Bulls Gap Railroad Museum

A History of Gilley’s Hotel
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Gilley’s Hotel, as it is known today, is a building located in the old downtown area of Bulls Gap, Tennessee. This building along with several others has been placed on the National Register of Historic Place. The buildings listed as a group are named the Bulls Gap Historic District. This was certified in the National Register on July 30, 1987.

The hotel started out owned by Clisby Austin. An advertisement from the Herald and Tribune (Jonesborough) on Thursday Nov. 30, 1871, placed the hotel up for sale as a great bargain.

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A Great Bargain.

A RARE CHANCE TO BUY A Hotel with so many conveniences on the Line of E. T. Va. & Ga. Railroad, Sixty miles East of Knoxville and Seventy-five West of Bristol, and at the Junction of the Rogersville and Jefferson Railroad, and known as the Austin House, where so many thousands of travelers remember the good Dinners they have enjoyed at this Hotel. A Five Acre Lot, well improved,—large Store Room in the Hotel, built since the wa. A splendid location to sell goods and keep Hotel. For further information, address C. AUSTIN, Trustee, Bull’s Gap Post-office, Hawkins County, E. Tenn. July 13th.

STEREOSCOPES.
Later on Peter Smith became the proprietor of the hotel and changed the name to Smith House. Peter Smith had married into the Austin family. In January 1883, Peter Smith ran this ad in the Morristown Gazette. Bull’s Gap at that time was called Rogersville Junction.

In searching the Hawkins County Register of Deeds Offices, the following deed sales and transfers listed below. Still searching for the transfer of property from C. Austin to Peter Smith and Peter Smith to George Mooney.

George S. Mooney and wife Mollie E. Mooney became operators of the Smith House (still researching when they purchased it) and changed the name to Mooney House. September 4, 1920, they sold the building and about 1 acre of land adjoining it to R.H. Gilley and wife Minnie Gilley. Hawkins County Deed Office, deed book # 64 page # 555.

During the ownership of R.H. Gilley, his daughter Ruby Gilley wrote a history of the hotel as follows starting on the next page.
Gilley’s Hotel – As I Remember It

By Ruby Lee Gilley

The Hotel was purchased from George S. Mooney and wife, Mollie E. Mooney, on September 4, 1920 by R.H. Gilley and wife Minnie Gilley for $16,000. It is interesting that they paid $6,000 down and gave 10 notes for $1000 each over a period of 10 years, with interest, the amount was not shown. This hotel when purchased was known as the “Smith Hotel”. This purchase was recorded in the register’s office of Hawkins County, State of Tennessee, on the 14th day of January, 1921 at 1:00pm in note book B. on page 249. Recorded in the book of deeds Vol. 64, page 555.

The original hotel was built of brick (and I have heard the walls were 4 inches thick). It consisted of the basement and three stories. No one seems to know when it was built-(later research states 1884-1885), but as of 1990, the old portion of the building was over 100 years old. There was very little plumbing. Most of the rooms were furnished with beautiful washbowls and pitchers. These have all disappeared through the years, as did so many other furnishings. At that time the kitchen and dining rooms were in the basement. The other three stories consisted of sleeping rooms. Another part of the basement contained a “Barber Shop”. Two of the barbers were Harley Flora and Leonard S. Haun. I am sure there were others, but I cannot remember their names. This shop operated for a long time.

Probably around 1924/25, Daddy decided to build an addition to the hotel. This was of concrete blocks, with a large concreted front porch on the ground level and a full porch on the second floor level. This adjoined the original building. After this was completed, the dining room and kitchen was moved to the new building. A very modern kitchen with a huge double-oven Home comfort wrought iron range T2 which was still in use many years thereafter. The dining room was furnished with probably five or six tables that would sit six to eight people. There was a small table inside the dining room where a large brass dinner bell was set. This bell was rung by the “dining room girl” on the front porch before every meal. The hotel was noted for very good food and many of the local residents brought their families there for Sunday dinner.

The second floor was designed for two apartments, with two or three additional rooms in between. The front apartment, of course, had the advantage of the big front porch. The back apartment was over the dining room and kitchen and afforded some view of the “up town”.

The front part of the building on the first floor was used as a large lobby. I do remember the big wooden and cane rocking chairs and smaller wooden chairs with curved backs that furnished the lobby. There was a large desk, a glassed in area, where the cash register stayed. On one side, in order to close the area in completely was a roll top desk. There was a wash basin on one side of the room next to the door (which I shall later describe), a pay telephone booth, in one corner and a local phone in the other. The front of the lobby “sported” a large plate glass window under which was a long radiator (the building was heated with steam heat). In the winter this was my Daddy’s favorite place to sit. He sat in a big rocking chair with his feet propped up on the radiator and watched the trains and cars go by. Craning his neck a little, he could even see the depot.
Now to explain “The Door”. It was a door about six feet off the floor opening into the lobby and entering the stairwell. Using this door, big pieces of furniture could be moved up and downstairs without having to turn a sharp corner (in fact, without the door, it would have been impossible to move certain pieces of furniture into the upstairs apartments. This shows something of Daddy’s ingenuity.

In the summer, all the chairs would be moved outside to the porch and it was absolutely great to sit and hear all the stories these railroad men could tell. There were other story-tellers too besides the railroad men. In the winter, games of Rook and Flinch, Jigsaw puzzles, and many other games were played in the lobby. If people wanted a game of “set-back” that had to be played in their rooms.

Music? Yes, occasionally Mr. Robison, a railroad man, played the guitar and believe me he could put some of the locals to shame! His crew tied up there after coming in from Appalachia. We had another man, whose name I can’t remember, who played the “saw”. You wouldn’t believe what music he could pull out of a saw. Ruby Fitzgerald, the school music teacher who boarded at the hotel, often played the piano for some old time singing fests. Not to be outdone, the Burkheimers would often open their door into the hall and Mrs. Burkheimer would pump the “good old player piano” and her husband would accompany her on the cornet. And of course, there was the good old Atwater-Kent radio with Amos and Andy and all the other goodies of that day.

The basement of the new addition was built for a movie theatre. My Daddy was a little ahead of the times to try this in a small town. To make a long story short, he was the subject of many of the preacher’s Sunday sermons until, finally in self-defense he closed the theatre, Robert L. Gaut was the projectionist. That particular area was converted into two apartments. Much later, Dr. Guy W. Justis had his doctor office in one of them.

With the new kitchen and dining facilities, a wall phone was installed in the kitchen, connected only to the depot, for the convenience of placing orders for lunches. The conductors and flagmen would go through the passenger coaches out of Greeneville and Morristown and take orders for the lunches (plate or box lunches). Call them in to the telegrapher at Bulls Gap, who in turn called the hotel kitchen. These were made up (and often there were 25 to 50) and taken over and delivered to the trains when they stopped. I have no idea of their price. Frank Hyatt was a telegrapher at Bulls Gap for a long time. His family moved to the hotel with him.

Grandmother Gilley could be seen sitting in the lobby or on the porch. She lived there for a number of years. She always loved “fish” and Daddy loved to fish. When he got a little fed up with everyone and everything, you see him in the kitchen getting a little lunch packed, heading toward his pickup truck and the river. He was a great fisherman—he could “feel” even the slightest strike and pull the fish in. This was before the TVA dams and the fish were tasty. Lots of his fish would be served in the dining room. I remember being so small my family would be afraid I’d get a bone, so the dining room girl would help me with mine. He also put out trout lines and fish baskets. I’d beg to go with him, like all children and their dada, and often he’d take me along. Thinking back over this, I’m sure it didn’t make his day.

Another person who was a big part of the hotel was Aunt Ida Grigsby. She was the widow of John Grigsby and aunt by marriage of Minnie Grigsby Gilley. She was of Pennsylvania-Dutch descent and a wonderful cook. Incidentally, her husband was a traveling salesman, selling wrought iron ranges. The family never knew where they met or married.
After he died she went to Canada and thought she would live with one of her sons and his family. It just didn’t work out and she wrote and asked my Daddy if she could come back to Bulls Gap and live and work at the hotel. By this time he and my mother were divorced and it worked out very well. She lived there the remainder of her life. She planned and helped with the meals and just generally made herself useful. Everyone “loved” Aunt Ida. The railroad men loved to tease her, but usually she could give as good as she got! She was a large lady, but always very neat. Thinking back over this, I wonder where she could find clothes to fit? She had lots of troubles and physical problems. We could certainly take a lesson from her because she never complained!

There were apartments as well as rooms in the hotel. Some of the names who come to mind who rented there are the Burkheimers, the Heddens, W.M. “Cotton” and Barsha Ward, Connie and Nettie Richardson Ward, a school teacher. This couple had a double wedding around 1929 with my Daddy and Bonnie C. Parks of Pilot Knob, who worked at Worth’s Drug Store. The wedding took place at Worth Quillen residence. Others were Clifford and Maude Moore, the R.E. Grubbs, Charlie Moores, and at a much later date, Rev. and Mrs. McGregor, a retired Baptist minister, Mrs. Georgia Talley, to name only a few who come to mind.

Some of those who boarded of the railroad men I can remember were “Bert” Lord, an Englishman. He came to the United States, worked a couple of years in New York, sent for his lady friend who was in England, a nurse. She came over and they were married in New York at the Little Church Around the Corner. They had one son Billy and they spent a lot of time at the hotel. They lived in Knoxville on Linden Avenue. And had a sign on their door which read “The House of The lord’s”. Arthur Wilson, an engineer, who was severely burned in a train wreck on the Leadville cutoff. He didn’t make it. Jimmy Johnson, a conductor, who was called “Craper” because a piece of one ear was missing. Curtis Grant, known as “Governor”, an engineer and his family. Sherwood Johnston, an engineer who was forever playing tricks on people. Everyone gathered around for the fun! I remember him coming in from a run carrying his suitcase and asking for Flo Hinshaw, who was the dining room girl, as he brought her something. She came in and with much reluctance, opened the suitcase. There it was - a huge sulled-up possum! There was also Frank Hall, a conductor...he loved to go fishing with Daddy. Jimmie Johnson who was the manager of Sands Store, which was the railroad commissary, and on and on.

Through the years there were many changes taking place in Bulls Gap and the area. This made a difference in Daddy’s business. At first I can think of was the Leadville Cut-off from Bulls Gap to Leadville, which shortened the trip to Ashville, N.C. by-passing Morristown. I don’t know how long this construction lasted, but they were good years for Daddy and his business.

Then came the new highway. He had the hotel full. Randall Horton was an engineer and later married Lorraine Burkheimer – in a double ceremony with Irene Hedden and Hugh Lee (Happy) Slemmons. Many brought their families, some with little babies. These were in addition to the railroad people. Do we think walking is a good new exercise? Well, the people staying at the hotel took long walks, especially to a Sulphur spring about 2 miles from the hotel almost every night after the evening meal.

Next came the TVA Steam plant in 1952-54. In the meantime Daddy had added some bathrooms and made changes in the hotel to accommodate more people. During this time, Myrtle and Bill Cawthorn rented an apartment, and stayed at the hotel until the steam plant was completed. Both are now deceased.
I do remember during this time there was a huge snow for this area. The men working on the steam plant had a terrible time getting back and forth to the hotel from work. The electric current went off and was off three of four days, and things were in a bad way. Daddy went to York Quillen’s General Store and got a big warm-morning heater and set it up in the lobby and kept it hot. The big old wrought iron range (coal fired) was the only way anyone had to cook. At almost any time you’d see someone going through the lobby to the kitchen to warm up some food. It always amazed me that Daddy was capable of solving all his problems and never showing any signs of distresses or frustrations. I’m sorry I didn’t inherit this trait of character.

One of the big entertainments of the day for many of the local people, especially the ladies, was to meet evening trains. Does that sound dull? The dining room closed around 1954—bringing to an end an era that will never be forgotten. There was a genuine interest, admiration and love between them that made their times together very special.

Mr. Gilley died Jan. 5, 1969. The hotel was sold Feb. 1, 1972 to Eugene Goan and wife Sylvia. Then on Feb. 2, 1972 the property was sold to Hugh C. Goan and R.J. Wisecarver. In Jan. 1978 it was sold to Francis Johnson and his wife Joyce, who lived in Whitesburg, Tn. On August 11, 1982 the property was sold to James Walls and Bill and Jimmie Manis. During this transfer of the property, Mrs. Bonnie Gilley reserved the right to live in her apartment at the hotel as long as she lived. (Information on the sale and resale of the property was furnished by Louise Goan.

I have done my best to describe the hotel as it lived through the years and a few of the people who called it home for a while. In writing this, it has brought to mind people I have not thought of in a long, long time; people who made my growing up years, happier ones.

Ruby Lee Gilley

In 2003, the Gilley’s Hotel was donated to The Bulls Gap Railroad Museum, a non-profit organization. The group put a new roof on the building in hopes to minimize the decline of the aging building. In 2017, this group agreed to donate the building to Knox Heritage East Tennessee Preservation Alliance so this group can find a buyer for the building so that it can be restored for commercial use.
A time table for the Rogersville & Jefferson Railroad shows the train schedule from the Morristown Gazette, January 1883.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stations</th>
<th>Eastward Daily</th>
<th>Westward Daily</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. 2</td>
<td>No. 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaves Chattanooga</td>
<td>12:10 p.m.</td>
<td>7:55 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arrives Ooltewah</td>
<td>12:46 p.m.</td>
<td>8:28 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Cleveland</td>
<td>1:15 p.m.</td>
<td>8:57 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Charleston</td>
<td>2:05 p.m.</td>
<td>9:29 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Athens</td>
<td>2:42 p.m.</td>
<td>10:00 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Sweetwater</td>
<td>3:15 p.m.</td>
<td>10:28 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Loudon</td>
<td>3:44 p.m.</td>
<td>10:53 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Knoxville</td>
<td>4:47 p.m.</td>
<td>11:55 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leaves Knoxville</td>
<td>5:09 p.m.</td>
<td>12:05 a.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrives Morristown</td>
<td>6:40 p.m.</td>
<td>1:02 a.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Rogersville Junc</td>
<td>7:16 p.m.</td>
<td>1:01 a.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Greeneville</td>
<td>8:25 p.m.</td>
<td>2:47 a.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Jonesboro</td>
<td>9:25 p.m.</td>
<td>3:34 a.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot; Johnson's</td>
<td>9:45 p.m.</td>
<td>3:56 a.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Bristol</td>
<td>10:50 p.m.</td>
<td>4:47 a.m.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
CONNECTIONS.
AT CHATTANOOGA with railroad lines diverging, making direct, close connection for all points North-west, West and South-west.
AT OOLTEWAH AND CLEVELAND with Georgia Division for Atlanta and all points South, South-east and South-west.
AT KNOXVILLE with Ohio Division and Knoxville and Augusta railroad.
AT MORRISTOWN with North Carolina Division for Warm Springs, N. C., and all Western and Middle North Carolina points
AT ROGERSVILLE JUNCTION with Rogersville and Jefferson railroad.
AT JOHNSON’S with East Tennessee and Western North Carolina railroad.
AT BRISTOL with Norfolk and Western railroad, connecting closely for all Virginia and Eastern Cities, via. Lynchburg and all Eastern, Middle and Northern States points, via. Roanoke and Shenandoah Valley Route.
AT WARM SPRINGS with Western North Carolina railroad for Asheville, Morganton, Statesville, Salisbury and all points in North Carolina.

SLEEPING-CAR SERVICE.
Nos. 1 and 2 have Leighton sleeper, between Memphis and Lynchburg.
Nos. 3 and 4 have Pullman Palace Sleeping Cars between Memphis and New York, via. Shenandoah Valley route; also Pullman Sleeping Cars between New Orleans and Washington via. Atlanta, Cleveland and Lynchburg.

Lynchburg, Va.

F. K. HUGER, Sup., Knoxville, Tenn.
JOSEPH GOTHARD, A. G. T. A., Knoxville, Tenn.

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