



OUR KIND OF PLACE

## Suite Memories

CONJURING THE GHOSTS OF SUMMERS PAST  
AT A STORIED MOBILE BAY RETREAT

By Ace Atkins

In the early 1980s, when my father announced we'd be visiting an old hotel on Mobile Bay, rather than taking our usual weeklong summer trip to the Gulf of Mexico, I was less than thrilled. How could a stuffy old hotel compete with go-kart tracks, souvenir shops tucked into fake volcanoes, and dodgy zoos along the highway? No long stretches of sugary beaches. No cheap carnivals that reeked of popcorn and weed, soft-serve ice cream shacks, or junk shops that sold airbrushed T-shirts.

My dad let me know it had a terrific golf course. I did,

and still do, loathe golf.

My dad let me know the hotel was indeed historic. It had served as a hospital during the Civil War.

He wasn't getting too far. I wanted to see girls in bikinis and rent a moped.

But it was decided. We could stay for a week as guests of his good friend who ran a large bank in Mobile. (My dad had strong ties in Alabama, as both MVP of Auburn's 1957 national championship football team and head coach of Troy State's 1968 championship team.) We would have the largest room at the place—the McRae suite—with the best view of the sunsets

situated right over the croquet court. Okay. I could learn to play croquet. And I loved to fish. The hotel offered a long pier with cane poles and as much bait as you could use. Frozen shrimp guaranteed to catch squirmy eels.

I'd also heard something about a pool that had once been the largest pool in the South. If all else failed, my dad said, my sister, Paige, and I could go to the movies in nearby Daphne or Mobile. I vividly recall my sister breaking speed limits to get us to Mobile for the first showings of *Return of the Jedi* in 1983.

So began more than a decade of family trips to the Grand Hotel in Point Clear, Alabama. Opened in 1847, it really did serve as a hospital during the Civil War and as a training base in World War II for something called Operation Ivory Soap. The name came from mobile bases, floating like the soap, that would resupply and repair equipment used on strategic islands in the Pacific. The whole mission was run from room 1108. So much history, so many hiding places. What a place for a young man to explore during hot weeks in June. Over the next decade, I'd get to know every corner of that old place. There were alligators, a hidden Confederate cemetery, ghost sightings, and banquet rooms where bottles of wine might be liberated. I fished. I sailed. I read dozens and dozens of paperback books. Ian Fleming. Raymond Chandler. Ernest Hemingway. Every day at four some old man fired a cannon.

It was quite a time.

The only downside of any Atkins family trip was the daily football practice. My dad insisted I leave the pool during the heat of the day and visit nearby Fairhope High School to practice catching, passing, and running wind sprints. Little did he know, I'd already been prepping for a professional life of writing by reading poolside. It was all part of the agenda: pool, fish, football, and then dinner. My dad liked routine.

At night, I roamed by myself. Sometimes meeting friends. At fourteen, I was thrilled to meet two sixteen-


year-old girls from Mountain Brook who liked to cuss and smoke cigarettes. One of them had a car. They invited me along as they shopped for bikinis at a nearby mall, and I happily obliged.

Another time, I brought my pal Lee Cook with me, and we would explore the pantries and back rooms in the main section of the hotel, which included the large stone fireplace and old banquet halls. We once found a cheap bottle of wine and roamed the grounds until late. Lee, to this day, swears that we saw a ghost—an attractive young girl, he claims, who eluded us.

Back then, at certain spots at the hotel, time stopped. It wasn't just in the architecture, but in the creaking floors and the pleasant, musty smell in the old main lobby. You felt it in the Birdcage lounge, with all its dark wood and brass. And in the old cedar closet in the McRae suite, the closet itself larger than many hotel rooms. Magnolias and live oaks draped in Spanish moss blowing in the brackish wind lined the property. There was a lagoon filled with koi and fancy ducks. Our family dressed for dinner in the Grand Hotel's old-fashioned dining room. Men had to wear a coat and tie, no ball caps to be seen. It was still very much bloody steaks, bourbon, and cigarettes. Families had been doing this for decades. It was the 1980s, but the hotel wasn't far removed from its reign as the place for wealthy Victorian travelers to vacation. Many of those old traditions remained.

After I graduated from high school, the annual trips to the Grand Hotel became less and less frequent. I went off to Auburn. The bank sold the suite. My father died. The hotel was taken over by Marriott, and by the 1990s, the company had gutted many of the rooms and built new sections. When I returned with my wife and two sons a few years ago, the old pool had been filled in, replaced with a sleek new one. The old-fashioned bar was gone, with only a plaque in honor of a much-loved server whom I'd known as a kid, Bucky Miller, hanging on the wall. Men didn't wear jackets and ties. Some of them wore ball caps and T-shirts to dinner.

Last year Marriott completed a \$35 million renovation. There's a brand-new farm-to-table restaurant, Southern Roots, and all the guest rooms have been thoroughly updated. While not the Grand Hotel I recall from my youth, with its strict dress codes and Victorian formality, the Spanish moss-draped oaks still populate the grounds, cannons still fire every afternoon at cocktail time, and the upper lobby's old fireplace still reflects the hotel's history. The Grand can continue to keep up with the times, but to me that fireplace, its old stones and bricks rising into a vaulted ceiling, remains the heart of the property, too iconic and hopefully impossible to change.

Maybe it's time to go back. Traditions are only good for as long as they're honored. I'll be glad to skip football practice this time and grab a paperback and go straight to the pool. I just hope the men remember to remove their hats at dinner. The ghosts are watching. 



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