

Reflections from the Past

The Hermitage Hotel – Historical Quarterly

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Cheers!

The grand exterior of The Hermitage Hotel sets a wonderful tone for many a special occasion. The event pictured here, dated 1940, was the 50th anniversary of the William Gerst Brewing Company. The horse and carriage theme was a clever promotion. They rode throughout downtown. The business was originally founded in 1859 as the Nashville Brewing Company. Christian Moerlein and William Gerst acquired it in the 1890s and it operated until 1954 (including times spent producing Orange Crush and other soft drinks during prohibition.) A historical plaque marks the original location on 6th Avenue South.

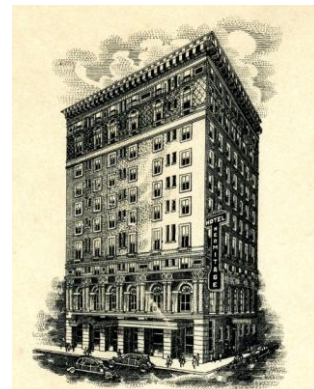


Image compliments of Scott Mertie, author of *Nashville Brewing* (Arcadia Publishing, 2006)

The words painted on the plate glass window to the right of the front entrance read “Hermitage Liquor Store.” This retail store was established in 1939, just one of the hotel’s many retail shops. A hotel sometimes seems like a small city. The Hermitage Hotel also offered a pharmacy, barbershop, beauty salon, pressing and laundering services, telegrams, the AAA Nashville Auto Club, stenographer services, valet auto parking, an airline ticket office and more.

Fun-Loving Conventioneers

The dates were September 9, 10 & 11, 1914. The place was The Hermitage Hotel. The occasion was the 45th Annual Convention of the Master Car and Locomotive Painters' Association. Published excerpts are as follows:

“Following the opening session at the state capitol, meetings were held in the Assembly Hall on the ninth floor of the Hotel Hermitage. Back of the president's chair hung the banner of the association, above the Key to Nashville, which had been presented to the association at its opening session. On one side was hung the Canadian flag and on the other the American flag. A huge bale of cotton reminded the members that they were in the ‘Sunny South.’ ”

Of at least ten hospitality suites in the hotel sponsored by distributors of paint, varnish, brushes, lettering pencils, and various other supplies, it was reported, “The Louisville Varnish Company did not lack for visitors in its room that was attractively decorated with flowers. They distributed sample flasks of a liquid filler that seems to be in popular demand, to judge from the manner of friends who expressed themselves as willing to make a practical test of it.”ⁱ The convention report wrapped up with this additional note: “A number of supply house established headquarters in rooms at the Hermitage and made visitors welcome, entertaining them with hospitality and making them forget the desert dryness which existed outside – for Tennessee is a prohibition state. Of course, the hotel had nothing to do with this.” Other convention souvenirs included pocket knives, memo books, embossed clasps, canes, and miniature bales of cotton. The convention business program was supplemented with social activities including a steamboat trip to Mammoth Cave with picnic (the very old boat described as a steamer that might have seen service ‘befo’ the wah’), a visit to Andrew Jackson's Hermitage, and a trolley car outing to Nashville's Glendale Park.

Yes, Tennessee was “dry”, yet mayors in the major cities of Memphis, Nashville, Chattanooga and Knoxville winked at the laws for a few years. Nashville major Hilary Howse, whose political machine included hefty support from saloonkeepers who helped organize and influence voters, once proclaimed about the saloons "Protect them? I do better than that. I patronize 'em." ⁱⁱ Some mayors stated that license proceeds could be used to build hospitals. ⁱⁱⁱ

As governments benefitted from the license fees and tax funds tied to alcohol consumption, so did the profitability of hotels and restaurants depend on those earnings to help them be financially successful. For example, many a traveling salesman would take the train into Nashville and enjoy checking into their hotel on Sunday night for a feast and plentiful drink.

Tea Pots at Hotel Contain Liquor

The Hermitage Hotel closed up its bar for good in March, 1912 amidst a city-wide crackdown. The newspaper reported, “All over town Saturday, the bars were kept under close surveillance and several bartenders found dispensing were taken in. Since the Hermitage Hotel was raided several days ago, the management has had the doors of the bar closed and have been serving drinks of all kinds in the grill room in disguise. Cocktails came in demetasse cups and beer was served in teapots and poured into cups and saucers like tea. Hordes of deputies have been hanging around the place night after night for evidence of violating the law and the ruse practiced by the hotel was only discovered Saturday night. While the grill room was thronged with men and women dressed in evening clothes, deputy sheriffs walked in and began an investigation. Tea cups were sized up and the contents of the small silver teapots were examined. Picking up a pot that was on the table between two men and two women the deputies found it filled with beer. They immediately arrested the cashier of the dining room as the person who was receiving money for the drinks.” ^{iv}

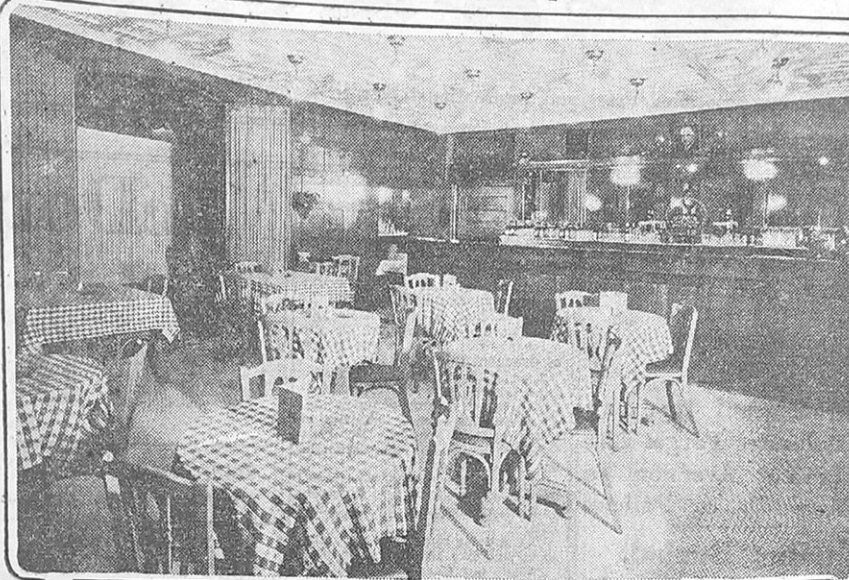
Lifting of Prohibition

At one minute after midnight on April 30, 1933, national prohibition was lifted. For Tennesseans it ended a 34 year drought, as state-wide prohibition had been enacted in 1909.

The Tennessean newspaper reported, “Hotels are making elaborate plans for the sale of beer here along with the restaurants. Modern beer gardens are being installed in three of the downtown hotels. The Hermitage Hotel will open an attractively decorated English taproom next to its grill; the Noel is converting the mezzanine into a Vienna Grill, and the Andrew Jackson, Tulane, Sam Davis, and Maxwell House have arranged to serve beer in dining rooms

and coffee shops." Special trains awaited on the sidings in Kentucky until midnight, ready to roll. Contents included seven carloads of Miller Highlife from Milwaukee, 3,500 cases of Atlas from Chicago, two carloads of Pabst Blue Ribbon from Milwaukee, 1,200 cases of Falls City Beer from Louisville, and Senate beer from Chicago - all told some 12,000 cases of beer.

Frigidaire Cools Hermitage Tap Room and Grill



Top: the red-checked table covers in the old English tap room at the Hermitage, where a person can raise a thirst and lower a temperature all at the same time. Frigidaire refrigerated air has been installed here. Bottom: an attractive view of the Hermitage's newly decorated grill room, where frigidaire refrigerated air has been introduced for the comfort of guests.

Cool and Comfortable

As of June 1933 amidst a slow recovery from more than three years spent enduring the great economic depression, the decision was made to install state of the art air conditioning in the lower level of The Hermitage Hotel.

The Nashville Banner enthusiastically reported, "No spot in Nashville is cooler or more attractive now than the Hermitage grill. Here is the picture it presents to the person stepping in from the hotel outside: First, an unbelievably delightful atmosphere. Red tile floor, undulating arches in a soft grey resting on numerous pillars. Dozens of tables spotlessly white with their aristocratic linens, accentuated by precisely-laid rose plates and soft-gleaming silver. And over by the wall a row of long continental push-away tables with cushions and back-rests of deep, luxurious leather. Couples are festive or reflective, according to the mood expressed in the music of Francis Craig's far-heralded orchestra. They play here, in the grill, every noon and on Sunday from 7 to 9 p.m. Hermitage guests from far and away know about Francis Craig and his orchestra; nor are they without honor in their own homeland. Incidentally, the canvas canopy under which they play, with its background of pleated satin and sidecurtains is just about as swank as anything in the country.

Next to the grill and separated by a white lattice-way and screen of pleated satin, is the Old English Tap Rom. All the color of jolly nineteenth century England is instantly here,

but again, all the modern ingenuity of the twentieth century as expressed in its Frigidaire refrigerated air system. For here also is a delightful atmosphere of dry, cool, bracing air, where one eats and quaffs over red-plaid table cloths, beside table lamps with bases of fat miniature beer kegs. The ceiling is of rare beauty, hand carved of solid plaster of paris. Walls are oak paneling, enlivened here and there with good oil paintings. There are also autographs of Babe Ruth and other celebrities presented to their genial host and manager, Mr. Baughman. Of no slight interest is the long, popular table reproduced from a Finland tap room, and made by Julius himself, the ingenious carpenter-general of the Hermitage.

And the Hermitage barbershop is still another story. No man ever had himself beautified in a more luxurious atmosphere. It gleams with cleanliness, touched off with the grand coolness of the refrigerated air. The color scheme is green and black, on through to the Russian gowns of the shop's barbers. And wonder of wonders, it is one barbershop where bottles and shaving mugs and such do not litter up the place. They just don't exist to the sight of

this shop. Here, too, are some of the most interesting art prints to be found even in any art shop in the country, for Mr. Baughman has hung here an entire set of prints from Gilbert Gaul's series of original oil paintings of Southern Confederate subjects. The originals of these are displayed in the Hermitage's lobbies, and are famous almost around the world.”^v

Beer was flowing in 1933, but it would not be until the passage of the liquor by the drink law in 1967 when establishments could serve a glass of liquor or wine in Nashville. Some circumvented the restrictions via memberships in private clubs, where members were allowed to keep their own stock. The Hermitage Hotel hosted the City Club as of 1958. It occupied the entire mezzanine level and grew to 600 members. A decade later when they moved to new quarters the Capitol Club occupied the same space until 1977.



Gilbert Gaul painting “Nearing the End”, courtesy Birmingham Museum of Art

12 original Gilbert Gaul paintings were donated to the museum as a set of by John Meyer, who was featured in the previous newsletter. Some were painted in Mr. Gaul's former studio on Church Street opposite the public library where a small city park resides today.

Source notes:

i National Painters Magazine, Volume 41, Schnell Publishing Company, 1914, pages 660 - 662

ii Don H. Doyle, Vanderbilt University, as quoted in The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture, Tennessee Historical Society, Nashville, Tennessee. Online Edition © 2002 ~ 2017, The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, Tn

iii Paul E. Isaac, "Prohibition and Politics – Turbulent Decades in Tennessee 1885 -1920, Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1965, page 175

iv "Palm Garden and Hermitage Grill Room are Raided", The Tennessean, March 3, 1912, page 2

v "Hermitage Hotel has New Air Cooler", The Nashville Banner, June 23, 1933



Do you have some special memories of The Hermitage Hotel ?

To share your own “news” please drop by and see Tom Vickstrom, telephone 615-345-7123 or e-mail archives@thehermitagehotel.com
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