CAMDEN CITY, N.J. 1ST ED.

OPEN FOR THE SEASON by KARL ABBOTT Doubleday & Co. Inc. 1950

Chapter Eleven: CAMDEN

AFTER the Profile burned other hotels came along, a new one every year or so. For the next twenty-five years four or five hotels in the North and four or five in the South kept me reasonably busy.

In August 1923, a few days before the fire, I had bought the Kirkwood at Camden, South Carolina, and that fall headed a group that purchased the Vendome in Boston, my first city hotel.

I secured a two-weeks option on the Vendome for $1,200,000 and promptly came down with the flu. But I borrowed $700,000 on a first mortgage, took $400,000 that was left over from the Profile deal, and with the aid of five slow notes for $10,000 each, signed by myself and four of my friends, gathered together $1,150,000 by the time my option expired.

When I went down to complete the deal I was $50,000 short, but a check for $1,150,000 is hard to refuse.

There was some discussion about a thousand-dollar revenue stamp to affix to the papers. I was glad the owners didn't ask me to buy it, as I didn't have a spare one hundred dollars in the world—not even for working capital. They brought it in—a little yellow stamp with no glue on the back, and I put a paperweight on it so it would not blow off the table.

When the papers were signed and I left the room, a representative of a leading hotel company in Boston was waiting. He offered me $50,000 for my deal, which would have been $25,000 a week for two weeks' work, but this only confirmed my judgment that I had made a good buy. Of course all this

seemed a whale of a deal to me in those days, and, as Harry Balfe had said, I was playing with blue chips.

Father often wondered why I was willing to deal with the bankers without the aid of a broker, attorney, and auditors. It was perfectly simple as long as they confined their conversation strictly to hotels. When they started talking about anything else I left.

With the deed to the hotel in my pocket, I rode to the Vendome. As I hurried through the front door I almost fell over a rubber mat, and a supercilious doorman snickered behind his gloved hand, instead of springing to my assistance.

My first act on taking charge was to point my finger and say, "Fire that doorman!"

As in most cases when one takes over a new hotel there were a lot of changes to be made in order to have it conform to a new policy of operation. We gave the old place a face lifting. I changed over the main dining room to an empire ballroom and I remember a slender young brunette in slacks standing on a stepladder painting a mural. This girl is now the proficient painter Maria Liszt. Harold Field Kellogg built the Nippon Room. Again following Charlie Greenleaf, who had long operated the Vendome, I had to be on my mettle and live up to our new slogan.

For more than twenty years we advertised: "Abbott Hotels—Service with a Smile."

As far as I know, we were the first to use this slogan that has since been put to national use by many industries.

The Kirkwood was different from any resort I had known before. Unlike Florida or Pinehurst, Camden was truly antebellum South, a sleepy little town surrounded by many old-time plantations and steeped in tradition and historical lore. It was a horseman's heaven, where bridle paths and hundreds of sand roads wound through great stands of longleaf pine and across sunlit cotton fields. "Nothing Can Be Finer Than

to Be in Carolina in the Morning" is not only a song title but a fact, demonstrated by a brisk canter on a good horse across country or along a winding path in some shady dell where cardinals dart like vermilion arrows through the foliage and mockingbirds proclaim their ecstasy.

The Kirkwood sat on a hill surrounded by green golf courses and polo fields. It was a white frame structure of two hundred rooms, the central part of which had originally been the old Kennedy Mansion. Its massive white columns and winding entrance stairways gave it an air of stately dignity.

The great doorway, with its beautiful fan and side lights, opened upon an interior of spacious rooms designed by gentlefolk for gracious living. The doors were flanked on either side by huge fireplaces where pitch-pine logs had burned these many years. It seemed the beautiful rooms were doing their diffident best to give a warm welcome of southern hospitality to the northern guests.

We brought many of our staff down from the North but also employed a large number of colored people, who lived in Camden, as bellboys, chambermaids, kitchen help, yardmen, and caddies. Many of these people had been employed as butlers, maids, and cooks in southern homes and were especially well trained.

A Christian colored gentleman named William Gamble who has been my superintendent of service in many hotels over the years once asked me, "Mr. Abbott, do you know why we colored people love you? Because you are one white man who realizes there is an aristocracy among the colored race much more sharply defined and of more importance than in the white race."

I once heard an old southern gentleman remark that he "would raise a monument to pierce the skies to the integrity of the old southern Negro." And this was the rich heritage that had been handed down to the Negroes employed in those days at the Kirkwood.

Many of the townspeople bore the names of South Carolina's aristocracy, and while a few were "unreconstructed," most of them got along with the northern people on a very friendly basis. Sometimes, however, the old southern spirit flared, often culminating in an amusing incident. I remember attending a polo game and was seated in the grandstand near an aged southern colonel whose son was one of the players. There was a collision on the field and the young man was thrown from his horse. The colonel pounded with his cane and roared, "Robert, come here! Robert!"

When his son came up to the box he demanded, "What did he do to you, Robert?" His son replied, "Why, Father, he knocked me off my horse."

"What did you say to him, Robert, what did you say to him?" demanded the father.

"Why, Father, I called him a Yankee son of a bitch!"

The old colonel beamed. "Did he hear you, Robert? Did he hear you? Go back and tell him again!"

The fast money and huge profits of the 1920s had given many brokers, investment bankers, and business executives the means to disport themselves upon the American scene and to conduct their business on a basis that allowed them much leisure winter and summer. After a couple of seasons at the Kirkwood or other mid-southern resorts where they played golf, rode horseback, and tried their hand at quail shooting, it became the vogue to buy old plantation houses and become landed gentry, however synthetic.

The first step was to buy an old plantation house from a local real estate man who gave them a beating only to be compared with that given the Union Army at the first battle of Bull Run. The house was always in a terrible state of disrepair so that the local contractors had a field day.

The next step was to staff the establishment with trained Negro servants who smiled and bowed and rendered perfect service, albeit with much amusement and secret disdain.

The third step was to try to ingratiate themselves into the good graces of the old southern families which, I suspected, they rarely did. I felt closer to the Southerners than most Yankees inasmuch as I had lived in the South half of each year since childhood and grown up with them. I knew the process of their thinking and understood their pride.

Once while attending the races at the Springdale course with a state senator, the governor of South Carolina came along and the senator introduced me. As I walked away I heard the senator remark, "Yes, Governor, he's a damnyankee, but he's been down here so long he's practically civilized." A very fine compliment!

It was a fascinating and complex situation, this intermingling of three different groups: the Northerners, the Southerners, and the Negroes, each with their different habits, psychologies, and traditions. Watching the interplay of ideas, prejudices, and personalities among these people was, to me, a source of never-ending interest.

One morning I stopped to speak to a northern lady on the veranda of the Kirkwood, who said she was leaving Camden and sorry to go, but "her mission was completed."

"Are you down here on a mission?" I asked.

She explained she was writing a treatise on the Negro race.

After learning that this was her first trip in the South, and that said visit had consisted of a two weeks' sojourn as a Kirkwood guest, I demanded, "Do you mean to tell me that after spending two weeks in a southern resort hotel that you feel qualified to write an article on the Negroes?"

She smiled loftily. "Certainly."

I started in to say, "Madam, I've lived in the South since infancy and I would no more think myself qualified . . ."

But I stopped. There wasn't any use.

Just then Jim, a colored carpenter I had employed for years, ambled past the veranda. I went down to meet him. I thought the lady had gone into the hotel.

"Jim," I said, "you stand right on that spot and look up at that roof. Remember yesterday I sent you up to fix a hole in it? You didn't think I'd climb up and look, but I did, and that hole is still there. Now you go straight up that ladder and fix it."

Jim had a hatful of apologies. "I sho' will, boss. I s'pected I wasn't goin' to get away wid it. I was jest in a hurry to get into dat crap game over to Dusty Bend."

He took his tools up on the roof and I removed the ladder.

"You stay up there till you get that roof fixed," I ordered. "When you finish, holler, and I'll let you down."

Down from the veranda sailed the northern lady who was writing the treatise on the Negro.

"Don't let Mr. Abbott talk to you like that!" she told Jim indignantly. "Don't you know this is a free country, and you're just as good as I am, and just as good as he is?"

Jim looked down over the edge of the roof in astonishment.

"Lady, I know this is a free country, and I'm just as good as you is, but don' you talk like that about Mr. Abbott. He's quality!"

It was a point of view that she would never understand. Loyalty and respect must be earned over many years.

I belonged to a small hunt club that had leased a ten-thousand-acre hunting preserve outside of Camden which was run by a white man born and raised in the locality. He lived in an ancient unpainted house with his wife and four children and owned the little patch of ground he cultivated, a horse, cow, some hogs, and a few chickens. We paid him sixty-five dollars a month.

One member from Connecticut was fond of this gamekeeper, as we all were, and offered him a position up North. That spring the gamekeeper moved his family to Connecticut, where he was given a beautiful vine-covered cottage and one hundred and twenty-five dollars a month, all the milk and cream he could use from his employer's dairy, plenty of fresh

vegetables from the garden, and his children had the advantage of a modern school.

But next fall I found him back in Camden in his old house and ready to take me quail shooting.

"What happened?" I asked. "Didn't you get along up North?"

"I got along fine," he said. "Everybody did everything for me and for my children, but, Mr. Abbott, I just can't live in a country where they eat their peas green!"

He was used to the hot, sun-dried peas, hominy grits, and fat back of South Carolina, and to the satisfaction of being his own man. No amount of money, luxury for his family, or educational advantages for his children could compensate.

The Northerners never fully understood the average South Carolinian's love of his land, which was more important to him than the material standards by which they judged success.

Camden became the accepted winter home for my family. The Gasparilla Inn remained a favored point in my line of duty, but I was always glad to return to the Kirkwood.

These were some of the happiest years of my life. We catered to a splendid clientele from the North and middle West; happy, energetic people—sportsmen all. Golfers, horseback riders, and quail shooters forgathered in this sunny clime for carefree vacations. We lived in a contrasting environment —a weird intermingling of the languid life of the old South and the vigor of modern living.

I used to stand on the wide veranda of a morning and look down across the golf course at the smoke rising in a blue haze from a hundred little chimneys which was colored town. Dogs barked, roosters crowed, and from here and there came the faint rattle of pans and cooking pots and the shrill cries of children. I heard the melodious singing of the Negroes as they wended their way up the long path to the hotel to begin their day's work and was, in fancy, whisked back to ante-bellum days.

The carefree life of Camden got under your skin. It was like a perpetual house party. There was a fine spirit of camaraderie between the guests and everyone connected with the place, and there was always something interesting to do.

A couple of miles from the hotel was the Springdale Hunt Club backed by Ernest Woodward and presided over by that internationally known sportsman, Harry D. Kirkover, both of Buffalo, New York. Here once a year the Carolina Cup was run—three and a half miles over timber—and attracted some of the finest horses in America.

Back of the hotel were the golf clubhouse and riding stables. The latter were presided over by Luce Bramlett, a wonderful character who came down out of the North Carolina mountains every fall, bringing with him a string of sixty or seventy beautiful "peavine" horses and several North Carolina mountain boys who acted as riding instructors and grooms.

Most of the fun centered around the stables. After breakfast on a sunny morning many of the guests would saunter down to the barn, most of them in riding clothes, all set for a morning canter. Luce was usually sitting outside the barn in a cane-bottom chair tipped back against the barn with a group of guests standing around listening to his conversation.

The boys kept a lot of gamecocks, brought down from the North Carolina mountains, and "walked them" on the little Negro farms around the country. They would take a fine gamecock and drive out into the country about five or ten miles and stop at a Negro's hut where they kept chickens. They would buy the Negro's rooster for five dollars, kill it, and give it back to the Negro family to eat, then put down their gamecock with the hens. They must have had a hundred gamecocks throughout the countryside. Every once in a while they would have a main or tournament in a pit about fifteen miles down the country. Men from all over North and South Carolina and as far as Virginia would bring their gamecocks and sometimes the fights lasted two or three days.

The cocks were matched according to weight and they had to weigh into the pit side to a fraction of an ounce. If Luce wanted to enter, say eight fights in one day, he had to have eight cocks that made the exact weight of their class and he had to have eight or ten cocks of each weight so as to have one that would make the exact weight and be in top condition on that particular day. No prize fighter was ever trained to a finer point than Luce trained these cocks to make the necessary weight and condition.

The pit was a squared circle like a prize ring in an old shed, with bleachers on all sides and coops for the birds in the rear.

Of course this was all strictly against the law, and I always got a great kick out of the humor of it because when you went through the gate and paid your admission a gatekeeper stood with the ticket taker and remarked:

"Now, boys, this is a-goin' to be a quiet and law-abidin' chicken fight. Check your artillery at the gate and don' use any profanity."

I never liked cockfighting, but it was interesting. The tense moment when the two handlers crouched in opposite corners of the pit with arm raised bringing it down with the word "pit"; the flashing of wings and the muffled tattoo of the steel-gaffed spurs as the birds met breast to breast and fought and fluttered above the ground until one drove a gaff into some vital spot and leaped upon his adversary with a crow of victory, gave me an unwilling thrill. The great fighting heart of these wonderful birds aroused unbounded admiration and, in a way, made me feel apologetic or ashamed of the human audience.

My greatest pleasure in Camden was the quail shooting. I had the pointers which we had raised from puppies and they were a joy to shoot over—well trained and thoroughly finished, steady to wing and shot, and good retrievers. To my mind the average sportsman who has the opportunity to shoot over his dogs only a maximum of thirty days a year seldom has a well-broken animal.

There was always much controversy in sporting magazines as to whether a high-bred, fast pointer, with plenty of heart, particularly a field-trial type of dog, is good on anything but quail.

I think it is a matter of experience. Our dogs were hunted six months every year and were shot over either by Nolan or myself or some sportsman staying at the hotel every day hunting was possible. They became veterans, or professionals, if you please, and there is no teacher like experience under a good handler.

Every summer I shipped the dogs North, and about the middle of September Leo Nolan and I took them to eastern New Brunswick where we worked them every day and all day on woodcock and grouse. After a season or two the dogs seemed to know what it was all about, worked their cover carefully, and rarely ranged more than twenty-five or thirty yards ahead.

For some reason, unknown to me, I have never seen a dog that enjoyed retrieving woodcock. Sometimes they pick them up by one wing and bring them in with their heads turned in seeming disgust.

About the middle of October we would move down to the White Mountains of New Hampshire for a short sojourn and then over into the Lake George region of New York until the snow was too deep.

By the time the dogs arrived in Camden they had a full two months' hunting behind them and were in fine form to start the quail season.

Here their tactics changed completely. They started ranging wide, taking field after field, instinctively hitting the birdy places and ignoring barren ground and unlikely cover.

Some of them had remarkable memories, and when they entered a field that we had shot over the year before would strike out for the spot where they had formerly located a covey.

Is there any greater thrill than to see a fine pointer crossing a field at top speed, freeze slam! bang! into a point, and stand as if etched in marble, frozen solid by the scent?

I have hunted quail all my life and never reached the point where the hair did not rise a little on the back of my neck as I flushed the first covey of a morning. The explosion of the birds from the ground—the little brown bombers fanning out through the trees and the satisfaction of making a clean double. The retrieve and the leisurely stalk of the singles, maybe one or two, so as not to cut down the covey unduly, and then on through the sunshine to the next field.

I enjoy the leisurely stop at noon with a little fire to boil the coffee; the dogs lying about; a filling lunch; post-mortem conversation on the morning's hunt; and afterward my inevitable nap of thirty minutes stretched out on the bare ground. Then the long afternoon, and the good, clean, tired feeling; a fresh brace of dogs; and the last covey located in a cornfield as the big red Carolina sun disappears over the pines; the long walk back to the wagon with the tired dogs at heel; the smell of the wood smoke from the darkies' cabins; and the ride home through the soft night with well-filled game bags. Truly a man is king in his own right after such a day.

Are you wondering what this has to do with hotel business? My answer is—everything! The hotels I ran were home to me and their backgrounds were mine. I learned, and loved, the best they had, and it was this I gave my guests. Every corner of our United States has something wonderful and distinctive to offer. Camden had charm and conviviality and sportsmanship.

As long as Nolan and I have hunted birds, some twenty-five years, we were amateurs compared to Harry Kirkover. To my mind he is the master. He had a lovely home in Camden, with stables in the rear and a kennel where he kept a

couple dozen bird dogs—both pointers and setters—of the finest breeding and trained to the nth degree. Harry had a bell in the dog kennel and push button by his bed, and if the dogs got noisy and started to bark of a morning, Harry would ring the bell and the dogs silenced immediately.

He would line them up at feeding time at what he called his Sunday school, and each dog would step forward and eat his dinner in turn.

A grand old gentleman of Camden by the name of George Little had a fine pack of foxhounds. Luce Bramlett, in charge of the stables, Leo Nolan, and I had a pack that we kept in a kennel back of the Kirkwood.

Our type of fox hunting was entirely different from the traditional English fox hunt. We did our hunting at night. We took the dogs back in the hills of a moonlight night and turned them loose, then we'd build up a fire, make a few side bets, and await developments.

It wouldn't be long before one of the dogs would strike, and away they would go in full cry, their exciting music echoing through the night. When the pack was almost out of hearing we took our station wagons and followed along through the woods on the sand roads.

Sometimes the dogs ran all night and until after daybreak. This was the sort of fox hunting that the native mountaineers of North and South Carolina have pursued for generations, and they line-bred their hounds for speed, stamina, and endurance.

My hounds were pure-bred Walkers, long-legged, clean-limbed black-and-white dogs with keen noses, bugle voices, and a tremendous natural will to hunt.

When we had been in Camden a few years the northern winter residents organized a hunt club which was most exclusive. They purchased a fine pack of English foxhounds and once or twice a week sallied forth dressed in full regalia. They made a very fine showing: all the ladies and gentlemen

in black coats with orange collars and cuffs and with their horses groomed until they flashed in the sun.

Everything was done according to Hoyle. They laid out a hunting course over the surrounding countryside. At first they merely had drag hunts, where they sent out a groom on horseback who dragged a well-soaked fox pelt or a bag saturated with the oil of anise, and soon they were away, galloping across the country and over the jumps with the pack in full cry.

These affairs culminated in a hunt breakfast given by some member in his or her manor house.

After a few weeks they decided that they should have a live fox, so they bought one that had been caught down at the state convict farm below Camden.

On a fine morning they forgathered in impressive array on a little hill. The entire membership was present. The master of the hounds was in command. The whippers-in were on the job, and the English foxhounds were lined up in military precision. The fox was released and sped over the hill. Those elegant English hounds moved forward, sniffed at the trail, and looked at one another in bewilderment, as much as to say, "I say, old chap, are they spoofing us?"

This was something new, and they would have no part of it.

Harry Kirkover telephoned me and asked whether Luce Bramlett and I would bring our hounds over and give them a hunt. I explained that our hounds were night-hunting dogs and if they got after that fox they'd run him straight through to Canada. Of course Harry knew all this, but I suspect he wanted to see some fun. I selected about eight brace of dogs, put them in a truck, had a pair of horses saddled, and Luce and I went over.

When we arrived the members were impatiently milling around on their horses and Harry Kirkover was sitting astride his fine hunter, grinning. He had hunted with the gentry of

three continents and I could see that he was getting a great kick out of the situation.

I dismounted, took Winnie and Walker, my strike dogs, led them up to the brow of the hill, and turned them loose. They took one sniff at the trail and lit out for parts unknown, tonguing with every breath.

I knew nothing about the etiquette of crying "Tallyho" and riding behind the master and the whippers-in and staying with the hunt, so when the dogs sighted the fox, I yelled, "There goes the bastard—now!" and set forth on my own.

The pack disappeared over the brow of the hill and away went the hunt club on their fine horses, a brave sight indeed.

Luce and I listened to the dogs, and I said:

"With all the steam that fox has got behind him he's going to make for water, and quick. Let's go cross-country to Sander's Creek, where we will probably find him."

When we reached Sander's Creek the dogs were down in the tall grass, standing in more or less of a circle, sniffing something on the ground, with their tails erect and wagging. Sure enough there lay the fox the dogs had killed. Still ignorant of the nuances of fox hunting, but having heard vaguely of the "brush," I cut off the tail and we started back for the Kirkwood stables.

About halfway home we met the Camden Hunt galloping aimlessly in the general direction of where the dogs had gone, and in my naïve ignorance I gaily waved the brush at the gathering as we raced by. I noticed Harry Kirkover was enjoying the situation immensely, but I didn't give it a thought until he arrived at the Kirkwood stables a few moments later.

It was my first and last experience "riding to hounds." It seems I had broken every rule of fox hunting. Incidentally, a groom was sent over to demand the "brush."

Nothing about the operation of the Kirkwood Hotel distinguished it from any other resort hotel I had known except

that the social activities, sporting events, and resort life generally were exactly suited to the locality. I was running it in the booming days of the twenties, when the mid-South was very popular, and the hotel was always filled to capacity. The tempo of the times made for "dizzy" living, and managing an exclusive resort hotel was like operating a Ferris wheel.

Everybody was playing the stock market. We had a brokers' office in the hotel and many stock manipulators as guests. Several had private wires to New York in their suites and gave tips to their favorite employees.

A friend of mine who owned a hotel came down to breakfast one morning looking so blue that his headwaiter asked him what was the matter. He told the headwaiter that the mortgage on his hotel was due and he couldn't pay it, and that the headwaiter and all the rest of the help might have to look for other jobs.

"How much is the mortgage?" asked the headwaiter.

"Fifty thousand," answered my friend.

The headwaiter beamed. "Oh, I can let you have that much!" And he did.

We had a stock brokers' office in the clubhouse adjacent to the first tee, and once a guest, walking out to tee up his ball, called back to the manager:

"Jack, buy me a thousand shares of radio."

He played the course, and as he sank his putt on the eighteenth green he called in to the broker:

"Jack, sell my radio."

The stock had gone up ten points and made him a profit of $10,000 while he played the eighteen holes.

The rates that seemed terrific then are commonplace now. I recall my good friend, the late Ward Belcher, came down from New York without a reservation. The reservation manager did not have a vacant room so he cleaned out the shoeshining parlor, put in a double bed and a dresser, and there Ward slept until someone left and we could move him. At

the end of the week he received a bill for twenty-five dollars per day, which he paid willingly, and then turned to me and said with a grin, "Karl, Jesse James had to have a horse!"

With AAA steaks selling at thirty-five cents a pound, wages one third as high as at present, and Uncle Sam more modest in his demands than now, a resort operator could really make a profit.

In one of our southern hotels a visiting "professor," who was only five feet tall and a marvelous magician, came every year, put up banners, and gave a show in the ballroom. One rainy afternoon when he came on the stage only two little boys were in the hall. But he was gallant—he doffed his high silk hat and went through the entire show not to disappoint the youngsters.

Toward the end of the performance an elderly guest tiptoed in and sat at the back. After it was over he joined the professor and his audience of two. "I want to thank you for not disappointing these children," he said, and wrote out a check for one thousand dollars. Handing it to the professor, he added, "They are my grandsons."

Another guest at this hotel developed delusions of grandeur, and I sent for his brother, who, not wanting to have him committed by the sheriff and the law, secured the commitment papers himself and took his brother away for psychiatric treatment. They went by train, and when the sane brother went to sleep sitting in the Pullman, the insane brother stole the commitment papers from his pocket.

The next day they were met at their destination by a group of physicians and a closed car. The insane one pointed to his brother.

"He's out of his mind, poor fellow," he explained, and produced the papers.

Of course the sane brother made a big scene, which helped convince the medicos that he was crazy. It took a lot of disentangling before they committed the right brother.

I remember a party at the Kirkwood that reflected the times, given for the governor of South Carolina by our northern guests after one of the Springdale races. My staff was busy for days preparing for the dinner, which was a sumptuous affair and not designed for profit. I was on my mettle to show these gentlemen the finer points of the boniface's art.

During the cocktail hour preceding the dinner colored servants passed among the guests bearing large silver salvers of hors d'oeuvre. I noticed one senator never let a waiter pass him by, and I was aghast at the amount of hors d'oeuvre he was able to consume. Just before we were to go in to dinner he came up to me.

"Mr. Abbott, suh, I would like to take this opportunity to tell you this is the best banquet I have ever had the privilege to attend."

He put out his hand to say farewell, and at that moment the big door to the grill was thrown open, and there was disclosed the glittering banquet table set for one hundred guests.

On the table, resting in a bed of asparagus fern and sweet-peas, framed by a thousand roses, was a tremendous centerpiece measuring fifteen feet, an authentic reproduction of the Springdale Steeplechase Course, complete with miniature hurdles and gallery, toy horses, and riders. Our efficient maître d'hôtel, Maurice St. Clair, had worked on this creation for two weeks, and he told me "it took twenty waiters and busboys with their shoes off to place it on the table."

The rest of the evening was glowing with mellow candlelight, mellow laughter, and mellow bourbon freely flowing. Prohibition was on, but there was always private stock.

These were the boom days of the hotel business throughout the country, and the hotel men, flushed with money and success, were trying to outdo one another in royal entertainment, especially to the other members of their own profession. Lavish entertaining was the finest type of publicity and

advertising, and it tended to enhance their reputations, and, I suspect, flatter their egos.

Some of the hotel parties in the twenties rivaled the splendor of King Solomon's court and the fabulous scenes of the Arabian Nights. They were never chronicled in public print, but they made history.

Dazzling affairs were hosted by John McEntee Bowman of the Bowman chain, at the Hotel Commodore in New York. One was his "Open House," given in the fall of 1921 in honor of five or six hundred hotel men who came to the United States to inspect the marvels of our newly constructed American hotels and study at firsthand the many innovations.

The Europeans arrived en masse on one of the luxury liners –I think the *Ile de France*–and from the time they landed on the dock until they re-embarked some two weeks later they were the guests of the American hotel men and were not permitted to spend one cent on accommodations, food, liquor, taxis, flowers, et cetera.

We sent them by special train to Chicago, where they were entertained with a lavishness calculated to outdo anything they could look forward to in New York, then by special train to Washington, where they were feasted, wined, and dined, then by special train to Atlantic City, where they were again entertained royally, and back by special train to New York, where they were housed in the city's finest hotels.

As they arrived back in New York the hotel show, lasting a week, burst into full swing in the Grand Central Palace, where the leading purveyors, equipment people, furniture dealers, decorators, and so on, showed their wares.

The climax of the week was Jack Bowman's "Open House."

About five hundred leading American hotel men were invited to the Commodore in addition to the European guests. Jack's short welcoming speech ended on the note, "On with the show." After cocktails and hors d'oeuvre served in a large foyer we were ushered into a larger room, metamor-

phosed into a circus side show, with all the attractions of Ringling's—the beautiful half-ton fat lady, the wild man from Borneo, the midget troupe, and such prize-yielding amusements as the Wheel of Fortune, Potting the Nigger, Ringing the Sticks, and Coaxing the Monkey (a live one), and a feature attraction—the Agglomeration with a huge caption reading: "MULTIFARIOUS, multigenerous, myelemiopopolous, agglomeration of astonishing anomaly, annihilating, apocalyptic, witching world wonder—FIRST AND FINAL PERFORMANCE!"

We were disporting in the side show when the clanging of bells summoned us into the ballroom where Ringling's Circus tent had been set up, complete to the last clown. Under the big top men and women swung in aerial acrobatics and into the rings trooped clowns and magicians, strong men and funny men, singers and dancers, the Queen of the Fairies, the Dusky Princess—all stars of the three-ring artistry. Adding to the general fantasia were cavalcades of trained dogs and horses, darting bareback riders, and, probably on their first visit to any ballroom, Ringling's trained elephants in majestic promenade.

We must not forget the dinner, served impeccably, with the circus in full cry, to a thousand hotel men used to the finest in Europe and the United States, who exclaimed in wonder as course followed course, each with its proper wine. I don't think our European guests were allowed to learn about our dark secret called prohibition.

Seated on the dais was Jack, surrounded by other notables, among them Sir Thomas Lipton, who had come to America to win back the racing cup with his famous *Shamrock IV*.

At the height of the evening there was a terrific commotion at the entrance. Headwaiters and captains were struggling to keep out fifty leather-lunged newsboys who burst into the ballroom with their arms filled with New York papers shouting "Uxtry uxtry, morning paper," and distributed copies to

all the guests. The lead stories were authentic, but scattered through the columns were other stories of the most ludicrous, witty, or embarrassing kind, concerning those present.

In our immediate party were L. R. "Lit" Bolton, Fred Adams, and A. B. Ricker of Poland Springs, who, I honestly think, was the most loved man in our profession. After we had wined and dined to suffocation and the last dessert had been served, A. B. pushed himself away from the table and remarked thoughtfully, "God, I wish I had a doughnut!"

Before writing of this affair I checked with John McCall, banquet manager of the Hotel Commodore, who was instrumental in its staging. While talking with him I tried to imagine the tremendous responsibility and untold detail such a function entailed. Once a press agent became famous by smuggling a lion into a hotel. Jack Bowman brought an entire circus into the Commodore.

Another of Jack's fabulous parties was strictly stag, given to Ye Members of Ye Tavern Club on December 18, 1925, in the ballroom of the Commodore.

In the ballroom that night was an old English inn, complete in every detail, with a mounted master of hounds and a full pack of hounds outside and people in ye old costumes at the door in a standard English coach complete with driver, footman, and four horses.

There were only twenty-six places at the dinner table, including those of the two guests of honor, Mayor Jimmy Walker and Governor Al Smith.

The genial Thomas D. Green, one of the members of Ye Tavern Club, was among the guests. Tom Green fathered the American Hotel Association, as we know it now, and was its president from 1925 until 1940.

He told me the cost of this party for twenty-six guests was reported to be upwards of $40,000.