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SPoon BREAD AND CHICKEN PIE

Submitted by Marty Everse

When the soldier boys from Selma's Craig Field invaded the coed rich courting grounds of Alabama College during the Second World War they racked-out at Montevallo's Hotel St. George. Long-time town barber Red Mahan bemoaned the less than stellar accommodations declaring, "I hate to see anybody stay in that joint. It might have been a nice place in its day, but it's nothing but a two-stick hotel now. One stick to prop the bed up with and another to fight the rats off."

Red was right. The St. George had its moments early on though it did get off to a shaky start. Opening with much fanfare on September 1, 1897, by the following week news of the two-story, 20 room, brick hotel built by Montevallo entrepreneur George Kroell had reached the pages of virtually every newspaper in the state. Room rates were \$2.00 a day with special attention given to the traveling commercial man. The original operator Alex A. Wall, with a reputation of being one of the best hotel men in Alabama, did not last long however, and within two years M. E. Ham had taken over. Ham directed his marketing efforts to parents visiting their daughters at the Industrial School. He boasted that the St. George was the finest brick building in Montevallo and led everything else of the kind in the state outside of cities. Ham's tenure was even shorter than Wall's though under Ham Dr. George Gill cured complicated cases of astigmatism and myopia in his rooms, spring vegetables from the tropics were dished up, a baby was birthed there, and oyster suppers were served by the Methodist Ladies' Aid Society. In February 1901, Mrs. S. L. Harris, "a thorough hotel woman from Atlanta," assumed control but lasted a mere 18 months. By the fall of 1902, Kroell was searching for a hotel proprietor.

The St. George's salvation came along with the husband and wife team of J. R. "Jack" and Ella Johnson from Faunsdale who took the reins in 1910 and ushered in the hotel's golden age. For 21 years, the couple guided the lodging's fate, creating what one correspondent described as a "friendly, homely atmosphere of the old South. Entering the lobby one would come face to face with several cages of lovebirds



The Hotel St. George had lost some of its former glory by the time of this 1946 photograph. For more information go to www.historicmontevallo.org and scroll down to Clay Nordan's "Throwback Thursday."

billing and cooing. In small fish bowls around the room tiny gold fish would be swimming in the clear blue water. Adding to the homey atmosphere were stray cats whose wanderings had led them to the St. George because of the table scraps always ready for them." Those scraps had a been prepared initially by what many people considered the real celebrity of the hotel, the African-American cook, Joseph Sidney Prentice, Jr. Son of a local preacher and clad in white trousers and a bright silk shirt, Joe prepared and served his specialties, spoon bread and chicken pie, to great acclaim. Traveling salesmen scheduled their routes to end the week at Joe's sumptuous Saturday night table.

Jack, Ella and Joe held forth until 1931 when Jack retired and opened a café on Main Street. He did find time to be Montevallo's mayor from 1926-1932. The St. George rocked along until 1963 when businessman Victor Scott purchased the building. He auctioned off the contents on June 15th and the building was demolished shortly thereafter. Eventually, Agee and Pat Kelly constructed the Merchants & Planters Bank building on the lot which is today TrustMark.