



Leon Hale

Old hotel stands empty but full of memories

If I had a great deal of money to play around with, and I mean millions, I would like to go along the shore of the Gulf of Mexico and buy up all the old frame hotels sitting on the banks of bays, and fix them up the way they were when they were built.

I don't know whether there would be any profit in it but it would sure be fun. I go into every old bayshore hotel I can find. I like to sit in the lobby, and talk to the owner or the manager or the caretaker.

The last hotel of this sort I went into was the Lafitte, on San Antonio Bay down at Seadrift. I had a long conversation with the owner, Azile Dierlam. Isn't that a great name? Azile is pronounced in three syllables and the last one sounds as if it has two e's. It must be said right or it loses all its beauty.

The Lafitte is now about 65 years old. Around Seadrift you hear that it was built anywhere from 1910 to 1912. In a laud-selling brochure he wrote for the American Townsite Company, a fellow named A. D. Powers said about Seadrift, "We have a modern hotel at Seadrift with running water and inside bathrooms, finish as good as any hotel, on the shore of San Antonio Bay. . . . If you want a good seafood dinner, the LaFitte Hotel can satisfy you."

The brochure is not dated but Powers mentioned in it that the Intraoastal Canal was not quite completed and that gives us a good clue. The Handbook of Texas says the Canal below Galveston was finished in May of 1913.

Pictures in that brochure show the hotel standing all white and square and plain and very lonesome, without as much as a shrub or a sapling around it. Today it looks pretty much the same except it's got a big tree by the front step. That piece of coastal prairie it sat on became the corner of Bay Ave. and 3rd St. in Seadrift.

Azile Dierlam's mother named the town.

"My mother, whose name was Roberta Sims before she married, submitted the name Seadrift to Post Office officials. She used to speak of all the driftwood settlers here picked up, and used for fuel. It collected along the shore of the bay. I think most of it came out of the river (the Guadalupe that empties into San Antonio Bay).

That's where she got the name Seadrift, and it was accepted in Washington."

We sat not in the lobby but in what used to be called the ladies parlor, just off the main lobby. It was not a restroom, but just a place where ladies gathered and men didn't go.

The Lafitte was built by the American Townsite Company which headquartered in San Antonio. When it was about 10 years old, a Baptist minister named John Dierlam acquired the hotel. This was Azile Dierlam's father. She joined with him on the deal and took half interest in the place. She has operated the hotel now for 18 years, since the death of her parents.

A lot of East Texas people will remember Azile Dierlam as a court reporter in the 87th District. She worked in Palestine, Fairfield, Centerville and Groesbeck.

She told me she can't make a living operating the Lafitte. In its early times it was the only place to spend the night in Seadrift but that's been changed a long time. The day I was there, the Lafitte did not have a single paying guest. Miss Dierlam said the last weekly guest she had left without paying her.

But she gets transients sometimes. And in the '50s when that Union Carbide plant was being built not far away, the place was full all the time. You'd think fishermen would like the Lafitte, but Port O'Connor up at Pass Cavallo gets most of those.

From what I've ever found out about Seadrift, it tends to be a pretty strait-laced town and was from the start. You just consider, when a town's only hotel was run by a Baptist preacher it doesn't figure to be exactly a swinging place.

Miss Dierlam talked about the big pavilion that used to draw a lot of party people. It was there near the hotel, and stood out over the water. Dances would be held there, and some drinking went on. It was owned by the city. Somewhere along the way, I didn't get the date, an election was held and the town voted to get rid of the pavilion. Miss Dierlam bid on it and got it. But she decided she didn't want to fool with it, and was released from her bid.

Land promoters and town developers like American Townsite used to put out some

mighty rosy information, as real promoters do even yet, on the real estate they were selling. In that brochure I mentioned before, A. D. Powers wrote, "I have spent twenty-five years investigating locations and establishing new towns, and if experience counts for anything at all, Seadrift is going to be a city."

More than 60 years after he wrote that, Seadrift has about 1,000 citizens. Maybe Powers could argue that 1,000 folks do make a city, at that, but I think he had something bigger in mind.

He also wrote about San Antonio Bay, "It is a quiet bay where storms are unknown."

Well, a few of them have become known, since 1912. Miss Dierlam says the Lafitte has survived at least five hurricanes, including Carla in '61 that was among the largest storms that ever scoured the Texas coast. It put 9 inches of water and mud into the Lafitte's ground floor.

Possibly because it was operated so long by church people, the Lafitte hasn't become all barnacled up with juicy tales that usually collect in the lobbies of old seaside hotels. There's a story that Bonnie and Clyde once spent the night there but Miss Dierlam doubts it's true. I expect she's right. That pair didn't get quite old enough to spend nights in as many places as folklore says they did.

For a good while the Lafitte did duty as a Baptist church. The local Baptists lost their building to a storm back in the '40s, and collected what pews they could salvage and set 'em up in the dining room of the Lafitte and kept on singing and preaching.

So the Lafitte has had souls saved in it, and three or four babies born (not to guests but to relatives of the owners), and several deaths. Both Miss Dierlam's parents died there.

Then it has had very likely more weddings in its lobby than any hotel in Texas, due to its owner being a minister. It was mighty handy for Rev. Dierlam to come out from behind the desk and perform marriage ceremonies.

Before I left I had to ask Miss Dierlam how she got that first name of hers.

"When I was born my father had just read a novel with that



Not one paying guest at Azile Dierlam's Lafitte Hotel

—Post photo

title, "Azile." He liked the heroine of that story. Her name was Azile Dameron, and that's how I got the name."

It looks like a harsh name in print but has a beautiful sound when pronounced right. Ah-suh-lee.

I think she would sell that

hotel. Wish I had the money to buy it. I would plant palm trees in the front yard and open up the dining room and specialize in home-style fried oysters served by the platterful. All you can eat for \$10 a head. That may seem high but you just haven't tasted my oysters.