Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel and Heritage Manor History

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Harlingen Historical Preservation Society, Updated November 2006, August 2011

On 7/13/25 it is announced in the Morning Star that work is to start on the $100,000 hotel of Mr. and Mrs. John J. Burk, formerly of Decatur, Alabama where in 1912 he had opened an automobile agency. He has had experience with a tourist hotel in Chattanooga, Tennessee. [Actually Burk was gleaning knowledge from his mother who owned and ran the hotel] Two of the three lots upon which it will be sited were donated by the Harlingen Development Co., and the Chamber of Commerce put forth a $5,000 cash bonus. After reviewing bids, Mr. Burk decided to take on the construction himself. The hotel to be built would become the Reese-Wil-Mond. The name is derived from that of three of his sons, John Reese, William Edwin, and Charles Raymond.

On 11/18/27 the Reese-Wil-Mond opens its first unit of 65 rooms, an additional wing of 65 to open later. It is 1928 when the five story fireproof Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel is completed by hotel operator and owner, J. J. Burk. It also has a roof garden and a finished floor for dancing along with a moveable stage for vaudeville presentations. The hotel's location is on First Street, corner of Van Buren. Early on it bills itself as the "Traveling Man's and Convention Headquarters of the Valley." It features large sample rooms for salesmen to show off their wares. Its room rates are $2.50/day down.

The quality of the building's construction is high. There is reinforced concrete, brick exterior, high ceilings, and quality Hunter Fans. Some dropdown ceiling fans taken from the hotel when it closed are still in operation in Grimsell's Seed Store. The hotel advertises itself as the only fireproof hotel in town. When it was built it was the only fireproof hotel south of San Antonio.

On the block to its east a competitor opens at the same time. The first unit of 84 rooms of the eventual 150-room Moore Hotel opens (7/17/28). The three-story Moore Hotel (renamed the Madison in late 1930) is erected at 121 Van Buren to the immediate north side the old two story wooden Mooreland Hotel soon scheduled for demolition. The Mooreland was the town's first hotel. It was in 1906 that the railroad company felt confident enough of Harlingen's future that it constructed a two-story, u-shaped, frame hotel having 10 rooms with two baths and verandas on both floors. Its location was the center of town, Hill (now First) Street and Harrison. Its first manager is Mrs. A.H. Weller. [Mrs. Weller's father, Charles Bock, Sr. (also spelled in the original German, Boch), has the distinction of being the first Texas Ranger to enlist in a company in Victoria.] In the fall of 1908 C.S. Moore purchases the hotel from the railroad company. It becomes known as the Moorland Hotel. Mr. Moore was an avid fisherman and held the honor of landing the first summer tarpon at Port Isabel from 1906 through 1909. Benjamin Franklin and Cora L. Ogan, who have managed the railroad hotel in Raymondville, come to manage the Mooreland. They soon built a two-story frame hotel with 22 rooms at 321 W. Jackson, west of the tracks. It is razed in 1945 at which time Mrs. Ogan still owned it and four adjacent lots. Mr. Ogan had died in 1922.
The Madison's first manager is J.V. Murphy, who will also later oversee the Plaza Hotel. The Madison proclaims "Where traveling men covering Southwest Texas stay because of the hospitality shown them and the service rendered." Each of its 150 rooms has a bath; daily rates range from $1.50 to $3.00 and monthly rates $25-60. In 1955 the Madison itself will be torn down to make way for construction of an office building whose primary occupant is Tropical Savings and Loan, which earlier had set up its first offices in the Madison.

The well known and popular Mr. Burk, who has done so much for the city by erecting a first class hotel, will serve as a City Finance Commissioner December 1933 to January 1936. His wife Bessie M. Burk takes an active role in the hotel management. As early as 1930 she is listed as assistant manager of the complex, which also includes a cafe. This same year son John R. Burk is a student while his brother William Edwin Burk fills in as day clerk. The family resides in the hotel. By the time the enterprise is incorporated by 1937 as the Burk Hotel Co., Inc., J.J. is president and Mrs. Burk is manager.

Unfortunately he is to die in April 1937 at age 57 after a long bout with tuberculosis. His widow Bessie M. Brooks Burk, whom he had married in 1908, then becomes president of the corporation. Burk and his wife had come to Weslaco in 1923 where they spent several years. Burk was born 1/4/1880 in Jasper, TN but four years later moved with his family to Chattanooga where his mother Nannie Bradley Burk operated the Burk Hotel from 1885 to 1920. At the time of his death Burk also owned an apartment building in Dallas. He was a 32nd degree Mason, a Shriner, a member of the Harlingen Kiwanis Club, a member of the Valley Mid-Winter Fair Board of Directors, and of the First Baptist Church. He was preceded in death by sons John Reese, who died of a football-sustained kidney ailment, and William Edwin, who died in an automobile accident, both deaths in 1930.

Burk’s April 20, 1937 front-page obituary notes that he was “possessed of a mechanical inventiveness which he applied in the operation of the hotel here and as a spare time hobby.” He was buried in a San Benito cemetery beside his two sons.

In 1937 during the extended economic depression both hotels advertise the same rates, ranging from $1.50 to $4.00 a day. A competitor, the 80-room Plaza Hotel has rates of $1 to $2 a day.

The hotel premises act as a key business and social focal point for the community. Club conventions, conferences, and meeting are held in it, but more importantly for the younger set, rooftop dancing is what entices them. Many of today's oldsters will fondly remember learning ballroom dancing in their youth under the tutelage of the area’s leading dance instructor, Markaleta Elstner (Mrs. Bert Epstein). The banquet facilities and catering were superior for the area. Still others will recall twirling lessons conducted in the roof top terrace by Griff O'Neal.

It is in 1943 that the Burk Hotel Co. sells the Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel to Lucille Wolf of Chicago. Later it is partly owned by B.F. and Katherine Weinberg of Jackson County,
Missouri. When they sell a half interest to Howard Hurwith for about $88,700, Jules Bisno associated with Weinberg and Mrs. Wolf retains the other half. The new owners advertise that it is air-conditioned, has steam heat, and a popularly-priced dining room in connection. In the 40s it will also house a barbershop operated by B.W. Hoffman and a confectionery shop.

One of the hotel's more interesting tenants is R.J. (Duck) Kroeger. From 1946 to 1948 he will be Harlingen's mayor. He has had an interesting career. In the years 1926-35 he is a publisher's representative. In Harlingen in 1938 he starts up C & H News Co., now at 402 North T Street. The initials stand for Cameron and Hidalgo. The company distributes newspapers, magazines and post cards to stores across the area. In time it will grow into a considerable enterprise with 25 outlets in the U.S. and Canada. When Kroeger dies his wife Zola Mae (Peggy) runs the company, which now also distributes pocket books. Having no children, the company eventually goes into the hands of a Corpus Christi nephew. The Kroegers make their home for many years in the Madison Hotel and move into the Reese-Wil-Mond when the Madison sustains a fire. Later they move into a suite at the new Seville Motel at West Harrison.

The hotel will have a succession of managers over the years. First under the new owners is R.J. Waters, there for about nine years until Leo B. Osner takes over in 1950 when it is listed as being owned by Consolidated Hotels. In 1953 Mrs. Geneviere Robinson is managing the Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel then J.A. Mewmaw follows the next year. D.F. Campbell is there in 1956, but W.L. "Bill" Kumpf is on board 1956-57.

In the 1950s with motor inns and motels becoming more popular for those on traveling by automobile, interest in staying at old style, inner city high-rise hotels began to wane. Harlingen had an explosion of new motels built along 77 Sunshine Strip when the state completed the Business 77 Bridge over the Arroyo Colorado. These drew considerable business away from the hotels in downtown Harlingen and were more convenient for travelers continuing onward.

By 1966 the telephone directory simply listed the old building as the Reese Hotel, but it was no longer advertised in the classified section.

On 12/10/49 the Harlingen Housing Authority was created with its purpose to provide apartments and homes to people of low income. Rent charged to each family would be based upon the total family income. In 1952 Le Moyne Gardens, with 200 units to serve as military family housing, had been built adjacent to the Harlingen Air Force Base. In 1962 when this U.S. Air Force base closed, one of the first projects of the HHA was Le Moyne Gardens, where low income city housing was instituted after reconstruction of the old military family housing at the location west of the airport.

The Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel is purchased by HHA, renovated, and converted in 1970 and 1971. Among its changes was a resurfacing of its exterior walls. A retirement facility for senior citizens of limited income, then comes into being. By 1972 the old Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel is then renamed Heritage Manor and has 104 senior citizen apartments.
With its central location and helpful staff the facility would be a godsend to its elderly occupants. It provided security and independence to those such as Mrs. Homer (Myrta) Perkins, who would live there until nearly the end of her life at age 101. Weekly "Kitchen Band" performances, among other activities, built a spirit of camraderie among the tenants composed of a wide range of ethnicities, religions, and races.

After almost 35 years serving as housing for some of the city's residents, on 12/10/04, Heritage Manor residents receive notice from Joe Hernandez, the facility's manager, that the facility may close. The culprit is the building's badly corroded cast iron plumbing system. It is unclear what action the Harlingen Housing Authority Board will take on the matter. HHA Executive Director Blas Cantu indicated that residents would be assisted in moving. Whether the 78 year-old structure is worth further investment will be a decision based on engineering input. Those with happy memories of the building and the many activities it once witnessed may take a little solace in the fact that the structure was recycled 35 years ago rather than being demolished at that time.

The building, if physically sound, and it appears to be, warrants preservation because it played such a central and important role in the city's business, social, and community activities over a 39 year period then went on to function in an useful manner as housing for senior citizens of the city. An assessed value of the building at this time is placed at $875,000 but the cost to repair deteriorated cast iron plumbing and make other renovations may cost $2-4 million.

After two years of vacancy, the building remains poorly utilized and in a state of bureaucratic limbo as options and paperwork are still being reviewed.

The building was purchased by Jo Rae Wagner, a commercial plumbing contractor, who completely restored the building at great expense by early 2011. It then housed an upscale Italian restaurant (Colletti's), two floors of commercial offices, two more floors of large condominium apartments and an events center on its fifth floor. The facility has been renamed" The Reese". The city and water board have sold it additional parking space.

Richard Bloss emailed this background material on the Burk family:

From: R Pace <repace@gmail.com>
To: 'Dick Bloss' <rbloss@umich.edu>
Sent: Sunday, August 28, 2011 8:22 PM
Subject: RE: Thanks!

Mother and I talked about the Burk’s today. As I recall the reason they went to Texas was purely business. The Hotel in Chattanooga was a good business. John understood hotel operation. The railroads and automobiles had opened up vacation travel and people wanted to see the west. The Gulf coast was a good vacation spot. At that time people didn’t actually build sizable structures directly on the beach.
She seems to have forgotten so much. I’m very pleased that you have gotten all of this family information together.

Today Dave came down (he still lives in Mansfield) and he and I and the boys took a tour of “Northside” Cincinnati. This was “north of the tracks” in 1900. Dave’s uncle built many of the houses there between 1920 and 1948. Dave’s mother told me the stories. I’m not sure he remembered many. It was an official tour with the Preservation Association, so it was nice to get the community history—and I tried to fill in the boys with the family history. Chris lives there now. In fact we stopped in front of his apartment building to talk about the building next door. (Unfortunately no one knew the history of his building.)

Do you know much about the Blosses who went to Kansas—who were burned out and returned to Ohio? I am reading a book with the long title “The Incredible Story of Ephraim Nute: Scandal, Bloodshed and Unitarianism on the American Frontier”. Nute was a Unitarian pastor who was sent from the East to plant a church in Lawrence, Kansas. He arrived to bare open prairie in the middle of the fight about whether Kansas would be a free state or slave state. Unitarians were firm abolitionists. I was hoping to run across a Bloss in the narrative—which is primarily Nute’s letters and journals. The index does not have the Bloss name, so I don’t think I will find them, but I’m certainly learning more about the “war”. Nute arrived in Kansas in 1855. He served in the Civil War and returned to Lawrence after the war, but then went to Boston in 1871. I stayed in the Free State Hotel in Lawrence which figures prominently in the book, and I attended service at a Civil War Era Methodist church the Sunday I was there.

I asked mother if the Blosses and Burks were always Methodists. She said yes, but she doesn’t really remember. I saw in your material that the Burks were Baptists at one point. I did wonder if they were Unitarians. Religion and the abolitionist movement played a large part motivating many people to move to free territory from the slave states.

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