

A Step Back in Time

NAPLES BEACH HOTEL & GOLF CLUB

Imagine having the unique experience of being able to step back in time to 1880! A time when Florida had only been a state for 40 years! We could watch the exuberance, frustration and joy of General John Williams as he was building his three story hotel on the beach on the Gulf of Mexico. He called it the Naples Hotel.

The General's joy was short-lived. Soon after the Naples Hotel was built, he went into bankruptcy. You can imagine the hurt and defeat the General must have felt when he had to sell out to a newspaperman named Mr. Haldeman. (Mr. Haldeman was to become a City of Naples founding father.)

It wasn't easy for the hotel because the clientele were mostly of the gentlemen class that enjoyed hunting and fishing. They had to travel 40 miles by boat from Ft. Myers to get to the remote village.

Naples Hotel was sold twice again and as time passed it was inherited by three sisters. The sisters, not being interested in the hotel business, put it up for sale. Roads were built by then and travel was made easier by automobile.

The year was 1946 in our time travel, and this was when Mr. Henry Watkins, Sr. saw the hotel. He was a defense con-

tractor for the Army during World War II and owned a toy manufacturing business in Ohio. He wanted to sell out and move his family south into the sunshine.

Can you see the expression on Mr. Watkins' face when he found the hotel deed also included more than 20,00 acres when he inquired into its purchase. Three-fourths of the platted city of Naples! You can almost feel his determination in finding investors. When he did, a partnership was formed and the deal was made along with a new adventure for the Naples Hotel.

A few blocks north of the hotel was an abandoned 18-hole golf course. Mr. Watkins, Sr. leased it from its owners, the Joslin family of Jergens Lotion fame. The first nine holes were restored in 1946 for use by himself and his hotel guests. At that time it was the only golf course in that part of the state. Later the back nine was restored and in 1950 he and his partners bought the property outright.

Mr. Watkins then moved his offices from the old Naples Hotel into the existing two-story clubhouse.

The partnership disposed of its extensive real estate holdings in Naples and Mr. Watkins bought sole ownership of the hotel and golf course properties. He start-

ed adding to the hotel complex and by 1953 completed construction of a two-story 35-room structure. This marked the start of the Naples Beach Hotel and Golf Club.

Mr. Watkins operated both properties for a time, but eventually all operations were transferred several blocks up the street at the new location and the 100-year-old original Naples Hotel was demolished.

New sections of the Naples Beach Hotel have been added every couple of years until now the complex has six residential buildings including the five-story tower, two-story main wing, two-level patio wing, a five-floor penthouse, two-level cabana wing, and the nine-story Watkins wings.

Mr. Watkins Sr., active in the resort until 1978, passed away in 1981 at the age of 92. He would have been very proud of his family for now the role of president is handled in the same tradition by his son Henry Watkins Jr. A third-generation Watkins, his grandson Michael, serves as General Manager.

As we step back into the present, we watched a humble beginning of Naples Hotel grow into the "Grand Lady" she is today. The NAPLES BEACH HOTEL AND GOLF CLUB reigns in a class by itself. ■



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