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THE HOUSE OF EDNA EARLE BOARDING HOUSES IN WELTY'S SOUTH By Dan Sanders

"I say to people who pass through here, 'Now just a minute. Not so fast. Could *you* hope to account for twelve bedrooms, two bathrooms, two staircases, five porches, lobby, dining room, pantry and kitchen, every day of your life, and still be out there looking pretty when they come in?"

EDNA EARLE IN "THE PONDER HEART"

Bill Simmons has called Mississippi home for most of his 83 years, and he knows Eudora Welty. He never lived in anything like the Beulah Hotel of "The Ponder Heart," but he thanked the heavens for boarding houses like them every day of his young life. "My sixth-grade teacher lived in one, and every day I had the honor of fetching her lunch from it -- which got me out of class fifteen minutes early," he recalls with a laugh. Simmons also remembers a man living in a neighborhood boarding house during the 1920s who was a veteran of the Confederacy: "I tried so hard to wheedle Civil War stories out of that man." Whether it was just sparing a schoolboy a few minutes in a cramped and muggy classroom, or a place for a wandering salesman to live for awhile, the boarding house was as much a part of American life a half-century ago as the video store is today. Yet it was in the South of Eudora Welty, with its more patient pace of life, where boarding houses took deepest root.

"Even in the small towns, there were one or two of them," says Simmons. "It was a very essential part of Southern life." Houses like the Beulah are almost unheard of today, so the remembrances of Southerners like Simmons are essential to appreciating Welty's novel.

In the 1940s America of "The Ponder Heart," air travel was rare and dangerous. The Interstate highway system was only a vision, and automobiles crawled over narrow, pocked roads, the automatic transmission still years from widespread availability. Railroads were still the dominant mode of travel, and even they were severely restricted during wartime. All this made for a vastly less mobile society than what we know. "It was a slower type of lifestyle, when things were simpler," says North Carolinian Steve Hill. "People had time to slow down, enjoy things around them. When they arrived in a town, people were content to find a boarding house and stay

there.” These houses were like anything else – there were good ones and bad ones. When luck awarded someone with a house as well-run as Edna Earle Ponder’s, there was affordable shelter and a chance to meet some interesting folks; when darker fortunes prevailed, the house proved that Sartre was right when he wrote, “Hell is other people.” Most often, boarding houses were landing pads for reshuffled lives in a nation with few options for women and the unskilled.

Today, Steve Hill runs a boarding house — one without guests. It’s a National Historic Site once owned by Julia Wolfe, whose dictatorial rule of a boarding house was immortalized by her son Thomas in *Look Homeward Angel*. For real-life boarders, the houses amounted to a short course in human relations. “You got a smattering of lifestyles other than your own, a lot of people brought together under one roof,” claims Hill. Amy Byra learned this firsthand, living in a house in Jackson, Mississippi – Welty’s hometown -- during the Second World War. “It was crowded, with all the soldiers in town, all their wives and kids. We had a recruiting officer for the Navy, four Army Air Force men sharing a room, a couple of 4F’s (men rejected for military service because of disabilities), a young married couple in one, and two old men in another,” she remembers. “There were three girls in *my* room. People were pretty packed in.” For another Mississippian, Ruby Anders, a boarding house in neighboring Louisiana comprised her first city experience after growing up in a very small town. “I was twenty just before the war, working for the phone company down in Baton Rouge,” she says. “I made ten dollars a week, but then they started taking out taxes. Social Security, you know. So my weekly salary was cut to \$9.85.” Boarding house rent took another four dollars.

Not far from Ruby Anders in Hattiesburg, Dr. Betty Drake recalls, “These were usually big, old, two-story houses, the kind with lots and lots of rooms. If the landlady was not nosy, did not read your mail, and provided good food and a clean house, those were her main selling points.” In the classic mode of *Upstairs, Downstairs*, the help lived on the first floor, those they served on the second. As a young girl Dr. Drake lived in a boarding house run by her aunt in Memphis, where *The Ponder Heart*’s doomed Bonnie Dee Peacock flees after she leaves Daniel. “My aunt preferred male tenants, she said they were less trouble. I had a little business going, the boarders would give me a dime a week to wash their socks.” Most of these profits were invested in movie magazines. “This was when movie stars dressed for glamour, not all *tacky* like you see today,” Drake says. “I’d cut out the stars’ pictures and make paper dolls.” In a nation that had yet to appreciate half its labor force, boarding houses provided a rare economic opportunity. “In the 1920’s and 1930’s, it was about the only option an unmarried woman had, to run a boarding house,” asserts Drake. Bill Simmons agrees: “Typically it would be run by a widow as a means of supporting herself.” In most cases, the woman either could not afford the upkeep to stay there alone, or simply found herself with too much house for one person. She would usually be assisted by one or two workers, most often African American, helping with cooking and cleaning, just as Edna Earle has Narciss and Big John Beech.



Eudora
Welty.

Running a boarding house meant long, hard hours. Most houses included maid service, and there were constant telephone messages to take, repairs to be made, mail to sort, bills to pay. Above all, upwards of twenty people had to be fed two or three times a day without a microwave oven or a

large grocery market nearby. “All the cooking was from scratch,” reminds Simmons. Chickens had to be slaughtered and plucked, potatoes had to be peeled, biscuits baked. Dr. Betty Drake remembers traipsing with her aunt and the African American couple working for her to farmer’s markets in Memphis, lugging home fresh food for the boarders. “Things had to be done 365 days a year, it was a very hard way to make a living,” Drake claims.

In a competitive business like a boarding house, the food was the landlady’s secret weapon. “The food was *good*, and there was a lot of it,” recalls Ruby Anders. “I used to wonder how they could cook all of it, and make it so good.” Drake assents, “Oh yes, it was good, typical Southern cooking, lots of vegetables, homemade bread, homemade pies and cakes, beef and pork roasts.” Bill Simmons still remembers the splendors of the fresh apple pie at the house his family ate at on occasion, saying simply: “It was *hearty*.”



JoBeth Williams as Edna Earle Ponder, boarding house proprietress.

In an era where a worker was judged more by what he or she could do with their hands than with their mind, the aroma of home-scratch cooking after a long day’s labor must have been welcome indeed. The house’s porch often served as its social center. “This being the South, it was warm most of the time,” says Amy Byra. “Of course there was no air conditioning, the lady running my house wouldn’t even let you have a fan in your room, the electricity cost too much, she said. Anyway, we were used to the heat, we were all from farms. We’d all sit on the front porch and talk. That’s how I

met my husband, he was one of the soldiers staying there, we got married after the war.” When Edna Earle mentions the Beulah’s porches – five of them! -- it reveals a pre-television society in which neighbors served as a prime source of support and entertainment, not the font of annoyance they frequently are today.

There were sacrifices, of course. Privacy was usually an early casualty of boarding house living. Amy Byra found this out when she fell in love. “Mrs. Grimes, the widow running the house, she said she didn’t want me dating a soldier,” she says scornfully. “I told her I didn’t think it was any of her business. She says she doesn’t want us ‘carrying on,’ I said we didn’t ‘carry on,’ we’d just go to the movies, but there was gossip around the house, so I moved out.” Ruby Anders also recalls a life with few secrets. “There was this one married couple, every single day after lunch they went up to their room and . . . everybody in the house knew what they were doing,” she giggles.

The Second World War and the deep changes it wrought in American life were a major factor in the boarding house’s demise. Claims Betty Drake, “There are jobs for women now. When I was in high school, no one gave much thought to educating girls. The war opened that up. People discovered that women could do things besides clean and wash and do dishes.” Before the war, says Amy Byra, “Girls didn’t live in apartments. It wasn’t considered proper for a girl to live that way. People thought she should be in a house, with somebody to look after her.” Steve Hill pegs another reason: “The boarding house declined when roads and automobiles improved in the years after war, and people got a higher degree of mobility.” The “new highway” that Edna Earle laments early in the novel is a stake aimed at the Beulah’s heart. Life is getting faster. People are seeing more of the world

and craving rapid change. An unthinkable Mississippi, a notorious place of Freedom Riders and their foes, of mayhem and flames, is soon to come.

Today, the closest thing in Mississippi to the Beulah Hotel might be the Fairview Inn in Eudora Welty's hometown of Jackson, but it's a distant relation. Bill Simmons' opulent, columned Colonial Revival home -- entered in the National Register of Historic Places -- is now a posh bed and breakfast. Simmons is now in the ninth decade of a fascinating life. "My curriculum vitae is about as crooked as the Mississippi River, all kinds of twists and turns," he laughs as he ticks off his careers: studies in France when World War II broke out; an agent for the Office of Strategic Services (the forerunner of the CIA) with a role in the D-Day campaigns; postwar State Department work; an import-export enterprise in Indochina before it became known as Vietnam; the oil and gas business; now an innkeeper. The other day he attended his sixty-fifth-year high school reunion, where he chatted with Ms. Welty's sister-in-law, a classmate from long ago. Staying at Simmons' house will set you back a bit more than the four dollars a week Ruby Anders paid to board in Baton Rouge, but Ms. Anders doesn't recall her room having its own library and a whirlpool tub, either. Does Bill Simmons agree with Edna Earle when she says early in "The Ponder Heart," "It's true that often the people that come in off the road and demand a room right this minute, or ask you ahead what you have for dinner, are not the people you'd care to spend the rest of your life with at all"? Mr. Simmons is too much of a gentleman to answer that, but his fondness for the Beulah Hotels he knew as a younger man seem to make him a contented proprietor of the Fairview Inn. Yes, it's very different from the Beulah. But it's a very, very different

country than the one that he and Edna Earle were young in.

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