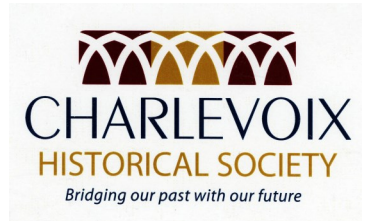




Looking Back #20

The Decline & Fall of Charlevoix's Beach Hotel



by
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Museum at Harsha House



Vintage color postcard of the Beach Hotel in its prime

In the previous edition of Looking Back, the conception, growth, and reputation of the magnificent Beach Hotel at the far end of West Dixon Avenue, overlooking Lake Michigan, was described. From fifteen to over 200 rooms in a decade and a half, the tallest building ever erected in Charlevoix, one of the most successful hotels in the state—all this was the result of the managerial genius of Martha Elston Baker, wife of builder and local farm equipment merchant John Baker. An untapped, actually unknown reservoir of hotel savvy in every aspect flowered once she got her bearings and the ideas started to flow. Her financial daring and complete faith in her own capabilities was the wonder of the local business world. The personal treatment she showered on all her guests sent her reputation from coast to coast, and these guests returned to her embrace and warmth year after year. She would think nothing of personally putting together and packing picnic lunches for fishermen headed out for a day on the waters of the big lakes or the Jordan River away to the south beyond East Jordan. In Martha Baker's time, the Beach Hotel was synonymous with the attractions of Charlevoix. But its sterling reputation didn't last much beyond that.

Martha Baker had great plans for the Beach after World War I. Her ambition was to surpass The Inn, the second largest hotel in Michigan after the Grand on Mackinac Island. This local 250-room giant, only a year older than the first incarnation of the Beach, was located due east at the far end of East Dixon Avenue where it overlooked the panorama of Lake Charlevoix. Over 130 more rooms were planned, each with a bath, a pipe organ in the casino, a new tea room with capacity for 200, and dining capacity increased to 700. But Martha Baker died in Miami in 1922, and is buried in Charlevoix's Brookside Cemetery below one of the largest headstones along Stover Creek.

Unfortunately, instead of thinking wisely after three years of illness and placing the hotel and its renown into the capable hands of her loyal secretary and business confidante who knew the business inside out, this time Martha stumbled in judgement. She left her fortune, around half a million dollars, plans, properties, and the outstanding mortgage of \$145,000 to her daughter. To husband John she left one of the fourteen cottages and the hotel laundry, located in a separate building downtown. This, known as the Troy laundry, was situated at the lower end of Clinton Street right on Round Lake. Its main business was doing laundry for the larger local hotels. The enterprise ended up with the name Model Home Laundry, as many today remember, until it was torn down in the 1960s.

Daughter Doris had not inherited a whit of her mother's genes and hospitality instincts. She was a flighty party girl married to a high-rolling gambler with shady connections named Arthur von Dolcke. According to local author and *Charlevoix Courier* columnist Edith Gilbert in her book *Summer Resort Life: Tango, Teas and All!*, "One of the desk clerks recalls seeing her waltz into the lobby 'higher than a kite' at 6:00 a.m. waving her dancing shoes above her head." The many kind services and considerations her mother had showered on her guests was a foreign concept to Doris and her husband. The Beach's guests to them were nothing but a wide-open wallet to support their extravagant and wasteful life style. Slowly the Beach started to falter. One by one the remaining thirteen cottages had to be sold off to meet obligations. Doris and Arthur von Dolcke tried to maintain appearances, but the Great Depression took its toll along with their mismanagement. Many of their high-quality employees who had established such good rapport with many repeat guests over many years either left during a season or never returned. Service declined precipitously.



Lower right, the Model Home Laundry, formerly the Troy Laundry owned by the Beach Hotel to wash its and other large hotels' linens, etc.

To give an idea of what was happening, this article appeared in the *Courier* of August 24, 1938. Headline: Beach Hotel Blaze Causes Big Damage. "Fire starting on the roof of the Charlevoix Beach Hotel from chimney sparks caused several thousand dollars damage early Wednesday morning. Guests were forced from the hotel as the blaze gutted the upper east and a portion of the north wings. Despite high wind, firemen checked the flames from spreading through the large structure and a greater share of damage was caused by water seeping into the lower floors." Pay close attention to this last paragraph: "It was the third fire from the same cause this season. No insurance was carried." That was the depth of the hole which the von Dolckes had dug for themselves.

In spring of 1939, the hotel was hit by yet another fire that severely damaged the kitchen wing, causing it to sag. Shortly afterward, on June 29, the Beach was placed in receivership through the Charlevoix County State Bank. In an abstract for the Baker cottage at the Michigan Avenue/West Dixon corner, which the von Dolckes apparently still owned, was later found this passage: "defendant failed utterly to protect the mortgage property by fire insurance. . . and the defendant's incompetent management since 1931 has produced no result except aforementioned waste, series of deficits, neglect of municipal and public utility service obligations, loss of credit among tradesmen and loss of hotel patronage." The von Dolckes slunk out of Charlevoix under a cloud of a terrible reputation for mismanagement and deceit. Nobody in town wanted to have anything to do with them after having given one of its treasures such a black eye and catastrophic fall from grace.



Bar redone in nautical style allegedly by and for a private party

The final landlord, a man named Harry Hogan who owned a lot of Charlevoix commercial real estate, changed the name to the Holiday Terrace Hotel (right). He wanted to bring in go-go girls to his basement bar called the Hare's Lair, the name undoubtedly influenced at the time by Hugh Hefner's Playboy bunnies and the Playboy Clubs. But the Charlevoix Ministerial Association successfully intervened by claiming that this entertainment undermined public morality, led to illicit sex, and was apt to lead astray servicemen stationed at Charlevoix.

A series of well meaning later owners did their best, rebuilding and redecorating in places, such as the nautical bar at left, this allegedly done with outside help for a private party in the 1940s. The lobby was still its warm, welcoming self. It looked like after World War II that the building and business might have a chance, even into the 1960s. But it was not to be. Conventions helped, a try at the ski business couldn't make it because of the enormous expense of heating, and it lost what little class it had left at the very end.

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HOLIDAY TERRACE HOTEL
CHARLEVOIX, MICHIGAN

CHARLEVOIX CLERGY COMPLAINS

Go-Go Girls Get No-No

CHARLEVOIX — The city council has denied a request for an entertainment permit at the Hare's Lair, Charlevoix's newest cocktail lounge, in the basement of the old Beach Hotel overlooking Lake Michigan.

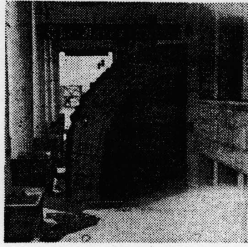
The action came after the Charlevoix Ministerial Association protested go-go girl entertainment offered by the Hare's Lair earlier this winter.

The Association maintained that go-go entertainment undermined public morality, led to illicit sex and was apt to lead astray servicemen stationed at Charlevoix.

D. A. Winnie, representing Henry Hogan, owner of the Hare's Lair, expressed surprise at the action and affirmed that there was no intent to establish a go-go house having a bad reputation.

"Without an entertainment permit, speakers, stand-up comedians and other forms of dancers and entertainment could not be engaged."

"We are interested in preserving the good, wholesome



Entrance to Hare's Lair

reputation of Charlevoix, if not more so than many, because of our investments and wish to see the city prosper," he continued.

"I repeat that our interest in having an entertainment license is in preparation for our new hotel and continuation of go-go girls is furthest from our minds, although this is a form of entertainment much publicized on television for the younger set, and like most things it can be exaggerated. To this extent, we apologize to anyone offended and hope it won't be seriously held against us."

The resolution was a stock form supplied by the Liquor Control Commission to sound out community sentiment on the granting of licenses. A license objected to locally has virtually no chance of approval by the state.

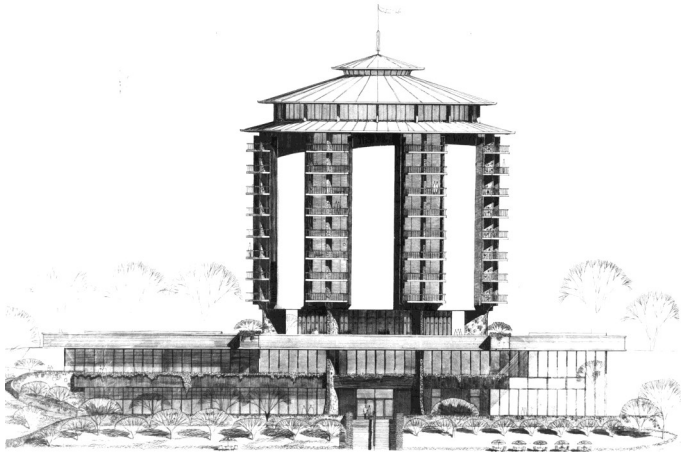
The type of license presently held by the Hare's Lair permits an orchestra and a singer but no other types of entertainment.

As the ski season is practically over for the year, Winnie is closing the Hare's Lair pending opening of The Deck with the approach of warmer weather.

The Deck, also in the old Beach Hotel, has a nautical motif and commands a magnificent view of Lake Michigan and the setting sun. Here, organ and piano music is offered for the dancing and listening pleasure of the summer tourist trade.

Hogan Enterprises plans to tear down the 19th century hotel and rebuild a nine-story structure on the site with a revolving cocktail lounge and dining room at the top.

This referred to local Coast Guard personnel and the U. S. Air Force men who manned the radar scoring station at Bay Shore eight miles east of Charlevoix. The servicemen there electronically tracked mock bombing missions over the emissions stack of the Big Rock Point nuclear plant four miles north of town, done to improve future combat accuracy without using real munitions. But note the last paragraph of the article. At the same time, Hogan was planning to tear down the Beach and rebuild with a reported nine-story circular structure that had a revolving cocktail lounge and dining room at the top, a popular concept of the day.



The concept actually reached the drawing board, above as seen from Michigan Avenue. It looks to be at least twelve stories tall in total, including eight floors of rooms. A second, less expansive version reduced by two floors of rooms, right, was drawn by local architect Jack Begrow as he envisioned it from lake level. But nothing ever came of the idea.





Vacated Beach Hotel, with one staircase gone, broken and missing windows that allowed in the elements

So the Beach just sat there, finally abandoned, and continued to fall apart. Kids threw rocks through the windows, and those they couldn't reach they peppered with slingshots or bb guns. Above left sees a lower staircase missing. Above right, some of the large upper sun parlor west windows have disappeared to allow wind and weather to penetrate deep into the huge building. The interior suffered also from vandalism, and one of the porch pillars toppled to block the sidewalk. The Beach's neighbors rightfully feared a conflagration like that which had decimated the Butters Sunset Lodge next door to the north in 1956, and voiced their concerns. So there was no alternative. The Beach had to go. Slowly it was pried apart. The entryway that had welcomed so many thousands was littered with demolition. The upper portion of the building came down almost to street level.



Entryway filled with fallen lumber



Upper levels reduced almost to street level



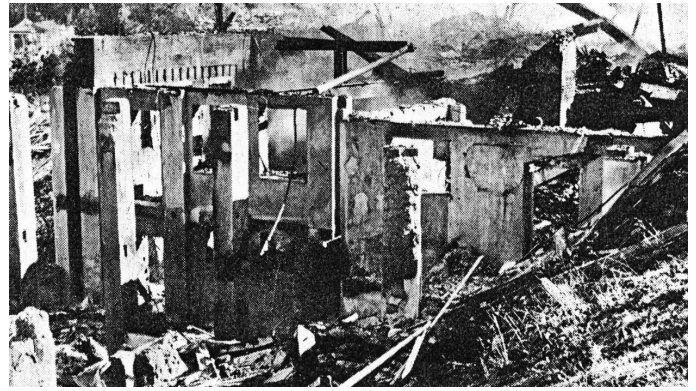
Bulldozers apply the major touches



Just prior to the fire that finished the job



Smoldering aftermath of the two-day fire



Nothing left but scorched foundations and wet, stinking ash

The end was drawing nigh. The hotel's intended destiny was to be hauled away in pieces by truck to a dump. Just after the bottom righthand photo on the previous page was taken, on the morning of Monday, October 16, 1967, a spark from a workman's torch hit some debris, and up she went. There was a lot left to burn. All that day and night and well into Tuesday, flames and smoke towered into the sky, fortunately not driven by the high winds that had threatened the north side eleven years before when Butters burned, but a spectacular sight nonetheless. No attempt was made to extinguish such a large expanse, only keep it under control. By Tuesday night, all that remained were piles of wet, acrid ash, smoldering wood, and broken foundation walls.

From the time Richard Cooper opened the Fountain City House on Pine River Lane in 1867 to the wretched demise of the Beach, exactly one hundred years of Charlevoix's hotel industry had passed. The ravaged grounds were filled in and graded in 1968, and lay empty for the next few years. A glorious era that had experienced so much had come to an inglorious end, the likes of which will never be seen in Charlevoix again. It had been a time filled with unimaginable luxury, glamour, scandal, the flaunting of great wealth, a constant round of teas and dances, wide open gambling, parties both wild and subdued, drama— for Charlevoixites, a continuous eye-opening exposure to another way of life, and a major factor in the taking of Charlevoix's name around the world.



La Croft condominium almost completed, 1973, on the site of the Beach Hotel and Butters Sunset Lodge