

THE LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE FOR MOBILE AND BALDWIN COUNTIES

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# MOBILE BAY

## CRISP FALL DAYS IN A WATERFRONT COTTAGE

CLASSIC CHARM  
IN FAIRHOPE,  
LILLIAN AND  
SPRING HILL TO  
INSPIRE YOUR  
DREAM HOME

THE  
HOME &  
GARDEN  
ISSUE

THE ICONIC  
DESIGNS OF  
TOMMY MCCOWN

GATHER FOR  
MAHJONG  
MADNESS

LITTLE-KNOWN  
CHURCH STREET  
GRAVEYARD



**Opposite** An early postcard of azaleas in bloom in Mobile.  
IMAGE COURTESY ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

# Overflowing with Beauty

The gardens of Point Clear's famous Grand Hotel have their roots in a 1940s modern rebuild that has endured.

*text by* SUSAN STEIN

Long before sprinkler systems, lawn mowers and motorized gardening tools were standard ground maintenance, the hotel at Point Clear enjoyed a lush landscape. A strategic location on Mobile Bay ensured an ever-lovely view from the shaded gallery, and the development of the grounds only added to the enjoyment over the years.

Although the Grand Hotel has been at its waterfront locations since 1847, the third iteration was acquired in 1939 by the first employee — and later on, the chairman — of the Waterman Steamship Corporation, E.A. Roberts, who had a new vision for Point Clear. Roberts bought an additional 25 parcels of land along with the hotel, ready to expand into the next phase of its history. The aging 1800s-era structures, which had been devastated by hurricanes, were torn down to make way for the new Grand Hotel. Roberts's brother, architect Platt Roberts, designed the new “modern”

lodging facility, opening in April of 1941. The new 90-room building, which increased occupancy from 40, allowed for more visitors and stood where the old Glennon building had been on the property. The air-conditioned building was long, with enormous picture windows and glassed-in porches. Later on, cottages were built using the lumber from the old building and featured heart-pine flooring and framing.

Complimenting the new structures were the hotel grounds, designed in 1940-41 by William C. Pauley, the first certified landscape architect in the state of Georgia, who designed many gardens, college campuses, parks and cemeteries. His new design for the hotel grounds included a man-made lagoon with a feature area known as the “cascades,” plus numerous curving brick-paved walking paths. Pauley's plans designated landscape plantings and even called for the use of swans to help control the vegetation in the lagoon.

New landscaping certainly improved the grounds around the hotel. But even before Pauley devised a plan specifically for the land, the grounds had two well established plants that already attracted visitors: the azaleas and the live oaks.

In the 1920s, Mobile introduced the public to the Azalea Trail. Following suit, Point Clear upped its game by introducing Southern Indica azaleas to the landscape. The earliest postcards of Mr. Roberts's hotel showcased well-established azaleas along with cards depicting oak-shaded lawns and boats in the distance, giving the full picture of the Grand's sweeping grounds. These massive azaleas put on quite a show in March and April, reaching heights of over seven or eight feet and luring families in their new automobiles, eager for a scenic outing. The approach to the Grand Hotel along two-lane Scenic Highway 98, just three miles south of Fairhope, allowed for fleeting views down long shaded drives leading into the “backyards” of elegant homes facing Mobile Bay as families drove along.

Although there were quite a few live oaks on the property when the new landscape design was implemented, many more were planted in the 1940s to enhance the property. The ages of the larger live oaks on property today have never been officially verified, but an arborist has estimated that several most likely exceed 200 years. So important to the resort, 155 large trees have been assigned a number and are tagged; a tree map is utilized by the Grounds department for locating the trees, which receive regular care to ensure the



*“As Roberts’ hotel grew in popularity and visitors flocked to Point Clear, the grounds and its expansion remained top of mind.”*

Top to bottom The Grand Hotel Lagoon, surrounded by lush landscaping and the famous cottages. IMAGE COURTESY THE DOY LEALE MCCALL RARE BOOK & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA.

An early color photo of the cascades. IMAGE COURTESY THE HISTORIC MOBILE PRESERVATION SOCIETY.

majestic trees are around for generations to come. The massive live oak trees dripping in Spanish moss are featured throughout the resort’s lush landscape and are utilized as one of the iconic logos.

As Roberts’ hotel grew in popularity and visitors flocked to Point Clear, the grounds and its expansion remained top of mind. With acquisitions of adjoining properties to the east, the resort’s acreage increased to accommodate Lakewood Golf Club, totaling about 550 acres. The first 18-hole golf course opened in 1947 with residential lots added soon thereafter. The Point Clear Creek flows westward through the golf course and Lakewood community, from County Road 3 to the yacht basin of the resort into Mobile Bay.

Preparing before a storm and clean up after storms is an all-hands-on-deck event. Some of the most challenging times for the hotel grounds crew has followed hurricanes. The Grand Hotel has a history of weathering Alabama’s strongest storms. It sustained the ravages of major hurricanes in 1893, 1906 and 1916; the latter covered the land with a tidal surge, taking with it every wharf and fence and requiring an extensive cleanup. Following 1979 Hurricane Frederic, the hotel closed for six months for repairs. When the brackish water tidal surge covered the entire point during Hurricane Katrina, it was uncertain how the historic oaks



would tolerate “getting their feet wet.” Immediate cleanup of the grounds took some time, but it was years before the long-term damage to some of the trees became evident. A few of the older live oaks eventually gave up the fight, but wood from their trunks was repurposed to create the upper countertops that now complement the front desk.

Although substantial changes have occurred since 1941, the integrity of the property has been maintained and the appeal of its gardens continued. While the Grand Hotel has evolved over the years — with 405 rooms sporting classic coastal hues and 29 acres of rooms, activities and gardens today — it maintains a traditional romantic atmosphere for guests and visitors alike. **MB**