
BOOK REVIEW

The Hermitage Hotel At One Hundred

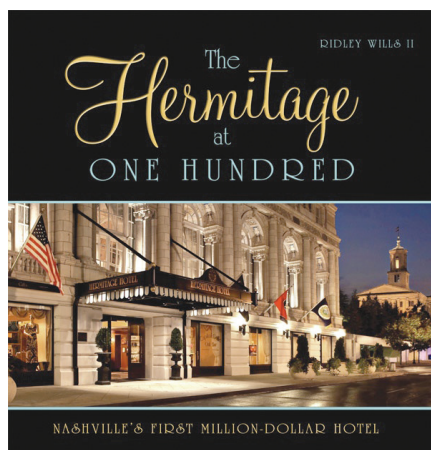
Ridley Wills II Chronicles Nashville's First
Million-Dollar Hotel

BY MIKE SLATE

Neil Armstrong, Al Capone, Bill Clinton, Bette Davis, Aretha Franklin, Billy Graham, Katherine Hepburn, Michael Jackson, Douglas MacArthur, Willie Mays, Elvis Presley, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Hank Williams, Oprah Winfrey, Alvin York—these and scores of other famous folk have over the years been drawn to Nashville's Hermitage Hotel. Now celebrating a climactic anniversary, the opulent hotel has sheltered a confluence of lives for a complete century, opening to the public at 6 p.m. on Sept. 17, 1910.

To mark its centennial, the hotel wisely chose Ridley Wills II to produce a commemorative book. A distinguished descendant of eminent Nashvillians, Wills is one of our premier historians. His book, *The History of Belle Meade: Mansion, Plantation, and Stud*, won the Tennessee History Book Award in 1991. Since then, he has authored several other important works, including *Tennessee Governors at Home*, commissioned by First Lady Martha Sundquist. The result of his voluminous Hermitage Hotel research is, fittingly, a lavish volume rich with historical detail, magical anecdotes, and luxurious photographs.

The book opens with the genesis of the hotel project—with particular attention to Beaux Arts architect J. E. R. Carpenter—and closes with the grand hotel's recent ascent to Mobil Five Star and AAA Five Diamond ratings, which



Ridley Wills II, *The Hermitage at One Hundred: Nashville's First Million-Dollar Hotel*; Providence House Publishers: 2009; Foreword by Greg Sligh; 281-page large-format hardback; illustrated, appendices, endnotes, selected bibliography, index; \$59.95.

mark our downtown Hermitage as one of the most uptown hostelries in all of America. (The hotel was recently ranked 11th in the U.S. and Canada by *Travel & Leisure* magazine.)

Chronologically between these two bookends, the author recounts the hotel's several owners and managers, its financial ups and downs, its 1970s flirtation with destruction, its various renovations and, most entertaining of all, its staff and guest stories, many of which will produce involuntary chuckles from captivated readers.

Wills gives appropriate attention

to the Hermitage as headquarters to both suffragists and anti-suffragists in Tennessee's dramatic run to ratify the nineteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which certified women's right to vote (see the August 2010 issue of *The Nashville Retrospect*). And among the book's many bonuses and sidebars is a six-page treatment of the larger-than-life pool shark, Minnesota Fats, and his colorful years at the hotel beginning in 1985.

Along with Wills' professional research and masterful storytelling, the wow effect of this volume's graphic design makes it a strong candidate for "coffee table" book of the year. Its vivid photos and other illustrations, some a full page or more in size, are stunning if not unforgettable. Plenty of photos showcase the regal centenarian's architecture and furnishings. The famous Capitol Grille and art deco men's room are represented beautifully. Even the more modest black-and-white photos are impressive. One in particular, a shot of Minnie Pearl posing above Gov. Frank Clement and his svelte wife, Lucille, struck this reader as iconic.

Those familiar with Wills' work as an author and teacher will not be surprised to see vintage picture postcards displayed memorably in the book. As a foremost deltiologist, Wills has no doubt inspired many other postcard connoisseurs and deserves a distinction such as "Father of Tennessee Postcard Collecting." Among his publications is the 1996 book, *Touring Tennessee: A Postcard Panorama, 1898-1955*.

The Hermitage at One Hundred is all anyone could reasonably ask for in a book: comprehensive narrative with both factual history and warm recollections, abundant eye-popping illustrations, outstanding sidebars, valuable appendices, and a thorough index.

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