

Never-closed Palmer House a magical landmark

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The Palmer House Hilton is the longest continuously operating hotel in North America.

Now it's time for the grand dame's wake-up call.

The Palmer House, 17 E. Monroe, remained open during its two-year, \$170 million restoration, which just concluded. The doors have never closed since the hotel opened in 1873. There are older hotels in the United States but they shut down for renovation. All walks of life have stayed at the Palmer House, including President Bill Clinton, the Dalai Lama and Carol Channing, who played opening night.

And now me.

I grew up in Chicago, but I didn't realize the Palmer House uninterrupted history went back so far. I brought along that sense of discovery during a recent weekend stay. I love old hotel lobbies such as the Pfister in Milwaukee and the Peabody in Memphis. Even if you don't check in, the Palmer House lobby is worth checking out. Everyone is casting about their fortune in an urban garden of clover.

Besides the lobby, most of the hotel's rooms and suites have been remade. A new spa has been built out of the fifth floor space that used to house the Gaslight Club restaurant and an expansive fitness center is on the eighth floor. I sat in the ornate lobby and tried to comprehend the history of the new lobby, which runs almost an entire city block from the Empire Room supper club (atop the Monroe Street entrance) on the north to Adams on the south.

Close your eyes and imagine who walks on by. President Richard Nixon (he stayed at the hotel). Sonny and Cher (they played the Empire Room on New Year's Eve 1970). My parents had their 1949 engagement party at the Empire Room. And the beat goes on.

The lobby ceiling of 21 Grecian paintings were installed in the early 20th century by French muralist Louis Pierre Rigal. He was already green in a world of gold. He used a vegetable-based paint on the ceiling, two stories above the floor. The lobby defines

the hotel's French Empire theme, which has been re-emphasized by Thor Equities, the New York-based development firm that owns the Palmer House. (Hilton manages the property). Thor also owns 11 waterfront acres of Coney Island in Brooklyn, N.Y.

The hotel originally was a wedding gift from business magnate Potter Palmer to his French wife, Bertha. She had the largest collection of Impressionist art outside of France, which she later bequeathed to the Art Institute of Chicago, a block east of the hotel.

So the new hotel bar is appropriately called Potter's Lounge. The room is accented by black and white panels of Chicago icons Hugh Hefner, Nat King Cole and others. Replica Sally Rand pink feathers sit in a glass case, but the case needs a marker. I'm not even old enough to get the Rand connection. The Empire Room opened in 1933, the same year Rand danced with feathers during the Century of Progress exposition in Chicago.

Definitely try the trio of Kobe beef silver dollar sliders on mini-brioche buns with a zesty black peppercorn sauce (\$14). Sweet dreams.

Also, the Lockwood restaurant opened last November in the former gift shop off the lobby. That space is named after Bertha Palmer's baby brother. It triples as a breakfast/lunch spot and fine dining restaurant with fare such as slow cooked Scottish salmon. Phillip Foss (Le Cirque, Quilted Giraffe in New York) is executive chef at Potter's and Lockwood. I saw dozens of guests eating at Lockwood before taking in local theater and having drinks in the lobby after winding down from "Jersey Boys."

"One of the things we wanted to establish in this renovation was to create a buzz and reason to be in the lobby," said hotel General Manager Dean Lane. "There was no activity in our lobby. People would come in and it was almost like a bus stop."

Since the Palmer House is a National Landmark, floors walls, ceiling and lighting fixtures could not be changed during renovation. Eight tons of fire escapes on the State Street side facade were removed. New interior fire stairs were added. "There was a lot more to look at on the facade once the fire escapes were removed," Lane said. "It was like taking braces off a child." Thor worked in concert with the Commission on Chicago Landmarks on the renovation.

The Palmer House also is the world's first fireproof hotel. The original Palmer House was across the street from the current property. It opened in 1871, only 13 days before it went down in the Great Chicago Fire.

I tried to pretend I was a tourist as much as possible. In fact, I forgot my razor and shaving cream. For \$5 the hotel delivered a bag with two razors, three packets of

shaving cream, a comb, a small tube of toothpaste and small roll-on deodorant. I was impressed. Or someone had complained about my appearance.

There are 1,639 guest rooms at the Palmer House, which makes it the second largest hotel in Chicago after the Hyatt Regency. The hotel was sold out on Nov. 22, the second night of my stay. "I'd say 40 percent of our occupancies are for downtown activities," Lane said on that Saturday afternoon. "Every month you see a different store or a different development on State Street, which is exciting to see in itself."

That's what I hear, but when I got up early Saturday I didn't see a lot of action as I walked the exterior of the hotel in what I call the Mid South Loop. I did pop in to revisit my old friends at Miller's Pub, 134 S. Wabash. By 10:30 a.m. college football fans were trickling in to hoist a beer in the venerable (Bill) Veeck's Corner of the pub. And here's a tip: If you're lounging around the lobby and time gets away from you, last call at Miller's Pub is 4 a.m. seven days a week. Last call in the Palmer House lobby is 1 a.m, Potter's is open from 4 p.m. until midnight, closed Sunday and Monday.

The renovation revealed hidden architecture. The lobby's earth-toned terrazzo floor had been covered by carpet for the past 40 years. The carpet has been yanked off like Sinatra's toupee and area rugs have been added. The old French Quarter restaurant has been transformed back into a junior ballroom that operated from the 1920s through 1950s. The space is now called the Honore Ballroom (which pays homage to Bertha Palmer's maiden name) and complements the Empire Room and Red Lacquer ballrooms.

The Empire Room closed to the public in 1972. It is still used for private affairs and weddings. I've been to events there and it remains a city jewel. The 325-seat space with dance floor could still be a vital spot for live jazz or blues. A populist re-emergence of the Empire Room also would make amends for Thor closing the historic Trader Vic's in favor of a self-operated 250-car parking garage that opens early next year. "We are looking at, on a much smaller scale, doing supper club-type performances in the Empire Room," Lane said. "We're going to try everything. We are attracting customers who are curious about the restoration.

"There's a different feel of the Palmer House now. "