River Community Foundation, an outfit born of the hope that the building's rebirth inspired. But if such persistence and optimism were things Brian looked for in the community, a random, unfortunate occurrence demanded first that he demonstrate it himself. On the rainy afternoon of September 20, a beer truck parked on the highway above the rebuild-in-progress lost its brakes and started rolling downhill. After staying upright against all odds as it dropped over a couple of three-foot retaining walls, narrowly missing a parked motor home, it slammed into the building's new electrical service, sheering off two of the pipes that drained the roof to the cistern. Once again, water poured into the Beardmore Block.

The hardest of the many necessary repairs was filling the hole made by the truck. Historic certification requirements required matching brick. The ravages of the previous winter had caved in the roof of another old brick building in town, and that building's owner generously offered some salvaged bricks. They matched, but they were the wrong size. Bricks on the interior of the roof's internal parapet were considered, but the tar with which the roof had been coated could not be washed off them. Finally, and with the blessing of the certification authorities,

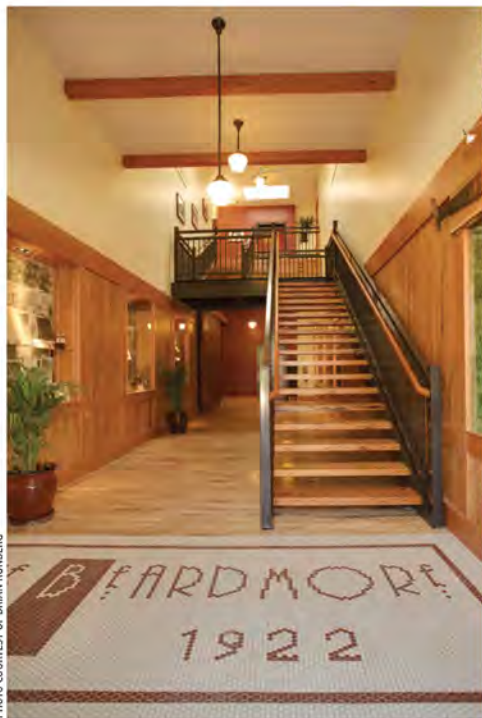


PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIAN RUNBERG

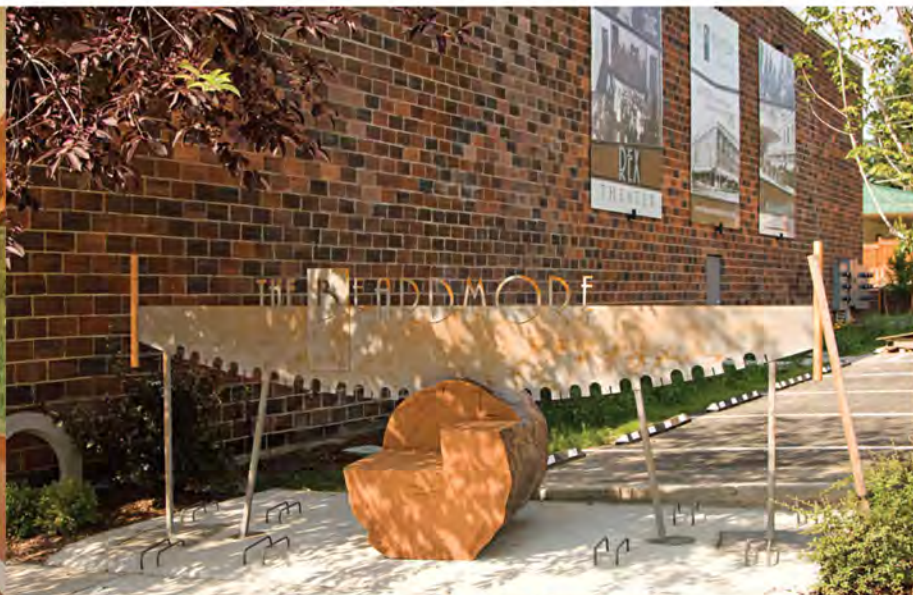


PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIAN RUNBERG

LEFT: Beardmore Block interior.

ABOVE: An innovative bike rack.

RIGHT: Idaho Governor Butch Otter and wife Lori at the building.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIAN RUNBERG

Brian cannibalized bricks from a three-brick-thick internal wall.

By the time of the fundraiser the following month, the hole was filled, the electricity was on, and the water was draining as required again, although the incomplete heating system meant that guests left their coats on for much of the evening. Priest River's Mayor Jim Martin and his committee planned the party. Brian's only request was that a certain brand of beer not be included in the celebratory libations. Rather than dancing and cards, the entertainments of this second grand opening included Brian's slide show of the project, starting with pictures of a White motor coach, a long-ago eighteenth birthday celebration, and a man in round glasses with a high forehead and a thin smile who looked just a little like Brian. An auction of com-

munity-donated items followed, and the new foundation was fledged.

The future of Priest River is unclear. Two hundred jobs disappeared with the shutting down of the JD Lumber Mill last year. But the town is doing its best. The Beardmore isn't full, but its tenants are hopeful folks who want to keep the vision of Charles Beardmore and Brian Runberg alive. Downstairs, where the Kaniksu Drug Store stood eighty years ago, a spa and smoothie bar purveys healthy concoctions, and a wine bar attracts an upscale crowd. Upstairs are the practical people—financial advisors, surveyors and engineers, and tax consultants.

Brian continues to return often, and he brings his children to the cabin at Priest Lake. His second child, Vivienne, now a toddling two-year-old, was born just before her great-great-grandfather's building was reopened. "We still go along the bay and I still point out to my kids where my great-grandfather would drop logs and run them down the river," says Brian. "I guess I feel and sense my grandmother is watching over me and is at peace that I am carrying on where her father left off some seventy years ago. Personally, nothing could be more rewarding or fulfilling." ■