The Old Hotel

Downtown Denham Springs building carries on as antique store

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

DENHAM SPRINGS — The Old Hotel in the middle of downtown Denham Springs has been a hotel for more than half a century, but locals still call it the "Old Hotel."

Joe Watson, who owns the hotel building, says the Old Hotel has been in his family for several generations.

"It was built in 1877," Watson said. "It was originally built as a store. It was later converted into a hotel in the early 1900s." Watson said the hotel has been in his family for the past 50 years.

The hotel is currently run by Joe Watson and his wife, Dee Watson.

"We have been very lucky to have such a loyal customer base," Joe Watson said. "Our guests have been coming back for generations, and we try to keep the hotel as close to its original state as possible." Dee Watson added that they have made many improvements to the hotel over the years, such as updating the bathrooms and adding new amenities.

Guests who stay at the Old Hotel can enjoy the original hotel rooms, which are decorated in the style of the late 1800s. The hotel also has a restaurant and a coffee shop located on the first floor.

"We try to keep the hotel as authentic as possible," Joe Watson said. "We have a lot of historic items in the hotel, and we like to share the history of the hotel with our guests." Dee Watson added that they have a lot of guests who come to the hotel to learn about the history of Denham Springs.

The Old Hotel is located on Main Street in downtown Denham Springs. It is open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and is open seven days a week.

"We are very proud of the hotel," Joe Watson said. "We try to make our guests feel welcome and at home, and we hope they enjoy their stay with us." Dee Watson added that they look forward to welcoming guests to the Old Hotel in the future.

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Downtown Denham Springs' Brown Hotel, now Crowder Antiques in the Old Hotel, was built in 1917 by W.F. Brown, who owned an oil factory directly behind the building.

RIGHT: Florence Crowder, who owns the hotel with her husband, Charles, enjoys the view of Range Avenue from the windows of the front upstairs rooms.

BETWEEN: Carl Barrow, Tee Watson, Pat Genre, Charles Crowder, Florence Crowder and Lionel Kubel, from left, reminisce in the area that was originally the hotel restaurant.

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ONE IN A SERIES

Advocate photos by John Bernard
I've ever seen," said Barnum. "I do remember that the front part had a long coffee bar but that was very pretty," she said, "and that the restaurant had seven or eight tables." Barnum said the hotel had two entrances, with the left entrance opening to the restaurant and the right opening to the stairway that led to the rooms upstairs.

"If there was a lobby, it was just an opening to the stairs," Barnum said. Between the two entrances was a telephone booth. "That's where all the bad news came in during the war," Watson said.

Salts Cook Wesley, who also worked as a waitress during the time the Watsons ran the hotel, recalled that the stairs to the second floor came off the street at the front of the building.

The food was very good, Wesley told Florence Crowder, the hotel's present owner, especially the menu which was hosted in the cabinet and then poured into serving bowls.

Watson thinks that was about 1941 when she and her husband gave up the hotel "it was killing me," he said. "You had no gas, no heat and no hot water.

Winston went to beauty school and became a local beautician. "She gave me my first haircut," said George.

After the Watsons left the hotel, Henry Stare ran it for a while.

Then, in 1942, two brothers, Ben and Morris Pushker, opened a Travel Store, the second largest store in Livingston Parish.

The Pushkers already owned one store on Scenic Highway on property that is now part of Exxon Mobil.

"That store was a gold mine," said Gloria Pushker Salz, Ben Pushker's widow. "We catered to the workers.

"Every Friday we would go to the bank and borrow thousands and thousands of dollars to cash payroll checks," she said. "We would pay the money back on Monday.

The Pushkers rented a small building on Range Avenue to open a second location. "When they closed the hotel, it was the perfect place to expand," Salz said.

The Pushkers changed the front of the building to its present store front. They also rented the upstairs to several local attorneys, who got to their offices in an elevator that opened onto the sidewalk.

"It was said to be the first elevator in Denham Springs," said George.

The Pushkers were the only Jewish family in Denham Springs, but they made an impact on the community.

"My husband was a very, very, charming man," Salz said. A young girl, a customer in the store, was born with a cleft palate, and Pushker was very quickly arranged for her to have an operation to correct the deformity.

"He was responsible for the first downtown Christmas lights in Denham Springs," Salz said. "He was responsible for the fence around the school yard.

He and two other local citizens raised money for the golf course. When they got a little extra money, they built the swimming pool," Salz said.

In 1955, the Pushkers closed the store and moved to New Orleans to a larger Jewish community. "We dearly loved Denham Springs," Salz said.

After the Pushkers left, the building was used in several different ways. Local historian and writer Lionel Kabell said that others have told him that the building was used as a dance hall at one time and even as a bar.

One owner, former Denham Springs Mayor Shelly O'Neal, dismantled the old fixtures. He called Watson to tell her that he was "bustling everything out and selling the marble from the restaurant counter and walls.

"He said, 'Joe, I know you loved this old thing,'" Watson said. "He told me they had an old handmade block where I made those 150 to 200 biscuits every day." Watson said she just couldn't afford to buy the marble. Then one day, someone gave her a piece. "I had it divided and put it on night stands or either side of my bed," she said. In 1957, the old building was purchased by Alex Theriot, who leased the downstairs and operated his engineering firm, Alex Theriot & Associates, in the upstairs offices. Among those leasing the downstairs were two printing firms, Smith Printing, operated by Walter Smith and Sharro Pringle, operated by Dan.

The Brown Hotel advertised itself as a "Wholesome Food Served Daily" and a "Specialty." Regular Business Hours were from 6:00 to 8:00 PM, and the hotel was open on Sundays from 9:00 to 2:00 PM.

A 1945 newspaper ad for the Brown Hotel gave the hours of operation and some menu items.

Photos provided by Pat Sevran

Golda Barnum stands in front of the hotel on Range Avenue license plate says 1942.

Sharp.

Then, around 1990, locals began converting the old Range Avenue buildings into antique shops, creating a downtown area that attracts antique buyers from all over the world.

In 1994, D.C. and Barbara Ballard and Jimmy and Brenda Edwards leased the downtown area for their Old Hotel Antiques.

In March, Charles and Florence Crowder bought the building, now called Crowder Antiques in the Old Hotel, and moved their antique business into the downtown area. They lease the upstairs offices.

The Crowders have big plans for the old building including restoring the exterior to the original hotel front. In hopes of putting the building on the National Register of Historic Places, they are collecting old photos and news clippings.

Golda Barnum showed several photographs she took of the building during World War II. Her son, Carl Barnum, reproduced the photos, which show the original front.

"The merchants are trying to do things to make visitors remember," Florence Crowder said. "In Denham Springs, we're preserving the past for the future."