

Peering Into The Past Of Pine Hills

Faintly visible from the Bay St. Louis toll bridge on the far north shore of the Bay - resembling at that distance what might be a mediaeval castle is the Pine Hills Major Seminary of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Empty for many year this impressive structure was purchased by them in 1953 and ever since has been dedicated to the training of young clerics to be missionaries to the poor and abandoned.

Before that for a brief six months in 1942 U. S. troops had been quartered in this five story steel and concrete building. Before for a pyrotechnical period of several years around 1925 it had been the expensive, exclusive Pine Hills Resort Hotel.

Back there in 1925 there was no vehicular bridge across Bay St. Louis. The old Kiln Road carried the Coast land traffic around the Bay between Pass Christian and Bay St. Louis To get to New Orleans that was the route you took. In that year of 1925, influenced by the spend it fast and make it faster hysteria of the Florida real estate boom, a group of moneyed businessmen of New Orleans, partly for pleasure and partly for profit, created between this old Kiln Road and the north shore of Bay St. Louis an elite subdivision and tourists resort --- a veritable Coast Shangri-La which its promoters called Pine Hills.

Cypress swamps were filled, log supported roads were built. Concrete sidewalks penetrated the pines and skirted magnolia shaded lots. An 18-hole golf course ran it's fairways around a \$75,000 palm patioed club house. A wide sand beach sloped to a rambling boat house

The Jewel in this setting, of course, was the Pine Hills Hotel, costing \$1,350,000 with an extra \$200,000 for furnishings. It had five steel and concrete stories of 180 rooms furnished with Persian rugs and tiled baths. Swank Pine Hills opened on December 20, 1926 and for three short years prospered.

Then came the unanticipated. Suddenly a bridge was constructed across

the mouth of Bay St. Louis and suddenly Highway 90 was routed across its shorter miles. The traffic that had recently flowed past Pine Hills was suddenly 9 miles away. Luxurious Pine Hills, of course, eventually was compelled to close.

Today the once festive Pine Hills Dinning Room is the Seminary Library where the Brothers seek knowledge, and the once ornate Hotel Lounge is today the dignified Seminary Chapel.

Up until recently 1925 was as far back as this column's knowledge of Pine Hills went. But now, with the permission of Rev. Martin Machovac, editor of the Pine Hills "Pageant" in which it was published, and through the courtesy of Miss Yvette Whitfield of 114 Cedar Crest Court in Lafayette, La., who supplied the original data, we can give you today the story of Pine Hills when it was a plantation home called Shelly over a hundred years ago.

William Alexander Whitfield, who built Shelly was born in North Carolina in 1817 In 1841 he married Charity Helen Jones, and the couple moved to Hancock County, Mississippi, four years later. At first they managed the Bay Place which belonged to Benjamin Whitfield. Then around 1850 they bought the Shell Bank Plantation and built the home they called Shelly, because it stood on a high shell bank that extended out in the Bay.

The Whitfields operated this plantation with the help of slaves until after the Civil War. A beautiful penthouse garden rested on Shelly's cement roof. The flowers were watered by an arterial well south of the house. And on the plantation, which was level for 500 feet back from the Bay, there were 5000 orange trees, 400 Japanese persimmon trees, 150 scuppernong and other grape vines and 150 varieties of roses. The Whitfields sold fruit as far as New Orleans.

People came from all around to visit and admire Shelly. The house was exquisitely furnished. The silver goblets and mugs had the children's names engraved on them and some are still in use. The organ that Mrs. Whitfield brought in an ox cart from North Carolina to the Coast is in that home of her granddaughter. Yolanda Whitfield in Lafayette Louisiana.

Mr. Whitfield was a graduate of the Law School of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. It is said he never did a bit of manual labor in his life. He

enjoyed his flowers and permitted nothing to worry him. Some of his children, however, were very energetic. Of his sons, Alston because a physician. Blanchard a school teacher and photographer, and Lolause a successful artist. His oldest daughter Rosabelle died at Shelly. He Imported a marble angel from Italy and placed it at her grave. Mrs. Whitfield, another daughter Irene, and several slaves were also buried at Shelly --- but the grave markings, disappeared after the Whitfields moved away. Around the turn of the century the Gulfport and Mississippi Traction Company planned, but failed, to extend the Coast electric line from Mobile to New Orleans. This line was to skirt Bay St. Louis as no other railroad could build a bridge within a mile and a half of the L&N bridge across the Bay. The line was to go through the Shell Bank plantation then owned by northern capitalist.

This group of capitalists owned 26,000 acres in one hunk and originally planned to establish a Chautauqua ground there. According to newspaper clippings, no year given, sawmills were to be brought in to cut out the timber and the cut over land was to be made into truck gardens, Canning factories were to be established for the vegetables in the summer and the products of the sea in the winter.

But the electric line failed to materialize, so did the canning factories. And the later highly publicized hotel failed when the road left it.

What happened to Shelly itself? We don't know exactly. All we can do is refer to the same above newspaper clipping which stated that "after the plantation was abandon by the owners, the New Orleans schooners went there and carried away ton after ton of its shells because there was no one to say they couldn't or shouldn't."

Article written by Ray Thompson 1962