



Looking Back #19

Martha Baker & The Beach Hotel

by

David L. Miles, Curator
Museum at Harsha House
Charlevoix Historical Society



In March, 1899, farm implement and supplies store owner John Baker announced that he would be building a small hotel at the far end of West Dixon Avenue called "The Pavillion," spelled with two 'l's. The *Charlevoix Sentinel* newspaper said it would "enjoy the most exhilarating breezes in the whole realm of resortdom." Surprisingly, it was the only hotel constructed in Charlevoix to take advantage of the Lake Michigan panorama. With a name change to "Beach Hotel" that would give it an aura of desirable location, the hotel was up and running by summer that year. Baker's wife, Martha Elston Baker, initially ran the place with another woman, then took over and became a Charlevoix legend.

Her father Robert had built the fifty-room Hotel Elston, which stood where Oleson's plaza is today, in 1898. Martha worked there for a bit when it was new and found she had inherited his hospitality genes and then some, a born hotelkeeper and razor sharp manager. So successful was she in handling the finances of the Beach and catering to her clientele that only five years after opening she was ready to expand.



Only known photograph of Martha Elston Baker



The diagonally positioned Hotel Elston with its splendid view of Round Lake



The original Beach Hotel as it looked for the first five years

Originally, the Charlevoix Beach Hotel provided a mere fifteen rooms over two wings, 32' x 50' and 32' x 60.' It had no room for an no office, only a desk placed in the corner of the dining room. The Beach claimed "private baths," but a 1922 *Charlevoix Courier* article said that the original hotel had only one bath to begin with. In 1904 came the first expansion, upwards, which doubled the capacity (right).



Expanded to twice the capacity, 1904

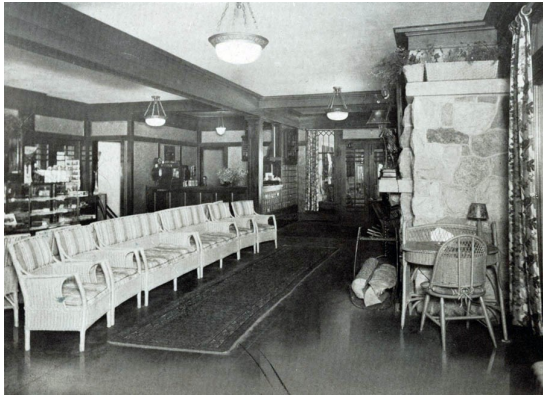
This building lasted eight years until a 1912 expansion, but even that was not enough, so an entire remodeling was scheduled after the 1914 season. A Chicago architect drew up plans for a 63' x 63' addition that would take the Beach further west and down to the shore. The number of rooms increased from around 100 to 216 with 86 baths. It was called "a new haven of splendor."



Fourth expansion, done 1914-1915



Seven stories, the tallest building ever constructed in Charlevoix. Beachside social pavilion at right

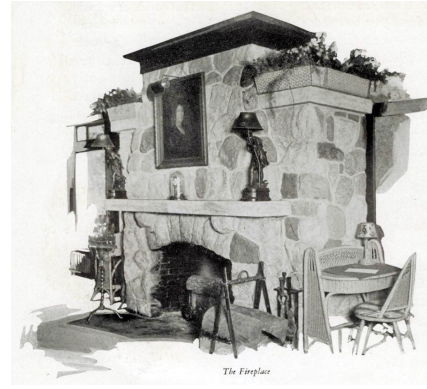


Above: View of main lobby

Below: One of two sun parlors



The Sun Parlor



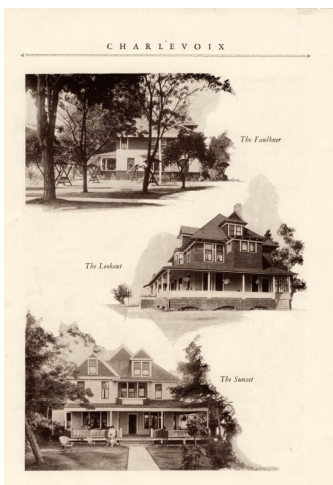
The Fireplace

Above: Martha Baker portrait over lobby fireplace

Below: dining room, capacity 350-400



The vastly enlarged Beach Hotel was a place into which a lot of thought had been invested. 1915 saw the first elevator in Charlevoix, an elegant bronze affair, and the Beach enjoyed its own ticker tape connection to the Chicago stock exchange. The *Charlevoix Courier* called the whole expansion and renovation "a house of wonderment" and "a triumph of beauty and an honor to our city, the owners, builders, and Northern Michigan as a whole." Now it was a serious competitor to the 84-room 1902 Belvedere Club hotel overlooking Lake Charlevoix at the east end of Belvedere Avenue, and the mighty 1898 250-room The Inn at the far end of East Dixon Avenue on Mercer Boulevard atop the terrace above the train station. The Inn was the second largest hotel in Michigan after the Grand on Mackinac Island. Of the three, the Beach alone stayed open later in the season, sometimes even into November, hosting many local affairs.



Three "cottages"

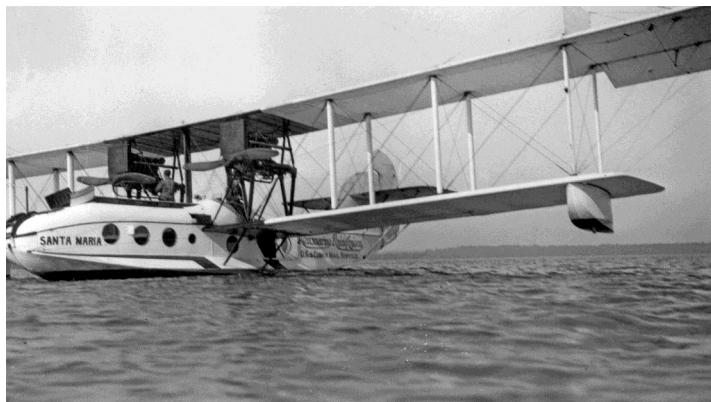
From the beginning, Martha Baker had begun to buy up neighborhood Victorian houses that she dubbed "cottages," owning an eventual total of fourteen. They, plus a separate bluffside annex across West Dixon, gave her over 100 facilities advertised as cottages and 'rooms to let' off the main premises.



A sumptuous "cottage" living room

Each cottage was furnished to the nines. Many of them were very spacious and capable of holding several families at once. It was estimated that at its peak, if every available sleeping surface in the Beach Hotel complex was utilized to its fullest, Mrs. Baker had the capability of housing around 1000 people per night.

A story was told that after World War I, when the times they were a-changin', taking a radical turn into the permissive Jazz Age, a young lady paraded through the Beach lobby wearing a bathing suit that exposed more flesh than had ever been exposed before. The result? An older female guest took one look and passed out cold.



This seaplane, called the *Santa Maria*, capacity fourteen including crew, arrived in Charlevoix in 1921 on an exhibition tour. The plane had been flying between Miami and Havana, Cuba. Its brief presence piqued Martha Baker's interest into making a major investment. Here it is seen on Lake Charlevoix.

Martha Baker was not only an astute manager who treated her guests like royalty and knew most of her repeat business by name year after year. She was a visionary and financial daredevil who made many local businessmen of the time blanch at her audacity and daring. Always looking ahead, full to the brim with self-confidence, she was a storehouse of advanced ideas that would continually improve her hospitality empire. According to local realtor and stone house developer Earl Young, "As a part of her expansion program and dream of the future, Mrs. Baker purchased Fisherman's Island for \$500 as a location for a casino, and placed an order for a seaplane as transportation between the hotel and the island seven miles south (more like three—DLM) on the Lake Michigan shoreline. It seems that Mrs. Baker had conceived the idea of building a clubhouse on the island (in 1921). She was already making arrangements for purchasing a seaplane to shuttle her guests back and forth from the Beach Hotel to her casino. It was always my opinion that it was fortunate that Mrs. Baker's plans were never realized. Fisherman's Island just never could have been a successful operation of that kind." Perhaps so, but we'll never know, for Martha Baker passed away in Florida the following year at age fifty-six.



Fisherman's Island south of Charlevoix, Martha Baker's intended gambling destination, reachable only by seaplane

NEXT EDITION: THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE BEACH HOTEL