



Lost splendor! Abandoned grandeur!

And Humpty Dumpty?

**KAL'S
KALEIDOSCOPE**



Ray and Rafe O'Neal

You may be asking yourself what the first two statements have in common with the last? Our local real estate agents could answer that question with three words - **Location! Location! Location!** And that prime location would be the west corner of Hwy 90 and Lorraine-Cowan Road, where *Fun Time USA* once stood. Remember *Fun Time USA*? The brightly-lit swirling carousel. Bumper boats battling it out under the icy spray of a sparkling water fountain. And Mini Golf! The *S.S. Minnow* rising out of the manicured lawn. The undulating, green-and-yellow-polka-dot snake. And then there was dear ol' Humpty Dumpty - towering black top hat, robin's egg blue coat and flashy red bow tie. Dear

ol' Humpty Dumpty sat on a concrete throne of painted red brick, but his less-than-comfortable throne was once part of something that stood long before *Fun Time USA* - the *Piaggio* mansion, or as most locals remember it, the *Merry Mansion*.

The *Piaggio* mansion was built by its namesake Henry Piaggio, who was born in Genoa, Italy on March 17, 1874. Little is known about Henry's early years, other than the fact that his family was prominent and wealthy. In his late teens, Henry moved to Pensacola, Florida, to learn the ends and outs of his father's timber exporting business, which was located in that city. In the early 1900s, Henry moved to Gulfport, Mississippi, where he opened his own



timber export business - that business prospered. Like all prosperous Americans of the day, he took the grand tour of Europe, and while in London he met his future wife, Margaret Muld-owned of Mt. Vernon, Ohio. They fell in love, married, and traveled across Europe, ending up in cold and snowy St. Petersburg, Russia, before returning home to Gulfport. In the years that followed, war clouds festered over Europe, Arch Duke Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated, and the world was pitched into the cataclysmic slaughter house of World War I. But World War I would add even more money to the coffers of Henry Piaggio.

According to Mr. Henry Bricker, author of *"The Italian American Shipyard at Pascagoula"* and *"Wooden Ships from Texas: A World War I Saga,"* the Piaggio Family had long been heavily involved in Italian ship building, which may have greatly influenced Henry's financial muse. In 1916, due to the huge shipping losses created by World War I, Henry made a surprising decision to begin building wooden ships on a massive scale, long after sailing ships had all but disappeared on the high seas. His decision could have also been prompted by the U.S. Government's strict control over all aspects of American shipbuilding except sail. Because Europe's timber resources paled in comparison to the abundant timber resources in the southern United States at the time, Henry saw an opportunity to wed his lumber business with his family's shipping expertise, and thus was born The International Shipbuilding Company, with shipyards in Orange, Texas, and Pascagoula, Mississippi; Henry Piaggio was its president. And the president of a prestigious shipping company needs an equally prestigious house to call his own.

I could not ascertain the exact date that Henry began building he and Margaret's dream house. From its style - *Renaissance Revival* - I must assume that it was sometime in the first decade of the 20th Century. The house was designed by the popular architects Burton and Bendernagel of New Orleans, Louisiana. They had also designed

the old Harrison County Courthouse which once stood in Gulfport on 24th Avenue, just one block south of the present day First Methodist Church. The house they designed for Henry Piaggio was a mansion indeed. Its exterior was adorned with Roman-Ionic columns and carvings of griffins and medallions, all of which were created from marble, concrete, and stucco. Its interior boasted marble floors. That marble was brought back as ballast in Henry's ships. Carved mahogany paneling covered the interior walls, while vast glass windows allowed the

poor Marshall was left in the swirling dust of Henry's Stanley Steamer touring car. Marshall was not at all happy with this course of events - but necessity is the mother of invention. He set up a speed trap - heaven only knows what it was - at the intersection of present day Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Government Street. The trap was a success. Henry's car slowed to a stop, and Marshall yelled out, "You're under arrest for speeding!" At which point Henry asked, "What's the speed limit?" "15 MPH and you were doin' 30!" was the reply. Impatiently, Henry



Gulf breeze to cool the house's long hallways and rambling rooms. Henry brought painters from Italy to festoon the ceilings in the house with paintings of nymphs and cherubs. It was a palace fit for king. And Henry Piaggio may have thought of himself as a king, as his actions sometimes confirmed.

Mr. Ray L. Bellande, a local historian, chronicled an amusing story which was told to him by Mr. J. K. Lemon, a life-long resident of Ocean Springs. In the early days of the town, Marshall Rupp was a local policeman who performed his official duties on his bike. Everyday on Henry's ride to the shipyards in Pascagoula, his chauffeur - most likely at Henry's request - seldom heeded the speed limit. More than once in his attempt to stop the speeding vehicle,

Above: The Merry Mansion after Camille. Photo courtesy of the family of Chauncey Hinman.



The mate to the griffin shown in picture above can be seen in the Camille picture - it is in the corner of next to the arch. Photo courtesy of Ray and Rafe O'Neal.

asked, "How much is the fine?" Marshall grinned wide, "Fifteen dollars!" At which point Henry thrust a handful of money into Marshall's waiting hand and said, "Here's thirty dollars! I'll be coming back through this afternoon!"

But Henry's bravado did not last forever. His demise came sometime in the early 20s. I could not ascertain the details, but apparently he was dismissed as president of the shipyard due to accusations of embezzlement. The completion of his and Margaret's dream home came to a grinding halt, and Henry Piaggio died in 1921 - a broken man - at the ripe old age of 47. Childless, Margaret held on financially as best she could, but eventually closed up the house and moved into a small cottage on the back side of the Piaggio's property. And there the old girl lived a life that was truly dependent upon "the kindness of strangers." I spoke with a man who was a teenager in the early 30s and knew



Marie Dressler

Mrs. Piaggio. He told me that one of his teenage "duties" was to pick Mrs. Piaggio up in his family auto - she never learned to drive - and transport her from her modest cottage in the back of her boarded-up mansion to afternoon tea, which his mother often hosted in their home on Beach Boulevard in Gulfport. When I ask why his mother would invite the practically indigent wife of an embezzler to tea, he beamed and said, "That Piaggio woman was a laugh-a-minute! She was the life of the party!" He de-

scribed her as large, a true wit, and very funny, much like *Marie Dressler*, who was a famous character actress of the 1930s. Different well-to-do families in Gulfport paid Mrs. Piaggio's taxes for her and also provided her with food and such. Hers was a riches to rags existence. Her plight was somewhat elevated by the onslaught of WWII. The government used her house as an officer's club, naming it the *Embassy Club*. Dashing officers in their summer whites escorted their beautiful dates to the club, enjoying its fading splendor while listening to the strains of "*Moonlight Serenade*" and "*In the Mood*."

Sometime in the early 50s, the *Embassy Club* was renamed, and the *Merry Mansion* was born. The Merry Mansion was a swank nightclub back in the day when nightclubs were places that attracted well dressed people out for a night of food, dancing, and at that time, gambling. Many may think that Casino gambling is something new to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, but gambling - the ol' one armed bandit - certainly is not. I spoke with many people who remember the Merry Mansion as one of "the" places to see and be seen on the Coast. Many local bands filled its vast interiors with red-hot jazz and big band music. But again, the bravado of the *Merry Mansion*, like that of its

builder, did not last. Mrs. Piaggio passed away in 1955, and her house and the vast acreage that it sat on ended up in the hands of a local doctor's family. The

house fell into disrepair, ending up as an "old curiosity shop" of sorts. By the time I came along to explore it in the mid-60s, used furniture and junk filled its rooms, rooms long since stripped of any grandeur. The only room that bore any vestiges of splendor was what I assume had been the library. Carved mahogany bookcases lined the walls, a huge fireplace with a massive carved mantle graced one wall, and a broken brass chandelier hung forlornly from a peeling ceiling.

One can only guess what might have happened to the old *Piaggio* mansion had it not been all but obliterated in 1969 by Camille's pounding waters and lacerating winds. Would it have been restored? Turned into a small luxury hotel with 1st class service and accommodations? The possibilities are limitless. But all that was not meant to be. And now the grand mansion with its marble and carving is only a memory - a memory of lost splendor and abandoned grandeur.

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



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