ONCE POSH, NOW PLAYED OUT

’23 hotel gets no bids at auction

Like many historic spots, Riceland a shadow of its former self

EMILY WALKENHORST
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette file photo/STATON BREIDENTHAL

Stuttgart’s Riceland Hotel, which closed in 1970, faces an uncertain future after no bidders came forward at auction last week.

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette file photo

The Riceland Hotel's coffee shop was once a popular gathering spot in Stuttgart. The deteriorating building now sits empty.

The once ritzy Riceland Hotel in Stuttgart went up for auction to a room thin on potential buyers at the Arkansas County Courthouse.

No one bid, leaving the tax-delinquent historic hotel in state hands for at least 90 more days.

The likes of Ernest Hemingway and Clark Gable once graced the halls, and young men and women dressed to the nines danced the night away at rooftop parties.

Today, it stands boarded up and empty, a blight on a small town's Main Street.

Stuttgart Mayor Marianne Maynard said there's a potential buyer, pending the results of asbestos tests.

But Maynard said many potential buyers have come and gone since the hotel closed in 1970. None of them ever had enough restoration funds.

"Everybody would like to see it reworked, but honestly I don't see that happening," said Billy Moll, who grew up in Stuttgart.

The Riceland Hotel faces an uncertain future, like many historic places around Arkansas.

The Majestic Hotel in Hot Springs, which operated for 124 years before closing in October 2006, has been quickly falling apart from water damage and loose bricks.

The Arc of Arkansas, which works with people with developmental disabilities, wants to turn the hotel's red-brick building and Lanai Tower into a universally accessible apartment complex for the general public, while maintaining the signature features of the old Majestic building.

Gary Hassenflu, the investor-developer, said reconstruction is still in the grantraising stage. He estimated the cost at $20 million.

Plans with The Arc of Arkansas have been under way since 2007, and reconstruction has yet to take place, *The Sentinel-Record* of Hot Springs recently reported.

"It's in bad disrepair. Just everything would have to be reworked."
— LIFELONG STUTTGART RESIDENT BILLY MOLL

In Pine Bluff, reconstruction has started at the Saenger Theatre, but its fate also is up in the air.

Classic entertainers such as Judy Garland, Will Rogers and Harry Houdini performed on the Saenger's stage. The theater opened in 1924 but closed in 1975 after years of fading popularity.

Pine Bluff Inspection and Zoning Director Robert Tucker oversees work to try to save it. He estimates that the building repairs will cost $8 million to $10 million — maybe more.

"We were on the verge of losing it," he said.

About $31,000 in roof work has been done to keep the building dry and prevent further damage, but more fundraising is needed. He's also awaiting word on a Historic Preservation and Restoration Grant.

He's not sure about the building's future, but he feels strongly about its past.

"The theater, in many respects, was once the heart of downtown Pine Bluff," he said.

Not all historic places in Arkansas have fallen into the shadows of yesterday.

The once-deteriorating Perot Theatre in Texarkana, Texas, received nearly $1 million from town-native billionaire H. Ross Perot for renovation. Funds raised by the community followed, and the sister theater to the Saenger Theatre was revamped.

But not every place has someone to save it.

Stuttgart's Riceland Hotel has racked up nearly $5,000 in delinquent taxes and had a minimum bid Wednesday of $19,760 — the property's value.

In June 1984, the Stuttgart City Council applied for a $500,000 federal Urban Development Grant to renovate the hotel but never received it.

The City Council also has considered demolishing the hotel. Maynard noted that that would be difficult because of a firewall the structure shares with another building.

Although Maynard said the building is structurally sound, she admits the inside is "really bad."

In a 1987 newspaper article, then-owner of the Riceland Hotel, James Mason, complained that the building had been damaged after years of pigeon shoots and abandoned shotgun shell casings blocking up drains.

“It’s in bad disrepair,” Moll said. “Just everything would have to be reworked.”

Jack Jacobs, another lifelong Stuttgart resident, also has doubts about it.

“It’s a very difficult building now, because it’s so large, and reconstruction will cost so much,” Jacobs said.

Jacobs, an insurance-company owner, had his first high school class reunion at the hotel in 1962.

He used to work at a nearby service station, handing back car keys to some famous faces staying at the hotel.

“That was a big deal for a young guy,” Jacobs said.

In its heyday, guests of the Riceland Hotel included Elvis Presley, Ted Williams, Will Rogers, Dennis Morgan, Joseph Pulitzer, Andy Devine, Wallace Beery and Robert Taylor. Companies relying on the hotel included Olin Industries, Western Cartridge Co. and Winchester Co., which sometimes reserved entire floors.

The Riceland Hotel, made popular by duck-hunting enthusiasts, was constructed for $215,000 and opened in 1923. It had 68 guest rooms, five stories, a basement, a barbershop, a restaurant, a coffee shop and a cadet room.

It closed March 9, 1970, after business slowed when other motels and duck clubs with lodging opened up in the area.

The Riceland Hotel's hotspot status had faded.

"Back in the days, there was no hotels," Moll said. "You either slept there or in your car."

The hotel had been a central point for the town and for out-of-towners.

"It was just a landmark, no doubt," Jacobs said.

City Clerk Mitri Greenhill, who grew up in Stuttgart, danced at the hotel with the Victory Dance Club. She remembers that her dad drank coffee there, along with the rest of the town's businessmen.

Moll also remembers getting coffee regularly in the mornings at the hotel. He was a member of the Jaycees, one of many organizations that held meetings there.

"It was the meeting place for the people in town," Moll said. "There was nowhere else."

Three businesses have tried to move into the first floor of the Riceland Hotel since the hotel's closing, but none has lasted.

What's left of the hotel now provides only memories for Stuttgart's elders and legends for Stuttgart's youth.

The Museum of the Arkansas Grand Prairie holds a few memories of the hotel, as well, including posters for the hotel's Friday night rooftop dances.

Patrons were treated to live orchestra music for four hours into the early morning hours.

No alcohol was served at the hotel, but a liquor store across the street stayed busy, with patrons sending the bellhops to fetch them libations,

Moll said.

According to legend, a piano was pushed off the roof during an all-too-wild soiree in the ’30s. It landed on a car in front of a policeman.

“That’s what I heard,” said Frances Camp, a 92-year-old museum employee who grew up in Stuttgart. “I guess they was drinking too much.”

Carl Humphries, who grew up in Stuttgart, went to his father’s company Christmas parties at the Riceland Hotel. When he was in second grade, his teacher, Mrs. Van Dyne, took his class to the roof, a moment that was pretty special to him.

“I was on the roof the other day,” Maynard said. “It has a hole in it now.”

Maynard has been in Stuttgart since 1967, three years before the hotel closed. She said she hopes the hotel will be restored. She doesn’t want to see it continue to fall apart.

For many Stuttgart residents and hotel employees, the closing of the hotel was a sad moment.

The last hotel manager, Helen Carter, left town the same day the Riceland Hotel closed, according to the Stuttgart newspaper.

Three days after the closing, Billy Burkett of the *Stuttgart Daily Leader* lamented losing the hotel to what she called “a victim of changing times and trends. A victim of a world in too much haste to enjoy the leisurely offerings of a grand ballroom or a roof garden complete with topname band.”

She concluded: “Closing of the hotel leaves an empty building on Main Street, Stuttgart, all right, but it leaves more than that. It leaves an

emptiness in the city's heart.

"Many speak of 'the good ole days,' and, though few remember them really, most, at least sincerely, have hoped for a return of better times, as described of years past. With the demise of the Riceland Hotel, it seems one more chance for those days is gone."

In its heyday, guests of the Riceland Hotel included Elvis Presley, Ted Williams, Will Rogers, Dennis Morgan, Joseph Pulitzer, Andy Devine, Wallace Beery and Robert Taylor.