

CHASING SHADOWS

Gibson Inn history shaped by siblings

By Pam Richardson
Special to the Times

From the Gorrie Bridge, Apalachicola's iconic Gibson Inn immediately catches the eye. It presides with grace and dignity over the entrance to the city, evoking an earlier, gentler era. This more-than-century-old grande dame of hotels, elegantly built of local heart pine and black cypress, could boast in 1907 of the most modern luxuries, like steam heat and electricity.

Since then, periods of prosperity have alternated with lean years, decades even, that took their toll. But "Lady Gibson" prevailed and today, she and the entire city block over which she reigns hums with new activity. Carpenters, painters and tradesmen of all kinds are busily transforming the hotel, the storefronts along Market Street, and the Victorian mansion, long-known as the Hays House, on Avenue D. In fact, it is with the first Hays settler that our story begins.

At the start of the last century, two South Carolina men, Nicholas Hays and James Fulton Buck, came to Apalachicola to build their fortunes in the turpentine business. Over time, the two men's paths would cross again, but Nicholas' primary importance in this tale is his kinship with his brother, Alfred. If Nicholas had not come to Apalachicola, Alfred Hays would not have met and married a young woman named Annie Gibson. Their 1905 wedding ceremony at the First Methodist Church on Avenue E took place at the unseemly hour of 6 a.m., so that the bride and groom could catch the first and only ferry out of town. They went to Alfred's hometown of Bamberg, South Carolina where their son, Edward Ryan Hays, was born in 1907. That same year in Apalachicola, James Fulton Buck completed construction on a stately hotel he named the Franklin, and began building a mansion next door for him and his family.

Sadly though, only two years after Edward's birth, Alfred Hays died suddenly of a heart attack, leaving Annie alone to bring up their boy. She brought him back to Apalachicola where they lived on Fifth Street, next to the Methodist Church, in a boarding house operated by her mother. For a decade or so, Annie and her younger sister, Mary Ella, helped run the hostelry. Then in 1923, Buck's beautiful Franklin Hotel came up for sale. Buck had recently died and his son was hard-pressed to manage both the hotel and his father's many turpentine stills. The sisters scraped together the necessary \$8,000, bought the hotel, and changed its name to the Gibson.

Oddly, name changes crop up throughout this story. James Fulton Buck was born James Fulton Belin, but he was called "Jeff" and he later changed his surname to "Buck;" Annie's sister, Mary Ella, was known to all as "Sunshine;" and Edward's name changed when a hotel employee, seeing an Irish look about the boy, nicknamed him "Pat," which stuck with him the rest of his life (Pat's great-grandfather did, in fact, hail from Waterford, Ireland).

Annie and Sunshine ran the hotel together until 1925 when Annie married C. Bryan Palmer, a man 16 years her junior, which



Alfred Gordon Hays [PHOTO COURTESY PHILYAW FAMILY]

caused more than a few tongues to wag! That age difference may be the reason Annie never told anyone, including census-takers, her actual age - a quirk perpetuated by her family who omitted her birth date from her tombstone.

Annie and Bryan lived in the hotel for about a year before relocating to Tallahassee where Bryan worked as an agent for Standard Oil. With Annie gone and Pat away at school, it fell to Sunshine to manage the hotel by herself until Pat returned home in the late '20s and jumped in with both feet to help his aunt - not knowing, of course, that romance was soon to come knocking on his door.

The romance of Kathleen and Pat Hays

Kathleen Reams grew up near Aucilla where her father, like Nicholas Hays and Jeff Buck, was in the turpentine business. She came to Apalachicola to teach second grade at the Chapman School. As pictures show, Kathleen was a beautiful woman - so beautiful, in fact, that years later a man confessed to her that he often tried to take his lunch hour when he knew she'd be on the playground with her students just to admire her good looks.

Tall, handsome Pat courted the lovely young teacher for three years until one day in 1933, they hopped in his car, drove up to Monticello and got married. Pat didn't want any fanfare as he never liked being the center of attention, according to Patsy Philyaw, the couple's eldest daughter.

In her living room, surrounded by framed photographs and scrapbooks full of family history, Patsy speaks of her parents with warmth and deep affection, saying that Kathleen was "a fool" about Pat Hays her whole life. For the first decade of their marriage, their home consisted of one large bedroom opening onto a small sitting room on the Gibson's first floor. Despite these close quarters, the couple spent most of their time together, never "fussed" at each other, and always had a close relationship.

Kathleen had no part in running the hotel, that was strictly Pat and Sunshine's territory. Instead, she taught school for five years and then devoted herself to raising her two daughters, Patsy and Frances. Kathleen was "a true Southern lady;" gracious, proper, hospitable, and, says her grandson, "classy." She was also a kind, supportive and giving woman as well as a "wonderful mother."

Her main interest, after her family, was antiques, an interest that was sparked by Annie Gibson's gift to her of a few family heirlooms. Kathleen's preference was for the ornate, and she haunted the shops of local antique dealers like Wesley Chestnut, George



Annie Gibson Hays [PHOTO COURTESY PHILYAW FAMILY]



Edward "Pat" Hays [PHOTO COURTESY PHILYAW FAMILY]

Martina, and Alma Neate.

Kathleen loved to cook, which may explain why she always had a lot of company. Desserts were her specialty, sour cream cake was a favorite, and one could always be found in her freezer in case she needed a dessert on short notice. Patsy remembers her mother's careful removal of the telephone from its hook every time she started the job of beating the recipe's six egg whites into stiff peaks. Another of Kathleen's famous desserts, remembered with lavish praise by son-in-law Jimmy Philyaw, was pear pie, made from the generous supply of fruits on the Le Conte pear tree in her garden.

Kathleen was also an avid bridge player and an active member of her church, community, and the city's two historical societies. Pat Hays, from Patsy's description, seems to have been Kathleen's male counterpart, as good-looking as she was beautiful and, like her, kind to a fault. Another common denominator was that in early childhood, Kathleen and Pat had each lost a parent. Pat was a man of his word, a man of both integrity and sound judgment. Dr. Photis Nichols commented once that he had never heard anyone say a negative word about Pat. Unlike Kathleen, though, Pat was plagued all his life with health problems, and the Army turned him away due to his frailty. Despite this, he loved to hunt and fish and spent many happy hours duck hunting on the river.

During World War II, the Army made a deal with Pat and Sunshine to rent the Gibson as a place for soldiers from nearby Camp Gordon Johnston to stay with their

families before shipping out to Europe. So, needing a new home, Pat, Kathleen and Patsy, along with Sunshine and two women employees at the Gibson, moved into the large Victorian house that Jeff Buck had built for his family behind the Gibson on Avenue D.

The Army reneged on the rental deal a few months later, but by then the Hays family were very much at home in their "new" house - the Hays House, as it came to be known - and Pat sold the Gibson. Pat's work life then turned to managing his properties, like the side-by-side beauty parlor and barber shop downtown on Market Street, and to his job as city manager. After his death in 1978 at the age of 71, Kathleen lived on in the Hays House. She passed away, just shy of 100 years old, in 2006.

As for the Gibson, after its use by the Army, it entered into a long period of gradual decline. The hotel closed, and shops took over the ground floor. By the 1970s the building was sadly neglected, with homeless people sleeping in its rooms. Then, in the '80s, two enterprising brothers, Mike and Neil Koun, and partner Michael Merlo, undertook a massive restoration effort, bringing the hotel back to its former elegance and helping to put Apalachicola on the map as a destination point for tourists.

A vision of the past

Today, the Gibson is going through another large-scale makeover. For the third time in the hotel's history, the new owners are a pair of siblings. Brother and sister Steven Etchen and Katharine Etchen Couillard were enchanted by their childhood visits to the Gibson, and have partnered with friend and general manager Cutler Edwards in the creative work of reimagining the hotel. Cutler has a doctorate in American cultural history and is sensitive to the story of Apalachicola's past, Katharine holds a degree in creative writing and has much experience with the restaurant business from her years of work at Bon Appetit and Eating Well magazines, and Steven, with degrees in sociology and biological anthropology, is an art collector whose interests focus on historic preservation.

A conversation with these dynamic 30-somethings revealed a glimpse into their shared vision. "Our mission," they said, "is to fulfill our understanding of Jeff



Kathleen Reams Hays [PHOTO COURTESY PHILYAW FAMILY]

Buck's dream. We want people to walk into the hotel and feel like they are stepping back in time - to a real, or maybe even an imagined, past." By that, they said, they are chasing down not only Buck's vision, but their childhood memories of the grandeur and Old World charm of the Gibson.

"Imagine," they said, "if the Franklin Hotel had never fallen on hard times, if it had blossomed in over a century of prosperity, what would it be like now?" To this end, the new owners have installed a reception desk built of native heart pine to replicate the one in a 1910 photograph of the original lobby, and have repaired and refinished the wood flooring. All 31 rooms are being renovated and uniquely furnished with art and antiques purchased in New Orleans, Savannah and around the world.

Local craftsmen are transforming the heart pine foundation of the Taranto house, formerly across the street, into vanities and shelving. Additional guest rooms are being created in the Hays House which will link to the Gibson Inn by a courtyard, restoring the relationship between the two buildings. Some spaces are being transformed to "work harder;" for example, Pat and Kathleen Hays' former bedroom is now a billiards room which doubles as a private event space with the easy conversion of the billiard tables into dining tables. The new owners' wish-list includes a discretely located spa, fitness center and pool, and maybe even a new building designed to look like Buck's original hotel. The hotel's restaurant, nostalgically named the Franklin, offers a sophisticated and creative menu.

Jeff Buck's late granddaughter, Doris Buck Sawyer, who as a child lived in her grandfather's hotel as well as his house, wrote "Grandpapa saw an enormous potential here and he could see the need for a good hotel... a big one for accommodations for the travelers."

His intuition proved right. In those days, the phrase "destination boutique hotel" had not been coined, but that appears to be the recurring dream shared over the years by Jeff Buck, Annie and Sunshine, the Koun brothers and now, Steven and Katharine.

Oh, and one more thing: remember all those name changes? Add one more to the list: the Hays House is soon to become the Buck House. Jeff Buck, wherever he is, will no doubt be pleased.