

311 W. Foothill Boulevard



To fully understand the Aztec Hotel, it is necessary to understand the climate of the times in the Monrovia of the 1920's. Monrovia was riding the crest of a boom after the war--or the Great War, as it was known. There was a spirit of unbridled optimism in the air, a can-do attitude that would not accept any limits. Some of that optimism may have been fueled by bathtub gin, since Prohibition was still in effect, and Monrovia was far from dry, regardless of the law of the land. Build a hotel in the foothills of Monrovia resembling the homes of cliff dwellers? Why not? Build a golf course where the caddies would need to have the agility of mountain goats? Why not?

The citrus groves of Monrovia above White Oak Avenue were being rapidly subdivided into lots for new houses. There was the promise that White Oak Avenue itself would soon be part of the fabulous Foothill Boulevard, stretching from San Fernando eastward to the county line, and beyond. The stodgy old Board of Trade reorganized in 1922 as the dynamic Monrovia Chamber of Commerce. And Robert Stacy-Judd arrived in Southern California from England by way of Canada and the Midwestern United States.

In 1923, the Chamber of Commerce looked around and decided that the dowdy old 'Leven Oaks Hotel needed to be replaced by a brand new hostelry. After all, it was an antique at twelve years of age. In June of that year, the Community Hotel Committee was "organized and fostered by the Monrovia Chamber of Commerce." The committee was led by Walter E. Keefe, chairman, and Arthur F. Graf, secretary. The Hockenberry System, Inc. was contacted by Lincoln Backus and a survey by them revealed that: (1) A new hotel was needed, (2) The money was in Monrovia, and (3) A community organization could be perfected.

In September, the widening of White Oak Avenue to four lanes as Foothill Boulevard was assured when the majority of the property owners along White Oak agreed to sell the necessary frontage. And in the fall, Robert Stacy-Judd received a visitor at his studio. It was a fateful visit, for the bookseller had brought with him a volume from the 1840's containing illustrations of the Maya ruins in Central America. The bookseller thought Stacy-Judd would be interested. He was. So much so that he revised his thinking about the design of the new hotel in Monrovia. He had been working privately with the Community Hotel Committee regarding plans for the new hotel, even though no public announcement had yet been made.

That changed on January 16, 1924, with the public announcement of plans for the new hotel. (Two women were on the Executive Committee-Hattie Bellinger and Mary

Seymour). A corporation was to be formed for the sale of stock, and a financing campaign was planned. The campaign headquarters was to be at 107 E. Lemon Avenue, now the home of Restaurant Devon. On January 19 the proposed location and design for the new hotel was announced. It was to be on White Oak Avenue, projected to become Foothill Boulevard. It was later to be on Route 66 until 1933. The “design was to be true colored Aztec, no other in Southern California.” According to Charles F. Davis, the site was to be obtained from W. A. Chess, “who strangely enough was not particularly interested in selling and who was not especially enthusiastic about the hotel. But they took the property away from him.”

On January 25, 1924 the annual banquet of the Monrovia Chamber of Commerce took place in the recently completed banquet hall of the Methodist Church. Louis D. Barr, western manager of the Hockenberry System, was the principal speaker. In March was the opening of the campaign. Daily luncheon meetings were held and a pledge board was installed in Library Park. Prospects were identified and three teams were established. March 29 marked the close of the campaign. The goal was \$135,000; \$138,900 was pledged. Charles F. Davis had this to say. “Monrovians bought stock, but among the canny were those who traded their shares for homes or business lots, quietly. Others later wished they had.” A construction loan of \$75,000 through the Fidelity Savings and Loan Association of Los Angeles was obtained for additional funding. On November 7 the building permit was issued. Low bidder was W. H. Mc Cune of Monrovia with a bid of \$140,000.

On September 1, 1925 the grand opening of the hotel with a dinner dance took place. Katherine Grauman of Hollywood and her son Sid were among those in attendance as guests of Robert Stacy-Judd. The menu included “Salad Montezuma and Fancy Ice Cream Aztec”. Dancing was available in the Aztec Cafe and Coffee Shop on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays to the music of the Aztec Syncopators and the Aztec Melody Five. Curb fountain service was provided to motorists on White Oak Avenue.

All was initially well, but the subsequent history of the Aztec was checkered. Charles F. Davis had this to say, “The hotel never made money. It opened with great fanfare, but somehow was too fantastic in appearance for success.”

In November of 1927 there was an unsuccessful attempt to arrange for re-financing, with an impassioned plea to the community. Alas! Foreclosure took place. The only bid at the sheriff’s sale on December 17 was a \$50,000 bid from Fidelity Savings and Loan, or 20 cents on the dollar, according to the newspaper article. The stockholders in the Aztec Hotel Corporation lost their entire investment.

By 1935, the Aztec was shown as vacant in the Monrovia City Directory. January 1, 1938 marked the re-opening of the hotel under the management of Nellie Jamieson. The Aztec limped along during the 40’s, 50’s, 60’s and 70’s. (It was off limits to service personnel during World War II.)

A sweeping renovation in 1983 created the Brass Elephant Restaurant and bar,

and in 2000 began a period of restoration that continues to this day.

Perhaps the same psychic energy that brought about the creation of the Aztec has persisted in the form of the spirits that have been detected there today. Former guests, alleged to still be in residence, are a hooker who was killed by a patron and a failed businessman from Chicago who ended up as a suicide, among others. Perhaps the very architecture of the hotel has opened a window from this world to the next. Who knows?