

EARLY HOTELS AND BOARDING HOUSES

The hotel industry is always an early entry on the scene of a pioneering area. Single men in numbers always come into a new area opening up and they always need shelter and food. If this can be provided by others, they will be able to pay greater attention to their original purposes.

Such catering usually begins in the form of a boarding house. The first boarding house was kept by Andrew G. Wallace. He came to Tuscola in 1858 and was to be one of the town's prominent citizens. Called the "Boar's Nest", this two-and-a-half story frame building was located on the north side of North Central Avenue. Many of the men who worked on the Indiana and Illinois Central Railroad boarded in Mr. Wallace's establishment.

The first hotel was built by the Town Company on the northeast corner of Main and Houghton Streets and was operated by M. C. Elkin. For a few years it was the only Hotel in town and was a lively place when court was in session because of its close proximity to the court house. This hotel burned in 1864 and rebuilt by the insurance company. It was then called the "Tuscola House." This hotel was the forerunner of the "Stanley House," run by Ben Stanley. Elam and Elizabeth Cook acquired the hotel from Stanley and renamed it the "Cook House." Later, their son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. W. A. Jones succeeded them.

The porch on two sides of the "Cook House" was concrete and was on two levels. The lower level was a wonderful place to roller skate and among the skaters were Lucille Dickenson, Elizabeth Weaver, Dorothy Blumquest, Lattie Jones and Thelma Gillespie. When you went in the south door there was a long hall that went back to the kitchen. On the right side of the bottom of the stairway was the Jones' quarters. Mrs. Cook and Mrs. Jones could be seen always sitting on the porch from the first sign of good weather until it was too cool to sit outside.

The "Cook House" burned down in June, 1926.



“The ‘Central House’ was another early hotel, located on the southeast corner of Sale and Main Streets. Originally built by Younger, the business did not suit him and he was succeeded by Alf Thayer. C. S. Smith, who came to Tuscola at the close of the Civil War, bought the hotel and ran it with the assistance of his wife. It burned down and never rebuilt” (Lida Jane Hunt papers).

The “Beach House” was Tuscola’s greatest hotel during its earlier history. It stood near the Illinois Central Railroad depot. “This location was chosen as a logical place where the traveling public would stop upon arriving in the town over its first and only railroad at that time. It was owned and operated by Mr. and Mrs. Henry J. Beach who came to Tuscola in the town’s infancy and established a hostelry that bore their name through several generations.” (Lida Jane Hunt papers)

Mr. and Mrs. Beach were both natives of England. Elizabeth Roberts had come to America in a sailing vessel at the age of fourteen. She was married to Henry “Pap” Beach, a florist, and they made their way to Chicago to make their fortune.

They located on a farm near Tolono and were about to lose what fortune they had when some railroad workers came along one day and asked for a drink of water. Mrs. Beach offered them some pie she had just baked. That led to her cooking meals for them while they were working in the vicinity.

Later they prevailed on the Beaches to come to Tuscola as the railroad work proceeded in this direction. They operated a boarding house on the northeast corner of Ensey and Parke Streets (1858). The first “Beach House” was built on the northeast corner of Parke and Pembroke Street facing south.

It was a frame structure with 18 bedrooms upstairs and display rooms, restaurant, office and living quarters downstairs. Mr. Beach died in 1867, and the hotel burned in October, 1869.



In the face of these misfortunes, Mrs. Beach rebuilt the hotel in 1870. It was first another frame structure, but a brick veneer and veranda were added later. She operated the hostelry in fine style in addition to rearing four children.

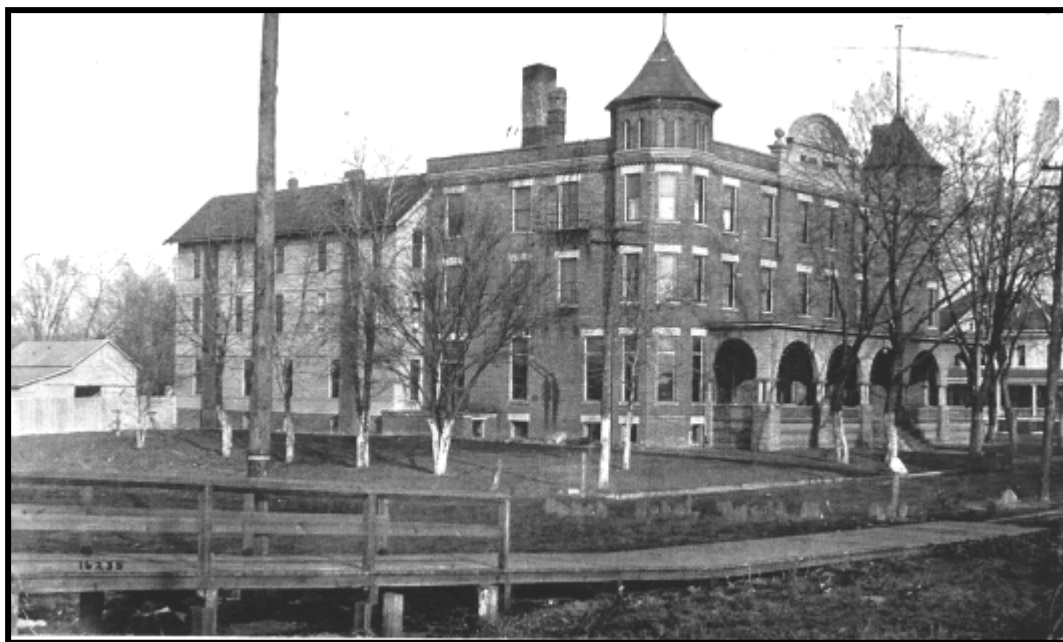
“The ‘Beach House’, says an ‘Old-Timer’, was the best hotel between Chicago and Mattoon. Every Sunday people from along the Illinois central would come to Tuscola on the train to eat one of the famous Sunday dinners that were served in style by the management. Weekend guests from as far north as Kankakee and as far south as Mattoon, came to enjoy the hospitality and comforts provided by Mrs. Beach at her hotel.

The social life of the town gravitated about the men and women who were connected with the building of the new railroad. Lawyers, engineers and other eligible young men who came to Tuscola on business stopped at the 'Beach House.' All the celebrities who came to town were met by a 'Citizens Committee' and escorted to the 'Beach House' where a reception was held for them. The late Charles G. Eckhart, a prominent Central Illinois attorney and a typical southern gentleman, who came up from Louisiana and lived over fifty years at the "Beach House. Major Asa G. Miller, editor and southern gentleman, lived at the 'Beach House' for a number of years. Mr. Miller was the founder of the first daily newspaper in Decatur, Illinois. It is related that he had a voracious appetite for corn-on-the-cob. He would dine slowly during the corn season and after other guests had left the dining room, those who left their corn-on-the-cob untouched, contributed their leavings to the Major, who stealthily collected the toothsome delicacy and carried it back to his plate, in the name of economy. 'Willful waste makes woeful want', the Major would quote as he consumed the delicacy. Another customer who could be seen many a time feasting on corn-on-the-cob was Uncle Joe Cannon, it was said to be his favorite." (Lida Jane Hunt papers – July 20, 1917).

Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) arrived unexpectedly at the "Beach House" at 2:30 A.M. on December 27, 1871. Twain was lecturing in several Illinois cities, including Tuscola, between December 18 and December 30. He lectured in Champaign on the evening of December 26 and was booked to stay in the Doane House hotel in Champaign that night, but took a train to Tuscola in a huff at midnight. In a letter to his wife Olivia, he wrote:

"I made an ass of myself leaving a mean hotel at midnight to hunt up a good one 20 miles away. Train was behind time & didn't get me here till 2:30 a.m.--& wasn't it bitter cold—the coldest night of this season. No one at the depot. Hunted up the hotel myself & carried my own baggage. Found every bed in the house occupied—so I had to sit up, in a fireless office the rest of the night. My splendid overcoat earned its cost—every cent of it. My body was not cold for a moment—but all the dirty shirts & things I could find in my valise wouldn't keep my legs warm. I wouldn't tell who I was, or I could have fared better—I was too savage.... (Cabin Chatter – Publication of the Douglas County Museum, Lin Salamo, research).

The "Beach House" burned for the final time in 1917.



“The ‘Cottage Hotel’, which was on South Central Avenue and Parke Street was a popular place for transients beginning in 1867. It was operated by Mrs. Henry Niles who home-cooked Sunday dinners to many Tuscola people who knew her skill in cooking. The ‘Cottage Hotel’ was built when the business section of the town fronted on the railroad park, and the hotel was included in the ‘Square’ of that day. But time brought the inevitable changes, and with them, the switching of the business block around the corner to Sale Street, leaving the hotel in a somewhat quiet, secluded corner.” (Lida Jane Hunt papers – July 20, 1917).



“The ‘Woody House’, which was an early residence of the Woody family and the first house built in Tuscola, stood on the northwest corner of Main Street and North Central Avenue where Midwest Galleries (formerly First National Bank) now stands. It was more of an inn than a hotel, and the Woody family gave welcome and shelter to the in-coming families that rapidly swelled the population of the new town. The Cashfords, Bardens, Coleys, Cross and other families came to Tuscola from England, and the tired wayfarers were made to feel ‘at home’ at the Woody house, after their long, homesick trip.

A small ‘Cottage Hotel’ stood one time on Sale Street, near where the Hotel Douglas stood. It was afterward named the ‘Farmer Hotel’ after the family name of the owner. This hotel was torn down to make room for business buildings.” (Lida Jane Hunt papers)

The “Whallon House Hotel” was located across the street and north of the courthouse. Mrs. Whallon and her daughter Grace ran it. In a green house on the southeast corner of Houghton and Court Streets was the “New Whallon House Hotel”, built by Mrs. Whalen. She moved her business to the new building.

“It was, for years, the most popular ‘boarding house’ in town, Mrs. Elizabeth Whallon, the proprietress, conducted the lodging house for years and some of the most prominent and influential business men and society women of Tuscola at one time or another found shelter and lodging in her house. The romance of at least one prominent attorney and his wife began at the table of the ‘Whallon

House' when both were young and striving for success and they recall, possibly, no happier years than those when the old 'Whallon House' was in its hey-day.

Prof. Charles S. Earle, who came 'west' to Tuscola from his home in Maine to take over the superintendency of the Tuscola schools and leave an indelible impression on the city...made his home at the 'Whallon House.' Mr Earle...died suddenly at the 'Whallon House' from an attack of acute appendicitis.

Early lawyers from distant cities made the old 'Whallon House' their headquarters as it was just across the street from the Court House and was easily accessible." (Lida Jane Hunt papers)

Mrs. Whallon was forced to give the boarding house up because her health failed. It remained a boarding house for many years after which was under different ownership. It became a private residence before being torn down several years ago.

The "Merchants Hotel" was built in 1899 by Mrs. Caroline Whitaker. It had 60 rooms, steam heat, toilet rooms, electric lights, billiard parlor, reading room and a large rotunda. After the loss of the Beach and Cook Houses it became Tuscola's only full fledged hotel.



A postcard dated August 29, 1907 showing the "Merchant Hotel"
(picture courtesy of Jon Oye)

"The Hotel Douglas, owned and operated by Mr. and Mrs. Walter Jones...has housed such men as W. J. (William Jennings) Bryan, Senator Reed of Missouri, Senator La Follette, the late Champ Clark, 'Pitchfork' Ben Tillmah, 'Alfalfa' Bill Murray and the Evangelist, Billy Sunday." (Lida Jane Hunt papers)



This photo taken in the early 1900's was just one of the many lavish parties which attracted guests from all over the state.

The name of the hotel became the "Douglas Hotel" at some point. In 1922, R. L. Bobbitt became the new owner. He remodeled and refurnished the hotel. Mr. and Mrs. Walter Jones purchased the hotel and ran it for many years. They were succeeded by their son, Fred Jones and his wife Helen, who lived in a beautiful apartment in the hotel. In May, 1964, after Fred died Helen Jones sold the "Douglas Hotel" to Ron Thompson. Mr. and Mrs. Harry Little bought the hotel in 1971 from the Ron Thompson estate. The brick building then contained 50 rooms, including 42 sleeping rooms, with a restaurant in the basement. Business locations on the ground floor were occupied over the years by a real estate agency, a chiropractor's office, the local Western Union office, and a barbershop. The hotel rooms were on the second and third floors. In later years, the Gordon Trucking Company had rented the third floor for overnight stays by its drivers. The "Douglas Hotel" burned down on October 31, 1975. Chris Hill owned the empty lot and it was used for public parking until the city bought it and built Festival Plaza.



Douglas Hotel