

BOCA CIEGA INN

In the beginning it was called the Hotel Dobler, built in 1922 on the corner of 31st Av. S. and 54th Sr S. 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 pantries. There were 42 rental rooms upstairs. It contained an elevator shaft but no elevator was ever installed. John Dobler seemed unable to manage well or even to attract enough guests. He was pistol whipped by local residents because he let his black employees stay in the stable attic after dark. A curfew was in effect in Gulfport at that time and no black person was allowed to stay from "Sun-down to sun-up". After that he never seemed to regain his strength enough to complete his plans for the hotel- his spirit was gone.

Ten years later, Mr. and Mrs. Paul B. Camp bought the hotel and changed its name to Boca Ciega Inn. The cost was \$32,500 for the building and four lots! They also paid \$2500 for furnishings for the 42 rental rooms and for the dining and kitchen equipment. The full basement was made into game rooms and a business office was added. In addition to the main building there were four apartments and two cottages facing 31st Av. which were rented by the season or the month. People renting these spaces were eligible to enjoy the activities of the regular guests and most of them took their meals at the Inn. The Inn was operated on the American plan with three complete meals a day. Usually there would be 200 hundred people for Sunday dinner and soon, 95% of the guests were booking for the coming year. Those who returned season after season said it was just like one big happy family!

Mr. and Mrs. Camp worked tirelessly as hosts, striving to please and make their guests comfortable in every way. They were competent and careful managers due perhaps to experiences gained from running their York Beach, Maine, hotel called The Ocean House. That was another seasonal business- for the summer for many years. They were admired and loved by all they contacted and the Inn became successful because two friendly caring people were in charge of it.

Mr. Camp would go to market every morning and if any of the guests wanted to get up early to accompany him, they were welcome to ride with him into St. Petersburg and return by trolley. The cars came down the center of Beach Blvd. after turning south from 22nd Av. Tracks ran between two rows of ancient oak trees and provided a shaded ride to the Casino. The fare was five cents.

Mrs. Camp was in charge of the kitchen (among other things) and planned menus for each day- no two were ever alike. The meals were hearty and delicious with plenty of fresh Florida fish, fruits and vegetables. That food was one big reason for the continuing success- it assuredly was no place to be on a diet! Mrs. Camp usually employed black chefs who travelled with them from Maine each year. One prepared the meats, another the breads and baking was done each day. Eventually one of those faithful chefs left for New Orleans where he took a position in the "Quarter"- but he came here each year to thank Mrs. Camp for giving him such a fine start in his career. Another mainstay on their staff was a remarkable black man named "Major". He was bellman, chauffeur, waiter, houseman and all around majordomo. He started working for the Camps when he was 16 and remained almost 40 years- in Maine and here.

The grounds around the Inn were always beautifully landscaped and kept, with flowers, plants and spacious lawns down to the Bay. A true artesian well on the waterfront slope was always a busy center. It bubbled up clear and cool like a spring and people from all over Gulfport were welcome to fill their jugs and bottles with pure water. Many called it their "fountain of youth". The attractive gazebo was a most pleasant place to sit and watch the water, or chat, or think, or just sit!

Entertainment was varied and lively. Day time activities included shuffleboard matches, swimming, boating and fishing. There were many lawn parties or picnic lunch groups on good weather days. Transportation was arranged for those wishing to attend church, the theater, musicals or lectures in the downtown area. Thursday evening was party night when the ladies dressed in their best gowns and the men wore black ties. After dinner, bridge, bingo or other card games were enjoyed and Mrs. Camp always provided prizes for each table, or game. An Art teacher came weekly to give lessons who wanted to learn how to draw or paint and classes were often held on the lawn facing the water. Saturday nights found the guests at the Casino where they joined or watched, the dancers. The floor there was said to be the best in the area and was always crowded. Often a group would get together and go to Tampa to eat in one of the beautiful old Latin Quarter restaurants to enjoy their spicy Spanish foods, the music and the flamenco dancers. Christmastime was always a gala time and the Inn was decorated from top to bottom, with a huge tree in the lobby with gifts for everyone. Carols were enjoyed and many guests exchanged gifts too.

The start of the War ll saw a slow down of many activities and in 1921 the Camps closed this popular Inn and it was never reopened.

Then came the depressing time of watching that stately old building fall into decay and ruin. Vandals broke windows, tore out plumbing, removed doors and anything else that was movable. The police could not seem to cope with their destructive activities and the new owners who had hoped to build an apartment complex, became so discouraged that before they could negotiate a sale they had the structure demolished. It was a sorry sight to see and to remember how well it had been kept during the 40 years the Camps had owned it. It seemed full of eerie sounds and sights- and walkers hurried past it in their evening strolls. In 1974, "D Day" for Boca Ciega Inn brought tears to the eyes of those who watched the bulldozer rip down the magnificent mahoney stair case, smash the once glorious chandeliers and destroy another landmark of once gracious and leisurely living, here on our Gulfport waterfront.

Allean Davis