



A Christmas Memory

The Christmas shopping season is at the starting gate, chomping at the bit, awaiting the starting bell. And once rung, Coastal shoppers can race to a myriad of exciting shops. From the Blue Crab Gallery in Bay St. Louis to Gulfport's Martin Miazza Gifts, and from Biloxi's Paper Moon to Salmagundi in Ocean Springs, Coastal shoppers are truly blessed. But back in the day the Coast was not so blessed. If Christmas shoppers longed for something unique, New Orleans or Mobile was their only option. But in the mid Fifties all that changed. The Purple Lantern opened and became THE place to shop on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

The Purple Lantern was the creation of Mary Jo Sternberg. Not long after graduating from New Orleans' Sophie Newcomb College, she opened her first shop in Gulfport on 27th Avenue across the street from the present day Amtrak station. The building, like others on the block, had not been properly maintained. When Mary Jo painted it purple, the city fathers hardly raised an eyebrow. She filled her first shop with the exquisite finery for which the Purple

Lantern would always be known. But problems lurked just outside.

Due to the store's somewhat seedy location, derelicts often lounged on the curb near the shop's front door, which was certainly not good for business. When opportunity came knocking in the form of a new building, Mary Jo answered the call and moved the Purple Lantern to 25th Avenue, Gulfport's main thoroughfare. In that building she created a Xanadu-ish interior that was the talk of the Coast. And it was this glittering, sparkling interior that I remember.

Many a Saturday morning, my Junior High School chums and I would glide ever so carefully through the Purple Lantern's crammed-packed pavilions. A particular favorite was the Victorian gazebo dripping with gingerbread trim and filled with fancy bottles of perfume. Looking for a book? Where better to find it than in a replica of an old English book shop. Thinking about giving a party with a South Sea Island theme? Check out the Tiki Hut for those must have hula skirts, bamboo curtains, and a ubiquitous swinging monkey. Around the corner was the Parisian Market, resplendent with a vast selection of taste treats from



The Purple Lantern interior and Mary Jo Sternberg.

the City of Light. In the Venetian Room, the morning sunlight danced off the cut-glass edges of crystal goblets and exquisite vases filled with masses of brightly colored artificial flowers. And perfuming the entire store was the smell of scented candles, scented oil and incense. Sitting in the midst of all this gilded splendor was the check-out counter. There in black toreador pants, black espadrilles,



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Purple Lantern Dec 12, 1965. Photo courtesy of Nels Anderson.

and a man's white dress shirt - collar up - sat Mary Jo, ready at the cash register. She'd wrap your purchases in purple tissue paper, put them in a purple and gold bag, and send you on your way with a smile. Strutting around town with one of those bags, my chums and I felt ever so regal, proving to the world that we had good taste. At least that's what we thought.

The look and feel of the Purple Lantern may have been Mary Jo's idea, but one of her dear friends made it all happen. Nels Anderson, Professor Emeritus at LSU, designed the interior of the 25th Avenue store. His design degree from Chicago's Goodman School of Drama was put to good use in creating the nooks and crannies that gave the Purple Lantern its unique look. Those nooks and crannies, piled to the ceiling with all sorts of goodies, are what many Coastal residents remember.



Nels Anderson

Neil McInnis said, "When I was in High School, my grandmother was the bookkeeper for Mary Jo. Whenever I visited the shop, I had to be careful not to knock any of that (expletive) off the shelves." Ann Gill Billings often went to the Purple Lantern with her mother, who uttered over and over, "Ann! DON'T touch anything!" As Ann said, "Even as a little girl, I knew the Purple Lantern was a special place." But Renae Collier had a somewhat different memory. She remembers going in the shop with her older sister, "certainly more graceful and sophisticated than me. She accidentally broke something and was made to pay for it. The store lost some of its magic after that." The store's magic may have dissipated for Renae, but for others, that magic still lingers. As Sherry Shell Balius told me, "I LOVED the Purple Lantern! I especially enjoyed shopping there during the Christmas Season, when the air was cool and the wind was blowing. I'd go into the shop and get a very warm, cozy feeling, sorta akin to going into an old bookstore." But Christmas was not always warm and cozy for Mary Jo and the Purple Lantern.

December 13, 1965, was a glorious



Purple Lantern Dec. 14, 1965. Photo courtesy of Nels Anderson.

day. Billowy white clouds blossomed in the azure sky. A crispy-cool breeze sashayed across the tawny-brown waters of the Gulf. And downtown Gulfport was knee deep in Christmas shoppers. As we did most Monday afternoons after school, Mom and I went to the Carnegie Library. Walking up the front steps, I sniffed the air. "Someone's burning leaves," I thought. I thought wrong. Suddenly, a loud crowd of people dashed out of the Albright & Woods Drug Store, located on the southwest corner of 25th Avenue and 13th Street. And just as quickly, an undulating cloud of pitch-black smoke rose above the store. The lovely afternoon quickly descended in to bedlam due to a clogged grease vent over the grill of the drug store's lunch counter.

As Mom and I watched in horror, towering fist-like flames shot out of the drug store's roof. Fire trucks wailed. People gathered. Fire hoses poured tons of water into the burning building. All to no avail. Due to the lack of fire walls between the buildings adjacent to the drug store, the fire spread. All in all, an entire city block burned that day. The Purple Lantern was part of that block.

As if it were yesterday, I remember the frantic activity around the Purple Lantern. Employees and customers alike attempted to salvage what they could, but the smoke and flames quickly squelched their noble desires. I begged Mom to let me help. "Certainly not young man!" was her quick reply. Seeing the Purple Lantern burn was like watching an old friend grasping for breath. That old friend ultimately gave up the ghost. A total ruin was all that was left.

The day before the great fire, Nels had put the finishing touches on a Victorian train, which was part of the

Purple Lantern's Christmas decorations. Due to his and Mary Jo's creativity, the Purple Lantern's window displays were the recipient of many prestigious awards. At that time, it was the only shop of its kind to win the National Award of Merit from the Gift and Decorative Association not once, but three times. Nels said seeing the store's burned out carcass was gut wrenching, but knowing that the window display that had taken weeks to create would never have its proper debut was even sadder.

After the fire the Purple Lantern - like the proverbial Phoenix - rose from its ashes. It also survived its next calamity, Hurricane Camille. The water damage was bad, but the damage was nothing compared to the great fire. In the mid-70s, Mary Jo moved her shop to Pass Road, and also opened up a new shop at Mary Mahoney's Old French House. Both proved a success, but that success eventually faded, as did Mary Jo's health, and the Purple Lantern closed its doors forever in late 80s.

Mary Jo Sternberg, one of the Coast's first women entrepreneurs, passed away on June 11, 1992, after a long bout with breast cancer. Her legacy is best summed up in a December 16, 1965, Letter to the Editor written by Peter Girardin, the Catholic Chaplain at the Biloxi V.A. Hospital. In writing about the losses caused by the great fire, he stated: "Gulfport had the Purple Lantern, and there is only one Purple Lantern because there is only one Mary Jo Sternberg. The Purple Lantern was more than a store; it was a natural extension of the owner and her character and personality: good taste, refinement, imagination and warmth."

Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless, and keep a song in your heart.

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