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Living at the Hotel: Childhood Memories

MARGARET ANNE GOLDSMITH

Employees and resident guests alike knew me as Mr. Lawrence Goldsmith, Sr. and Miss Annie Goldsmith's granddaughter, and Mr. Lawrence Goldsmith, Jr.'s daughter. I lived in the Russel Erskine Hotel for most of every year from the spring of 1941, when I was a few months old, until I was twelve. In 1952 my father remarried, and my new mother, my father and I moved from the hotel to our family home on Gates Street.

In 1941 Huntsville had a population hovering around 13,000 residents. There was no Parkway, and out Whitesburg Drive the road was lined with cotton fields. Huntsville, a farming and cotton mill town since the late 1800s, was on the verge of transformation. The "talk" in 1941 was about the recent establishment in Huntsville of Redstone Arsenal, an army munitions factory, a facility that after the war would become a major installation for government defense work and space exploration. The seeds had been planted for Huntsville to become "Rocket City USA."

The Terry-Hutchens building at the corner of Clinton and Jefferson Streets had been built in 1925 and was Huntsville's first skyscraper. The *Times* building, a twelve-story office building a few blocks away at the corner of Greene Street and Holmes Avenue, was completed in 1928. The only other buildings over four stories at that time were the Twickenham and Yarborough Hotels. The twelve-story Russel Erskine Hotel, built in 1928 and 1929, opened on January 3, 1930. The Terry-Hutchens and the *Times* buildings and the Russel Erskine dominated Huntsville's skyline for almost thirty years.

The Russel Erskine Hotel had two entryways: through the garage on Spragins Street, a block from the Big Spring, and through the main entrance on Clinton Street. The garage was always packed with old-fashioned cars, the kind with running boards. Luna, the garage attendant, would have to jockey around five cars

in order to pull out the one needed by a guest checking out of the hotel. I always marveled at how Luna managed never to scrape the large beams that supported the hotel tower as he maneuvered around.

After entering through the garage, I would walk past the cars into the hotel proper. As I entered, long winding corridors jutted off to my left and right and led to the engineering rooms, the boiler, and laundry rooms that smelled of heat and freshly ironed linen. I would wait for one of the elevators in the dark basement lobby next to the men's room, then get on the elevator with my nurse, Cora, and go up to the eleventh floor where Cora and I lived. Room 1101 was a corner room next door to my father's and one floor below my grandparents' twelfth-floor apartment.



Hotel elevator operators and bellmen, 1936. Archived photo courtesy The Huntsville Times. Reprinted with permission.

The elevator always stopped first at the main lobby, then went up to the mezzanine and on up to the eleven guest floors, two through twelve. I remember the sounds the elevators made at night as I listened to them starting and stopping, lulling me to sleep. The elevator boys, not much older than I, wore uniforms and caps and white gloves to open the heavy green elevator doors with their brass handles. Sometimes the elevator boys let me run the elevators.

Tourists came in through the garage, but most townsfolk entered the hotel through the main entrance on Clinton Street, across from the First Baptist Church (now located on Governors Drive). Once inside, they either turned left to go into the barber shop for a haircut, right to go into the Blue Room, perhaps to a luncheon,

or straight ahead toward the lobby, with its marble floors and elegant chandeliers. Some visitors climbed the stairs on the left to the mezzanine to go to the beauty shop or the office of the Automobile Association of America, which later became the Rocket Club. Others continued on to the hotel's coffee shop, then Huntsville's most elegant restaurant, or they walked through the lobby to the ballroom to a club meeting, a party, or a prom.

On Sundays, folks flocked to the hotel from the town's six or seven downtown churches, wearing hats and gloves and suits and ties. They were headed to the coffee shop to be greeted by Cristo, the head waiter, then seated and served lunch by one of the gentlemen waiters who dressed in dark pants and white coats. Some of the townspeople's favorite menu items were the shrimp appetizer, the hotel's home-made rolls, and chicken croquettes, red snapper, prime rib, steak, and, of course, ice cream or apple pie for dessert.

I remember the kitchen and Horton, the chef, the coffee makers and large commercial stoves. The catering manager's room was in back where the walk-in freezers were. I remember the cooks, the waiters, and the tables on rollers that were used for room service, with their white cotton tablecloths, cloth napkins, and white china with blue trim.

Resident guests sat in the lobby surrounded by red damask curtains and thick area rugs that covered the marble floors. At the end of the lobby was Miss Josephine's newsstand, filled with magazines, candy, tobacco goods, and, best of all, comic books. There was the brass and marble reception desk with the hotel guest registers in their black covers, and behind the desk the old switchboard with its long connector tubes and red board lights. Katherine Taylor stood behind the desk greeting everyone. Her husband was the hotel manager, Mr. Taylor—Jimmie. Jimmie could always be found in his office talking to the employees or out front visiting with guests.

Continuing past the reception desk, through the lobby, I would come to the ballroom to peek in and admire its high ceilings and elegantly carved walls or just to

see what was going on. The ballroom was always booked. At night there might be high-school proms or parties, and during the day, club luncheons or business meetings and sometimes conventions.

During the week, the rooms were filled with businessmen and traveling salesmen. They were joined during the winter months by tourists making their yearly trek from the northern states to Florida. I remember the bellboys carrying their bags and receiving a quarter or sometimes a fifty-cent tip. There were also a number of resident guests. I especially remember the Robinson sisters, Miss Nora and Miss Hazel, from Texas. Miss Nora taught home economics at Huntsville High School and Miss Hazel was one of the two dancing teachers in town.

The guestrooms were furnished with either twin or double beds. Each room had a tile bath with special running ice water faucets, a radio and a Bible. Steam heat radiated from old-fashioned radiators with pipes that made knocking sounds in



Russel Erskine maids, 1940s. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library



Ballroom windows, west side, late 1940s. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects

winter. I remember listening to the whirling oscillating fans in summer and looking out through open windows with Venetian blinds, and I remember that the wind rattled those windows as I watched flocks of birds fly south in autumn.

On rainy days I liked to run up the twelve flights of stairs or take the elevator and stop on each floor to visit with and watch the maids (one for each floor) in their gray and white uniforms. Each maid cleaned twelve rooms a day, taking only one break, at noon, to go to the Big Spring Café a block away on Spragins for a hamburger wrapped in waxed paper to bring back for lunch.

I went to West Clinton school through the sixth grade. The school was located just down the street, about where the North Hall of the civic center stands today. After school I would take the hotel elevator to the basement and run down the street to the Big Spring to ride the Little Lion or climb the bluff overlooking the spring. Some days I would spend hours throwing bread crumbs to the goldfish and ducks. At other times, if I could find a large piece of cardboard to use as a sled, I would slide down the big hill behind the tall buildings that used to be on West Side Square, known as Cotton Row.

This was the hotel as I remember it during the 1940s and early 1950s. My father and grandparents shared with me other stories and memories of the hotel during the 1920s and 1930s. It was my ancestors who played a major role in making the Russel Erskine a reality back in the twenties. It all began with an idea of my grandfather, Lawrence B. Goldsmith, Sr. His idea was to build a first-class hotel to put Huntsville on the map and provide a much-needed public facility for the town. He gathered together a group of friends and relatives, including Morton Hutchens, Wells Stanley and sister-in-law Elsie Schiffman, widow of my grandmother's brother Robert, to discuss his investment idea. All who listened trusted my grandfather, known to all as Mr. Lawrence or Mr. Goldsmith, or The Big Boss or Captain. They respected his wisdom and business acumen. It was this group of brave farsighted individuals who invested their dollars to build the hotel.

The land on which the Russel Erskine was built was acquired from my family. It was originally the site of a row of buildings bought by my great-great-grandfather Morris Bernstein, who immigrated to Huntsville from Germany before the Civil War. The buildings he had bought long ago were demolished during the late 1920s so the hotel could be built. Although the hotel's grand opening coincided with the early days of the Great Depression, through the guidance of the stockholders, the directors and the sure hand of my grandfather, it remained open and solvent so that when the economy recovered the hotel fulfilled its promise and became Huntsville's social and civic center. It was the gathering place for most club meetings, civic and



Christmas party for hotel employees. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library

social, for weddings, proms, business meetings, and birthday parties. The hotel was the social, business and civic heart of Huntsville for many of the city's residents from the 1930s until the 1960s, "providing a facility for everything but funerals," in former manager Jimmie Taylor's words.

By the time my grandfather died in 1972, the hotel had contributed greatly to Huntsville's growth. It had served as caterer for most of Huntsville's major events both in the hotel and at other locations. It operated the restaurant at the old lodge on Monte Sano. It had been a major player in luring the generals who chose Huntsville as the site for Redstone Arsenal, which in turn became the site of the

space and rocket industry that brought prosperity and growth to what might otherwise have remained a farming and mill town. But as the town grew, it outgrew the hotel, and larger, more modern facilities were wanted to meet the needs of a growing community.

The Russel Erskine had seen its day as a grand hotel; in fact, hotel operations had been discontinued in the 1970s. The building was rented for some years after the hotel's closing, until several investors purchased it. Their alteration of the building into a suite hotel was abandoned, and eventually the building was purchased by a group who converted it to HUD apartments. Today the hotel is anticipating a major renovation, having been sold to a new group of investors who plan to renovate the apartments and restore to the public rooms something of their former glory.

In 2001, Jimmie Taylor organized a reunion of the Russel Erskine Hotel family, including more than sixty of its former employees, managers, suppliers, stockholders, and directors and their families. Over a hundred people came from miles around to embrace each other and share memories of the time when their lives had been so closely intertwined with one another and the hotel. It was very special for me to be there for it was indeed an extraordinary event. After more than thirty years, the loyalty everyone continued to have for the hotel and their years there was something unheard of today. I had childhood memories of the hotel, but now as an adult experiencing the reunion, I knew what it was about the hotel that gave it the aura of a *grande dame*. For all the people who lived and worked there for so many years the Russel Erskine had—a deep and lasting sense of place.



Grand stair, leaning rail, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects



Hotel lobby. Miss Joyce Hollingsworth (front) was crowned "Miss Huntsville" during the 1955 Sesquicentennial celebration. Behind her is Elizabeth Hunter, "Miss Madison County." Note ornate chandelier. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library