The River Forest Manor

By Mary B. Wahab, Tabitha Sprouse and Stewart Whitley

This story on River Forest Manor has been a long time coming. It actually began over ten years ago when journalism student Mary B. Wahab interviewed Mrs. Melba Smith, the owner, on October 8, 1987. For one reason or another, Mary’s very fine article never made it into print. Then, in December, 1996, journalism students Tabitha Sprouse and Stewart Whitley interviewed Mark Smith, the son of Mrs. Melba Smith; Mark has essentially taken over the
operation of the River Forest Manor for his mother. So, finally, here is Life on the Pamlico’s story of the River Forest Manor, from Mrs. Melba Smith’s perspective of over ten years ago and from her son’s current viewpoint.

[The following article is from a brochure at the River Forest Manor, 1987.]

In 1899, John Aaron Wilkinson, president of J. L. Roper Lumber Co. and vice president of Norfolk and Southern Railroad, began building the Victorian mansion known today as the River Forest Manor. Italian craftsmen were called in to carve the ornate ceilings and by 1904, the mansion was complete, with carved oak mantels for each of the eleven fireplaces, sparkling cut glass leaded into windows, crystal chandeliers glittering from the ceilings, tapestry places above the mahogany wainscoting in the dining room, and two baths so large that they included oversized tubs for two. Eight years after the completion of his showplace, Wilkinson married a beautiful New Yorker who shared the house with him for many years. At his death, the house was sold to J. W. Hines of Rocky Mount, and in 1947, it was purchased by Axson Smith of Belhaven, whose experience in hotel management was partially gained at the Drake and the Palmer House in Chicago. Since then it has become a world famous restaurant, hotel, and marina, featured by many newspapers and in National Geographic Magazine. It has attracted the wealthy and famous, with James Cagney, Tallulah Bankhead, Robert Ripley, Harvey Firestone, Burl Ives, and Twiggy, among others, numbered as its guests. So you are in good company here at the River Forest, and we hope your visit here with us will be a memorable one.
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Mrs. Melba Smith welcomes Mary Wahab in 1987.

Introduction (written in January, 1988)

By Mary B. Wahab

The River Forest Manor (RFM) is a country inn, restaurant, and marina located in the heart of the peaceful town of Belhaven. This was once the home of a railroad magnate named John Aaron Wilkinson. He started constructing the home in 1899 and completed it in 1904. The exterior is ante-bellum, and many wonder if RFM was a Civil War plantation house; however, the interior of late Victorian oak paneling demonstrates that the house is not.
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We approached the Manor down East Main Street, the principal avenue of this small town. The tree-lined street shelters houses that were created for another century. Downtown Belhaven has changed very little since the days of John A. Wilkinson. Because we are in our horseless carriage, we use the circular carriage drive, to enter by the side door. Had we been town visitors of Mr. Wilkinson’s day, we would have walked down the front walk that bisects the huge lawn and entered through the front door into the foyer. There we would have been greeted by the butler and would have presented our visitor’s card. He would have taken the card to the Master or Mistress. They would instruct the butler as to the place the guests would be greeted.

We were greeted by the present owner, Mrs. Melba Smith, in the main hall. Her late husband, Axson Smith, Sr., was the first to open the Manor as a business. Mrs. Smith had graciously consented to conduct us on a tour of the Inn’s rooms, furnished in period antiques, and to tell us a little of the lovely building’s history.

We now invite you to share this delightful afternoon with us, as we tour one of Down East’s historic sites, the River Forest Manor.

[Mary Wahab’s Interview with Mrs. Melba Smith, December, 1987]

Life: Let me just begin by asking you how you became associated with River Forest Manor.

Mrs. Smith: I became associated with it when I got married. My husband had bought the property in 1945, and he opened it in ’47. We were married in ’48. So that’s when I became associated with it.

Life: How old is the structure?

Mrs. Smith: It was actually completed about 1900. Some say 1904, but most of the records I have show about 1900.

Life: Who built it?

Mrs. Smith: Mr. John Wilkinson. He was the uncle of the attorney John Wilkinson [prominent Washington, N. C., attorney].

Life: What was the place originally built for?

Mrs. Smith: He [Wilkinson] was a bachelor at the time, and my understanding is it was built to entertain out-of-town people to promote the area, to promote the land and the railroad. He was vice president of the Norfolk and Southern Railroad, and he also promoted the land because it was so rich. People used to laugh and say that he built it large enough that he could entertain big friends and they couldn’t go out and talk to the local people and have them run the area down.

Life: So he lived here?

Mrs. Smith: Yes, he lived here. And then he married a young girl from New York City, who was in show business. He was 30 or 40 years older than she.

Life: Can you tell us about some of the materials that they used in the construction of this building. It’s really just marvelous!

Mrs. Smith: The wood paneling in the dining room is Honduran mahogany. The original tapestry is still here. We thought of tak-
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Life: Where is the tapestry from?

Mrs. Smith: Belgium. And the ceiling in there [dining room] is as well. These rooms were done by, I understand, Italians that he brought over, who also did work at the Biltmore [in Asheville, N. C].

This organ is on the first floor.

Life: Was your husband the first to open it up as a commercial venture?
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Mrs. Smith: Yes, my husband was the first to open it as an inn.

Life: Was someone living in it up to his opening it?

Mrs. Smith: No, it was vacant when he bought it. The second owner, J. O. Hines, bought it to live here. And he came to Belhaven with the ice factory and the crab factory. I remember he opened the first crab factory. Mr. and Mrs. Hines lived there, and I remember that she was just a small girl.

Life: How long was he here?

Mrs. Smith: He bought it in '33 and resided here until '45. Axson bought it from Mrs. Hines. She had moved to Rocky Mount, and it was sitting here vacant a little while.

Life: Have you enjoyed operating the River Forest Manor?

Mrs. Smith: I love it!

Life: What do you find most enjoyable about it?

Mrs. Smith: The people! I would have enjoyed it if I had started earlier, but I was in another business until Axson died. See, he died in '79, and so I’ve had the responsibility since then. And my son helps me.

Life: You say you enjoy the people.

Mrs. Smith: Yes, we have lovely people that come here.

Life: Where have they come from?
Mrs. Smith shows chest with secret drawer.

Old but elegant tub is six feet long.

Life: We have really enjoyed talking to you.

Mrs. Smith: Well, thank you for coming.

Life: We thank you. [This is the end of the December, 1987, interview with Mrs. Melba Smith.]

Introduction

By Tabitha Sprouse

I have worked as a waitress at River Forest Manor, so what has impressed me the most about this beautiful inn is the home-cooked
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food. Steaming hot oyster fritters, boiled shrimp, and mouth-wa-
tering, home-made apple pie are some of the foods you may en-
joy if you take a trip to River Forest Manor Boatyard and Marina. The all-you-can-eat buffet is legendary in the area. But don’t make
the mistake that some do of overeating the main courses. Save
some room for the delicious desserts, like my favorite, apple pie.

We interviewed Mark Smith, the son of Melba Smith, the owner
of the River Forest Manor, in December, 1996. Mr. Smith is a
jeweler by trade but now works extremely hard to keep his
mother’s pride and joy thriving as a premier attraction on the
coast of North Carolina for both Intracoastal Waterway boaters
and locals who enjoy the hospitality of the dining room and the
bar. Mr. Smith is extremely proud of his mother and father’s suc-
cess and does a great job in the restaurant. I ought to know; I
have had the pleasure of working for him!

Mr. Mark Smith is a friendly, laid-back kind of fellow, who enjoys
wearing brightly colored shirts. Perhaps his identifying character-
istic is the key ring he wears, which weighs down his pants. You
can hear him coming a mile away! During our interview, he ex-
hibited the warm hospitality that the Manor is known for. He was
very helpful in providing accurate and fascinating information
about, in my opinion, the greatest attraction in the small water-
front town of Belhaven.

Life: We talked to your mother ten years ago about the River
Forest Manor. Do you remember how your family got involved
with the River Forest Manor?

Mr. Smith: My father purchased the hotel in the mid-forties. Ac-
tually, it was a private home. He moved from Chicago back home.
Mark Smith chats with Tabitha Sprouse and Stewart Whitley.

He had grown up in the hotel business here in Belhaven. He and his father ran the Carolina Hotel that was here years ago; it was in downtown Belhaven. And my father later got in the food service business in Chicago. He got experience at the Drake Hotel and The Palmer House in Chicago, and he also ran Civilian Food Services for the military during World War II. After that, he came back home and purchased what was then a private home from Mrs. Hines, Mr. Hines’ widow. He had a dream of converting it into a marina and country inn or hotel. County inn is a word that hasn’t been used for many years, but we are more of a country inn than a bed and breakfast. We are not really a bed and breakfast, even though we are included in many bed-and-breakfast magazines. Almost all of the publications that come out with bed and breakfasts have us included in there.

Life: Was this a marina first?
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Mr. Smith: No, he actually did it all at one time.

Life: River Forest Manor is one of the premiere places in the whole area to eat. How did it develop that reputation?

Mr. Smith: Well, for example, we have two chefs that are here currently still working; the youngest one has been here for 42 years. As very young girls, my father taught them how to cook from his experiences, and they have guarded their secrets very, very well even from the family.

Life: [Mr. Smith told us how he became involved in the business.]

Mr. Smith: I came home a little over three years ago. I lived in Greenville for 17 years, running a jewelry and gift store. My mother asked me to come home and help because it had gotten to be a little too much for her working seven days a week and her becoming a little older. I said, “Do I have to?” She said, “No, you don’t have to.” I said, “And if I don’t.” She said, “I’ll sell it.” So, I said, “Can I tell my wife first?” So I told my wife, and in 30 days I closed my store and came home right before Christmas, which is unheard of in the retail business—to close right before Christmas; but I was not under any contract or lease because we owned our own building. So I came home and helped during the height of the season, which was October here during our boating season. We’ve become one of the better stops along the Intracoastal Waterway between Maine and Florida, mainly because of our services, such as the restaurant and the marina. We have a travel lift and boat yard that we’ve added on in the last two years, which is not on the premises; but it’s three blocks from here or accessible by water. That’s another reason incorporated in. People like to come in and go to a place that’s other than, basically, a filling station. A lot of marinas are basically a filling station where they pump gas and serve maybe nabs, and that’s about it. There are very few full-service four-star facilities. We’ve been with Texaco for many years, and we’re rated as a star port. A star port has many requirements to be considered a star port. There are star ports both on the East and West Coasts of the United States. There are probably 30 in all, but it’s a matter of selling a quality product and having the services that they require, such as things to help the environment, like pump-outs for the vessels to keep our waterways clean. We’ve provided that service for about two and a half years. Not every place offers it. The Coast Guard requires now on the Intracoastal Waterway that you have to have holding tanks to help keep our waterways clean. But as far as the restaurant is concerned, we serve a traditionally cooked meal instead of fast food. All of our items on our menu are prepared with care with certain ingredients and spiced. Things have to be just right.

Life: What are some of the more famous items you have?

Mr. Smith: One of the things that we’ve been known for many, many years, of course, is our oyster fritters. People come for those especially, that and our crabmeat casserole, scalloped tomatoes, potato casserole, spiced apples, fried chicken and apple-nut bread. We serve the bread complimentary with our continental breakfast in the morning for our guests that stay in the inn. We have six rooms in the inn on the second floor. We have three suites in the building behind the hotel and an adjacent house that we rent out by the evening.

Life: Do you usually have those full?
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Mr. Smith: We have about a 78 percent occupancy, which is pretty good.

Life: Is this time—Christmas—your off season?

Mr. Smith: Yes. Right now, it's sort of everybody's at home trying to get everything ready for Christmas. As it gets a little closer to Christmas, they've gotten everything taken care of. Then they want to book in here during the holidays and, you know, go to a place where they don't have to do anything but enjoy the scenery; it's a quiet place to come to until Christmas day.

Life: You mentioned your cooks, they've been here 42 years.

Mr. Smith: They used to be cooks. Now they're chefs [laughter]! The youngest one has been here 42 years.

Life: And the other one?

Mr. Smith: Longer. She won't say. Both of them have their own recipes that they do. The morning chef comes in and starts preparing and cooking the pies and desserts that we're going to serve that evening. She starts to prepare our casseroles and things of that nature, washing the vegetables and breaking the stems off the collards. It's just peeling the potatoes, getting everything ready so that our evening chef can come in and put them on to cook, so that they'll be ready by 5:30 to start serving.

Life: How many of your people that come to eat regularly are local?

Mr. Smith: On weekends we have a lot of locals, mostly from
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surrounding areas like Bath and the surrounding river areas where people have what they call cottages.

Life: Can people dock here and stay on their boats?

Herbert McCullough, retired dockmaster, is seen here in 1987 photo.
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Mr. Smith: Yes. I would say 98 percent of the people that stay here stay on their vessels. They’ve spent a lot of money for expensive yachts or sailing vessels, and they have everything they need there as far as sleeping is concerned. They like to get up early and get going to their next destination. We’ll find some of them will stay several days if they’ve never been before and they are really not in a hurry. Most of the people do stay on their own vessels unless they have had boat problems and then their boat is up on land or something and then they may check in for a few days.

Many visitors to Manor stay on their own boats.

Life: What exactly is that water here?
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Mr. Smith: Inside the break water is what we call Pantego Creek. Outside the break water is what we call Pungo River. Pungo River, of course, leads to the mouth of the Pamlico River, which is at the start of the Pamlico Sound.

Life: Since you’ve been here, who are some of the more famous people that you’ve had come in?

Mr. Smith: A couple of years age we had Jimmy Buffet [the Florida singer] stop in.

Life: Was he on a boat?

Mr. Smith: Yes, “Cheesburger in Paradise.” He came in and had dinner. There were quite a few people in the lounge during the season, a lot of yachters who sit around in here and mingle and talk. A lot of them know each other or know mutual friends. It’s a good place here in the River Room, which we built about four and a half years ago. This is an addition that we built in the same traditional look outside as the rest of the hotel. However, the exception is the traditional wainscoting coat and that sort of thing that’s present in the other part of the manor. But all of the other ideas were incorporated from the inside of the manor. Buffet got his guitar, brought it back up here, and played a few songs. It wasn’t like he was under pressure and it’s not like we go out and say, “Hey, everybody come in!” You know, get on the phone and call everybody.

Life: I bet that was something!

Mr. Smith: It was fun. We just had a good little party, and he wasn’t stressed out. Of course, I was happy to have him. It made
The River Room, added to the original building, was added over five years ago.

the party go a little better. Occasionally, we have local entertainment in here on the weekends. That’s not one of our big fortes because it’s normally after dinner hours and mostly for local people. They’ll come in, and we’ll have local artists. We’ll have Don Cox if he happens to be in town. He’ll come over and play a few sets just for the fun of it, see all of his friends, and do public relations work for himself, I guess. Joe West, the major league umpire, comes over occasionally. He is also a musician. He’s called the Blue Cowboy, and he sings country music. He’ll get his guitar out or they’ll play the piano and have a good time. It is just a good place to go and enjoy yourself without pressure.
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Life: It sounds like you have a group of regulars.

Mr. Smith: Yes, I would say so. On entertainment nights it’s mostly locals, I would say, the business people in town. We don’t draw a big crowd from out of town, mostly friends of the artist and that sort of thing.

Life: What do you see for the future? It sounds like you are thriving. Is business doing about as well as it’s done?

Mr. Smith: Yes. We’ve been very happy this year. Figures are looking real good. It’s getting near the end of the year. We were looking over them the other day and I guess it’s a combination of all the things: fuel sales and an increase of wedding receptions and weddings that we’re doing, now.

Life: So somebody can book this whole place for a wedding?

Mr. Smith: We’ve had people come from as far as Seattle, Washington, to be married here. Last year, the bride and groom were from there. One pair of parents were from Arlington, Virginia. Someone was flown in from Guam. They had the whole facility booked. We even had an adjacent bed and breakfast booked for the overflow. They had their rehearsal dinner, wedding in front of the hotel, and reception here; and they were in no rush to leave so they stayed an extra day. It was not like they all left after the wedding. It was like they were here, so they enjoyed themselves another day. That’s as far as we’ve ever had anybody come to get married. We offer anything from an organist that we use to ministers that perform weddings for us. And being in the jewelry business like I am in my day job, I can sell them rings, everything but the marriage license!
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Life: Do you have people who get married in the church and then use this for the reception?

Mr. Smith: Yes, inside and outside. We put a canopy up. It’s been almost two years now with the canopy out over the deck area, which makes for a real nice flow of people coming in the doors and out. We set up fruit, fountains of fruit and different tables of food and punch.

Life: Is the foundation of your attraction the food?

Mr. Smith: Yes. People really like the food because, like I say, it’s prepared differently than most places do. It’s not bland. It’s our own recipes, and I don’t think you’ll find many of the same recipes anywhere.

Life: How has the Manor changed in the last 30 or 40 years?

Mr. Smith: Some of the main changes have been in the drinking laws. We used to have a yacht club up on the third floor, in which we had a brown-bagging license. That was the only thing allowed. Of course, when liquor laws changed a few years ago, about five years ago, that’s what spurred us to put in this room, the River Room, which, of course, has dual purposes as a lounge on occasion. We don’t play up the part as a lounge, being in the Southern Bible belt, you might say.

Life: But people can come in here for just a cocktail?

Mr. Smith: Yes.

Life: Or they can come in and eat?

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Mr. Smith: Yes. They can choose between our three traditional parlors, our buffet room, or the River Room. We try to accommodate them anywhere they’d like to be. Of course, we don’t allow smoking in all of our dining rooms. Those are some of the changes over the years.

Life: No smoking anywhere?

Mr. Smith: We do allow smoking in certain parlors. Of course, some people being respectful, will step outside on the porch to smoke because porches surround the hotel.

Life: So your business is really booming?

Mr. Smith: Our business is doing very well. We’ve probably booked about six weddings for this upcoming year. We just completed one wedding this past weekend, actually a rehearsal dinner, with approximately 70 some people in this room. We give them a choice of items that they can choose to eat, and it’s all buffet. We don’t serve by menu. That way it gives us flexibility of seasonal vegetables and things of that nature because we have local suppliers of vegetables. One man has been bringing us collards for over 30 years. And the suppliers who do bring us our vegetables and products of that nature tend to bring us their best because they like to say they sell to River Forest Manor. So they use us as a selling tool but also give us their premium products so that we’ll continue using them. We try to make sure that the products we receive are of very good quality. I inspect all of the vegetable produce when it comes in—meats and that sort of thing—to make sure that we get good things. You can get some bad stuff, and you have to be there to make sure you don’t get it.
Life: There are several nice small towns in the area that don’t have anything like the Manor. Why?

Mr. Smith: I think the Intracoastal Waterway goes within two miles of the channel coming into Belhaven, which is probably halfway between what could be the two roughest runs on the whole Intracoastal, the Albermarle Sound and the Neuse River. They could be the two roughest runs if weather dictates that it’s going to be rough, so we find that this is a good day’s run for most any vessel: a long day’s run for a slower vessel and a short day’s run for a faster vessel. We’ve had vessels in here up to 130 feet in length. We had an Australian vessel called “The Opal.” I guess it was probably owned by a mining company of some sort. They had come in because of weather out in the ocean. They decided to come here and spend about a week. They had recently left Australia, and they had recently dropped off Lady Di or Princess Di over in England.

Life: They didn’t have her though?

Mr. Smith: No, [laughing]. We don’t know who they had on board, but we think they had somebody [famous] on board. Many times you’ll find that the famous people don’t like to have to go in to deal with everything. They like to see everything and stay under cover, but here it’s not like they’re going to be spotted and mobbed. You’re definitely not going to be mobbed in Belhaven!

Life: You mentioned Jimmy Buffet. Any others that you can think of?

Mr. Smith: Neil Sedaka was here a few years ago, and his crowd enjoyed the hot tub and Jacuzzi and swimming pool, which we added a few years ago, and we have the tennis court. A lot of them enjoy the fact that they can get out and jog in town and feel comfortable and safe. They can exercise by playing tennis or swimming. We have just about every facility, except maybe an exercise room, which a larger resort would have. We have laundry facilities and good food.

Life: It sounds like your father was either brilliant or lucky or both in putting the whole package together.

Mr. Smith: He had a dream, and it was a tough dream because many times hurricanes would come through and destroy the pier, and he’d rebuild it. He finally came up with some things. He probably had the first removable deck pier on the east coast. The damage of the pier comes from the surge of the waves up under the pier where it pulls your pilings up. If you’ve ever seen a damaged pier from a storm, one side of the pilings will be up and the pier will be slanted. Well, he built the pier, drove his pilings, and put in the underpinning. Then he had his decking done in three to four board sections that were numbered and could start at the end of the pier on these carts. You could pick them up on these carts and stack them and roll them onto a tractor-trailer and roll them away until after the storm. He could lay them back out after the storm.

Life: That really prevents a lot of the damage?

Mr. Smith: Yes. A couple of times he didn’t have time to remove it. He simply nailed rope to it [the removable decking] and they would float off. You would see a long rope of sections of pier, but it was retrievable. Sometimes it would break. Some of the older
neighborhood kids tell me that dad would pay them a dollar a piece to go out in their little skiffs and tow back the sections. Of course, they were numbered, and they could put them right back in place. We’re attempting to rebuild the pier or do some upgrading on the pier. This past year, of course, we put in sprinkler systems throughout the hotel. That took six months to do because it was very intricate work to get it in the older part of the hotel without being obnoxious looking and so that it would be aesthetically acceptable. The past year we removed our underground fuel tanks, which is also to protect our environment. That was a big expenditure this year. We had hoped to be working on the pier, but we opted to go for the environment first and then upgrade facilities. Now, that we’ve got our infrastructure here with our facility able to accommodate approximately 100 people at one seating in the Manor, we can now build up our pier to accommodate more vessels. Now during the peak of our season, we cannot accommodate everyone. We work as hard as we can to accommodate everybody that’s here. And right now, with the addition of this room, we can now accommodate more people, so we’re expanding out on the waterway to give us more [boat] slips.

Life: You’ve really got a wonderful place here.

Mr. Smith: People like to tour the home here on the Manor. The rooms that aren’t occupied in the evening by any of our guests are left open for guests if they come to dinner or for yacht people. They like to just see. They are impressed by the antiques that my mother and father accumulated.

Life: [Mr. Smith told us about the tub for two and the secret compartment behind a secretariat.]

Mr. Smith [looking at photos]: That’s the tub and secret compartments behind the secretariat. The secret compartment is behind the center door. Actually, years ago when people would have these items custom-built for them, they did not have safes and things in their homes, so to protect their valuables and their jewelry, they would have secret compartments to hide things in so that a robber or burglar or thieves would not know about them, even if they ransacked.

Life: Your mother in an interview several years ago was quite proud of this clock in this photo.

Mr. Smith: She collected clocks for many years; all of the clocks in the Manor run even though we don’t run them all of the time. We’ll run them probably a month out of a year total to keep them somewhat lubricated.

Life: Who is the fellow in this 1989 photo?

Mr. Smith: That’s Herbert McCullough. He’s a retired dockmaster. When I was growing up, we had a dockmaster, Mr. Roosevelt Windley, and after him we had Charlie McCarney and then Herbert McCullough. After him came Enok. Enok is known up and down the waterway because he’s a retired drill sergeant from the army.

Life [Tabitha]: That is why he’s so loud!

Mr. Smith: Yes! People would look forward to coming in and getting yelled at, I mean, actually commanding them where to put their vessels and how to put them there, so that they wouldn’t have any damage done to their vessels by not seeing where they were going. He had a voice that could carry and he would tell
them, “Hold it! Hold it right there, Captain! Shut it down now! We got the ropes!” People looked forward to coming back and seeing him. He comes in during the season typically to visit some of the captains that have been coming here. There are many captains that have been coming here for many, many years. We had a man that said he had been coming here since 1948. A man that was here the other day—he was like 92—I think he said he had been coming here since then, and he’s been here twice a year since 1948. He had about a 115-foot yacht. He says, “But the first time I came here I didn’t.” He said each year it got a little bigger. So we’ve seen our customers become successful, and their continued patronage has allowed us the opportunity to serve them better each year. And also it’s allowed us to grow with them as they’ve been successful. We’ve been successful because of their continued patronage, and our hospitality is in treating them like people. If there is anything in particular they need, we go out of our way to provide it. We provide transportation to an airport if somebody needs to fly back home on business or something like that. They know when they come here, they are going to be well taken care of because we do everything we can to accommodate them, even if someone is a vegetarian and they don’t eat the dishes or some of the fried foods—some people are real peculiar about that. Our main chef, Alice will be happy to talk with them and see if we can do something for them, provided we’re not having 100 people eating at that moment, but if they’re willing to wait, then we’re happy to take care of them.

Life:[laughing] Not if you had 100 people!

Mr. Smith: Not at that moment! We’re not set up for individual orders, but we’re happy to try to work with anyone!
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Conclusion

By Stewart Whitley

After talking with Mr. Mark Smith, I have learned that the River Forest Manor in Belhaven is not only a historical attraction but is a friendly place with genuine hospitality shown by all employees and owners. The most impressive attribute of the Manor to me is the quality of the food. I am particularly impressed with the time and care taken in the preparation of the dishes. (But don’t try to pry any of the recipes loose!) Two of the chefs have over thirty years of experience in the kitchen. So the employees are loyal and are a vital, and much appreciated, component in the operation. Mr. Mark Smith says about the guests, “They know when they come here, they are going to be well taken care of because we do everything we can to accommodate them.” We appreciate the time and cooperation of Mark Smith and wish him continued success with the River Forest Manor.

Mark Smith obviously enjoys managing the River Forest Manor.