

Hotel Irving

Did you know that Lake Bluff once had a five-story, resort hotel which held up to 500 guests? Newspaper advertisements for the Hotel described it as “the finest and most economical Summer Resort in America.” The hotel faced Prospect Avenue and took up an entire block backed by Center and bounded on the sides by Moffett and Maple. The grounds around the Hotel were laid out for croquet and a new game brought from England, lawn tennis. It was a short walk to Lake Michigan and from the upper floors guests could see the beautiful blue lake. Built in the Queen Anne style, it was surrounded by fountains, floral gardens and graveled walks with towering trees. It was named for J. Irving Pearce, the manager of Chicago’s famous Sherman House. Hotel Irving, also under Pearce’s supervision was advertised as a “summer resting place for business and literary, for families and children, for invalids and all others who desire rest, recreation, pleasure and good society.”

“Its interior is perhaps the most perfectly arranged on any summer resort hotel in the West. There were reception rooms, elegant parlors and spacious dining rooms.” According to a Descriptive Sketch of Lake Bluff, published by the Lake Bluff Hotel and Improvement Company. The outside of the hotel was surrounded by broad, breezy verandas with comfy chairs and settees “occupied by refined and distinguished visitors.”

In the basement, there was a barber shop, grocery store, and meat market. It had a public telephone and a Western Union Telegraph office. In addition, there was a bowling alley and billiard room. It is easy to understand why this hotel flourished. Lake Bluff was located on the rail line between Chicago and Milwaukee, an easy train ride for Chicagoans wishing to escape the summer heat and enjoy lake breezes at a fine resort.

Initially, Lake Bluff was the setting for a Methodist Camp Meeting Association starting in 1874. Guest summered in tents until July 1, 1883 when the Hotel Irving was opened. But as the popularity of the hotel grew and people flocked from the city for bathing, boating, bowling, and dancing the Methodists felt they couldn’t compete with these changing times, the Gay Nineties decade. The August 22, 1892 Chicago Tribune reported that over 3,000 people were on the grounds of the Lake Bluff Methodist camp-meeting. Their purpose was to look after their spiritual welfare. However, “many and especially the young people have found time for much pleasant recreation. The tennis courts and bowling alleys about Hotel Irving have been in demand. There should be no one at billiard tables, to be sure, and even the bowling alleys are looked upon with disapprobation by some of the clergymen... Dancing at the present, except in mild form, has been prohibited...” However, tension between the religiously conservative Methodists and the more worldly youth mounted. The July 14, 1895 Tribune told the shocking news, “the good people of the Bluff have in the last few years become accustomed to much that is worldly, but they have been again badly shocked. Dancing at the hotel Saturday night, hammock swinging Sunday, a church and municipal quarrel, bloomers whirling by the door, and even swimming by the men Sunday have all been experienced... but when last Sunday two city girls... donned their bathing suits and plunged in old Lake Michigan right before the eyes of all the deacons, deaconesses and preachers of the Bluff during the

quietest time of a quiet Sunday afternoon every one but the depraved youth held up his hands in holy horror and cried, "The horrid, bold things!"

The Methodists weren't the only ones who came to Lake Bluff for a retreat, so did the Salvation Army and the July 29, 1894 Chicago Tribune reports that guests at the Hotel Irving were quite disturbed by their noise.

"There is some feeling between the summer boarders at the Hotel Irving and the soldiers of the Salvation Army, who have been in camp there the last week. The former complain the Salvationists disturb the peace and quiet of the place by their method of conducting meetings... They object not only to the noise of the bass drum and the yells of Tom-Ma-Ho-Kum, the converted Indian, and the singing of Joe the Turk, which they complain keep them awake until late in the night, but they also say that no sooner do they fall asleep ... than they are awakened again by the noise of the big drum as "one Armed Murphy" parades through the woods sounding the call for "knee drill." They also complain they cannot leave the hotel for a short walk but they are haunted by the scores of knights of the red shirt, who bother and harass them in their efforts to sell the "War Cry" and photographs of Salvationists....The soldiers... pay no attention to the complaints and woes of the "unconverted" summer boarder. They are out to worship and intend to fulfill their purposes regardless of taunts and complaints."

On October 23, 1895 Lake Bluff was incorporated as a village at that time there were about 325 actual residents although the population swelled to 1500-2000 in the summer.

Sadly, on May 30, 1897 the Hotel Irving, the pride and glory of Lake Bluff, was destroyed by fire. It burned to the ground shortly after midnight. The Chicago Tribune reported that "it is supposed the blaze was started by vandals who have attacked the place at intervals during the winter." The building was valued at \$75,000 and had been insured for \$17,000 so the owners said they would not rebuild.

Two men guarded the hotel during the vacant winter months, Oscar Olson and John Killing. "Before midnight, Killing heard a noise which he thought might be burglars. When he went to investigate he heard a crackling sound in the linen room, which can only be reached from the inside of the hotel." Flames roared out of the room and Killing and Olson escaped before the stairs caught fire. They rang the bell, which is used to call worshippers together in the summer on Sundays. In a few minutes the village was awake but it was impossible to save the building. "During the hot weather a fire brigade is kept up consisting of men employed about the grounds. The Village has not had a fire in four years," The Chicago Tribune June 2, 1897 edition reported.

With the building lost, the brigade focused their effort on saving nearby houses. Sparks from the Hotel were carried by wind to neighboring rooftops and men armed with brooms swept them off as fast as they fell. They saved the outlying buildings but many trees were scorched.

A day after the fire, four member of the Lake Bluff Bowling Association gathered to create a new structure for bowling that resulted in the establishment of the Lake Bluff Country Club. This

was intended as a family club and initially 50 people joined. A two-story clubhouse was erected with bowling alleys on the first floor and a large room above for concerts, stage shows and dancing. Two tennis courts were built just east of the club. It took just 20 days to complete and the club opened with a concert on June 20, 1897.

Two years later, perhaps in response to changing times, the Lake Bluff Camp Meeting Association allowed itself to expire, 25 years after its founding.