The Grand Ole Bayview Hotel

Article by Gail Baynor

Built in 1925, the luxurious Bayview Hotel stood on the sandy shores of the Pamlico River in the Bayview Community of Bath, North Carolina, for 19 years, until it burned to the ground in 1944. The Bayview Hotel was both symbol and reality of an era of elegance on the eastern coast, from New England to Florida. This was the time of the grand hotels, those mammoth, usually rococo edifices, which were the last word in sump- tutous seashore vacationing.
Mrs. Margret Kilby has lived in Bayview for over fifty years. For many years, she and her husband Jay ran a store, a popular gathering place of the pot-bellied stove variety, at Bayview. She wistfully remembers the hotel. In fact, before she moved to Bayview as a bride in 1930, she remembers that in 1928 her high school class held its junior-senior banquet in the hotel.

In addition to enjoying the hotel in its heyday, Mrs. Kilby also saw the fire that burned and destroyed the hotel as well as many Bayview dwellings. Her account of the fire is perceptive and compelling.

It was an honor for Mrs. Hughes, Mr. Armstrong, and me to talk with Mrs. Margaret Kilby at her home just behind the site of the Bayview Hotel. She spoke of an elegant place that was frequented by grand ladies and gentlemen from all along the eastern seaboard as well as from the local towns and communities. In the large dining room and dance pavilion, guests could dine and dance by the light of the magnificent chandeliers. During the day, vacationers could find their places in the sun on a sandy beach. And they could ride a merry-go-round. The hotel now has receded into the past—except for those who remember, like Mrs. Kilby.

This interview with Mrs. Kilby was really more of an informal conversation between Mrs. Kilby and Mrs. Hughes, her longtime neighbor in the Bayview community.

Mrs. Kilby began by showing us pictures of the 52-room Bayview Hotel, which, with its broad porches and elegant dining rooms, provided a social center for Beaufort County for almost 20 years.

These are the most amazing pictures of the hotel! It's exciting just to think about it, isn't it, Margaret? From these pictures it looks like hundreds of ears, lined up and down as far as you can see.

Yes. You couldn't get a parking place. The streets were full. I suspect when [the hotel] was a new thing, people came from all over. People from Washington used to come down here and have wedding parties and things like that. There wasn't a place in Washington for things like that. They used to have a lot of parties over there. It was a nice hotel, the nicest of anything in this area.

Those pilings we see in the water now, is that where the dance hall was? And was it just a great big dance floor with a crystal ball?

Yes. That's where it was. And it had windows all the way around that could be pushed up, and then [there was] a walkway all the way around outside of those windows, and benches where people could sit and watch people dance.

When they had a dance, did big bands come to play?

The Blue Devils [a collegiate band from Duke University] lived down here for two years.

So the boys in the band would just come down here and stay the summer and play? Was it like Friday night, Saturday night, and Sunday afternoon? Or did things close up on Sunday?
Vistas of the Hotel

--circa 1930.
No, they didn't close Sunday. There was a merry-go-round, and [even though] we don't have the best shoreline now, [then] it was real sandy, great for swimming.

In addition to providing private rooms for as many as 52 quests, the hotel also housed a "drug store" or soda counter.

There was a drugstore inside the hotel? Was there a soda fountain?

Yes, it was sort of a gathering place. There wasn't a pharmacist.

Was it like a gift shop, in a way?

They had things in there, not a whole lot. It seems [that] I can't remember too much about it when it was in its glory. They had someone keeping it open all the time, so it was a popular place.

Did any famous people come and stay at the hotel?

Well, I was so young ... I don't recall any. But I can tell you this. In the wintertime, hunters came from up north, just gobs of them! They would hunt for ducks and birds. They came back every year and made a livelihood [for the caretaker of the hotel] for the winter.

Besides the dance pavilion and drugstore, there were approximately 52 rooms, right? Was there anything else?

I don't know any place I've been where you could see more people than in the dining room. Just a beautiful dining room! Oh, gee, if that hotel and dining room and kitchen were here now . . .

Was it nicely furnished?

Oh, yes, it was quite up-to-date. It had the most beautiful floors. You know, they didn't put rugs on the floors like they do now. The [hardwood] floors were all sanded and finished.

Was the hotel just operated certain months out of the year?

Well, it was [in operation] summer season [and during hunting season]. [Jay and I] lived in it [during] one winter.

Mrs. Kilby pointed to the shoreline of the Pamlico and then drew our attention to a merry-go-round and bath houses lining the waterfront in her circa 1935 pictures.

It's hard to imagine this magnificent two-story building with a dining room, dance pavilion, and drugstore being right here at Bayview on land that is now washed away. And as for the activities that took place there, I'm sure it was greatly missed when it all burned. Would you tell us about that, Margaret, about the decline and destruction of that great hotel?

Well, before the hotel burned, those were Depression years, 1932. People didn't have any money. The people who owned [the hotel], I guess, they didn't have any money either. So it just gradually went down. The dance hall was torn down; then the hotel stayed on for, I suppose, several years. The hotel burned in 1944, in March? For some reason, practically everyone was gone from
Bayview that day.

The wind was blowing, just about like it did last week. The fire started in the roof, way up there. Jay [Mrs. Kilby's late husband] and I were coming home, and before we turned in [to the Bayview road], I said, "Look, there's a fire up there!" So we drove on around there to where Jack Wallace now lives. Jay said, "Put me out here. Maybe I can keep this from catching afire." So I drove around. He called to me, "Go to the hotel and call the fire department." I went to call, and I kept looking back at him, wondering how things were. When I looked around, the fire was right at me, and I just drove out of the way before it jumped the road. I drove around there and called the fire department. By the time I did that, this store on the corner, two story building, was on fire.

Now, was that a company store?

Yes. It was on fire. We had a bowling alley where our store was. That was on fire. Jay and I worked to put out that fire. The wind was blowing so hard it set a house on fire on the other side of the cemetery. It burned to the ground. The Slades had a barn, back of the fire. Top of his house was on fire. It was just like something you can't believe! Jay and I saw smoke on top of this house. Nobody had come! We ran back here. Just as we got here, Mr. Howard Selby and a Northern man were arriving here. A couple of men had gotten a ladder and were on top of our house. Then, when the wind had passed, we got some things out. Jay and I got in the car, and we went up the shore where there were three houses on fire. So we went on; we knew we couldn't do anything about stopping that fire there. Frances Scott's house caught afire. We went on up, and what used to be the Bullock's house, the doorsteps were burning. Jay and I tore those away from the house.

Practically everybody in Bath became involved in fighting the fire that burned Bayview. Boys from Bath High School were brought to the scene by agriculture teacher O. J. Gaylord. Much of Bayview was reduced to ashes that day.

But, you know, all that was so exciting, you didn't realize you were a human being on earth.

What frightened me more than anything else, I had three little girls. [When Jay and I] got back, we couldn't get out on the road because light [electric power] wires were down all along the road. I looked up and the bus was coming with those children and stopped it right along those wires, and opened the doors. I screamed, "Don't turn those children out! They'll get electrocuted!" So they [the children] got off by the bridge.

Did the hotel stay?

The hotel stayed. And that night, I woke up and I got hearing some noises and everything was so light. I came to the side window and looked out and the fire was just running up the side of that building. It burned to the ground that night.

When the Bayview Hotel burned, an era of elegance passed. Many "summer people" still come to Bayview to stay at their cottages and enjoy the river. But the grand hotel is just a memory.
To most of us time is thought of in terms parallel to progress. But to others, who possess years of precious memories of days gone by, time has carried away a way of life, leaving no more than a memory to the few who can recollect it. Decay, ruin, and violent destruction make it impossible for the young of us to conceive personally of the images of the now non-existent structures and lifestyle of the past. But thanks to Mrs. Margaret Kilby of Bayview, we have a vivid picture of the Bayview Hotel, gone now for almost 40 years.