

The Brown Hotel

AND LOUISVILLE'S MAGIC CORNER

Introduction

A debutante dances under shimmering chandeliers in the Crystal Ballroom. A doorman clutches his collar against the freezing Fourth Avenue wind and smiles as he opens the door for a lady wearing mink. A guest, alone at Christmas, is cheered by the gift of fruitcake left at his door by a bellhop. A comedian protects himself with raised arms as diners throw hard rolls at him, a protest to his bad jokes.

These stories and those shared by the people quoted on the following pages reflect memories held by thousands of people who visited or worked at The Brown Hotel during its decades of operation. Although most people were interviewed separately, their stories blend easily into one, like conversations at a reunion.

Just as time will fade an old photograph, it has softened the edges of some memories, but the sun-points shine through. The brightest, funniest, saddest, most dramatic moments capture the spirit of this gathering place, The Brown Hotel. Elegance weaves like a gold thread through many of the stories as if the grand style of The Brown inspired people the moment they stepped into its lobby.

The Brown Hotel

Louisville in 1923 was the 34th largest city in the country with a population of 235,000. *“It was a sweeter kind of town,”* said Barry Bingham, Sr., Chairman, Courier-Journal and Louisville Times Company. *“People get nostalgic – I do too – but we tend to forget that it was very limited in terms of arts and entertainment.”* It was a town where you knew you would meet your friends on Fourth Avenue, and it would remain that kind of town for at least two more decades.

THE BUILDING

Only a year earlier, the first announcement had been made: J. Graham Brown, millionaire lumberman and capitalist, would build a \$4 million hotel at the corner of Fourth and Broadway. St. Louis architect Preston J. Bradshaw would design the hotel. Existing buildings, including Louisville’s beloved Solger’s, were leveled and the 15 story hotel went up in record time. As Louisvillians watched The Brown Hotel grow out of the ground, newspaper accounts fed their anticipation. It would *“give Louisville one of the largest and finest hotels in the country.”* It would be *“the finest hotel south of Chicago.”* It was a sign of Louisville’s *“growth and progress”* in an era that revered progress.

Hardly had the original announcement for an L-shaped building been made when Brown decided to add a wing. *“I am making this addition because I have confidence in Louisville,”* he said.

Reality lived up to expectations. *“Everything that architectural science could furnish has been employed in building the hotel,”* reported *The Louisville Times* on opening night. *“Every modern appliance known to both America and the Old World in the way of service and comfort to mankind has been installed.”* The Louisville Post elaborated, *“There is a bath for each of its...rooms, either shower or tub, running ice water and a standard of furnishings that compares with the best metropolitan establishments.”*

Opening week for The Brown Hotel began when owner J. Graham Brown held the hotel’s first dinner party to honor the workers who had constructed the hotel in less than a year’s time. The next night he invited four hundred guests that included hotel managers, businessmen and government officials from Louisville and elsewhere, and his close friends to formally dedicate the building with a tour, dinner in the Crystal Ballroom, and speeches. Judge Robert Worth Bingham, acting as toastmaster, said of Brown, *“Success is never an accident, but comes from courage, character, judgment, and hard work.”* The public celebration began the next night and continued into the weekend.

THE FESTIVITIES

On the night of October 25, 1923, people jammed the corner of Fourth and Broadway for the official public opening of The Brown Hotel. A capacity crowd of 1,200 guests invited to the first of two evenings of celebration could scarcely push their way through the spectators to the inaugural dinner dance inside the hotel. Contributing to the evening's festivities was a ceremony on the street corner.

Louisville Mayor Huston Quin threw a switch that for the first time illuminated ten blocks of Broadway with glorious new arc light street lamps "*of the most modern design.*" Called the new "*White Way,*" it was a fitting symbol of the excitement and civic pride inspired by this elegant new hotel. "*Today will go down in history as a turning point in Louisville's life,*" Mayor Quin told the throng before him.

The local press reported the activities with enthusiasm. "*Crowds gathered early at Fourth and Broadway – crowds composed both of those who were to participate in the opening and of hundreds of less fortunate,*" reported *The Louisville Herald.*

The next night, October 26 another 1,200 guests attended a second opening dinner dance. Then on Saturday the hotel doors were thrown open to the public. Ten thousand people reportedly trooped through the wondrous new building at Fourth and Broadway that would, surely, put Louisville on the map.

THE CITY

J. Graham Brown's hotel brought a new verve to Louisville in a period of rapid growth and great optimism. The heady times that characterized the Twenties, people assumed, would last forever.

The lavish Loew's State Theatre was built in 1928 north on Fourth across from the Rialto. On the south side of Broadway the Warren Memorial Presbyterian Church occupied the west corner, and in 1927 the Heyburn Building opened on the east corner with office space for doctors and other professionals. In 1925, J. Graham Brown built the Brown Building just east of the hotel. Because the first Macauley's Theatre was being razed, he included The Brown Theatre in this building to honor the wishes of Martin Brown, his late brother, that the city have a theatre equal to any in New York.

Also designed by Preston J. Bradshaw, the 1,500-seat Brown Theatre was praised for its beauty. While never a financial success for Brown, the theatre offered Louisville decades of fine entertainment – first road shows, later movies, and finally the productions of many of Louisville's performing arts groups.

Business, entertainment, religion, medicine, shopping, and transportation – they were all at the "*magic corner*" of Fourth and Broadway, and The Brown Hotel created the magic.

The Early Years

Rudy Suck worked at the Seelbach Hotel as a young man and met Graham Brown there. Impressed with his competence, Brown asked Suck to join the staff of his hotel while it was under construction to “*keep tabs on things.*” In 1925, when he was 27 years old, Suck became manager of The Brown. “*I was the youngest hotel manager in the South, as far as I know,*” he said.

PROHIBITION AND THE DEPRESSION

For all its glamour, its owner’s faith, and its employees’ hard work, the Brown Hotel was not an immediate financial success. Prohibition was in effect from the time it opened until 1933, and the Depression of the Thirties stalled Graham Brown’s businesses as it did nearly everyone’s.

Good times, though, like good whiskey, surfaced through those years. Lily Pons, who stayed at the hotel when she played an engagement at the theatre, let her pet lion cub roam free in her suite. Al Jolson, who also played the theatre, got in a fight in the English Grill; but he said, “*It was all right, because his black-face makeup would cover the shiner.*” Queen Marie of Rumania visited Louisville in 1926 and was elegantly entertained at a party in the Crystal Ballroom. A red carpet was laid for the Queen’s entrance, and she watched the proceedings from a gold throne mounted on a dais.

Victor Mature had a brief career as an elevator operator at The Brown Hotel before he earned fame as a movie star in Hollywood. Louisville contemporaries remember him as a mischievous boy, and he agrees. “*For a while the principal was calling my mother to school so often I told the kids she worked there,*” Mature confessed.

“*I was madly in love with this girl, see, and she was at a dance in the Roof Garden. I couldn’t get off that night, so I had an ‘Out of Order’ sign made. I’d put the sign out, run the elevator up to the Roof Garden, have one dance with this girl, run back down, hide my coat, and operate the elevator for a while. Then later, I’d do it again. One time I was dancing with her and I saw the manager across the room carrying my ‘Out of Order’ sign. That was the end of my career at The Brown Hotel,*” said Mature.

Some thought, “*It was more fun during Prohibition.*” Everybody brought his own bottle and “*there was more drinking during those days than when you could buy it at the hotel.*” “*We took moonshine. Even after, we took our own bottle.*” “*If you were lucky you could get a doctor’s prescription for whiskey.*”

Then on October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed. “*There was one elderly man – I talked to him about 20 minutes before he jumped out of the 14th floor window. He seemed very calm when I spoke to him.*”

Herman Bullock, Doorman

In 1931, Brown defaulted on the loan that had financed the hotel. The bank threatened to foreclose. Brown's oft-quoted response to the bank was, "Go to hell!" Financing was rearranged and Brown kept the hotel, but not without taking some painful steps to keep it open, including his appeal to employees to work without pay.

"It's hard to stand up in front of your employees and say, 'Look, I can't pay you, I just don't have any money. I'd appreciate if you'd just keep working. Maybe two weeks from now we'll be able to pay you.' Well, they did. When things rolled around to where he had some money, first thing he did, he paid a bonus."

David Quin, Managing Director, Brown Properties.

WAVE Radio opened its studio on December 30, 1933, on the 15th floor of The Brown Hotel, its 239-foot tower perched like a giant Erector Set on the rooftop. The first program aired by the station originated from the Crystal Ballroom and was part of a nationwide NBC Network salute to its new affiliate.

"Graham Brown used to bring out-of-town guests up to the studios. I think he was proud that we were in his hotel. You have to remember that radio was something quite new and became quite popular at that time. What with the Depression and all, no one could afford entertainment."

Burt Blackwell, Announcer, WAVE Radio.

Like businesses everywhere, the hotel struggled through those years. Despite financial problems, Graham Brown insisted on an orchestra and floor show in the Bluegrass Room to keep the hotel lively. Before the onset of World War II began to revive the economy – and with it the hotel's fortunes – The Brown and Louisville were hit with another disaster.

THE '37 FLOOD

In 1937 the waters of the Ohio River rose over their banks and invaded Louisville's buildings, including The Brown Hotel. Water from torrential rains along the Ohio Valley began rising on January 6. By January 24, the city was without electric power. The river crested at 34.2 feet above flood stage at the upper level on January 27, but did not return to its normal level until mid-February, leaving a slime-coated city of upended houses and homeless people. Silt reupholstered many a brocade chair.

As the river rose, nearly a thousand people from low-lying areas in the West End and the Upper River Road area sought refuge in The Brown Hotel. As the river continued to rise, they found themselves stranded there.

"On Sunday, January 24, all light and power in Louisville failed, and WAVE went dead. A 100-kilowatt motor generator was located...and set up on an elevated parking lot behind The Brown Hotel. By running cables up outside, the generator brought power for some of The Brown's lights and put WAVE back on the air. Relays of WAVE

announcers and engineers broadcast 24 hours a day during the 10-day emergency.”
History of WAVE, Inc. 1963.

“When my father knew the flood was coming, he had thousands of candles flown in from Chicago. The hotel did all its own printing and the press was moved out of the basement during the flood to print menus with special flood dishes like ‘Driftwood Salad.’”

Helen Garner, daughter of Harold Harter, Hotel Manager.

“There was constant rain. The boys thought it was great to hang out the windows and watch the skiffs on Broadway below. It was eerie with all the lantern light.”

Barry Bingham, Sr., Chairman, Courier-Journal and Louisville Times Company

“City Hall would give us the names of people who needed help. We’d get on the radio and say, ‘Send a boat!’ Rescuers had radios in their boats or at relief stations and they would go to the address we’d give over the air.”

Burt Blackwell.

“The story of the fish found in the main floor lobby is true. Elmer Wick, the bell-captain, scooped it up in a bucket for the bucket brigade. There was a bucket brigade hauling water from the first floor to the upper floors to flush toilets.”

Helen Garner.

“We had this boat and we were rowing down Broadway and there was The Brown Hotel. The doors were open and the place was filled with water so we just rowed our boat in one door, went through the lobby and rowed out another door. There wasn’t much to see. Somebody had already moved all the chairs and stuff, just a lot of water. For years there was a water mark on the Broadway side to show where the water had hit.” **Joe Davis**, Printer and former Bandleader.

“Guests played bridge by coal oil lamps.”

Herman Bullock.

“I remember being intensely cold. We bundled up and slept under mattresses to keep warm. They fed us all the niceties they had left. We had Oysters Rockefeller in the middle of the flood.”

Burt Blackwell.

“Food was only served in the English Grill during the flood, but they served three meals a day, cooking with charcoal after the gas and electricity went off. Employees stayed at the hotel and were housed in the Crystal Ballroom, dormitory-style.”

Helen Garner.

“Jobs were scarce and so hard to get. When I got a chance to work at The Brown, I took it. I washed flood dishes after the water had gone down. Didn’t start there until

after the flood.”

Charley Flaherty, Head Bartender

Life continued after the '37 Flood but first came the massive cleanup and rebuilding that saw Louisville into a new decade. The city clung to many of its old habits, but not for long.

“I remember going with a date to see the Marx Brothers in ‘A Night at the Opera’ – I think it was in the late Thirties. There was a long line, and about the time we got to the front of the line my date realized he had forgotten to bring any money. I didn’t have any either, but it was all right because in those days you could always find someone you knew along 4th Street and he was able to borrow the money from a friend.”

Mrs. Charles W. (Alberta) Allen, Jr., Civic Leader

WORLD WAR II

Boom time for The Brown and Downtown began with World War II. The influx of soldiers and war plant workers brought more money into Louisville than ever before, and the town changed.

While many people in Louisville awaited word of sons and husbands at the front, soldiers from Ft. Knox and residents sought relief from the anxieties of war at The Brown Hotel.

“We were busiest during the War. Check in at 5 p.m. was the worst. Sometimes there’d be soldiers lined up for hours waiting for a room. Two or three trains a day would come from Ft. Knox and we’d know they had arrived by the lines at the desk.”

Lyman Guinn, Bell Captain.

“During the War everybody had money, see, more money than they’d ever seen before. We had soldiers and a lot of hometown people. I was there during all the War. Charley and Thad and the rest were off in the service. Couldn’t get help. We’d hire anything that could walk and breathe. Business was booming and you couldn’t get bartenders. It was hell.”

Roscoe Flaherty, Bartender English Grill.

“The business from Ft. Knox was tremendous. Very few soldiers came to the Bluegrass Room but the brass did. The soldiers mostly went to the English Grill and the Thoroughbred Room because they could lounge at the bar and be more casual.”

Fred Caldwell, Head Waiter Bluegrass Room.

“I was making \$100 a week at Naval Ordnance in one of those ‘Rosie the Riveter’ jobs. I was young and all I was doing was working, so I quit and went to work at The Brown. They called us the Old Brown Hotel Girls. I made \$23.50 a week. This was not a job. You would almost want to pay The Brown to let you work there. As to the War, I

never really felt any of the sad part of it because I didn't lose anybody close to me but you might say I fought the battle at Fourth and Broadway."

Boots Walker Frederick, Information Desk Clerk.

"I worked with The Brown Hotel Girls, as some of them were known, but I didn't have all the fun they had. You see, my husband was overseas in the War and you just couldn't enjoy yourself much with that happening."

Gertrude Campisano, Front Desk Clerk.

"I went in as a page girl. I loved meeting so many people and, of course, the tips – I made my living in tips. I was the first female bellhop. It was a lot of fun. I was around 19. I carried bags and ran errands – everything a boy bellhop did, I did. Then, I went to the front desk and worked information, the mail desk, reservations."

Dixie Sherman DeMuth, Receptionist.

"When you were curvy and young, you wanted to be where the fun was. There were about eight of us girls and they had a house rule that employees could not date guests of the hotel, but we believed that was one rule worth breaking."

Boots Walker Frederick.

"I'd only date officers, never a noncommissioned officer."

Dixie Sherman DeMuth.

"The most asked question in those days at the information desk was, 'What're you doing tonight?' You could have one eye in the middle of your forehead and you'd still get asked out if you worked at The Brown. There were so many soldiers."

Boots Walker Frederick.

"When the War was over, 4th Street was complete bedlam. Soldiers kissing women they didn't even know and vice versa. It was as if the street came into The Brown to celebrate."

Boots Walker Frederick.

The Middle Years

YOUR ORDER PLEASE

With the English Grill and Thoroughbred Room, the Coffee Shop and Pastry Shop (later the Tea Room), the Bluegrass Room, and of course the private parties in the Crystal Ballroom, the Roof Garden and the smaller rooms, there was a special place, a perfect ambiance for any occasion that called for eating, and the food served was dependably superb.

Talk to anyone about The Brown Hotel and the subject of food is likely to come up. Rye rolls, hard rolls, Chicken à la King in patty shells, chicken chow mein, Colgan sandwiches (turkey, ham and lettuce served on a small roll), Louisville's beloved Benedictine sandwiches, flaming dishes served in the Bluegrass Room, the Hot Brown, the Cold Brown, Jack Salmon, sweetbread croquettes, a black walnut cake with divinity frosting, French pastries – each person seems able to conjure up the aroma and the taste of that special favorite from The Brown Hotel kitchen.

“When I was four or five, my great aunt took me to the Tea Room for my birthday and I had chicken chow mein for the first time. No one since has ever served me better chicken chow mein.”

Gordon Davidson, Louisville Attorney

“Charlie and I never met anywhere for lunch but the English Grill.”

Alberta Allen, Civic Leader

“The Brown was about the last place in the city to still use full length tablecloths – almost touching the floor – and white napkins. If you ordered onion rings there, they came on a silver dish with a white napkin wrapped around them. At the very last part of it, the last two or three years, that wasn't true, but remember, I was there for 15 years.”

Anonymous

“I can remember the president of our company would come down from Chicago on the L & N and first thing he wanted to do was have country ham and eggs at The Brown.”

Charles Yann, General Manager retired, Pepsi-Cola Bottlers

“At Collegiate School we got out early on Friday. We would have lunch at the Tea Room – always grilled cheese and a milk shake – and then walk up Fourth to the movies.”

Alberta Allen

“The chef at The Brown concocted The Hot Brown, and it has never been duplicated.”

Helen Garner

“It was light, not heavy and laden with cheese.”

Camille Glenn, Noted Food Writer

“The Hot Brown was developed three or four years after the hotel opened when the supper dance business was falling off. The band would play from 10 until 1 and when they took a break around midnight people would order food. It was ham and eggs, ham and eggs, so we decided we needed something new. The Chef (Fred K. Schmidt) said, ‘I have an idea for an open-faced turkey sandwich with Mornay sauce over it.’ At that time turkeys were only used at Thanksgiving and Christmas, and they had just started selling them year-round. I said, ‘That sounds a little flat,’ and the chef said, ‘I’m going to put it under the broiler.’ The maitre d’ said, ‘It should have a little color, too.’ So Schmidt said, ‘We’ll put two strips of bacon on top of it.’ I said, ‘How about some pimienta.’ And that’s how The Hot Brown came to be.”

Rudy Suck, Hotel Manager

The search for the “real” Hot Brown has been carried on since it disappeared with the hotel in 1971, and aficionados, while they may argue about eggs vs. whipped cream, seem to agree that the sauce was light and fluffy. They also disparage the serving of peaches with a Hot Brown.

“Lunchtime favorite was always The Hot Brown. Maybe 200 people would be eating lunch and 190 of them would be eating Hot Brown sandwiches.”

Fred Caldwell, Head Waiter

MAY I HELP YOU

Good food served with style set the tone at The Brown, but the style of the employees, many of whom worked there through several decades, brought patrons to the hotel time and again. With a smile, with a nod, employees from waitresses to the manager had their own way of welcoming patrons to The Brown and the patrons showed their appreciation.

“Those people – when you walked in, they knew your name.”

Jimmy Davis, Owner, Buschemeyer’s Jewelers

“People stuck with the hotel for years.”

Burdett Bullock, Doorman.

“I used to hide under the doorman’s desk whenever I got in trouble with my father. My dad would come and say to Herman or Burdett Bullock ‘Have you seen

Audree?’ and they’d say, ‘No, Mr. Tillmar.’”

Audree Tillmar, Daughter of A.R. ‘Bud’ Tillmar, Assistant Manager

“One night – this was back in my drinking days – I was at The Brown, and the next morning, when I got up, my clothes must have weighted 900 pounds. I guess I stole every piece of silverware in sight. I got dressed and went back down to the hotel and returned about 200 pieces. Another time I put an ashtray – you know, one of those lobby ashtrays that was about two feet tall and filled with sand – well, I put it in the back seat of my car. The next day I took that back, and I asked them, ‘How come you never arrested me?’ ‘We knew you’d bring it back,’ they said.”

Foster Brooks, Entertainer

“The regular staff took good care of their regular customers quite aside from serving food and drink. One night some New York friends of ours were in a show here and later we all went to the English Grill. About 1 a.m. the waiter came to our table and, carefully positioning himself between my wife and me, he handed me a note. I opened it and saw the first word – ‘Darling!’ I looked around and saw a beautiful woman standing in the doorway. The other man at the table saw her too and leaped across the table, saying, ‘That note’s for me!’ Indeed it was, but the waiter, thinking it was for me, took care to deliver it discreetly so my wife wouldn’t see.”

Dick Haas, Senior Vice President, Bank of Louisville

“One time a man and his wife came out of the hotel about dusk. The man went to get the car and the wife waited for the longest time. After a while they got a call at the desk. It was the man who said he forgot to go back and pick up his wife, said he was home and we should send her in a cab.”

Herman Bullock

“There was a very prominent man about town who went into the Grill and had too much to drink. John Abel knew he had too much to drink and that he shouldn’t drive home. So Mr. Abel said, ‘Well, I’ll just put him in a room and I’ll take his trousers away from him so he won’t go anywhere until he calls me.’ So he put him in a room and took his trousers to the valet. About two hours later, here stands a guy down in the lobby in his shorts. He says, ‘I don’t know what happened to my pants. I don’t have any.’”

Charlene Cave, Hotel Auditor

Special Places

As people recall the food and service at The Brown, their memories seem bound to one of The Brown's public rooms. Among these rooms were three favorites where deals were struck, looks exchanged, occasions celebrated. In the English Grill a young man was initiated into the rites of business. Couples laughed at comedians in the Bluegrass Room. Men and women of accomplishment were toasted at banquets in the Crystal Ballroom. Each room held its own special meaning.

THE ENGLISH GRILL

"If I put the best hours of my life end-on-end, the better part of them would have been spent at the bar in the English Grill."

Dick Haas

"More business was conducted in the English Grill than in any office in town."

Boots Walker Frederick

"We heard the stories they (Patrons) wouldn't tell their confessors."

Thad Flaherty

"The Brown was a meeting place for friends, and then I would introduce you to my friend and you would introduce me to yours. There would always be someone waving to a friend across the English Grill."

Mrs. Roberta Abel, Wife of John Abel, Hotel Manager

"When they're standing up, they're drinking. When they're sitting down, they're sleeping. Brown's argument was good on that – no stools, more drinking."

Thad Flaherty

THE CRYSTAL BALLROOM

"Fourth Street and The Brown had such a tradition. People had a spiritual connection to The Brown. If you wanted the pizzazz of the new age you could go somewhere else. But if you wanted elegance and wonderful service and beauty, you went to The Brown. A main occasion was always held at The Brown in those days, as well as the more important civic affairs."

Wilson Wyatt, Mayor of Louisville, 1941-45.

"Weddings were a big deal at The Brown. An attorney's daughter wanted to be married in The Brown. I had already left to work at The Brown Suburban but I came back for her. You see, I'd known her since she was a child coming into the Bluegrass

Room. She would only be married in The Brown if I supervised her wedding. So I came back to The Brown long enough to put on her wedding in the Crystal Ballroom.”

Fred Caldwell

“The Crystal Ballroom was the place to go New Year’s Eve.”

John Herchenroeder, Courier-Journal City Editor, retired

In 1936, at age 62, (film director D.W.) Griffith finally divorced his first wife after many years of separation and married a 22 year old beauty from New York. They were married March 3, 1936 on the third floor mezzanine (outside the Crystal Ballroom) of The Brown Hotel.”

Teresa Heintzman, *“A Tour of D.W. Griffith’s Kentucky,”* college paper

THE BLUEGRASS ROOM

“Bing Crosby, Liberace, Bob Hope – I waited on them all.”

Lyman Guinn, Bell Captain

“The Gish sisters were here, Mary Pickford, Helen Hayes, and Elizabeth Taylor.”

Herman Bullock

“Buddy Rogers, who was married to Mary Pickford, played the Bluegrass Room a number of times. It was about 1938 when he played The Brown and his drummer didn’t show, so he went out and scouted the area clubs and found this drummer, who wasn’t from Louisville but whose name was Gene Krupa, and took him back to the coast with him.”

Mark Davis, Louisville Attorney

“He hypnotized ---- and had him bark like a dog! Fanny Brice was the best show they ever had in the Bluegrass Room.”

Fred Caldwell

“I remember the Bluegrass Room and the Crystal Ballroom, too. I left Louisville when I signed up to play for four years at the Drake in Chicago and from there we went on to the Paramount in New York and played on the Lucky Strike Hit Parade, but I’d come back and play The Brown for a week at Derby.”

Clyde McCoy, Bandleader

“The Bluegrass Room was a proving ground for a lot of good acts, particularly comedians, who went on to bigger things. George Gobel started out there, Corbett Monica, Rowan and Martin who had their own television show later, and Professor Backwards who was on the Ed Sullivan Show so many times.”

Jimmie Bittner, Booking Agent

“Dick Van Dyke performed there.”

John Flaherty

“The real glamour came when I was in high school. If you had a real good girl friend, one worth spending the money to impress, you’d save your money and take her to dinner and dancing in the Bluegrass Room. Of course, that was usually a once-a-year event because it took that long to save up enough money to really enjoy the Bluegrass Room. Boy, it was the top of the line in Louisville. You were living high on the hog if you could take a girl to the Bluegrass Room. Sometimes, if you were real nice and acted old enough, you could talk the waiter into bringing a bottle of champagne to the table.”

Gordon Davidson, Attorney

“The most celebrities were here, of course, during the horse races. Eddie Cantor, D.C. Stevens who ran for president, and Harry Truman who had lunch in the Bluegrass Room.”

Fred Caldwell

“Robert Young, Gene Autry, Don Ameche, John Daly, Eva Marie Saint.”

Roscoe Flaherty

Special Times

No matter how special Fourth Avenue and The Brown were to people year-round, no time was more special than the week of The Kentucky Derby.

THE KENTUCKY DERBY

Joe Hirsch, executive columnist for *The Daily Racing Form*, says, “*The Brown was a living ‘Who’s Who’ at Derby time.*” Katie Overstreet, former publicist for Fourth Avenue Amusements (which included the Loew’s and Rialto Theatres), has pictures on her wall of Derby guests who stayed at The Brown: Walter Huston, Irene Dunne, Sammy Sneed, Bing and Bob Crosby, Walt and Lil Disney (“*Awfully sweet and dear,*”) Miss Overstreet remembers, Fifi D’Orsay, Beulah Bondi, Lum ‘n’ Abner, and the Duke of Windsor, among others.

Eddie Arcaro, five-time Derby winning jockey, recalls the “*Streetcar Derby,*” so named because that Derby in 1948 was the last time that streetcars ran in Louisville. He also remembers riding the streetcar from The Brown to Churchill Downs during the war years because “*they wouldn’t let you use cars for those kinds of trips during the War.*”

“The Brown was the meeting place. I guess I was there about every Derby between 1935 and 1968. It was a place where you went to see people.”

Eddie Arcaro

“In the late Thirties and Forties and even into the Fifties, The Brown and all of 4th Street was the place to walk through or mingle on Derby Eve. They’d shut the street to cars and have jug bands and banjo players and we’d walk along and see everybody in town we knew. If you wanted to see celebrities, you’d walk through The Brown Lobby.”

Gordon Davidson

“One Derby Eve I got a call from Eddie Arcaro at two in the morning. He said these people had something in their suite I had to see. He said they had a million people and a horse. Well, who wants to miss a million people and a horse in a hotel room? I went to the party. Everybody who was prominent in racing was there. The horse didn’t bother anybody. He seemed to be wandering around the room just like everybody else, seeing who else was there and what he could overhear. I figured seeing that horse was why Arcaro told me you needed a drink as soon as you walked in the door.”

Joe Hirsch, Executive Columnist, Daily Racing Form

“The fabulous man of Dallas, as we employees called oilman D. W. Josey, would send every waiter who served him to Levy’s to get a new suit and shoes. When the head of room service was buried in a potter’s field, Josey had him moved so he would be near his wife’s grave and gave him a proper funeral.”

Fred Caldwell

BUSINESS AND POLITICS AS USUAL

Just as horsemen claimed The Brown as their turf during Derby week, Louisville's businessmen made The Brown their hub throughout the year and so, too, did some politicians.

"I remember when Conrad Hilton came in and met with J. Graham Brown and his lawyer, Mr. Barnett, to try to buy The Brown."

Fred Caldwell

"It was right after the Brown Suburban opened (1956), which was tremendously successful. The Hilton chain was very interested in locating in Louisville. They proposed to buy The Kentucky, The Brown and the Brown Suburban (Mr. Brown owned all three). Conrad Hilton told Mr. Brown that he got all of this strength from dancing all night. Mr. Brown was just the opposite."

Bernard H. (Barney) Barnett, Mr. Brown's Attorney

"He wanted to show them he knew how to run a good hotel, too --- It got down to talk of dollars. Mr. Brown said, 'Look, this is nonnegotiable. I don't really want to sell my hotels, but if you want them, you pay that price and they're yours.' Of course, they didn't meet his price."

Barney Barnett

"Between 11:30 and 1:30 you could see every other businessman in Louisville – everyone you would want to see for business or social reasons. If you were clever, you would have a drink in the English Grill and then go downstairs and have lunch in the Coffee Shop. That way you would cover everyone."

Dick Haas, Senior Vice President, Bank of Louisville

A Changing Downtown

A GRADUAL DECLINE

In the late Forties, following the trend of cities across the country, Louisville endorsed construction of an expressway system designed to bring more people Downtown. Instead, the opposite happened. The expressway system, which opened in the late Fifties, made the farmland surrounding the city more accessible and more appealing to developers. Homeowners and businesses began the exodus to suburbia.

The changes were subtle, the decline slow. In the Fifties and early Sixties, Downtown was still the scene of first dates, Community Chest celebrations and business conventions.

“In the Fifties there were an awful lot of ballroom dances. Atherton and Male would give dances. We’d decorate The Brown. We’d have to fireproof the Christmas trees and bring them in through the window.”

Mark Davis, Attorney

“I always knew the policemen around town. One time I went over to The Brown and there was a crowd at the Fourth Street door. The police captain on duty knew me and said, ‘Step back, folks, and let Mr. Brooks through.’ When I got up to the lobby there was Elizabeth Taylor with Mike Todd (here for the premiere of ‘Raintree County’ at The Brown Theatre) just heading for the Broadway exit, so I turned around and walked out with them just like we were a threesome. It was fun.”

Tom Brooks, Television Personality

On May 19, 1959, Pepsi-Cola had the opening dedication of its new Louisville plant on Crittenden Drive. Joan Crawford, widow of Alfred Steele who was head of Pepsi-Cola until his death in April of that year, came to the opening. Pepsi-Cola had a big party for her, which was attended by business leaders in the community and Pepsi-Cola executives from around the country.

“We had a cocktail party first and the ballroom was beautifully fixed up to match the splendor of the occasion. The rooms weren’t very great in her (Crawford’s) opinion. Of Course, hers had all kinds of problems – no air conditioning, tire under the bed....”

Charles Yann, Pepsi-Cola General Manager, retired

“Just before she came, there had been a tire convention in the hotel and they had a lot of hospitality suites. They had tires up there to show. This room she was in had been a hospitality suite, and somehow this tire got under the bed. Everyone in the hotel, including maybe Mr. Brown, had inspected that room before she arrived.”

Russell Anderson, Assistant Manager

Like the tire under the bed, Downtown, and with it The Brown Hotel, was left behind. In an effort to compete with the suburban motels, Brown spent \$1.5 million in 1965 to modernize both The Brown and Kentucky Hotels. But the rooms were still small by Sixties' standards and the traveling public was not lured back by the new carpet and paint, fluorescent lighting, and motel plastic.

THE HOTEL CLOSES

At the end of February 1971, two years after its builder had died, The Brown closed as a hotel. A group of regular patrons held a wake.

"Closing night was quite a gala."

Mrs. William Habich, Lifetime Patron

"That final dinner at the English Grill – hardly anyone could believe – we knew it was going to close – I kept saying, 'Well, Stouffer's will buy it and they'll paint the English Grill white.' I said, 'They'll never let this hotel close; it just won't happen.' But then it became very clear it WAS going to close – the announcement came rather suddenly – and everybody made arrangements for that final dinner. It was on a Saturday. Some of the old waiters came back that night – people who hadn't worked there in years. There were three or four bartenders. None of the Flahertys were there – they'd had a rift with Brown. The tables were sold out immediately, but, of course, I had my table. Eight or ten people."

Anonymous

"Some people sat out in the lobby that night and the Thoroughbred Room was filled up too, so they were short of help in spite of some of the old people coming back, and service was a little slow. You'd take a tray up to the bar and say, 'I'll have four martinis and two old fashioned.' Drinks even then were about \$1.65. I'd get my tray full and say, 'How much do I owe you,' and he'd say, '50 cents.' They had a great big barrel behind the bar and every time he'd kill a fifth of gin or a fifth of Scotch, he threw it in the barrel and broke it."

Anonymous

"Everyone cheered whenever a bottle was broken. Women were not allowed to stand at the bar then, but that night we stood at the bar in defiance of it all."

Mrs. William Habich

"Everyone pilfered something – ashtrays, silver – not good, but it had the name on it. I took a water bottle. Each table had an old beat-up water bottle. I put it in the sleeve of my raincoat. I was carrying the raincoat over my arm. See, you put the cuff of the sleeve in the pocket of the raincoat. When the party broke up, it was pretty wet."

Anonymous

A NEW BEGINNING

The Jefferson County Board of Education purchased The Brown Hotel in 1971 for its Brown Education Center, which housed a “creative” school and administrative offices. By then, adult entertainment places and vacant buildings greeted people in every block of Fourth Avenue. Downtown had become a place of daytime office workers who sandwiched shopping and eating into their lunch hours and headed for their suburban homes at quitting time.

“It became too expensive to go Downtown. It was easier and cheaper to drive out to the suburbs, and the office buildings like the Heyburn were declining, and parking was inadequate. Nothing, it seemed, could save Downtown at that time.”

Wilson Wyatt

Something had to be done if Louisville was to have a viable center. Private developers and local government began to tackle the rebuilding of the city’s core. The spirit of renewal grew as community leaders from every sector became enthusiastic about prospects for a revitalized Downtown.

The cycle of decay was broken in the early 1970s by exciting events on Main Street. New buildings were under construction, the Riverfront Plaza and Belvedere were created near the river, and the Victorian, cast-iron façade buildings of Main Street’s earlier glory became prime prospects for renovation. At nearly the same time, the opening of a mall that closed Fourth to automobiles encouraged development to march, once again, up Fourth Avenue.

“Two fundamental catalysts brought Downtown back – the Belvedere and the Mall. Both have been regarded as very doubtful, but what people tend to forget is that each was proposed as a factor in a grander plan. The Mall was built as an anchor to reestablish 4th Street ... (It) was intended to cause development such as the Convention Center, the Hyatt, the Galleria. Planners did contemplate the kind of development that has occurred on 4th Street as a result of the Mall, but many people forget that.”

Wilson Wyatt

Meanwhile, the inventive use of the worn-out Brown Hotel building as an education center proved unworkable. By the next decade, The Brown again sat empty.

Broadway's Renaissance

The closing of The Brown Education Center and the development at the north end of Fourth Avenue put the Broadway area in greater jeopardy, but these events also created the impetus for the renaissance that is taking place.

THE BROADWAY PROJECT

Thomas C. Simons, chairman of Capital Holding Corporation, saw both the decay and the potential of Broadway's "magic corner." From his office in the Commonwealth Building, which his company owns, he watched as store after store closed, and he contemplated the "interesting rhythm" of the Downtown renovation projects as they moved south from the city's river source.

In May, 1979, the Broadway Group was formed at the instigation of Louisville Central Area by Simons and representatives of other major business and property owners in the area who had a vested interest in reversing its decline. Government and other downtown development leaders joined them, and they began to plan the area's revival.

"The Broadway Renaissance had been an effort of will on the part of the local community," said Arthur Ziegler, president of Cranston Development Company, co-developer of Phase I of the Broadway Renaissance. *"To put something like this together requires a complex and arduous process. People in Louisville got through it because public and private interests both worked swiftly to make it work."*

The process – and its success – have gained national attention as a model for undertaking major downtown redevelopment.

"One of the group's initial actions was to retain the firm of Zuchelli, Hunter & Associates of Annapolis, MD, to prepare a concept plan for the redevelopment of the area," Simons said. *"The concept plan convinced us that the 600 block of the Fourth Avenue Mall, centered around the historic Brown Hotel properties, and the blocks immediately to the east and west were the critical 'target' areas for redevelopment. Further, it was clear that a project in that area would have to be of sufficient magnitude, or 'critical mass,' if it were to succeed."*

In the next year the plan was presented to neighborhood, civic, business and preservation groups throughout Louisville. *"Anyone who would listen got the story!"* said Simons, who was named chairman of the Broadway Project Corporation, a non-profit organization formed in April, 1980 to carry out the plan.

Development of the 3 block, 33 acre area was divided into three phases to be completed over a 10 year period at a projected cost of \$250 million. Phase I includes the renovation of The Brown Hotel and office building, construction of a 475 space parking

garage, and the creation of Theatre Square adjacent to the hotel. Phase II will combine apartments and condominiums to create the first residential community in downtown Louisville. Phase III will provide additional office, retail and residential space.

Next came the financial planning, *“This project required a significant level of creativity in arriving at the financial package,” said Tom Simons. “We’ve been particularly proud that more than any other Louisville project – and most national projects – the Broadway Renaissance reflects community-wide participation.*

“The financial package represents the commitment of the federal, state and local governments along with that of Louisville businesses and, most significantly, of labor unions. For the first time in Louisville history, labor had become a full and active – and very valuable – financial partner in downtown redevelopment.”

Labor funds came from Pension Fund Investors, a consortium of local labor union pension funds that includes the building trades and firefighters.

“Making all of these funds come together at the same time is extraordinary,” noted Ziegler.

As soon as the financial package was in place, attention turned to design of the project. The developers selected a national architectural firm known for mixed-use urban revitalization projects, Landmarks Design Associates of Pittsburgh. Together they worked out a plan that sought not only to restore The Brown Hotel and Brown Office Building, but to retain significant elements of the theatres that had been so much a part of the area’s past and to develop a new festive retail center compatible with that history.

The architects used the style of The Brown Hotel as the format for the new retail buildings and for a brick façade for the proposed parking garage that would face a new public area, Theatre Square. A major restaurant-entertainment center, designed to echo the theatre theme and facing a magnificent new fountain and outdoor performing area, is the focus of Theatre Square.

The goal to create a new place that evolved naturally out of the historical uses and the existing architecture of the area was met.

Morewood Galleries was appointed interior designers for the hotel. They developed guest rooms and public space interiors that befitted making The Brown the premier hotel in Louisville once again. Great attention was given to detail, and the spirit of The Brown was revived while appropriate new decoration was designed and furnishings selected. Even night stands were ordered 2” higher than the standard the manufacturer offered in order to make them a more comfortable height.

THE BROWN HOTEL AND THEATRE SQUARE

The Brown Hotel, the linchpin for all three phases, returns an elegance and energy to Fourth and Broadway. While The Brown's classic features have been retained, its facilities have been revamped for today's use.

Maroon and green Bottocino Marble, polished brass, crystal chandeliers, mahogany, oak – the finer woods – preserve the charm of the original Brown Hotel.

Updated décor, high-class shops, enlarged guest rooms and new restaurants enhance the quality that is the legacy of The Brown. The old rooms seemed shabby and small by modern standards so the new Brown Hotel opens with larger, airier rooms – 296 of them instead of the original 600.

An old gustatory favorite – The Hot Brown – is served in the warmth of the English Grill and the original bar returns, but in a different location for better use of space. Quiet design suggesting art deco turns the Bluegrass Room into an exciting setting for large private functions. Handsome furnishings and antiques are used in the second floor lobby with its arched plaster-relief ceiling that extends nearly the length of the Fourth Avenue side of the hotel. From the lobby, which now includes the Thoroughbred Room, patrons can reach the new parking garage.

On the mezzanine, the J. Graham Brown Room joins the Louis XVI Room and the parlors as places for more intimate meetings. Dancers will once again waltz under the chandeliers of the Crystal Ballroom with the South Room enlarging the ballroom's capacity for banquets.

At street level, the hotel's tobacco shop with its glass and brass fittings returns. Other fine shops and a Café circle the first floor. A cobblestone drive passes before The Brown's entrance and continues to the hotel's garage. Brick walkways flank the cobblestones where the south end of Fourth Avenue becomes Theatre Square.

A mix of old and new creates an eclectic city life in Theatre Square. Offices, festive retail shops, and entertainment restaurants open onto an amphitheater-style fountain plaza set off by green spaces. Year round entertainment, some of which will be performed on the top tier of the fountain that converts into a stage, makes Theatre Square sparkle. Across the way, the Ohio Theatre Marquee stands as a link to the past while next to it the "Kentucky Show!" acquaints visitors with the state in the restored Kentucky Theatre. Period transportation connects Theatre Square to the north end of Downtown.

With the opening of Theatre Square in Spring 1985, the renaissance of Louisville's "*magic corner*" matures. Its roots, though, reach back to 1923 and the opening of Louisville's grand hotel, The Brown.

“The hotel was more or less like Churchill Downs when it comes to box seats at Derby – the same people every year and always the best.”

Fred Caldwell

“It was elegant and gracious. You could never forget you’d been there.”

Jimmy Davis

“My favorite place was the old lobby – all the marble all around, all the people coming and going – wasn’t anything like it anywhere.”

Lyman Guinn

“I’d call The Brown Hotel the congregating place. You say they’re rebuilding it? That’s good to know. It was one of those one-of-a-kind places.”

Eddie Arcaro

J. Graham Brown

“Mr. Brown would come into the kitchen and taste the food. One day he tasted something and said, ‘I don’t like this. It’s not made right.’ The Chef said, ‘It IS made right!’ They got into an argument and the Chef walked out – he just quit and went up to New York. Everybody, including the manager, was very unhappy about it. Mr. Brown got him to come back later, but he had to pay him more.”

Burdett Bullock, Doorman

“The Brown was truly a proprietary hotel – a rare thing. He was there every day, talking to the bellman, the cooks and so forth. The place had color from the beginning because of the color of the man who founded it.”

Barry Bingham, Sr., Chairman, Courier-Journal and Louisville Times Company

The man who founded it was J. Graham Brown, an extraordinary businessman who parlayed his family’s quite respectable business holds into a fortune that made him, by some accounts, the richest man in Kentucky.

He was born in Madison, Indiana in 1881. His father owned a lumber mill and large tracts of timberland in Eastern Kentucky. By 1902 or ’03 Graham and his older brother, Martin, had moved to Louisville and, with money borrowed from their father, started the W.P. Brown & Sons Lumber Company. Over the years the company’s holdings increased to hundreds of thousands of acres of timberland across the South as well as a number of sawmills and creosote plants, including two plants in Louisville.

Martin Brown died suddenly in 1920 on a train returning to Louisville from Chicago. After that, Graham Brown had no partners. He added hotels, real estate and construction interests and later a wholesale liquor company to his empire. He owned a racing stable and was a major stockholder in Churchill Downs, serving as a director for 32 years.

Business was Graham Brown’s all-consuming interest. He said, *“You want to be successful? Don’t get married.”* And of all the businesses, lumber remained the core of his wealth. *“Now let me tell you, young man, the hotel business is pretty good, but the lumber business is where the ‘jack’ is.”* He told George Spalding, then sales director for the hotels.

Brown lived modestly in a one-bedroom suite in the hotel and gave away enormous amounts of the *“jack.”* During his lifetime, he reportedly gave away \$10 million and on his death he left most of his estate, estimated at \$100 million, to the J. Graham Brown Foundation, which he had established in 1943. Generous amounts of money have gone to support projects in his native Madison and nearby Hanover College, where he attended prep school and one year of college, but most of the bequests have gone to charitable causes in Louisville and Kentucky.

Not surprisingly, Brown was a man of strong opinions. He never signed a union contract and he expressed an intense dislike for paying taxes. Many stories about this man who gave away large amounts of money relate to his parsimony with smaller sums.

One time Mr. Brown came in and put a quarter on the bar and ordered a Coke. The bartender gave him a dime back. Brown said, 'Where's the other nickel?' Bartender said, 'Mr. Harter said Cokes had to go up five cents.' Mr. Brown said, 'Give me my nickel. Cokes stay a dime.'"

Tom Brooks, Television Personality

Men who make such fortunes are not like ordinary folks, and tales of their habits, foibles and eccentricities leave strong impressions. Such was the case with J. Graham Brown.

"I adored him – from afar." One woman said. "I had fun working at The Brown," said another, 'but that J. Graham – he was a stinker.'" Audree Tillmar, whose father worked at the hotel when she was a child, remembers, "Mr. Brown treated me like a royal princess."