

THE DOCKERS RIVERSIDE HOTEL at Shawneetown, Illinois, is only a memory.

Two large and pretentious hostleries were built in the 1800s on the Illinois side of the Ohio River, the Halliday Hotel at Cairo and Dockers Riverside at Shawneetown. Both are gone. The Halliday, built in 1857, burned on February 22, 1943; the Dockers Riverside, built in 1870, was torn down in 1941. They had much in common: in design, in the fact that British money helped considerably in financing them, and in their importance in the romantic river traffic along the Ohio in the latter half of the 19th Century.

The last time that we saw the Dockers Riverside was in the spring of 1937, when Shawneetown was trying to recover from the devastating flood of that year. This was the flood that finally broke the courage of Old Shawneetown and led to the decision to move the little town to higher ground and safety. The 1937 flood ran Ohio River water six feet deep over the top of the levee and through the second floor of the Dockers Riverside. When we saw it in 1937, a family was living in the "tower suite," with a cow quartered in the guest room just at the left of the tower and a flock of chickens enjoying the hospitality of guest rooms back of that.

The name "Shawneetown" usually recalls one of two things, either the repeated, terrible floods of the Ohio River or the old First National Bank, the one that in the early 1800s turned down a request for a loan from certain Chicago business men, "Because Chicago was too far from Shawneetown and probably would never amount to much anyway." Another hotel in Shawneetown has its place in Illinois history, the small two-storied Rawlings Hotel, built in the early 1800s. General Lafayette was entertained there in 1825.

Mrs. Eddy Wiederhold of Shawneetown has given us a good first hand story of the Dockers Riverside. Here are excerpts from letters from Mrs. Wiederhold:

"The Riverside Hotel was built by Henry Docker and a company of others who he had sold stock to. Henry was the son of William Docker who came to Shawneetown from Manchester, England, and had been living here a short time before General Lafayette visited our town in 1825. William was our first mayor and was serving at that time. Henry inherited some money from his father, and his wife some from her father (Orval Pool), and they thought the town needed a good hotel, sold stock, formed a company, and built it. It was a large, four story building of pretty architecture. . . . The first floor was almost level with the street (the levee reaching above the first floor was built after the flood of 1884) and used for business such as stores, post office, express office, Western Union, and sample rooms for drummers to show their samples to merchants on long tables. The second floor housed the large lobby, large dining room, an apartment for family on corner, and on opposite corner the bridal suite of sitting room, bed room, and bath. On the third and fourth floors there were 53 bedrooms. The entire house had large rooms and high ceilings, pretty wood work. The big ball given by Mr. Docker when he opened the hotel is talked of yet by some of the older citizens who were children but had attended. It was run on grand style at first, in fact too grand for a small town. It was soon bankrupt and closed, and the stockholders lost. It was taken over by Thomas

S. Ridgeway whose wife was Henry Dockers sister, and was closed some time. A family moved to town from New Haven, Illinois, by the name of Cadle. . . . Mr. Ridgeway asked the oldest son, Richard Cadle to move there and advanced money to buy more furniture, rent free until he made it pay; he and his sisters had the hotel many years and finally bought it. . . . I forgot to mention the beautiful wide stairway. When I was a small girl one of my chums parents had the hotel, and I spent the night with her when they had the big balls. We would sit in the lobby and watch the people come down the wide steps in full dress ready for the Grand March. The balls were held in the large dining room. . . . Even as children we sat in the ball room and watched the dancing, the dances not being over until 4 a. m. Couples came by train as far as 50 miles. . . . The ladies dresses were beautiful made of fine silk and satin very low in the neck, long skirts and trains, gold or silver or white high heeled dancing slippers. . . . The food was generally good whoever had the hotel, served in three or more courses and silver and white table linen was always used. In the early days many came there to wait for the big boats that plyed the Ohio River then, going to Evansville, Indiana, Cincinnati, or New Orleans. I forgot to mention the tower on the S. E. corner that at a distance made it look like an old castle. The bedrooms at Riverside had carpets, bed, dresser, chairs, wash stand, bowl, pitcher, like any other hotel. These things were all sold at auction before hotel was demolished."

In a later letter Mrs. Wiederhold told us of the cornerstone of the building, ". . . on the north east corner on the second floor, could be seen when on the levee. It was layed by the Masonic lodge. . . . When the hotel was destroyed by the W. P. A., the stone was opened contained a lead box in which a Bible and some other papers ruined by the 1937 flood when water was over it."

The Harrisburg (Ill.) Daily Register for October 3, 1941, carried a front page story: "Historic Dockers Riverside Hotel at Shawneetown, built in 1870 for a flourishing post war trade, will be demolished next month as the removal of Shawneetown from the banks of the Ohio River to New Shawneetown, three miles inland, continues apace. For the sentimentalist, the demolition of the large brick building, towering its French Architecture high above the Shawneetown levee, will be a tragedy. . . ."

"Beginning at 10:00 a. m. on October 17, there will be an auction of all the hotel's equipment and furniture. Furniture from the hotel's 50 rooms, kitchen equipment, stoves, silverware, linens, tables, bedding, 100 goose feather pillows. . . . To be sold at private sale will be salvage from the building. The iron steps in the old Hotel were poured at the Illinois Iron furnace in Hardin County. Other parts to be sold will include brick, stone lintels, steel beams and columns, the balcony grill, and the walnut stairs, doors, and window frames."

Shawneetown has moved to New Shawneetown; the Dockers Riverside is gone forever.

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The blocks for the print and type were cut as usual from tulip wood from old University Hall, a building in design and construction much like the Dockers Riverside; printed by hand on the kitchen work table by the Japanese method.

FRED AND BETTY TURNER

Urbana
Christmas
1952