

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 30
Number 3 *The Russel Erskine Hotel*

Article 6

9-22-2004

From Stamp Licker to President: My Career with the Russel Erskine Hotel

Eleanor Newman Hutchens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly>



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hutchens, Eleanor Newman (2004) "From Stamp Licker to President: My Career with the Russel Erskine Hotel," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 30: No. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol30/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

From Stamp Licker to President: My Career with the Russel Erskine Hotel

ELEANOR NEWMAN HUTCHENS

This is a brief personal memoir. My connections with the hotel were sparse, sporadic, and unpaid. They came about through my father, Morton Hutchens, one of the founding investors who thought up and put up the hotel in the optimism of the late 1920s, when Huntsville was a vigorous town drawing more business travelers than the two existing hotels could accommodate.

There were then two passenger trains each day to and from Huntsville and Washington and New York. Travelers with business in Huntsville—with its mills, its banks, its retailers, its wholesalers, including nurseries among the largest in the world, its small manufacturers, and even its individual citizens who were steady clients for Oriental rugs and linen or custom-made clothing—such travelers arrived by train, took taxis to hotels, and settled in for several days of profitable transaction. Spending most of their working lives in travel, these men knew what they liked in hotels and which hotels best served them. My father and his associates decided to create a hotel in Huntsville that would impress and please them and any other discriminating guests who sought well-kept, up-to-date rooms, good service, and excellent food.

I was about nine years old when my father began mentioning the hotel at the family dinner table. It was to be called the Joe Wheeler, after the famous Confederate general. But as the search for building capital fell short, the founders decided to name it the Russel Erskine, for a Huntsville native who had become head of the Studebaker Corporation. Erskine was a member of one of the oldest Huntsville families and could be expected to enter into the civic spirit of the enterprise to the extent of investing substantial funds in it. The compliment was appreciated but not rewarded, except for a token \$500 investment.

Large sums had to be borrowed. My father occasionally mentioned his concern

Menu, 1960s. Courtesy Jimmie Taylor. The hotel's dining room was called the Coffee Shop. For years its sign was misspelled "Coffe" Shop. It was the first room to be air cooled.



THANKSGIVING MENU

Apricot Nectar—Tomato Juice—Pinnacle Juice 15
 Chicken Soup a la Reine 15
 Fresh Jumbo Shrimp Cocktail 35 & 70

ENTREE

Served with Two Vegetables, Salad, Rolls, Butter
 Coffee or Tea

Fresh Speckled Trout Fried in Corn Meal 1.50
 Baked Sugar Cured Ham, Raisin Sauce 1.50
 Roast Leg of Lamb, Mint Jelly 1.50
 Pan Fried Minute Steak 1.50
 Roast Young Turkey, Celery Dressing,
 Chutney Relish 2.00
 Roast Prime Ribs of Beef, au jus 2.00

VEGETABLES

Fresh Baby Lima Beans — Parsley Buttered Potatoes
 Fresh Buttered Broccoli — Fresh Creamed Carrots
 Candied Yams with Marshmallows

SALADS

Cranberry Rings, Cream Cheese
 Water Cress a la Dennis

DESSERTS

Old Fashion Pumpkin Pie 15
 Hot Mince Pie 15
 Lemon Fruit Jello 15
 Bleu Cheese, Jelly 20

STEAK SPECIALS

Broiled Baby T-Bone Steak 1.75
 Broiled Sirloin Steak 3.25
 Fillet Mignon with Bacon 2.85
 Broiled T-Bone Steak (16 oz.) 3.25

Served with French Fries, Sliced Tomatoes, Head Lettuce with Roquefort Dressing, Rolls, Butter, Coffee or Tea.

COFFEE SHOP

11:30 A.M. - 2:00 P.M.

5:30 - 8:30 P.M.



over this debt, but the promises of prosperity kept him hopeful. Building went on, then furnishing. My father marveled at the high standards set by his good friend and associate Mr. Lawrence Goldsmith, who continued to insist on the best. Parenthetically, I may say the members of business partnerships often go home and tell their wives that they alone are keeping the ship afloat, while their associates are knocking holes in the hull. My father was one of such partners, but not in the hotel enterprise. Never once did he hint that anyone contributed more thought, study, and energy to the nascent Russel Erskine than Mr. Goldsmith.

As opening time approached, a grand reception for about 300 people was planned. I, at age ten, was given the important job of buying the stamps for the invitations and sticking them to the envelopes. First-class postage was two cents for out of town, one-and-one-half for local delivery. I was given several dollars for the purchase.

Having quieted the fears of the postal clerk who suspected that a child my size had no business with folding money, I carried the 300 stamps home, set up a card table in our back hall, and began work. Soon the job palled: licking the stamps was pleasant at first but after a time was cloying to the tongue. I brought a saucer of water to the table.

When they dried, the stamps I had dipped in water fell off the envelopes. The envelopes, stiff with high quality and handsomely addressed in someone's elegant penmanship, were irreplaceable. So were the stamps, for one in my financial bracket. But every schoolchild, if I remember correctly, had a bottle of mucilage. I fetched mine, with its slit rubber cap, and carefully stuck the stamps back on. The effect was not pristine, but I may have gotten by with it; I don't remember scoldings or penalties. I don't suppose I went to the reception, though, being a child.

That was early in 1930. The stock market had crashed in October 1929, and the sense of risk attending the borrowings for the hotel was intensifying from month to month. The strain must have been terrible, but I was only faintly aware of it; I took more interest in my maternal grandfather's anxious watching of the stock market.

Every weekday brought a score, up or down, nearly always down.

In my teens, I knew the hotel for its delicious food and its ballroom. As I later learned, the food, not only in the dining room but in the rooms where civic groups held their weekly lunch meetings, was keeping the hotel from bankruptcy. Business slowed and slowed. The trains brought fewer and fewer travelers. As I heard from my father, Mr. Goldsmith was resolute in keeping up standards nevertheless. He would not cut corners. The few guests who did come found good service, smartly dressed bell-boys and maids, and impeccable rooms. My father was proud though sometimes despairing, as he and others put up thousands more toward the debt.

Good meals beautifully served by a well-trained hotel staff.

The approach of World War II brought the first arsenals to Huntsville. Our representatives in Washington and our business leaders at home had worked very hard to win them. The TVA, which I had been reared to believe was a dangerous experiment in socialism that classed President Roosevelt with Hitler and Mussolini, and possibly Stalin, was probably the most important drawing card we had. The hotel, its owners liked to think, may have been another. Redstone, for ordnance, and Huntsville Arsenal, for chemical warfare, saved the Huntsville economy.

It should be noted that we were not a somnolent little village; we were a progressive town that in the 1920s had prepared for progress. We were ready for the construction executives who settled in at the hotel to oversee the building of the two arsenals. We were ready with rental quarters for the union officials who collected dues from the arsenal workers, filling desk drawers with dollar bills. We were ready with four banks on the Square to take their deposits. We were even ready with a railroad track that ran from the west side of town to the river. We were ready with retailers who sold the construction companies the building materials and services that went into the arsenals. We knew how to provide local labor. Men streamed into my father's office to ask for recommendations. By secret agreement with his new friends at the

arsenals, he gave each of them a favorable letter, but used different colors of paper for good and no-good applicants. We were ready for prosperity, and the arsenals brought it to us. The hotel flourished.

In the thirties and forties, I knew the hotel only as a place to go for lunch or for the big dances given by the civic clubs at Christmastime. For a few years, there was the Blue Room, a pleasant cocktail lounge. After the war, I was only vaguely aware that motels and their parking lots were eating into occupancy at the hotel, serving travelers who were coming in not by train but in cars and planes. I was working in Georgia or studying in Philadelphia and took little note of this downward trend. Even when the space program arrived and perked up the economy, I wasn't here to notice its effect on the hotel.

Late in 1965, my father died, and I began to take his place at various board meetings around town. Then one day Mr. Goldsmith came and told me I was to be president of the hotel company and to call him Lawrence. He was really the head, but he wanted to continue as secretary-treasurer and oversee all details. He lived at the hotel.

As retail business completed its migration to the Parkway and hotel business to the Hilton and others, it became apparent that, like older downtown hotels almost everywhere in this country, ours was doomed. It was losing \$20,000 a year and had no prospect of turning around. I began to try to sell it. After Mr. Goldsmith died, I finally managed to find buyers, and we sold it at a price that would enable us to pay the stockholders their original investment plus enough, counting previous dividends, to give them an average 5 percent return for each year of its existence. Our accountant, a prominent Birmingham member of that profession, told me that although he had closed the books of many a downtown hotel in recent years, ours was the only one that had achieved that.

I was nevertheless sad at presiding over the dissolution of the enterprise that had begun so ambitiously in my childhood. The building stands, handsome as ever, and provides valuable housing near the center of town, but the excitement and hope that

charged Huntsville in the 1920s, and that found expression in the Russel Erskine, has moved to other ventures. I watch them with affirmative sympathy and wish them well. They are bringing back the old vital Huntsville.



Sale of Russel Erskine furnishings, May 1979. Archived photo courtesy The Huntsville Times. Reprinted with permission



Ballroom window, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects