

GER Ron and First Lady Nancy Hicks' Visit to Mississippi

We left Fredericksburg early Wednesday evening, December 2, for an overnight stay near the DC Reagan Airport and an early flight through Dallas to the "Magnolia State" and the Mississippi State Elks Convention. We arrived at the Gulfport-Biloxi Airport around 1:00 pm, where we were met by State Sponsor PGER Mike Smith and his wife Sandra, SDGER Mike Gordon and his wife Bonnie, State President Paul Auge, Grand Lodge Lecturing Knight Arnie Blackmon and his wife Toni, PSP and Convention Chairman Mike Nobles and his wife Pam, and, from Alabama, Grand Lodge Audit & Accounting Member Andy Milwid and his wife Ruth.

On the way to the Treasure Bay Hotel and Casino, site of the Convention, we stopped for a "light" lunch of Sweet Tea, Shrimp and Oyster Poor

boys, Gumbo and Bread Pudding. (Welcome to the "Gold Coast!!") Thursday night dinner was at the hotel with State and Grand Lodge

Officers, and VIP guests from Florida State President Carl Ledig and his wife Dolly, and PSP and former GER Aide to Mike Smith, Jim Coggins and Sonya. Still full from our "not so light" lunch, Ron and I each enjoyed a Shrimp and Grits appetizer, another one of our favorites.

Friday morning our group of about fourteen toured Kessler Air

Force Base, a training installation with active duty and many



Mississippi State Sponsor Mike Smith and wife Sandra and Nancy and Ron



Ron and Nancy with Bonnie and Mike Gordon, Special Deputy Grand Exalted Ruler for Mississippi



Andy and Ruth Milwid, Ron and Nancy, and Dolly and Carl Ledig



Ron standing in front of one of the propellers of a C130-J plane in a hanger for routine maintenance



Ron presenting his GER pin to Sgt. Eric Johnson, Chief of the Propulsion Unit, who presented Ron with his Challenge Coin



Mike Smith, Ron and Mike Gordon in front of one of the "Flying Jennies," WC130-J Hurricane Hunter planes



Painting of Colonel Lawrence E. Roberts, Commander of the Maintenance and Supply Group at Kessler Air Force Base depicting some of his duties during his Air Force career. Most notably he was a Tuskegee Airman and served in numerous flying, technical, and command assignments. He is the father of Robin Roberts, one of the anchors of ABC's Good Morning America.

traditional Reserve personnel. Kessler is the home to the 815th Airlift Squadron, the "Flying Jennies" (mules), and their C130-J cargo planes with combat capabilities that serve in equipment and troop transport and evacuations and as airborne hospitals. Kessler is also home to the 53rd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron, the "Hurricane Hunters," and their fleet of ten WC130-J planes especially equipped to fly into hurricanes and perform other weather-related services. We were welcomed to the Base by Group Commander Colonel Jay Johnson and received tours of various areas of the Base, including an on-board tour of one of the Hurricane Hunters.

After lunch at the Old Biloxi Schooner

Restaurant, famous for its Crawfish, Shrimp, Oysters, Gumbo and Schooner Fries, we went to Beauvoir ("Beautiful View"), the final home of Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy. He wrote "The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government" during his years at Beauvoir. This wonderful southern home, like all of the Biloxi and Gulfport coast, was devastated by the 15 to 25 foot water surge and 130 mph winds of Hurricane Katrina, but is being restored to its former elegance with many original furnishings. There was

also a new museum on the property, which in addition to its tribute to Davis, chronicles the great storm and contained many photos and items destroyed by the hurricane (The force and damage caused by Katrina was dramatic and is still quite evident!!)

Friday afternoon we visited the two State Hospitality Rooms and that evening went to dinner at Mary Mahoney's Restaurant, built circa 1737, with its very nice courtyard and the "Patriarch," a tree thought to be over 2,000 years old. The restaurant did not escape Katrina and had over a foot of water on the second floor. Its owner, Bob



Old Biloxi Schooner Restaurant



Relaxing on the porch at Beauvoir, home of Jeff Davis

Mahoney, greeted our group of about twenty-two and entertained us with jokes and stories about his family, the restaurant and Katrina.

Saturday morning Ron attended an 8:30 am breakfast meeting with the District Deputies followed by the opening Business Session and an open meeting with the Board of Directors of the State Major Project the Mississippi Elks Camp. Lunch was with the Past State Presidents, where Ron was voted an honorary member of the PSP Association. The Business Session continued after lunch with a number of good reports. Mississippi finished fourth in the Nation last year in per capita ENF contributions and this year is currently number ten in ENF giving and number fourteen in Membership gain. Mississippi, with its eleven Lodges and 2,700 members, is a relatively small State having a big impact in Elkdom.

Nancy, along with Sandra Smith, Ruth Milwid, Dolly Ledig, and chauffeur Bonnie Gordon, attended the Mississippi Ladies Auxiliary luncheon at a local restaurant. President of the Auxiliary Nancy Nelson presided over the delicious luncheon and meeting. On our way back to the hotel we happened to pass a nice shopping area, and after a quick vote, felt the need for some "retail therapy." After a couple of the ladies found items they just could not live without, we returned to the hotel and casino to try our luck at a little "slot therapy."

Saturday afternoon also presented time for more socializing in the Hospitality Rooms and some college football. While Mississippi Elks are proud supporters of their own sports teams, the main focus this day was on the SEC Championship Game, Florida vs Alabama. (Mike, Sandra, Carl, and Jim, all from Florida, were not happy with the outcome.)



Ladies from the Biloxi Lodge who helped prepare and serve our delicious dinner at the Banquet

Saturday night the State Banquet was held at Biloxi Lodge 606, located across the "Gold Coast



L to R, Sandra Smith, Dolly Ledig, Ruth Milwid, and Nancy in front of the Biloxi Lodge. The marker on the tree indicates the waterline from Katrina.

Highway," from the beach and a great view of the Gulf of Mexico. We were met by ER Louis Kostmayer, who gave Ron a tour and explained that while the Lodge lost its roof and suffered much wind damage from Hurricane Katrina, since it is located on slightly higher ground, it did not receive as much water damage as other nearby structures. (Louis has three brothers who are PERs of the Biloxi Lodge.) ENF Chair Michelle Gordon handled the GER Wine Raffle which was won by Jiselle Smith, who received the autographed



ENF Chairman Michelle Gordon, winner of the GER Wine Raffle Jiselle Smith, and Ron

wine, while ENF received \$1,025 in her name, the name of her Greenville Lodge 148 and the Mississippi Elks.

With a 2:30 pm scheduled departure from Gulfport-Biloxi, our Sunday routine was quite different from the norm. After a leisurely Sunday morning, we went for an early lunch at "Slap Ya Momma's" Barbeque Restaurant with SDGER Mike and Bonnie Gordon, SP Paul Auge, and PSP and Convention Chairman Mike



L to R, Mike and Pam Nobles, Paul Auge, Bonnie and Mike Gordon, and Nancy and Ron in front of Slap Ya Momma's Barbeque Restaurant

Nobles and his wife Pam. We arrived about 11:15 and by noon the place was packed with a waiting line outside. No wonder, the BBQ and all the sides were great! (Bon Appetite, ya'll.) Mike and Bonnie then dropped us off at the airport, and all was right with the world until our flight was cancelled and we were re-scheduled for 6:15 pm. What to do with our new-found four hours?

Ron recalled Mike saying, that after Katrina, the Gulfport Lodge had re-located near the airport, so we called, and although the Lodge was closed, Lodge Treasurer Lynn Odle invited us over, and we grabbed a cab. Lynn was waiting for us



Ron, Nancy, and Paul Auge at "Slap Ya Momma's Barbeque"



L to R, Ron, Craig and Dixie Huch, Lynn Odle, and Terry Nelson in front of the Gulfport Lodge

as we pulled up to the Lodge and we were soon joined by Exalted Ruler Terry Nelson and State VP-South Craig Huch and his wife Dixie. We had a really good visit with these dedicated and passionate Elks, talking about the Lodge, how it was destroyed by Katrina, and how they are working on plans to rebuild back at their original site on the Gold Coast

Highway.



Nancy and Bonnie Gordon standing by one of the Live Oak sculptures along the median of Route 90 on the Gulf. These are trees Marlin Miller, a wood sculptor volunteered to create to leave a tribute to the Live oaks that lined the highway before the saltwater surgery of hurricane Katrina killed them at their very roots.

The Gulfport Lodge is down to eighty-three members, losing over 200 members in the ten years since Katrina and their relocation to an out-of-the-way "temporary" facility. Despite their challenges, the Lodge continues to make a difference in the Community. It received four ENF Community Investment Grants last year, and has been approved for four more Grants this year; has averaged over \$28 per capita to ENF over the last three years, and among its other activities, supports the local VA Hospital, the USO Airport Lounge, and holds two fishing rodeos each year for area youth. Gulfport is a great example of the Community Focus of all Mississippi Lodges. This unexpected side trip was most enjoyable and revealed a truly inspiring story of challenge, survival, commitment, and hope for the future!

Craig and Dixie drove us back to the airport, where we visited the USO Lounge before proceeding to our Gate. Eight hours later, after making a connection in Charlotte, we arrived at our condo in Orlando, Florida, for a week of R & R. Then home to Virginia and two weeks for time with family, friends and Christmas. On December 30, we head back on the road to Pasadena California, Hawaii, and Wyoming.



Beautiful view and sunset overlooking the Gulf from our room

Submitted by Ron and Nancy Hicks

Send comments to webmaster@virginiaelks.org