

Webb Hotel - Hugo bids farewell to local landmark

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Not with a bang, but with a whimper, Hugo's once grand Webb Hotel is slowly, painfully being converted into salvage and carted away. Instead of a wrecking ball or explosive, the Webb is being brought down by a small crew working with sledge hammers and crowbars.

Gene Powell, 89, a former desk clerk at the hotel who worked there off and on since 1916, and his wife Ila, said they were both sorry to see the 71 year old landmark finally being torn down.

"I'm going to miss the old hotel," Mrs. Powell said. "It's hard to watch them pull it down after all these years."

Gene Prater, 74, an employee of the hotel's last owners since age 13, recalls that the Webb was by far the nicest hotel in town during its heydays in the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s.

"The Bellmont and the Winnie Hotels were around then but the Webb was the big meeting place for tourists and traveling salesmen back in those days," Prater said.

Only four years younger than the state of Oklahoma, the Webb was built for the same reason that the town of Hugo originally came into being - the railroad.

"Hugo was built here because of the Frisco railroad crossroads," Prater said. "The hotel is just east of the old railroad depot."

According to Choctaw Historical Society member Smith Luton, nearly 16 passenger trains a day would stop at Hugo during the 1920s. Passengers often had to seek local accommodations over night to make a train connection the following day. Luton said.

"The people who lived in town never had occasion to stay at the hotel very much," Luton said. "I remember the dining room and the lobby but I can't recall ever being upstairs."

Prater was one of many young bachelors who did live at the Webb during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

"There were about 25 fellows like me that lived at the hotel," Prater said. "I had a third floor room that I paid \$15 a month for out of a salary of \$18 a week."

"That was like paying \$125 to \$150 in rent today," Prater said.

Although the rooms in the oldest part of the building shared a public bathroom, each of the rooms in the annex built in 1913 had its own bath, Prater said. Furnishings included beveled glass mirrors, porcelain water pitchers and other antiques, he said.

"A lot of that stuff has been stolen out of the hotel over the years," Prater said.

The part of the hotel that the residents of Hugo most often enjoyed was the dining room, 77 year old Hugo resident Alpha Knipp said.

"The food was the best in town," Mrs. Knipp said. "The Rotary Club and Lions always had their luncheons at the Webb."

On one occasion while Mrs. Knipp was in high school during the early 1920s, she was asked to sing as the entertainment at a Rotary luncheon held at the Webb.

"Halfway through the song, the waiter came in and started gathering dishes," Mrs. Knipp said. "Then when he got through clanging all the dishes together, he tripped on the way back to the kitchen and dropped his tray."

According to Luton, the people who made the most use of the Webb Hotel were the traveling salesmen that crisscrossed the country by rail trying to interest local merchants in their wares.

"The hotel had a sample room where the salesmen would set up their samples," Luton said. "The merchants would order what they....."