

The Guest House at the Alexander Inn

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on November 10, 2014)

Recently Rick Dover, founder and general manager of the Family Pride Corporation, which has saved the Guest House/Alexander Inn from demolition, spoke to the Rotary Club of Oak Ridge. This report of that talk was created by Carolyn Krause who was in attendance. It is included here in *Historically Speaking* in the spirit of keeping readers informed of the conversion of this iconic Oak Ridge historic inn. Dover is converting the historic Guest House/Alexander Inn into an assisted living and retirement facility while preserving the old hotel's classic architecture and interior gathering places during rebuilding.

Carolyn reports:

Dover is a graduate of Bearden High School and the University of Tennessee. Rick's background is in real estate development and construction, specializing in historic preservation. His 21-year-old company, which has been involved in projects in Tennessee (including Loudon County), Texas, California, and Florida, plans to renovate and restore the old historic Knoxville High School and Hotel Farragut in downtown Knoxville. Rick and his wife have three grown children.

The old, decrepit Alexander Inn has already gotten a facelift. It is being preserved and restored as the famous hotel it used to be in the early 1940s through the early 1970s. The Family Pride Corporation is turning the Jackson Square landmark into an assisted living and retirement center with 64 apartments.

The center will have a museum that features memorabilia and information on the famous scientists and government officials who stayed at the Guest House during the Manhattan Project days. The facility is expected to open in the spring, and an open house and partial tour was held Friday, Nov. 7 in association with the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance's annual conference held in Oak Ridge at the New Hope Center.

The old City Club with a bar and dining hall, where charter members of the Rotary Club of Oak Ridge formed the club and members met up until the early 1970s, has been rebuilt. Rick Dover, president of the Family Pride Corporation, said he agreed with the late Bill Wilcox, who insisted Dover name the facility ***"The Guest House at the Alexander Inn."***

This iconic project has fulfilled a dream for Rick Dover. He had wanted to buy and restore the rundown Alexander Inn for 10 years, but the initial price was too high. He didn't change his mind about buying it later, even after he began to check it out and fell through the first floor when he stepped on some rotten boards.

Some 20 years ago he became interested in restoring old buildings "because they tell us who we are and where we are going as a community" and in turning these buildings into assisted living facilities when his grandfather needed special care. When he first inquired about the Alexander, he found out that the owner wanted to sell it for too high a price.

The East Tennessee Preservation Alliance contacted him a couple years ago and found out he was still interested in helping save and restore the Alexander Inn. ETPA and the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association, both in the nonprofit sector, the private sector (Family Pride, bank), and city and federal governments worked together to save the Alexander Inn, Rick said.

The Department of Energy provided a half million dollars to ETPA (with ORHPA's support) so they could acquire the property and make it available to Family Pride at an affordable price. Family Pride then proceeded to invest in rehabilitating the old hotel.

The Alexander is on the National Register of Historic Places, and Family Pride has followed the Department of Interior's guidelines in the Guest House's restoration. Family Pride removed hazardous materials from the property, including asbestos and structures covered with mold as a result of a leaky roof.

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The ballroom and kitchen areas were remediated and rebuilt. Oak Ridgers waiting in a very long line last spring were allowed to remove leftover items from the inn in exchange for a donation.

The city of Oak Ridge and Industrial Development Board froze the property tax at the current assessment as an incentive for restoration. With the help of the preservation organizations, Family Pride also received tax credits for preserving an historic site.

Family Pride obtained a construction loan from Citizens National Bank of Sevier County, and Family Pride injected some of its own cash.

The “new” **Guest House at the Alexander Inn** will be a licensed assisted living facility for seniors. “What we do that’s different is that the operations, attitude, and care we provide make it a wonderful place to live,” Rick said.

It will have courteous and respectful staff including nurses, “great food” because of cooks with experience as chefs, a full-time activities director, a physical fitness room, wellness program, fulltime transportation, and affordable apartment rates that are 20% below the standard rate for assisted living facilities in the community. There will be a monthly gathering with food for visitors from the public interested in seeing the renovated City Club, other parts of the inn that have been restored, and the museum.

Rick said that the old Alexander Inn was designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) of Chicago, one of the largest and most influential architecture, interior design, engineering, and urban planning firms in the world. He visited the SOM headquarters, where he was shown the original drawings and plans for the Guest House, one of the smallest buildings the company designed.

The plan for the old Alexander Inn bears the signature of the late John Merrill. Rick learned that, because of the shortage of earthmovers as a result of the war effort, the firm decided in the 1940s that the layout of Oak Ridge should be along the contours of the land, a concept often used today.

He said one of the largest buildings SOM has designed is Burj Khalifa, the 163-story glass spire in Dubai, United Arab Emirates; it was finished in 2010 and declared the tallest building in the world.

That concludes Carolyn’s report.

I took the State Historic Preservation Officer, Patrick McIntyre, on a private tour of the Guest House at the Alexander Inn on Thursday, 11/6/14, after the close of the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance annual conference activities for the day. He was much impressed with the progress being made and expressed his appreciation for the way several groups came together to make this iconic project a success.

Rick Dover and Ethiel Garlington, previous executive director of ETPA, were presented awards from ETPA for the accomplishment of preserving the Alexander Inn at the ETPA annual conference awards dinner held at the Children’s Museum of Oak Ridge.

I was also able to provide Patrick a private tour of the museum. Again he expressed appreciation for the high quality of the museum beginning with the extensive Ed Westcott exhibit, the TVA waterworks, the nearly finished excellent “Difficult Decisions” exhibit of Oak Ridge history, the Doll House, the Rocket Room being refurbished by Y-12, the Lloydstown model train exhibit and more.

It is so refreshing to be able to show off Oak Ridge to the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance conference attendees. The main conference location is the Y-12 New Hope Center with the dinner at the Children’s Museum of Oak Ridge, a visit to the American Museum of Science and Energy, and finally the GALA at the Guest House at the Alexander Inn. Mayor Beehan and Mayor Frank opened the conference by expressing their appreciation for the conference being held in Oak Ridge.

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Susan Whitaker, the commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, and Franklin Vagnone, the Executive Director of the Historic House Trust of New York City, are featured speakers along with Brian May who told about plans to create a distillery at the former Brushy Mountain Penitentiary.

Actually the development at Brushy Mountain is so much more than just a distillery!

Phil Thomason spoke about previous efforts to identify historic districts in Oak Ridge, Y-12 and ORNL and Karen Doughty spoke about progress at the East Tennessee Technology Park to interpret the history of the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant previously located there.

So, there are some very exciting historic preservation activities happening in our area and this conference is focusing on much of it. Rick Dover and his team are nearing completion of the Guest House at the Alexander Inn. The Jackson Square area is soon to get a new look.

That townsite area was of interest to Franklin Vagnone as the alphabet houses located nearby were of keen interest to him. I was pleased to be able to provide Franklin a private tour of the museum as well focusing on photographs by Ed Westcott featuring the alphabet houses.

Thanks Carolyn for the report on Rick Dover's talk to the Oak Ridge Rotary Club. Thanks Todd Morgan for bringing the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance annual conference to Oak Ridge!



Rick Dover speaks to the audience after receiving the ETPA preservation award for the Guest House at the Alexander Inn

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The Guest House at the Alexander Inn is nearing completion