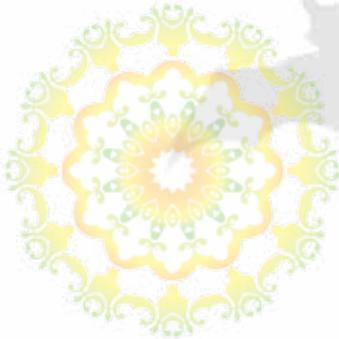


Dogs! And Cops! And Bats! Oh! My!



**KAL'S
KALEIDOSCOPE**

“And Lord, please protect us tonight from dogs and cops...” The prayer was suddenly interrupted by a whispered voice. “Pssst, don’t forget the bats,” I said.

“And the bats, Lord, protect us from them as well. Amen!” Jimmy Curtrell added. He was the much adored music director of Gulfport’s First Baptist Church during the 70’s. “Now, let’s shake a leg and get a move on.” And with that, a caravan of cars filled with teenagers and kids home from college roared down Interstate 10 toward its destination.

Turning south on the Delisle exit, the cars came to a slow crawl as they entered a towering, pillared entrance. Beyond it a dark winding path snaked its way through the woods. The drivers turned off their car lights but kept driving down the path. The evening silence was softened by a springtime symphony of chirping crickets and bellowing frogs. But in the distance barking dogs could be heard.

The cars slowed to a stop. The riders got out. Their trail through the woods was hampered by tangled weeds and vicious vines. They stumbled into a clearing, and there, glistening in the silvery moonlight, was their destination.

That destination had once been one

of the Coast’s grandest hotels: the Pine Hills Hotel. The locals called the old hotel “The Pink Lady” because of its pale-pink, stucco walls. And because it was like a true lady—elegant, sophisticated, and refined. The hotel opened its doors to the public on December 20, 1926. The opening was attended by Dennis Murphee, Mississippi’s governor, and Hal Thompson, president of the Pine Hills Hotel. The wealthy from Mobile, New Orleans, and cities in the frozen North were also well represented.

Some guests arrived by train and were ferried to the hotel by yachts owned by the hotel. Others arrived by car, driving down the same narrow path as would the youth group from FBC Gulfport. One of those opening day guests, Mrs. Emily Bickerstaff, a long-time Coastal resident, remembered that day.

“The hotel was full of folks, all dressed in their best,” she told me. “The lobby had a huge, arched window. The floor was covered in yellow and gray tiles. A little fountain stood in one corner of the room. Water splashed out of a green dolphin’s mouth into a basin. From the lobby you could see the lovely dining room through huge arches. The lounge was my favorite place. It was filled with carved armchairs, potted

**Entrance of Pine Hills Hotel,
as of December 25, 2013.**



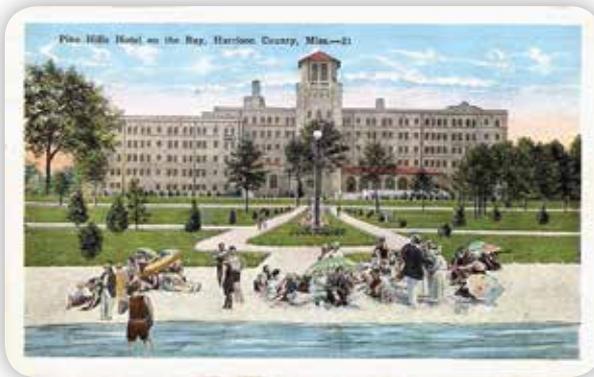
palms, and thick rugs on the floor.” While telling me this story, Mrs. Bickerstaff’s eyes sparkled. “But it was the velvet drapes and the plush fabric on the furniture that I remember the most: blues, golds, oranges, and deep burgundy. And did you know the old hotel had central air conditioning and heat? Mighty unusual during the 20s. It was a shame the old girl didn’t last.”

Opened at a cost of twenty-three million dollars in today’s money, the Pine Hills Hotel was advertised as a place to “enjoy winter where it is always spring.” Hal Thompson stated: “Nothing can be found in Pine Hills Hotel which will not compare favorably in beauty, value, and comfort with that found in the homes of the wealthy who will be guests of the hotel.” Other national advertisements declared other amenities: “Tea on the broad terraces brilliant with sunshine, golf on a sporty course of hazardous fairways and velvety greens, a brisk canter through the pine-clad hills, fishing, swimming, and in the evening, wonderful music that just makes you dance.”

But the dancing came to an abrupt end when Old Man Depression checked in as a guest. Not only did most of the hotel’s well-heeled customers find that their wealth had evaporated, so did the banks that had pumped the grand hotel full of money. It was then the hotel closed its doors, covered its luxurious furnishings and sparkling chandeliers in swaths of canvas, and waited. Little did the Pink Lady know, it was the beginning of her slow demise.

She sat silent and abandoned during the 30s, but did her bit during World War II when she became a training camp for the United States Army. Her tiled floors and arched lounges echoed with the heavy thumping of boots. Her rooms sported not the wealthy, but young soldiers bound for the harsh realities of war. And when the war ended, she was once again abandoned. Her once manicured lawn became choked with weeds and her pink stucco began to flake. Was there anyone to save her?

Her salvation came in the form of a cross. That cross belonged to the Oblate Fathers. They were and still are a mis-



sionary order of the Catholic Church. In 1953, they christened the old hotel with a new name: Our Lady of the Snows Scholasticate. And instead of hosting wealthy patrons or rowdy soldiers, the new guests were priests, Catholic brothers, and young ministerial students.

The Oblate Fathers did much to change the hotel’s interior. The hotel dining room became a library. The Spanish lounge, which was Mrs. Bickerstaff’s favorite room, was given new life as the chapel. Gone were its plush carpets and chandeliers. Gone too were its carved furnishings—all of it replaced by hard pews and an altar made of Bedford stone. The room’s soaring arched windows, that once led to the terrace and the warm waters of the Gulf, were replaced by windows of Prussian-blue stained glass. The hotel’s central tower, which contained a huge water tank fed by an artesian well, was crowned with a towering cross. The locals re-christened the Pink Lady with a new name: *The Monastery*. And her future appeared secure once more. It was not.

In 1968 the good Fathers announced they would move their ministry to Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. When they did move, the old



Pine Hills Hotel Spanish Lounge

hotel was once again empty and abandoned. In the late 70s and early 80s there were new plans to reopen the old hotel. Some renovations were started, but all of those plans fell through. There was another plan to make her a shelter for battered women and unwed mothers. That plan, too, fell through. And so the Pink Lady was left to languish in a purgatory of decay and vandals. And inquis-

itive youth groups from local churches.

On the night that I reminded Jimmy to pray about the bats, we approached the old hotel from the south because that would help muffle our squeals and giggles from the caretaker. He lived in a house on the north side of the hotel and did not take kindly to unannounced visits to his crumbling charge. He also owned some vicious dogs. Our band of explorers carefully crawled through a hole in what had been the stained-glass windows of the former chapel. At last, we were in the old hotel.

Even though that was almost forty years ago, I can still recall the vast, empty silence of the abandoned hotel. We walked gingerly atop broken pieces of Prussian-blue glass. Stagnant pools of water reflected light from our flashlights. Dripping water could be heard, which added to the eeriness of the silence. Walking into what had once been the lobby, we could see the bright moonlight prancing through the room’s arched window. There before us was the grand staircase and the little fountain that Mrs. Bickerstaff had remembered.

But our main objective was none of these. It towered above us in the old water tower. From it, we were told, you could see all the towns between Biloxi and Bay St. Louis. We had to see for ourselves. Little did we know what awaited us.

Traipsing up the stairs we stopped to look down the silent halls of long abandoned rooms. The gentle spring breezes from the Gulf stirred long dormant smells--rotting wood, flaking plaster, and oil. The oil had once greased the cables and machinery that had lifted the hotel’s elevators from the

basement, up nine stories, to the top floor. The elevators had long lost their etched-glass doors, and looking down the creepy, dank elevator shafts was a memory in the making.

At last our fearless band of explorers reached its destination: the tower. We walked out on the balcony that surrounded it; its towering arches reaching upward. In the middle of the tower, the rusty, cast iron water tank held court. It was cold to the touch. And from the sound of it, empty. Or so we thought.

From far below, we heard the howls of the caretaker's dogs. We could hear him cursing. He knew something was amiss. And then it happened. Suddenly the night air was filled with bats, screeching and flying in all directions! The girls screamed. I screamed. Jimmy yelled, "Run to cars!" And we did. We raced down the stairs. We dashed through the lobby and through the hole in the stained-glass windows. The brilliant moonlight and sweet-smelling spring air were refreshing. The caretaker and his dogs were not.

We ran like the wind, fell into pud-

dles of water, and were scratched by weeds and vines. The dogs were hot on our trail. So was their owner. A shotgun blast echoed through the night air. "I've called the law!" the caretaker yelled. "The cops are gonna arrest you lit' hooligans!" With a lunge, we leapt into our cars. Tire rubber adhered itself to gravel, and we made a mad dash down the winding path on which we had arrived. In the dappled moonlight, the old Pine Hills Hotel and the bats slowly evaporated into the night sky.

So what happened to the old hotel? In 1984, it and the vast acreage surrounding it was purchased by the DuPont Chemical Company. The company stated it had no interest in demolishing the hotel. There was a glimmer of hope for the Pink Lady. As that hope grew, so did the Pine Hills Historical Society. There were attempts to put the hotel on the National Historical Register

But all those hopes were dashed when The DuPont Company announced that the Pink Lady would be razed after all. And by January, 1987, this once-grand old hotel was nothing

more than memories—memories of her former glory and the jewel she had been in the Coast's glittering crown of vintage hotels.

One last thought: Due to the passing of time, the stories told by the teenagers who were on that eventful trip to the old "Monastery" have morphed into legend. And one of those legends is the bats. In reality, they were pigeons. But impressionable teenagers and their fearless leader, Jimmy Curtrell, were sure they were bats. And so they remain to this good day.

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

Kal



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