

BOCA CIEGA INN.

by Allean Davis. 1984.

In the beginning it was called the Hotel Dobler, built in 1922 on the corner of 31st Ave So. and 54th st. So, It was meant to be an exclusive fishing lodge, but it never really succeeded well. It was a large frame building covered with stucco. The lower floor consisted of a large entrance hall, main lobby, sun porch, dining room, kitchen and pantrys¹²⁵. There were 42 rental rooms upstairs, and it also contained an elevator shaft, but no elevator was ever installed. John Dobler seemed unable to enlarge the hotel, or even manage it very well as only a few guests came and went. He was pistol whipped by local residents because he let his black employees stay in his stable attic after dark. A curfew was in effect in Gulfport at that time, and no black person was allowed to stay in Gulfport from "Sun-down to sun-up." Mr Dobler never seemed to regain his strength after the attack to complete his plans for the hotel, his spirit seemed completely broken.

Ten years later, in 1932 Mr and Mrs Paul B. Camp bought the hotel Dobler and changed the name to Boca Ciega Inn. The cost was \$32,500.00 for the building and four lots. They also paid \$2500.00 for furnishings for 42 rental rooms, ^{and for} as well as dining room and kitchen equipment. A full basement was made into Game rooms, and a business office was added. Besides the main building there were 4 apartments and 2 cottages facing 31st Ave which were rented by season or month. People renting these places also enjoyed the activities of the regular guests, and most of them took their meals at the Inn. It was operated on the American plan with three complete meals a day. Usually there were two hundred people for Sunday dinner, and soon

95% of the guests were booking for the coming year. The guests who returned season after season said it was just like one big happy family getting together again.

Mr. and Mrs. Camp worked tirelessly as host and hostess, striving to please and make their guests as comfortable as possible. They were competent and careful managers, due perhaps to experience gained from operating their York Beach, Maine hotel- called Ocean House. That was another seasonal operation they owned many years. This couple was admired and loved by everyone they contacted and it was their personality primarily, that accounted for their success.

Mr. Camp would go to market early every morning and if any guest wanted to go with him into the city he could return by trolley later. The cars came down the center of Beach Blvd. after turning south, and ran between rows of age-old oak trees- shaded all the way to the end of the line at the Casino. The fare was five cents!

Mrs. Camp was in charge of the kitchen and planned the menus, each day offering different selections. The meals were hearty and delicious with plenty of fresh Florida fish, fruits and vegetables. That food was another big reason for their popularity, no place for one on a diet! Mrs. Camp usually employed black Chefs who travelled with them from Maine each year. One of these prepared meats, ~~and~~ baked the breads and pastries, fresh each day. Eventually he left them to work in New Orleans in ~~the~~ "The Quarter" but he came

back to see the Camps once a year to thank Mrs Camp for giving him such a good start toward his career.

Another mainstay they had was a remarkable ^{black} colored man named "Major". He was bellman, chauffer, waiter, houseman and all around "majordomo." He started working for the Camps when he was sixteen years old and was with them when they sold the Inn almost 40 years later.

The grounds around the Inn were always well kept and beautiful with blooming flowers and plants. A true artesian well, on the back slope, was always a busy center. It bubbled up clear and cool like a spring, and people from all over Gulfport brought their jugs and bottles to be filled with the pure artesian water. Many who drank it every day declared they had found "the true fountain of youth."

Entertainment at the Inn was varied and lively. Day time activities consisted of spirited shuffle board matches, swimming, boating and fishing. There were many lawn parties, or picnic lunch groups, on good weather days. Transportation was arranged for those who wanted to attend Church, the Theater, musicals, or lectures in the downtown area. Thursday night was party night and all the women wore party dresses, and the men black ties. After dinner, bridge, bingo, or other card games were enjoyed and Mrs. Camp always provided a prize for each table. An Art teacher came once a week to give lessons to those who wished to draw, or paint, and the class was held on the lawn facing the water. Saturday nights usually found the residents of the Inn at the Gulfport Casino where they joined, or watched, the dancers. The floor there was said to be the best in the area, and always crowded. Often a group would get together and go over to Tampa

page 4. "boca Ciega Inn."

to eat in one of the beautiful old Latin Quarter restaurants and enjoy the spicy Spanish foods, the music and the flamenco dancers. Christmas was always a gala time at the Inn, and the place ^{was} decorated from top to bottom. There was a huge tree in the lobby with gifts for everyone. Carols were sung, and each person recieved a gift from the Camps.

The start of world war two saw a slow down of many activities, and in 1971 the Camps closed their popular Inn and it was never reopened. Then came a depressing time of watching the stately old building fall into decay and neglect. Vandals broke the windows, tore out the plumbing, removed the doors and anything else they could carry away. The local police could not cope with their destructive activities, and the place fell into ruin with nothing left but rubbish. It was a sorry sight to to think how well the place had been kept during the almost forty years the Camps had managed it. It became an eerie sight, full of ghosts and wierd sounds. Anyone passing that corner at night, crpsed the street and walked faster as they approached the ruin.

Demolition finally arrived in 1974 and neighbors were sad to watch the bulldozers level the once beautiful old ~~Boca Ciega~~ Inn, they had pointed to with pride. "D" day saw the end of an era, a time when life was leisurely, and gracious people found quality and comfort in the friendly old Boca Ciega Inn of Gulfport.

Allean Davis