

Hotel Colfax

By M. M. MORRIS

A high bluff located one mile east of Colfax, Iowa, was famed for its healthful elements for many years after a resort hotel was dedicated there in 1877. Schuyler Colfax, vice-president under President Ulysses S. Grant, performed the honors at its grand opening.

Workmen drilling for coal at the site two years before, discovered the mineral springs which were to make Colfax known all over the world. As many as thirteen hundred people were annually attracted to this booming Iowa town. Its mineral water came to be sold throughout the United States in ten, twenty, and fifty gallon jugs. Many who were benefited by the water later came to visit the resort. They were entertained by famous orchestras and singers while enjoying health establishing habits and stimulating treatments. By 1894, the hotel was a prosperous enterprise. It contained one hundred fifty rooms, many types of therapeutic baths and employed a large staff.

At the height of its popularity the building was lavishly remodeled by Colonel James Donahoe of Davenport, who invested over half a million dollars in the project. He became interested in Colfax after his wife had unsuccessfully sought relief from rheumatism in many European spas. She was told in Germany that she would find the kind of water to cure her in Colfax, Iowa; and it did.

Hotel Colfax under the direction of Donahue alternately flourished and languished. It was sold at a sheriff's sale in 1904. Then it later made a comeback. But after several successful seasons, it finally closed during the depression following World War I. The government offered seventy-five thousand dollars to use it as a veterans' hospital. The old hotel underwent extensive change as a result of this transaction. The large luxurious bedrooms were divided to accommodate two, three

and more patients. However, the facilities were apparently inadequate to meet the needs of convalescing veterans. It closed again, this time for twenty-two years.

Old Hotel Colfax eventually opened again as a home for four hundred fifty-five fat pigs, and was appropriately called the Pig Palace. Officially known as the Great National Swiss Palace, it became the headquarters of the National Purebred Livestock Exchange.

Within a few years, the still impressive structure and grounds were purchased for two hundred thousand dollars and used as a center for the treatment of alcoholics by Dr. Frederick McCallister, Chief of Staff at Still Osteopathic Hospital in Des Moines. He did much to publicize the proper treatment and rehabilitation of such afflicted persons. Patients were assigned a room and put to bend for a week, with medical and psychopathic treatment sometimes lasting a month. Expenses began at four hundred dollars per month. The record in the late 1940's showed 83% of the patients, including many women, to have been substantially helped in this manner.

The institution soon failed because of the expenses. It was one of the largest centers of its type in the United States, serving one hundred patients at any one time.

The Foxbilt Feed Company of Des Moines, bought this fabulous landmark, and for a short time, used it as a training school for their sales people. It passed into the hands of the Catholic Society of the Divine Savior in 1952. Known as Salvatorians, this group of priests have their headquarters in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and train youths of fourteen different countries in missionary work.

The original Hotel Colfax still stands proudly on the highest ground for miles around. It looks down upon the Skunk river valley and hundreds of acres of scenic woodland. It has been a renowned spa, a government hospital, a "pig palace," an institution for the treatment of alcoholics, and finally, an international religious school. Hotel Colfax, a unique and interesting symbol of a by-gone era in Iowa, fortunately, is being preserved and once again serving a useful purpose.

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