

## Roscoe

by James R. Hacker

No one ever knew what Ed Roscoe was thinking when he built his hotel in the middle of these hills. There are no big towns or major highways anywhere near here. Nobody ever asked him why he did it and he never told. You see, Ed Roscoe wasn't from around here, and our folks don't ask many questions about other peoples' private business. They might gossip a little among themselves, but curiosity just don't kill our cats.

He had the thing built right opposite where the county road runs into the state road. Now don't get to thinking that the state road is some big fancy highway. It is just two lanes of bad blacktop with a faded yellow line down the middle. It's drivable, but that's about it. Every couple of years, just before elections, the road crew sprays some oil on it to make it look nice but that's about it for the state road. There's been some talk about redoing it, but nothin' ever happens. The county road is actually in better shape than the state road, but it don't have a yellow line.

There was not much else here when Ed Roscoe built that hotel. There are houses scattered up and down the hollers, some churches here and there, an occasional one-man coalmine. Ever few miles you'll find a Mom and Pop general store. There was nothing to justify Ed Roscoe's building a hotel here, but there it was.

The first anybody heard of Ed Roscoe was when the word got around that somebody was buying some property from Lefty Weaver. Now Lefty is probably the biggest landowner in the county, but the land isn't worth all that much so when somebody willingly buys a small piece its news. And news gets around pretty fast up here.

We were really surprised to find out Sammy Dale Unger was buying it. We knew it couldn't be Sammy Dale's money because ol' Sammy Dale never had any money to amount to anything. He just did odd jobs for enough money to buy something to drink. He had never owned anything. Everybody liked Sammy Dale and gave him work to do—even when there really wasn't any—but we never expected too much of him. Sammy Dale was kind of a sad case. He had done well in school, better than most of us, but things just never seemed to work out right for him after that. We hadn't seen him around for quite a spell, but nobody thought much of it. He always seemed to disappear from time to time. Now here he was with enough money to buy property and he had a city lawyer to see it was done right. We didn't know what was going on, but we knew it couldn't be *his* money. We were kind of worried about what Sammy Dale had gotten himself into.

Next thing we knew the builders and material arrived and construction of Ed Roscoe's hotel started, although we still hadn't seen Ed Roscoe, or heard his name for

that matter. Lefty Weaver, Joe Bob Holton and I drove out there in Lefty's truck to see what was going on. There was Sammy Dale all cleaned and shaved and looking so important, we almost didn't recognize him. Sammy Dale didn't have much time to talk to us though. People kept coming up to him and asking questions and Sammy Dale would look in this notebook he was carrying and answer them. Sammy Dale told us that a man named Ed Roscoe was building a hotel. We thought Sammy Dale was putting the shuck on us, but he was graveyard serious. Anyway, that's how we first heard of Ed Roscoe.

In an area where most buildings are simple structures built over a tiny crawlspace—a wonderful shady spot for various varmints to get out of the sun—Ed Roscoe built a big, fancy three-story building with a full basement. The porch, or veranda as Ed Roscoe later called it, must have been fifteen foot wide and went around the whole building so there was always a place to get relief from sun or rain. These fancy wood decorations hung from the top of the porch; Joe Bob called it gingerbread. The steps leading up to the porch were at least twelve feet wide with fancy handrails on either side. Directly opposite the steps was a wide doorway that just invited you to come right on in. It looked like one of those kind of doors you would see in a catalog, but nobody ever buys. There were two large windows with lots of little glass panes on each side of the doorway. The second and third floors each had a row of twelve church-like windows and six doors opening onto a porch that stretched from one end of the building to the other. This arrangement was repeated on the rear of the building for the two upper floors, but the back of the first floor just had three solid wood doors spaced evenly across the building and a ramp that went down to the basement. The sides of the building were just plain wood siding above the porch, no windows at all.

Ed Roscoe had his hotel painted the whitest white you ever saw. Folks said it looked like a giant wedding cake, and it kinda did.

When a crew poured concrete all around the building we all thought this Ed Roscoe must be some kind of crazy man. We just use gravel or maybe a little blacktop for a parking area. He even had white lines for parking painted on it. We thought that was getting to be a mite fancy for our county.

Finally the builders were done and moved on. A few days later the supply trucks moved in like a small army. They brought everything needed to outfit Ed Roscoe's hotel. Beds and linens, chairs and tables, food and drinks, china and silverware. There were a lot of white rocking chairs for the front porch. The trucks brought everything and Sammy Dale Unger was right there seeing that it all got put away right. Sammy Dale must have done a good job because Ed Roscoe kept him on as his right-hand man after the hotel opened. Ed Roscoe called him the "concierge." I had to look that up to make sure it was spelt right.

After this there was no activity around the place for a few days; then one day a strange car came driving down the road. It was a big, black four-door car. Some foreign make, German I think. It sure looked out of place in these hills.

When it stopped in front of the hotel, a tall, thin black man that looked like he hadn't eaten in a long time unfolded out of the front seat and opened the back door real proper like for a stocky, well dressed woman of about forty or so. At the same time a portly, distinguished looking man was getting out on the other side. Lefty Weaver, Joe Bob Holton and I were there talking with Sammy Dale and we figured the couple were the owners until Sammy Dale said, "Howdy, Mr. Roscoe. Everything is ready just like you wanted."

To our surprise it was that skinny, black driver who answered Sammy Dale. He

thanked him, introduced the couple as Gus and Lula Watson and asked Sammy Dale if he would be so kind as to help them up to their room. Folks soon found out that Gus was the cook, although Ed Roscoe always called him the “Chef,” and Lula was in charge of housekeeping and waitressing.

Then that tall, black fella walked up onto that front porch and invited us in just like we had been his neighbors for a long time. He told us to have a seat in the bar and he would be with us as soon as they were settled in. We graciously accepted his invitation.

We hurried up the steps and into the lobby where we stopped and stared slack jawed. We all knew right away there wasn’t anything like this around here. Above our heads was a really fancy light fixture with what looked like a thousand pieces of glass hanging down. Joe Bob said it was a chandelier and we didn’t argue with him, but it actually was a fancy electric light. Right in front of us was the counter where you signed in. It was made from a dark wood and was so shiny we could see the reflection of our dusty shoes and denim pants just like in a mirror. It stretched out to the right and curved around to become the bar in the barroom. In the barroom there were twenty-four tables with four straight back chairs each. The barroom was brand new, but it looked like it was an old, comfortable place.

To the left of the sign-in counter was a fancy stairway to the upper floors. Further to the left was the door to the dining room where there were twenty-four tables covered with snow-white tablecloths. Each table had four chairs with arms set around it and a brass lamp with four lights hanging down from the ceiling over it. From the windowsills on up to the ceiling the walls were covered with little mirrors, which made the room seem bigger and brighter than it was.

“Fancier than one of them restaurants in Lexington,” whispered Joe Bob.

“I’ll take your word for it,” Lefty replied. “I ain’t never been there. Let’s go on back over to the barroom. I’m a little uncomfortable here. Afraid I might get it dirty.”

I didn’t say anything, but I thought it was about the fanciest room I had ever seen.

As we turned the corner into the barroom our senses were jolted again. None of us had ever seen so many different kinds of whiskey. From one end of that long bar to the other, bottles stood in neat rows on two shelves in front of the mirror.

“Boy-o-boy” exclaimed Lefty. “If a fella wanted a drink he would die of thirst before he could make up his mind.”

“You got that straight,” replied Joe Bob. “Old Sammy Dale is going to be in hog heaven.”

A voice behind us said that Sammy Dale didn’t drink anymore, which made us laugh a little.

“Yeah, sure,” said Lefty.

“You watch him.” It was Ed Roscoe talking. “You’ll see. He’s sober and he’ll stay that way.” Then, in a voice like he was making an announcement at the county fair, Ed Roscoe said, “The Roscoe Hotel is officially open! What’ll you boys have? You should make it something good. It’s the last free one you’ll get for a while.” He had a real pleasant sounding voice. There was something in that voice that made you believe he meant every word he said.

Ed Roscoe was right about Sammy Dale. None of us ever again saw him take a drink. How he could work behind that bar with all that temptation surrounding him was something no one could understand, but he did it. Maybe all he needed was some respect.

Like I said, out here news gets around in a hurry. By the next evening everybody in the whole area knew the Roscoe Hotel was open and the folks came by. They all just

wanted to see the place. Some of them were dog certain it was going to be a “house of ill repute” and they wanted to see it before the girls moved in, but that wasn’t Ed Roscoe’s way. No girls ever arrived.

Like I said, word gets around fast up here. In a few weeks the dining room started filling up on Friday and Saturday nights. The food wasn’t fancy, but it was good and it didn’t cost an arm and a leg. A fella, even one of our hardscrabble folks, could bring his family and have a nice dinner fairly cheap and Mama got a night out of the kitchen.

Lula was just about the friendliest person you would ever want to meet. She would talk to everybody like she had known them all her life. She called everybody “Sweetie.” It sounded kind of nice. Gus would come out of the kitchen, when he had time, and ask everybody how they liked the food, then he would tell the women if they had a special recipe they wanted to see on the menu “just bring it to me and I’ll work it in.” Seeing *Suzanne Weaver’s Apple Pie* or *Betty Jean Robinson’s Corn Pudding* on the menu was a temptation the ladies couldn’t resist. Folks liked to hear Gus and Lula talk because they sounded funny. Joe Bob said they had an English accent, but I don’t know. They just talked funny.

During the rest of the week a few people came in to eat, but mostly some of us boys would gather in the bar to have a few drinks, play cards or just talk. Lefty Weaver, Joe Bob Holton and I were there practically every night, cheating each other at Gin. If somebody had a few too many, which didn’t happen very often, Ed Roscoe let them sleep it off upstairs and never charged for the room.

It was amazing how quickly Ed Roscoe’s hotel caught on. It gave us a sense of community that hadn’t existed before. We used Ed Roscoe’s hotel for what could be called town meetings, if there had been a town. Pretty soon the hotel was the center of life in the area.

Ed Roscoe had some strange rules about the place. In the dining room the only alcohol you could get was beer or wine, no whiskey. In the bar, which Ed Roscoe closed during dinner, the only food you could get was sandwiches. If you wanted dinner, you ate in the dining room. There was no cussing in the dining room. A simple “damn” and Ed Roscoe would tell you to watch your language.

When the hotel opened Sammy Dale was the one who cleaned up the tables, but Ed Roscoe soon hired some local teenage boys to do that job and Sammy Dale stayed behind the counter. He also hired some girls to help Lula with the waitressing and cleaning the hotel and some other kids to help Gus in the kitchen.

All of these kids had been giving their parents fits for a few years. Just part of growing up, I guess. Some folks thought they were “wild” kids and Ed Roscoe had to be crazy to hire them. But that’s the kind of kid Ed Roscoe seemed to look for. These were the kids that didn’t play sports or make the cheerleading squad. They weren’t doing as well in school as they should. That didn’t seem to bother Ed Roscoe. The change in the kids seemed to sneak up on us. Pretty soon they started doing better in school and they kind of stopped being so cantankerous at home. Some of them didn’t work out, but most did. Ed Roscoe just had a way that brought out the best in people.

Ed Roscoe spent a lot of time with Sammy Dale Unger, teaching him about the hotel business. He taught Sammy Dale how to keep records and order supplies for the hotel and all that kind of thing. Gus ordered the supplies for the kitchen, so Sammy Dale didn’t have to worry about that, but he did have to keep track of what Gus spent and how he spent it. It was almost like a father and son the way Ed Roscoe treated Sammy Dale. Like I said, Sammy Dale had done well in school and he caught on real fast. It still surprised everybody, except Ed Roscoe, that Sammy Dale stuck with it.

On slow nights when Ed Roscoe wasn't working with him, Sammy Dale would tell us about it. He was just as proud as he could be. No one had ever treated him like this before and he wanted to tell us.

Pretty soon Sammy Dale was practically running the place by himself, which was a good thing because every few months Ed Roscoe would get in that car of his—he never did get himself a truck—and drive off. He would stay away a while, sometimes as long as two weeks, then one day he would be back acting like he had never been gone.

Now another funny thing about Ed Roscoe was The Watson's, Gus and Lula. We figured they had known him a long time, since they all arrived together, but once when Ed Roscoe was off on one of his trips Lefty said to Gus, "I guess you all have known Ed Roscoe for quite a while, haven't you?"

Gus really surprised us when he said, in that funny voice of his, "We just met him at the airport the day we came here." It seems they had been working in a restaurant in Boston, Massachusetts when somebody bought the place and closed it. That same day a man showed up at their apartment and made a job offer to them.

"We didn't have any prospects, so when he told us our salary would be more than it had been and we would have very few expenses, how could we turn it down? He already had contracts with our names typed on them and airplane tickets from Boston to Louisville. First Class—non-stop. He was even willing to buy out the lease on our apartment. We thought it was too good to be true, but we didn't have any other prospects, so we accepted. When we arrived at Louisville Mr. Roscoe was waiting for us. Then he drove us down here." Even if Gus hadn't had that funny accent that would have sounded peculiar.

After the hotel had been open for four or five years, some reporters from a newspaper in the city heard about the place and came down to write it up for the Sunday paper. "Human Interest," they called it. They took a lot of pictures of the place and the people in it. There was even a picture of Lefty, Joe Bob and me playing cards right there at that front table where we always sat. They said we were regular guests at the hotel. Boy, did folks josh us about that! But Ed Roscoe never got his picture taken. He let Sammy Dale act like the hotel was his and just stayed out of sight.

For several years things went along real smooth. Folks just came to Ed Roscoe's hotel and enjoyed themselves. We couldn't remember what it was like before the hotel, it had become that much a part of our lives.

One time Ed Roscoe had been gone longer than normal on one of his mysterious trips and folks were beginning to wonder if he was coming back. He finally showed up one day about noon and seemed like he was really feeling low-down. Sammy Dale asked what was bothering him. Ed Roscoe said it was nothing, so Sammy Dale just let it pass. A few days later Ed Roscoe didn't come down to the desk at his normal time. This worried Sammy Dale and after a few minutes he went up to Ed Roscoe's room to check on him. He knocked and called out but didn't get an answer. Sammy Dale opened the door and saw Ed Roscoe fully dressed, lying on top of the bed. Sammy Dale could tell right away that Ed Roscoe wasn't breathing. The Doctor said it was his heart, but it didn't really matter what it was, he was gone anyway. No one around here knew how old Ed Roscoe was, but he was much too young to die.

We didn't know who to contact. It was surprising that as long as we had known Ed Roscoe, we didn't know anything about him. He had never talked about himself and there was nothing in his room except his clothes and shaving stuff. There were no pictures or letters or other personal belongings. His wallet had forty-two dollars in it, but nothing else, not even a driver's license. Lefty and Joe Bob looked in Ed

Roscoe's old car, but there wasn't anything in there either. The only bank account was for the hotel and that was in Sammy Dale's name. Sammy Dale drove over to the county seat to get that city lawyer's name from the deed to the property, but when he wrote him a letter it came back marked "address unknown."

If there is such a thing, we had a nice funeral for Ed Roscoe right there in the hotel dining room. Nobody could remember him ever going to church, but the Pastor said he knew what kind of man he was and he deserved a Christian burial. Some of the girls that worked at the place over the years got together and sang a song. Lefty's family graveyard was just a little ways down the road from the hotel so we buried him there. After the burial everybody came back to the hotel and just sat around and talked. Gus had fixed some food, so we all ate and, all things considered, had a good time, just like Ed Roscoe would have wanted.

Sammy Dale took Ed Roscoe's passing awfully hard. We thought he might revert to his old ways, but he didn't. In a few days, he took the wreath off the door and opened the place up just like Ed Roscoe was away on one of his trips.

It was funny, but nobody ever came looking for Ed Roscoe. After a little while, it was almost like he was just someone we had all imagined. Lefty, Joe Bob and I still came in most nights and played cards. I guess old habits are hard to break. Folks still came in for dinner, but Sammy Dale didn't have the same touch with the kids that Ed Roscoe had, so the service suffered a bit. Sammy Dale was good at keeping the records and running the business, but he didn't know how to get other folks to do their jobs.

Three or four years went by like this and we kind of got used to Ed Roscoe not being there. Then one day Lula said she didn't feel too good. The Doc checked her over and said she needed to go to the hospital in Lexington. She didn't want to go, but Sammy Dale shut the place for a couple of days and drove her and Gus up there in Ed Roscoe's old car.

About a week after he got back, he got a letter from Gus that said Lula was worse than they thought and she wouldn't be able to come back. Gus was going to stay with her. That made us feel pretty bad. They were such nice folks.

Sammy Dale closed the dining room. He couldn't cook and didn't know how to find a cook he could trust. He kept the bar open, but Lefty, Joe Bob and I were about the only ones that ever stopped in. Sometimes another one of the boys would come over to talk a while, but they never really hung around the place.

One evening about a year after Gus and Lula had left, I drove out to Ed Roscoe's hotel just like always. Lefty and Joe Bob were sitting on the front porch in a couple of the rocking chairs Ed Roscoe had put out there. I thought this was mighty unusual. When I got out of my truck they told me. Sometime during the night Sammy Dale had taken Ed Roscoe's old car and drove away. We never saw him again.

Ed Roscoe's hotel is still out there. You can drive out and see it if you want to. The weather has started to rough it up a little. Ed Roscoe always kept the place painted the brightest white you ever saw, but now the weather has turned it a dull gray. A few of the windows are broken and some critters have made it their home. All the furniture is still inside. The beds are all made like somebody was going to stop by, but there's dust all over them. Ed Roscoe's clothes are still hanging there in Room 24, just like he left them. The rocking chairs are still on the porch and if the wind blows just right, they rock back and forth like they got somebody sitting in them. I suppose that one of these days the whole thing will fall into complete ruin and nobody will know it was there.

Folks used to say Ed Roscoe's hotel was so pretty it was the queen of the mountains. Now it just looks like a sad, lonely, run-down old building.