

BELFRY TOWER FROM ACROSS LOTUS POND...INN-BY-THE-SEA, PASS CHRISTIAN, MISS.



*“Once I built a tower up to  
the sun, brick and rivet  
and lime.*

*Once I built a tower,  
now it’s done.*

*Brother, can you spare  
a dime?”*

These lyrics are an anthem to the dark spirit and the equally dark days of The Great Depression. They express the deep regret of an America that had lost its ability to dream. This anthem was sung by millions, as they witnessed their dreams of grandeur dissolve into bankruptcy and breadlines. But there was a time - a time of jiggling flappers and red-hot jazz - when the American dream seemed an endless, joyous path leading upward into the skies of tomorrow. And that endless, joyous path also lead south to the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

During the 1920s there was a building boom on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Tourists had discovered it, and it became known as the “Riviera of America.” Many grand hotels dotted the landscape like glittering jewels in a glittering crown. Hotels like the Pine Hills in Bay St. Louis and the Edgewater Gulf in Biloxi stood like sentinels, keeping watch over the tourists streaming to the sunny Coast seeking an escape from the rigors of Northern winters, just as tourists do today. But tucked away on the crescent shore



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of the Bay of St. Louis, in a little cove unto itself, was a quaint hotel looking as if it had been “lifted bodily from Old Spain and gently set on the romantic Gulf Coast of Mississippi.”

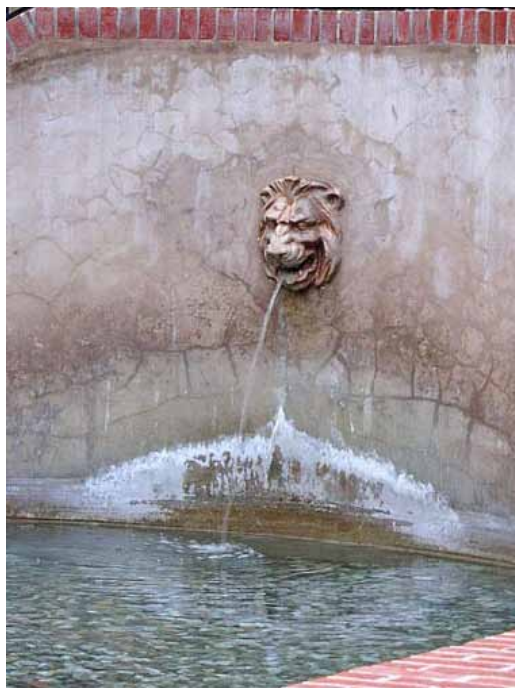
A period advertisement for that hotel, the Inn By The Sea, went on to say, “One could almost expect to see Spanish Grandees or French Cavaliers strolling beneath the rough-hewn beams of its corridors. One could almost imagine waking in the morning to witness a duel beneath one of the majestic Live Oaks. The very atmosphere of the Inn is charged with the romantic intrigue of the Spanish Main, and yet it has all the creature comforts in catering to the slightest wish of a vacationing family.” I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I’d relish seeing a duel on my vacation, or sleeping a sleepless night worrying about marauding pirates roaming the Spanish Main. But I would have enjoyed the Inn’s other amenities.

Built around 1926, the Inn was to be part of a larger, but ill-fated, planned community created by the Pass Christian Isles Company. It was a long, rambling building with low arched doorways encasing heavy, hand-hewn doors with wrought iron fittings. The windows were tall, with double arches and railed balconies.

Flagstone courtyards and patios were lush with huge pots christened with semi-tropical flowers and shrubs. Wall fountains gurgled in secluded cloisters, and unexpected nooks and winding stairways awaited the visitor at ever turn. Squawking, turquoise-and-yellow macaws, along with stately white cockatoos, serenaded the guests. The Inn’s exterior walls were painted a pinkish beige; pale green and terra cotta colored glazed roof tiles glistened in the afternoon sun. The hotel was surrounded by manicured lawns, swaying palms, and a vast shimmering pond



filled with pink and white lotus blossoms, their sweet scent filling the hotel’s public rooms and guest cottages. Encasing all this beauty was a radiant white sand beach, the Bay’s tawny-brown waters kissing its shoreline. An advertisement for the Inn stated, “Bathing on our sandy beach may be enjoyed practically the year around, as even in the dead of winter the waters of the Gulf



are warmer than the water in Northern Resorts in summer...” “Children especially can use our beach with safety because of its freedom from deep holes. But do not understand from this that you can bathe every day in the year with comfort.” Sounds like period damage control just in case it was needed.

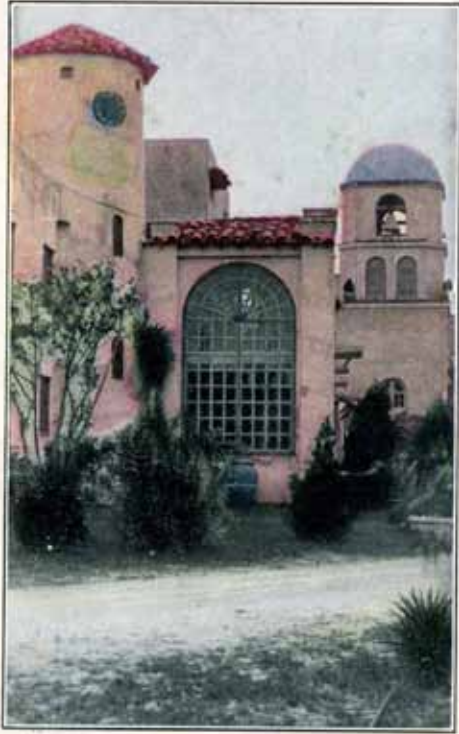
The Inn’s interior’s were encased

in warm wood and cool plaster, beams and paneling reflecting the undulating firelight from “hospitable looking fireplaces.” The Inn’s furniture was an eclectic mingle of Arts and Crafts lamps and tables, reproductions of Spanish antiques, and of course, whicker settees and chairs sporting comfy cushions. Brightly colored majolica pottery adorned the table tops; brass and copper Spanish-looking shields graced the walls. The guests were booked into “large, comfortable and home-like bedrooms, such as you find in a country estate (and it is along such lines that the Inn is run).” Many of the bedrooms had fireplaces and boasted, “finely appointed bathrooms with built-in tub, pedestal basins, etc.” The Inn was “modern and up-to-date in every way, but with the air an ancient mission.”

Like good hotels of the day, the Inn was known for its cuisine. “Fresh fruit and vegetables, chickens, ducks and turkey, fresh fish and seafood just caught, good coffee, and Western meats, deliciously cooked and seasoned, have made our table famous, and immaculate cleanliness, light, airy bedrooms, quiet elegance, and unobtrusive hospitality have done the rest. Special diets may be arranged to suit any guest.” Other attractions included the five, eighteen-hole golf courses which were within easy driving distance of the Inn. And then there was fishing.

“Fish of all kinds abound in the waters of the Gulf while the countless fresh water streams and brackish bayous are inhabited by many varieties of game fish. The climate is favorable for fishing at all times of the year.” At the Inn’s dock, guests could board one of two sailing vessels maintained by the hotel: the *Pussy Cat* or the *Queen of the Fleet*. For those wanting more than just a simple jaunt across the Bay, there were daylong excursions to Ship and Cat Islands aboard the small steamer, *Oneida*.

But this simplistic luxury, along with the exotic birds, the fabulous cuisine,



BELFRY AND CLOCK TOWER--INN-BY-THE-SEA  
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and the Inn's Old World charms could not last. I can imagine what it was like on that late October's day in 1929. Perhaps the Inn was being decorated for Halloween, which was two days away. The phone rang. The desk clerk answered. "What? What?" he kept repeating. "What crashed? The stock market?" And with those seemingly innocuous words, the Inn's glory days were numbered. Slowly over the weeks that followed the Inn grew quiet, as its guests rushed home to salvage their bankrupt lives. The Inn creaked along through the 30s, but Old Man Depression finally reaped his toil; the Inn fell into bankruptcy itself, never again to open its doors as a hotel. It remained shuttered and silent until World War II erupted. It was then sold to the U.S. Government where it became a training academy for the Merchant Marines, only to be abandoned once more when the war ended.

And there the old Inn languished until it was demolished in the late 60s - a forgotten relic of a bygone era. I can

imagine the Inn's caretaker sitting in the shuttered, cozy splendor of the lobby. Perhaps there was an old phonograph and some records. Perhaps he put a 78 on the turntable and cranked the crank, lifting the heavy arm onto the dusty black disk. And from the whirling phonograph record came the scratchy sounds of Bing Crosby singing "Brother Can You Spare a Dime." That haunting Depression anthem, about that which was and could never be again, then echoed down the long, abandoned hallways of the Inn by the Sea - paradise lost.

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