



## Historic Redlands Hotel Offers Visitors Step Back in Time With a Modern Twist

By Tracy Torma

When the Redlands Hotel opened for business in Palestine in 1915, the five-story, brick building made of steel and concrete was one of the finest hotels around. A speaker at the hotel's grand opening, which drew dignitaries from across the state, predicted the Redlands would stand the test of time:

*"This enduring pile of steel and stone stands today as it promises to stand a century hence. As a work of art and as a structure eminently adapted for the purpose, let it speak for itself. Long after its markers and the present generation alike shall have crumbled into dust in their graves, its solid foundation, its massive walls and its substantial frame will combine to offer that same safe and hospitable shelter to mankind that it offers now."*

Fast forward six decades later, when Jean Mollard, her late husband Norman, a Palestine native and Houston contractor, and Jean's brother Robert Laughlin sized up the hotel as a possible renovation project. Boarded up for more than 20 years, the building resembled a parking garage, with open hallways and a leaking roof. Most of its 186 windows were beyond use. As they poked through the structure with flashlights, Jean recalls, they saw a basement full of dampness and a dark and nasty environment.

But Norman and Jean, who was in the an-

tiques business in Houston, and Robert, an engineer with electrical experience, could see the possibilities. They purchased the old hotel, promising city officials they would replace all the windows and operate a business on the first floor.

### Restoring the Hotel's Grandeur

True to her word, in 1977, Jean opened an antique store on the first floor, refinishing furniture in the hotel's basement and offering it for sale in the 2,000-square-foot storefront and at her store in Houston. It was the beginning of a successful antiques wholesale business called Artifacts that at one time employed as many as 42 local employees and a network of contract sales representatives nationwide.

While Jean ran the wholesale antiques business, Norman and Robert began renovating the old hotel one floor at a time. Monthly rental apartments were available in the 1980s and nightly updated suite rentals began in 2007.

"This building is more than just mortar and stone. It was the creation of something 100 years ago — a vision that has been adjusted along the way. What's most important are the things that happened in it and the livelihoods it provided," Jean says.

In fact, the Redlands' historic designation on the National Register of Historic Places is not just for its architectural

detail, but also for its contribution to the social fiber of the community.

"This was once a railroad office building that impacted so many livelihoods. Someone is always telling me, 'My dad or grandfather worked here,'" Jean shares.

### A Railroad Hotel

When the hotel was built in the early 1900s, Palestine was the center of a county population of nearly 30,000 and called itself the "Queen City of East Texas." Located on the mainline of the International & Great Northern Railroad (I&GN), Palestine was a hub for salt production, timber, cotton, orchardry and truck crops.

Recognizing the need for a first-class hotel in the area, the Palestine Hotel Company was founded, with 83 local businessmen and women helping to finance the \$100,000 building constructed with steel and concrete beams.

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*The historic Redlands Hotel is a destination all its own with beautiful suites for rent by the night or longer, an on-site fine dining restaurant and bar, elegant ambience throughout the building, and a front row seat to all the happenings in downtown Palestine. PHOTOS BY DAVE SHULTZ.*

*Jean Mollard (right) is the owner of the Redlands Hotel and continues to make enhancements to the delight of her guests. PHOTO BY TRACY TORMA*

