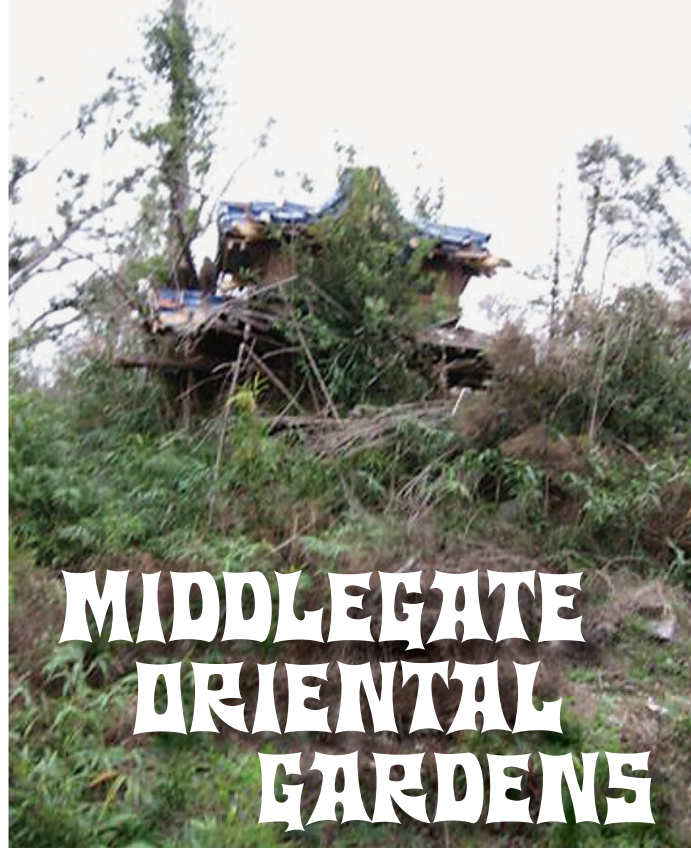


# Kal's Kaleidoscope



To an impressionable, 17 year old boy, it was a magical place! Winding pathways tiptoed through masses of exotic greenery. Unfettered wisteria vines, lush with purple blooms, draped the trees like fine lace. Trickling water from an ornamental river could be heard, flowing gently under humpbacked bridges painted bright red. Late spring sunlight glistened off the top of a bronze turtle, and a bronze rider atop a bronze water buffalo. The rider and the turtle sat along the river's edge - friendly greeters for friendly visitors. Deep blue roof tiles glistened in the sunlight, those tiles attached to the undulating rooftops of fanciful teahouses. A pair of fierce Foo dogs, with fierce, caved-stone, teeth and claws, guarded one of the teahouses. And surveying it all from atop a bronze throne that resembled a lotus blossom sat a massive bronze statute of the Buddha, serenely blessing his magical, manicured kingdom with an uplifted hand.

My first indication that this magical place even existed came from a rather unlikely source - a place mat. Place mats like it once graced the tables of the Friendship House, which was a locally owned seafood restaurant that opened in the late 40s, and for the next thirty years was a favorite watering hole for both locals and tourists alike. The place mats, deep blue with yellow lettering, had a map of the Mississippi Gulf Coast printed on them. Looking at the map, you could see Highway 90, and many of the tourist sites that then existed along it.

On a sweetly warm, Spring afternoon in the late 60s, I sat with my parents in the Friendship House, bored out of my gourd as most teenagers are when dining out with their parents. But my boredom quickly alerted my brain. My brain alerted my eyes. And my eyes then alerted my index finger, which

then began a slow glide atop the smooth surface of my Friendship House place mat. I stopped at each of the tourist sites that were listed - Shearwater Potteries, Dead Man's Oak, the Biloxi lighthouse, and Beauvoir. Easing west along the printed highway, I saw the sight of the famous 1882 Sullivan and Ryan fight, which took place in Mississippi City. Also shown were the Gulfport Yacht Club, Gulf Park College for Girls, and the Dixie White House where President Woodrow Wilson often summered. Nothing impressed me. But then my finger screeched to a halt when I read the words - Middlegate Oriental Gardens. Printed on the place mat was a squiggly arrow that pointed to a drawing of a Japanese teahouse.

"Mom! Pop!" said I. "Ever heard of the Middlegate Oriental Gardens?" My Dad pondered my question and said, "Son, I think those gardens are on Hwy. 90 in Pass Christian, but you can't see 'em from the street. They're hidden. Lots of bamboo and a high fence." My facial

expression certainly betrayed my thoughts. "Son, don't you be goin' over there . . . snoopin' around. That's private property! You'll get yourself arrested! UNDERSTAND?" With my fingers crossed so hard they ached, I blurted out, "You bet Pop! I understand you loud and clear!" But my Mom and Dad both knew what I already knew: a visit to the Middlegate Oriental Gardens was in the making. Wild horses, or should I say, wild samurai warriors, couldn't keep me away.

The next Saturday, bright and early, I was off, riding west in my Dad's 1965 Nash Rambler. (Dad was always a Rambler man.) Having done my homework, I already knew the location of the gardens, so when I arrived, I knew the entrance to them was not on Highway 90, but on a street one block north. I stopped the car, and surveyed the situation - no one in sight. So far so good! Then, I sauntered bold as brass through the garden's entrance—a quaint creation with a bamboo gate that was tucked between clusters of bamboo columns



The Reflecting Pool where Buddha onced sat

that supported a blue-tiled roof. And then, there it was - the Middlegate Oriental Gardens in all its splendor. Keeping clear of the gardener's cottage, I wandered through the gardens, which transported me to another world. Picturesque, granite, Japanese lanterns, some well over five feet tall, dotted the landscape. Bronze statues of graceful cranes, with their wings extended as if ready to fly, delighted my eyes. Following a path through a dense jungle of bamboo and lush flowers, I came upon a sunken garden, surrounded by polished stones. There was also a man-made lagoon, complete with islands, and a trickling fountain. Trying to keep out of sight, I detoured onto another path, and as luck would have it, that path led me to the most wonderful sight of all - the Buddha.

The Buddha statue lay ensconced in all its regal beauty at the top of a man-made hill. Scampering up the hill on granite steps that lead to a granite terrace, I was stopped short by a pair of menacing-looking samurai warriors, each sporting a fierce bronze grin and a sharp dagger. But the Buddha was still not accessible. His reflection wavered in the placid waters of a semicircle reflecting pool, which was on this first terrace. To get to the next terrace on which the Buddha sat, I had to cross over one of the two wooden bridges that spanned the reflecting pool. Another flight of granite steps led directly to the Buddha. Approaching the statue as if I was expecting it to speak, I smiled when I saw some coins resting gently in the statue's left hand, left no doubt by someone hoping the Buddha would bestow upon them good health or good luck. But the serenity of the Buddha, and the serenity of his surroundings, was quickly shattered. "Hey you! Kid!" yelled a deep male voice boiling with anger. "This here's private property! Get-the-hell off of it! I'm callin' the law!"

Private property! Calling the law? Yikes! Was my father's prediction about to come true? Like a monkey in a tree, I scampered behind the Buddha. Seeing that the edge of the huge retaining wall, which separated him from the house next door, was like stair steps, I lunged from one step to the next, and then jumped into the brush, and made my escape through a hole in the bamboo fence. The irate man, whom I assumed was the gardener, or worse yet, the owner, never stopped yelling his threats. Quickly cranking the car, I slammed it into drive, and lunged down the street, as gravel danced in all directions. I was praying that whoever was doing the yelling would fail to get my license number. He didn't, and I rushed home—my heart pounding all the way.

Years after my near-death experience in the peaceful serenity of the Middlegate Gardens, I learned their history. From friends who lived in one of the grand houses located on Pass Christian's Scenic Drive, I was told that the gardens had been created in the late 20s by Mr. and Mrs. Rudolf Hecht. Mr. Hecht was a wealthy businessman from New Orleans, who, along with his wife, traveled the world, spending many pleasant hours in the gardens of Japan. It was their desire to recreate these gardens, and thus their happy times, at their summer home in Pass Chris-

tian. This they did, having huge holes dug, which became the ornamental lagoon and river. The dirt from those holes went to create the hills, on which grass and flowers were planted. The hills were capped with quaint teahouses. Wisteria, camellias, Japanese magnolias, Confederate jasmine, and cherry trees were all planted and cultivated. And over time, nature took its course, turning what had once been nothing more than sandy, palmetto-covered, land into a place of beauty. A place of serenity. And to an impressionable, seventeen year old boy, a place of magic.

But things magical and beautiful are fragile creations. What Camille spared in 1969, Katrina washed away in 2005. Today the Middlegate gardens are a complete and total wreck - a faded, washed-out remnant of what once was, it's glory seen only in old, sepia-toned, photographs, faded garden club pamphlets, and vintage post cards. I visited the old gardens not long ago; took a few pictures of what little was

left, making sure that this time I honored the "private property" signs by keeping my self firmly planted on the public sidewalk. It's amazing how age mellows the impetuosity of youth. As I stood taking those pictures, a faint breeze from the Gulf scurried around me. From somewhere came the faint scent of wisteria and jasmine, and then it happened. Closing my eyes, I could almost see a quaint garden gate capped with blue roof tiles, basking in the late spring sunlight. And just beyond that gate, lay a misty, magical, place - The Middlegate Oriental Gardens.



Above: Japanese Lanterns



The Goddess of Music and Elloquence



The God of Fishermen

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

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*All Photos by  
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