

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 8, 2014

Hotels in Rehoboth Beach, 1930s: Since the opening of the first Chesapeake Bay Bridge in 1951, Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, has promoted itself as the “Nation’s Summer Capital,” as it is the closest ocean resort to Washington, D.C. It was not always that way. Rehoboth was first established as a Methodist Camp Meeting in 1876, and for the next 75 years, it was primarily a cottage colony with few hotels and restaurants. The original section of Rehoboth covered about four blocks on each side of Rehoboth Avenue and extended three or four long blocks inland from the beach. The railroad arrived before 1900, and the tracks ran down the middle of Rehoboth Avenue to the passenger station less than ½ block from the shoreline. Also, from the late 19th century, Rehoboth had a boardwalk, originally only a few blocks long.

The “Pines” area to the north of the original town was developed before and after World War I, and in the 1920s and 1930s, Henlopen Acres to the north of that and Rehoboth Heights to the south were planned. My father was instrumental in helping Henry W. Conant, founder of the Rehoboth Heights Development Corporation, lay out 30 blocks of streets, curbs and sidewalks in 1925. Our beach-front cottage on Queen Street was completed in 1927 by local builder Ralph Pointer, and before the Depression took its toll at the end of 1929, approximately six houses had been built in each block, and the boardwalk had been extended along the beach to serve this area. Unfortunately, feeling the impact of the poor economy, new home construction ground to a standstill for the next 10 years.

I can think of only four hotels and one boarding house that existed in the 1930s. The Henlopen Hotel, built in a Spanish style and owned by the Grenoble family, was the largest and most prestigious and stood at the north end of the boardwalk about five blocks from the center of town. Its dining room was the most expensive place to eat in Rehoboth but would be considered mediocre by today’s standards. The Carlton and the Belhaven were both on Rehoboth Avenue in the first block from the boardwalk. In fact, the Belhaven, run by Mrs. Barnett, fronted on the boardwalk, with its dining room tight along the sidewalk on the south side of the avenue. It was probably built about 1900, was entirely of frame construction and had either two or three floors and about 30 rooms, with a few of them overlooking the boardwalk and the ocean.

In the 1920s, Carlton Bryan, formerly of Wilmington, bought an old frame hotel on the north side of the street more than ½ block from the boardwalk and modernized his hostelry by attaching modern rooms in a several-story brick building close to the sidewalk. Bryan had bought one or more Stanleys from my father in the 1912–1916 period, and he named his newly rebuilt hotel the Carlton. The food in the Carlton and the Belhaven may have been better, and a lot more reasonable, than that of the Hotel Henlopen. On Brooklyn Avenue, three blocks to the south and facing the boardwalk, was the Star of the Sea, a small hotel possibly owned by the Catholic Diocese. At First Street and Olive Avenue, three blocks north of Rehoboth Avenue, was Boddy’s Boarding House, a frame building having its dining room with white tablecloths easily visible from the sidewalk. It is obvious from the above that all hotels of those days required dining rooms offering full-course meals, quite formal regardless of their modest prices and mediocre quality.

By the late 1920s, passenger trains ceased to serve Rehoboth, and the station was moved from the center of Rehoboth Avenue to the south side of the street and became a bus station, Railway Express agency, and telegraph office. Short Line and Red Star buses stopped there before terminating their runs at the Henlopen Hotel. Of the hotels mentioned, only the Henlopen exists today, having been enlarged and modernized to include many condominiums. After World War II, the Carlton became a retail store that is still in business (I think). The other buildings are long-since gone. By the late 1930s, Rehoboth had an excellent restaurant, the Dinner Bell, operated by Ruth Cowgill Emmert. Much more commercialization was soon to come.