

The Hotel By The Railroad

Christiana's Finest

By Melvern Evans, Jr.

*T*his story is about a hotel. . . .not just any hotel, but the unique Christiana Hotel, which stood so close to the Pennsylvania main-line railroad that everytime a fast freight rumbled by the whole building vibrated. I was born there some 71 years ago and its childhood memories are still etched in my mind.

This three story brick building was built in 1848 by Joseph Dickinson and was one of the first in that area to be electrified. Richard Marshall became its first landlord, followed by "Hope" Herschberger. In the spring of 1887, Martin Fieles sold his "General Wayne Hotel" in Baltimore and purchased the Christiana hostelry for his sons, Mordecai and William. Martin was no stranger to this area because as a young lad he had delivered whiskey from his father's distillery near Lititz to all parts of Lancaster county. William Fieles, who was Martin's second son, was also my grandfather. While Bill was learning the hotel business in Baltimore he became acquainted with the Peters family who ran a restaurant on the docks at Broadway and Thames streets. Peters had five daughters who helped run the restaurant, and Bill courted the second daughter, Cecelia, and married her in 1877 before moving to Christiana.

"Imposing" is probably the best word to describe the hotel. It had a wide porch facing the front and extending around on the railroad side at both first and second floor levels. The ornamental iron work in the second

floor porch railing and piers were exceptionally fine and rivaled those of New Orleans. When Dickinson built the hotel he must have hired a master craftsman for this phase of the work. The second floor porch was accessible by going through the ballroom, or through the double doors at the front end of the hall. On warm sunny days my grandparents used the porch rockers a great deal. Guests evidently used the porch sparingly since it never appeared full, nor did anyone on the porch ever share my enthusiasm of watching from the railroad the passenger trains roar past and waving to the engineer.

The hotel windows at the west section had iron bars, which were added later, since this area served as the first Christiana Bank, opened in Dec. 1882 by Samuel Slokom with a starting capital of \$50,000. The spacious ballroom on the second floor facing the tracks had red glass windows and doors, and two sparkling crystal chandeliers. There was an upright piano in the corner and sometimes my grandmother would play World War songs while we gathered around and sang. The ballroom was used for occasional dances, but for most of the time it remained closed. The hotel bedrooms each contained a large bed, a bureau, table and rocking chair, none of which matched. A standard item was the chamber pot since none of the rooms had private baths. Early reports indicated that the 21 rooms were comfortable and kept neat and clean. If there were closets, I do not remember them.

Close by the hotel stood the ice house shed with its two pits, each fifteen feet in diameter by fifteen feet deep, where hundred pound blocks of ice were buried and covered over with straw. The ice stayed solid for days on end.

The hotel menu was not gourmet although the food was tasty and ample portions were served. Seldom did hungry patrons have to ask for "seconds." The meals were prepared in a large kitchen on the west side which housed two wood-burning stoves. This kitchen was the home for two parrots, "Polly" and "Joe." Polly was quite tame and often spoke in German. One of her frequent expressions sounded like, "Der bast der boop," which I never did decipher. Polly's antics often amused the hotel cooks with whom she became very friendly. Joe, on the other hand, was a mean bird who nipped anyone venturing too close. Both parrots were uncaged and sat out on wooden perches from which they occasionally strayed. The kitchen help tolerated Joe only because he was Mordecai's pet. I suppose "misery loved company!"

Snapper soup was one of the house specialties. Once a month huge live turtles were brought up from the bay area and made into a thick, dark colored soup, prepared German style and liberally mixed with sliced hard boiled eggs. Pokeberry pie was another speciality, although the pokeberry plant was reputed to be poisonous. Perhaps the Germans had a special recipe to



Christiana Hotel, 1897, showing Powells Bus on way to Cochranville Masonic Lodge.



Barroom of Christiana Hotel. Figure at right is Mordecai Lieles, in his latter years.

counteract this? Pies were usually baked a half dozen at a time. Whatever meat appeared on the menu was carved by Mordecai with his own set of bone-handled knives which no one else was allowed to touch. He was very proud of these utensils and kept them razor sharp and spotless. Fresh eggs were available from the chicken coops in the out-kitchen, and were part of a gigantic breakfast served daily and including hot-cakes, scrapple, cooked cereals, etc. Typical of German cuisine, beer accompanied the dinner, served from large glass pitchers tapped in the barroom.

The barroom was busiest during early evening hours. Strangely enough, neither Mordecai or William ever touched a drop. Their father, Martin, was known to have taken a drink whenever he thought it was needed, but he prided himself that after forty years of bartending, he was never once intoxicated. Tradition has it that the brothers ran a "tight-ship." Foul language and cursing was strictly taboo. Boisterous conduct was not tolerated, nor were women allowed near the bar. Customers who imbibed too freely were encouraged to "sleep it off" in the back room, lest they try to stagger home and fall on the tracks.

Mordecai, better known as "Mort," was the oldest child and his decisions were final although many heated arguments often ensued before his word was accepted. He remained a bachelor all his life despite romantic interludes with the hotel cook and the upstairs chambermaid. I discovered years later that Mort sired illegitimate twins when he was fifty. This episode was obviously screened from the public eye. Sports did not interest him and

he would arise early each Sunday morning for his customary ten mile hike in the countryside. He was especially fond of carnivals and circuses and attended all within traveling distance. He was an antique collector and considered to be the oldest established dealer in Lancaster county. He smoked only on occasion a Merschaum pipe. Mort was not a talkative person and his reserved nature was often misunderstood by the patrons, many of whom considered him a "crank." I learned at an early age that the best way to get along with him was to keep out of his way.

Mort's brother and partner, Bill, walked with a cane as a result of a broken knee-cap which never healed properly after a beer keg rolled out of control and smashed his leg. Bill had many interests. He was an avid baseball fan and once tried out for the Major League Baltimore team. He too was an antique dealer of considerable scope, storing his wares in the old bank section of the hotel and later acquiring a nearby church in which to store the overflow. Some of the Fieles antiques went to the Landis Valley Museum when it first started. Among Bill's clients were the DuPonts, who often drove up on a Sunday afternoon in their chauffeured limosines to look over his stock. It has been said that if Bill wasn't in the right mood when they arrived, he simply refused to see them. He also managed the hotel livery stable which accomodated 25 horses, two of them "trotters" which he raced unsuccessfully at local fairs. The stable foreman was Ike Diller, who probably spent his adult lifetime tending the horses and keeping the



Mordecia Fieles, 1849-1924

stable in order, as no one seems to know if he ever worked elsewhere. Ike's sons, Leo and Melvy, were excellent ball players and played on the same Christiana championship team as my Uncle Bill (William's only son). Sometimes, for a special treat, Grandfather would hire a young stable hand to take me for a horse and buggy ride on the back country roads. If our horse was run too hard and returned to the stable in a "lather," Bill would be furious at both of us and vow, "never again," but he always relented and another ride would crop up sooner or later.

Bill was a crack marksman and held the Pa. Live Bird Shooting Championship in 1897 and again in 1902. It was not unusual for him to down 99 pigeons out of 100 shots. His record was just as impressive at "clay pigeons". He also trained bird dogs. Dogs who were "gun shy" were taken out in a row boat and forced to sit still while a shot gun was fired repeatedly over their heads. This performance continued until the frantic canines were over their fright. Cruel perhaps, but effective. Another of Bill's interests was the Masonic Lodge. The closest lodge to Christiana in those days was at Cochranville. Local members were driven to the lodge meetings in the "Powell" bus-coach, led by four horses. By 1882 the Christiana membership had grown large enough to provide its own lodge hall, with Bill as its Past Master of chapter number 417. Saint Patrick's Day was Bill's favorite, for he came from strong Irish stock on his mother's side, and was proud of it. On "Paddy's Day" he would wear the traditional shamrock and clay pipe insignia, and invariably boast about his heritage.

The hotel business was comprised mostly from the railroad crews working in that area for extended periods of time. Whenever a train stopped at the station directly across from the hotel, many of its weary passengers wandered over to the dining room for a bit of lunch and relaxation. The bar did its best business during the Firemen's Conventions. The thirsty firemen would line up at the bar five deep, clamoring for service. Incidentally, the "relief-bartenders" were not too responsible or even honest. More than one conveniently forgot to ring up a sale and would slip the change into his apron pocket. Mort was fully aware of this and chose to ignore it. He reasoned that it really didn't matter that much since he was paying them so little to start with.

Since Bill was a successful small game hunter, it is quite possible that pheasant, rabbit, or wild duck might appear on the hotel menu during hunting season. I do not remember if this was the case since wild game did not nearly have the appeal to me as did my grandmother's strawberry short cake or cherry tarts. She could bake with the best of them! Roast beef and baked ham appeared on the menu frequently because it was very popular with the lodgers. The dining room, which seated forty guests, used linen table cloths and napkins, and the tables were often decorated with freshly cut flowers. As country hotels go, ours probably set the pace. It was unusual to spot a



William Rodgers Fieles, 1859-1929

gentleman without a suit coat at the dinner table, but at breakfast and lunch, working clothes dominated.

I think the hotel accomodated women guests from time to time, but its didn't happen very often. Mort and Bill had a younger sister, Mary Ellen, who lived there until her marriage. My mother of course lived there as a young girl, but was sent to Sacred Heart Academy in Lancaster when she reached her early teens.

Free lunch on the bar was a popular gimmick in those days to draw in trade. Whether our hotel followed this practice, I cannot say, but free peanuts and pretzels were always available. Supposedly they stimulated the thirst and thus increased beer consumption.

One item almost overlooked was the maid's quarters, which was considered off-limits to most of us. It seems to me that there were three small rooms with puny windows and low headroom on the third floor over the kitchen. It was reached by a narrow, winding staircase. The quarters were definitely not very home-like, but then not many of the maids stayed there, at least not on a day to day basis.



William R. Fieles and wife Corolla (Peters) Fieles on hotel porch, 1906. Note the fine ornamental iron work.

Room service was probably not available. For one thing, there wasn't that much hired help available to provide it, and there was no communication system between bed room and front office to request it. In fact there was no front office as such. . . . guests registered or paid their bills at a "fold-down" counter arrangement in the main hall close to the bar, with Mort handling the transactions. He also handled the business ledger, and records show that the hotel made a comfortable profit in good time.

One might think that being so close to the main line would bring its share of train wrecks. Not so! Only one accident was reported way back in 1893 when a derailed engine ploughed its way into the hotel back yard, injuring nothing except some fruit trees and a picket fence. It did, however, create some local excitement.

When grandfather was laid up for months with his injured leg, he enter-

tained himself with his gramophone and its stacks upon stacks of records, some piled five feet high. His bedroom was over the kitchen and had a cozy alcove where the "talking machine" rested. He would sit for hours in front of the gramophone horn with his hand cupped to his ear because he was slightly deaf, and listen to records of all description, amid frequent time-outs to rewind the contraption and change needles. His vast record collection included opera, ragtime, dixieland, Strauss waltzes, Sousa marches, Caruso arias, and hundreds of others. The ones he seemed to play most were "Amos and Andy," "The Two Black Crows," and "Harry Lauder." I have often wondered what became of all those records—certainly collector's items today. Bill was a dyed-in-the-wool fight fan. Whenever he got to Lancaster, he would take me to the prize fights held at Rossmore Ball Park or West Orange Street arena or Fulton Opera House; and I would watch such pugilists as Rosey Stoy, Len Brenner, Eddie Ochs, Tim Derony and Battling Williard in action. Incidentally, traveling to these fights was not too enjoyable. Grandfather chewed tobacco, a habit which sometimes made him extremely unpopular. Whenever the family pick-up truck was put into service, he rode in the front seat and would invariably open the window and spit. Things could get real messy for the unlucky riders sitting down-wind. I was "sprayed" many a time enroute to the fights.

But back to the hotel! The Fieles brothers invested heavily in real estate and at one time owned many properties in Christiana, including an apartment house, barber shop, store, restaurant, mechanic's shop and numerous dwellings. When the economy dropped, they were forced to sell most of their real estate so that the hotel could be retained. In 1920 they sold the hotel because of failing health. Frank and Laura Allison became the new owners and the Fieles family moved to North Bridge Street across from the old Slokom estate.

Mort died four years later and was buried in the family plot adjoining Old Leacock Church, near Paradise, Pa. In 1929 Bill passed away from a heart attack and was also buried there. The whole family reposed in this particular cemetery owing to the insistence of Ellen Rodgers Fieles (Martin's wife) who was a devout Presbyterian and wanted her children buried in the same graveyard as her own parents.

During this interim the hotel was just plain "going down hill." It changed hands again in 1954 to Anthony Canestra and little was done to revive it. The present owner, Helen Roberts, has converted part of the building into apartments, and altered the bar which was renamed "The Railroad Lounge," but time has taken its toll, and the old building now stands without its stately porches or its tradition of a hundred years ago. Added to its miseries is the fact that train traffic on the main line has decreased alarmingly. Now that they are both almost gone, I am thankful for my cherished memories.

Sources

Octorara Historical Society - 300 Anniv. Celebration
Biographical Annals of Lanc. County
Klein's History of Lancaster County
Ellis & Evans History of Lancaster County
Data from Christine Ammon
Family Bible records
Old Leacock gravestone inscriptions
Christiana Ledger, 1904 issue
Phila. Inquirer — Feb. 12, 1939
Evans Genealogy & Allied families
Recollections of the author:

Author's Note

Much of the data in this article is based on my recollections as a lad of 8 to 10 years of age, when I visited the hotel for short periods of time. It is quite possible that my memory has not served me correctly, in some instances, after all those years.