

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 30
Number 3 *The Russel Erskine Hotel*

Article 3

9-22-2004

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Recommended Citation

Ellis, Diane (2004) "An Artifact of Time and Place," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 30: No. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol30/iss3/3>

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An Artifact of Time and Place

DIANE ELLIS

Hotels have always held a special place in the imaginations of local residents and travelers alike. As the setting for historical events or books and films, the world's great hotels are often steeped in folklore and, over time, become so associated with a particular city and its history that they merge to become a single identity. Think of New York's Algonquin Hotel and its literary Round Table, or the Waldorf-Astoria, so closely linked with New York swank and celebrity. Tea at the Ritz in London, Sacher torte at Vienna's Sacher Hotel, and Parker House dinner rolls in Boston at, well, the Parker House, illustrate how closely city, hotel, and tradition can blend to form one historical memory.

Hotels are artifacts of time and place, and a study of hotels has much to tell us, whether about architecture and design, business operations and economics, visionaries and their power to inspire, or prevailing social attitudes. As a social institution, the hotel reflects a community's manners and values, including the legal relationships that affect social contact. Tied to a community's identity, a hotel can reinforce the community's view of itself and reveal how groups see themselves and each other.

Looming large in Huntsville's own identity is the Russel Erskine Hotel, a local landmark that has anchored the downtown corner of Clinton Avenue and Spragins Street since its opening in January 1930. Symbolic of our own modest splendor during the Depression years, the Russel Erskine surely symbolized to local residents the possibilities of a better future for themselves and their nation; thus those who were able to avail themselves of its luxuries and comforts, whether in the form of a Sunday dinner or a meeting of a local civic group, no doubt could forget for a few hours the harsh realities of the larger world. Over time, the Depression would end, and a new promising era of growth and prosperity would appear, in which the hotel, its patrons, and its staff would share. As the essays in this issue show, the Russel

Erskine had a good, long run before its decline and eventual sale.

For many years during the Russel Erskine's heyday, the hotel, like others in the region, operated within a legal system of racial segregation that had been in place since around the turn of the century and affected nearly every institution and almost all social interaction. About the time that the Russel Erskine's cornerstone was laid, for example, nearly thirty percent of Madison County's population was black, which in effect meant that three out of ten local residents could not legally enter the hotel unless it was to go to work. Recognizing these realities in no way diminishes our appreciation for the hotel's place in local history, but rather helps us to better understand the degree to which the Russel Erskine represented a particular time and place in our past.

For many of the hotel's golden years, a man named Jimmie Taylor kept things humming. Taylor's career at the hotel (1936-1960, with four years out as a paratrooper in World War II) is emblematic of the growth opportunities the hotel offered its staff. From teen-aged elevator operator to bellman to clerk to general manager (in 1947), Taylor "served the hotel's guests in every capacity during its golden age," as Bill Easterling wrote in a *Huntsville Times* column in March 1996. Clearly fond of the staff he oversaw during his years at the Russel Erskine, Taylor is a man of relaxed good humor, who possesses an impressive understanding of human dynamics and social relationships and conveys a sense of firmness and managerial acumen. The collection of memories he's amassed from his years at the hotel is remarkable.

It's been Taylor, along with Margaret Anne Goldsmith, who has helped keep the memories alive and the members of the Russel Erskine hotel "family" in touch with one another. In September 2001, some thirty years after the hotel closed, Taylor was the master of ceremonies for a reunion at the hotel of 100 or so Russel Erskine shareholders and former hotel employees and their friends and families ("So many of them had done well," Taylor remarked of the former hotel workers.) He noted that during the first ten (Depression) years of the hotel's operation, sixty percent of the employees hired in this period worked until they died or retired because of

age. “They were a breed of employees who are gone forever,” he said. “They were extremely hard-working, loyal, and seemed to rather be at the hotel than at home.” About sixty of the hotel’s 100 regular employees were black, forty white. “In the early days of the Depression, the average work week was ten to twelve hours a day for six days a week. The pay averaged fifteen cents per hour until about 1940.”

*We served watercress
salad 365 days a year—
366 in leap year.*

JIMMIE TAYLOR

In a videotaped interview with Blake Hudson this year, Taylor noted that he worked the elevator for fifteen cents an hour and wanted all the time he could get, working on one occasion for seventy-two hours. The hotel’s employees came from poor surroundings. At the hotel they could get meals at half-price. At one time, there were twenty handicapped people working at the hotel. Taylor also noted that Mr. Goldsmith (prime mover behind the hotel’s development and operations) gave “nice Christmas bonuses.”

There were appreciation parties in the ballroom for the regular workers, who were served by a few others. “Happy days,” Taylor recalls.

The development of Redstone Arsenal and the start-up of the missile and space programs ushered in a new and vibrant era for Huntsville and the Russel Erskine, and the hotel’s facilities were hard-pressed to accommodate the scores of meetings and guests. “The very things that the Russel Erskine contributed to the growth of Huntsville were the very things that contributed to her demise,” Taylor noted at the reunion. With prosperity and diverse development, the town had outgrown the hotel and the Russel Erskine’s glory years were over.

Thanks are due Jimmie Taylor and Margaret Anne Goldsmith for graciously sharing their memories and memorabilia with the editors as they prepared this issue of the *Quarterly*.

Quarterly readers have at hand three absorbing essays to broaden their knowledge of the Russel Erskine hotel as it was. David Bowman has gone to original sources

to give us a detailed account of the genesis of the hotel and how the business and finances fared over time. He also located many of issue's valuable photographs.

Dr. Eleanor Newman Hutchens and Margaret Anne Goldsmith are original sources. Both their families were involved with the hotel from its beginnings. Here they share some remarkable memories from their perspectives as children of founding members. As the daughter of one member of the original group of investors, Dr. Hutchens grew up with talk about the hotel at the dinner table and went on to hold an important position with the hotel company during its last years.

Margaret Anne Goldsmith's grandfather and father are forever linked to the Russel Erskine hotel and the vision-to-reality achievement they brought to the city. For many years, "home" for Margaret Anne was the Russel Erskine (fans of the Eloise at the Plaza stories will find themselves envious), and she gives us a private tour and insider's view of the hotel.

Mike Holbrook's update on the current restoration of the hotel and David Greenberg's account of the financial elements that came together to make the new project work round out the issue.



Water Cress á la Dennis

Recipe from the Russel Erskine Hotel. The salad dressing was prepared in a five-gallon commercial mixer by Lucille Holden Pickett, the pantry cook at the hotel for more than twenty-five years.*

12 EGGS	VEGETABLE OIL
VINEGAR	SUGAR
SALT	SALAD OIL
PAPRIKA	KETCHUP
WORCESTERSHIRE SAUCE	

Combine paprika, salt and sugar. Add vinegar and eggs, then beat well. Add oils, then beat well. Add Worcestershire sauce and ketchup. Beat till fluffy.

Optional: horseradish, mustard, white pepper, olive oil. Chop a shallot and a slice of crisp bacon for each salad. Toss with a generous portion of Dennis watercress.

The Huntsville Times, April 21, 2002

**The hotel's watercress was supplied by the Dennis Water Cress company, which grew watercress in its Martinsburg, West Virginia farms during the summer and in Madison County, Alabama ponds in the winter, guaranteeing the Russel Erskine a year-round supply of the delicacy.*



Russel Erskine tower late 1940s. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects