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The Hotel Del Monte--First 100 Years

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Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School

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The Hotel Del Monte – First 100 Years

by JOC' P. Gresham

Few of man's enterprises last a century, especially those that are twice ravaged by fire, but the Hotel Del Monte, site of the Naval Postgraduate School has, although not quite in the grandeur conceived by the hotel's founders.

Described by Robert Louis Stevenson as "Millionaire Vulgarians" the founders of the Del Monte, Charles Crocker, Leland Standford, Mark Hopkins and Collis P. Huntington, envisioned a "watering spot" on the Pacific shoreline that would rival Saratoga, Atlantic City, Newport and Brighton. If the Del Monte never reached the historic social eminence of the eastern resorts, it is because it was started later.

Still the Del Monte served the same purpose, to cater to the upper class, their lackeys, imitators and hangerons. In that function it served splendidly.

PRE-CROCKER NOTORIETY

Since before the Del Monte was built, notoriety, fable and scandal set to tone of conversation about the site that would become the Del Monte.

One early story about the site is related by author/historian Richard Rinehardt in his "Legend of Del Monte." Rinehardt relates that one of California's first millionaires, a Scotsman of "notoriously acquisitive disposition" named David Jacks started the transformation of Monterey into a fashionable resort in the late 1870's. Jacks and business associates built a narrow gauge rail spur from the Southern Pacific's main line near Watsonville to a wharf they operated near the Monterey Customs house.

Jacks prodding of his business associates into construction of the spur was self-serving. He had spent the better part of the previous 30 years obtaining the rights to Spanish land grants and municipal lots in deals that were little more than shady.

One such transaction took place while Jacks was acting as attorney for the City of Monterey in the 1850's. He represented the town council before the U.S. Land Commission for the title to property surrounding Monterey, then accepted the deed to the property from the council in lieu of his legal fees.

Legend has it that the citizenry of Monterey with an eye to venting their dissatisfaction upon his person were still looking for Jacks 10 years later. As far north as San Francisco calls were made to "string up Squire Jacks at the first convenient opportunity."

ENTER THE BIG FOUR

Jacks, in what would have been considered a slick land deal for the times, unloaded his peninsula holdings on Crocker, Huntington, Stanford and Hopkins for $5 an acre. He had paid about 12 cents an acre for the property, consisting of the Ranchos Pescadero, Puenta Pinos and Lagunita, the bulk of which is now known as Del Monte Forest, Pebble Beach and Seventeen Mile Drive.

The Big Four were doing business as the Pacific Improvement Company, a holding company for their stock in

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Hotel Del Monte Interior

the Central Pacific and Southern Pacific Railroads, their mines, lumber interests and town sites.

Crocker in particular was struck with the idea of a plush resort in Monterey and legend, that has the ring of a crack PR man's copy, has it that he and his confederates spent the morning combing the peninsula seeking the construction site of their spiffy spa.

Coming upon an area where the sun pierced the dense fog, Crocker is said to have plunged his walking stick through the ice plants and decreed that the building would take place in the sun-basked area.

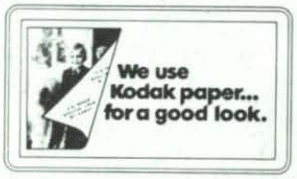
It is interesting to note that the site selected by Crocker in this manner of a Biblical prophet was both adjacent to Monterey Bay – the resort's major calling card – and Pacific Improvement's newly acquired narrow gauge railroad spur.

PROSPERITY OFFERED

Diminished whaling caused by over hunting – 20 years before the birth of the sardine canning industry – had reduced the peninsula's economy to one of agriculture and fishing. The Big Four's resort offered prosperity to the area's proletariat.

Not only would revenue from the construction of the resort bolster the sluggish Mexican fishing/farming economy, but work in the hotel's kitchens, parlors, stables, grounds and shops would prove to be a steady supply of hard cash. After opening the Del Monte, which was constructed in 100 days, Crocker and company would continue development of the Monterey holdings, building a gas and water works, a printing plant and a mattress and upholstering factory.

Still with the promise of the prosperity offered by the hotel there were the disgruntled. Robert Louis Stevenson, for one, wrote: "The Monterey of last year no longer exists. A huge hotel has sprung up in the desert by the railroad. Three set of diners sit down successively to table. Individual toilettes figure along the beach and between the live oaks; and Monterey is advertised in the newspapers and posted in the waiting rooms of railway stations, as a resort of wealth and fashion. Alas for the



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poor little town! It is not strong enough to resist the influence of the flaunting caravansary, the poor, quaint, penniless native gentlemen of Monterey must perish, like a lower race, before the millionaire vulgarians of the Big Bonanza."

Charles Crocker himself headed the guest register of the Hotel Del Monte on opening night, June 3, 1880. At the time, guests arriving by "lightning-express" train from San Francisco via Watsonville, were greeted at the hotel by light from nearly a thousand gas-jets reflected again and again in nearly as many mirrors. Billed by Crocker as the "Most Elegant Seaside Resort in the World," the hotel grounds boasted 126 (some say 127) acres of landscaped gardens, planted with 1200 rare (and not so rare) trees.

The facilities were to be expanded to include a dairy and fish hatchery, as supplements to the athletic facilities which at the time included tennis courts, croquet plots, archery grounds, polo fields and the bathhouse.

FIRST FIRE

The railroad "robber barons" were men who did business in a manner that displeased more than a few. Known plots against the Big Four, who were often attacked through their holdings, can be documented. Other schemes aimed at crippling the "robber barons" are only alleged, with time obscuring the facts.

Regardless, the Hotel Del Monte was destined to be reduced to ashes twice, with the men's club house burned to the ground in another holocaust and at least one known robbery planned by bandit-raiders, a plot foiled by a wild west style shootout.

The first fire to raze the Hotel Del Monte, a predominantely wooden structure, struck in the wee hours of April 1, 1887. By dawn nothing but ashes remained of the "Grande Dame of America."

While a hotel housekeeper believed the fire broke out in the Chinese employees' dining room, she told of warning these workers of their carelessness with matches and claimed she had moved gas-brackets away from the walls, others felt differently.

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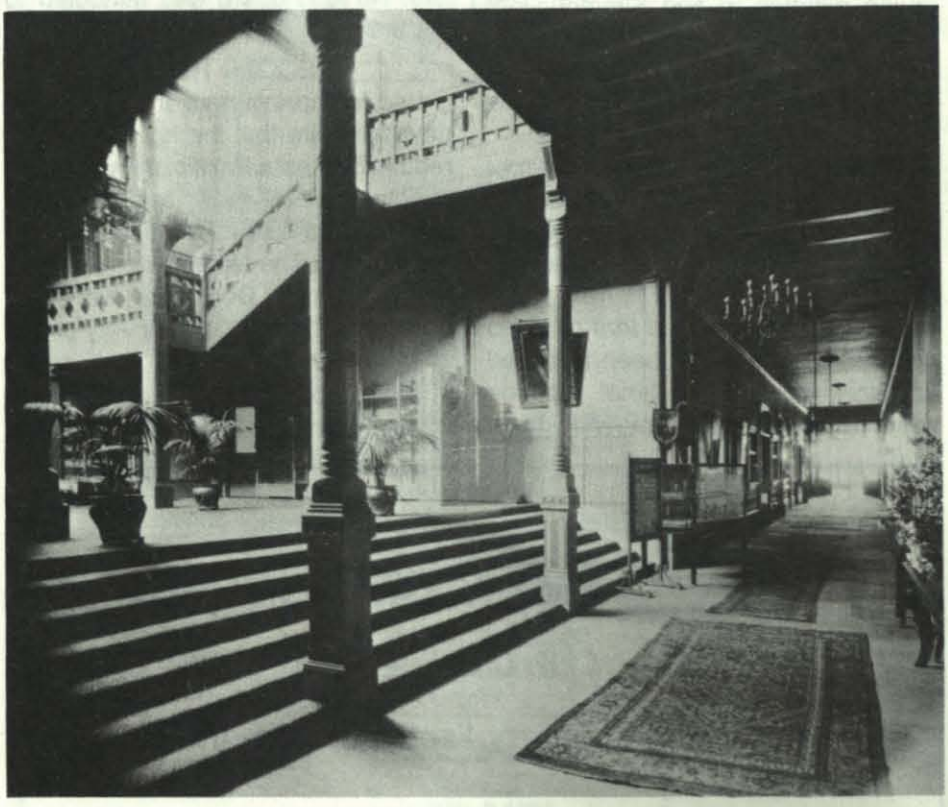
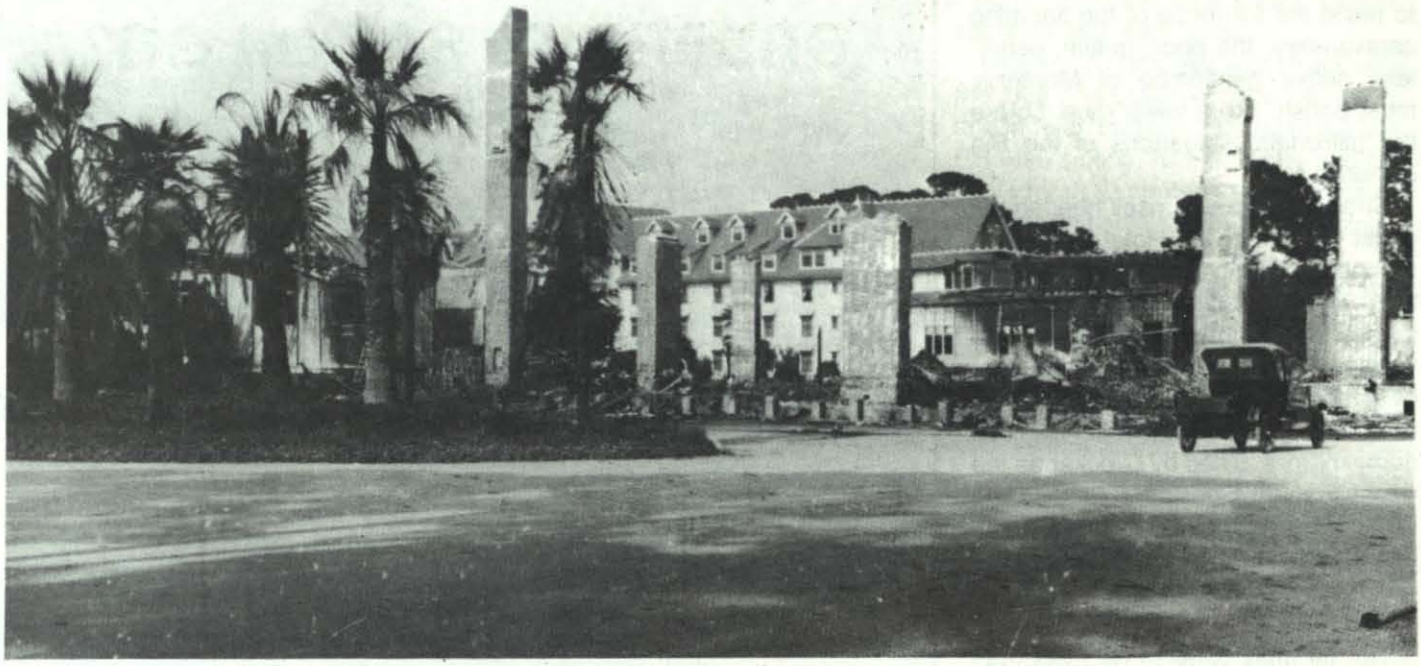




ARSONIST CLAIMED

Disgruntled employee E.T.M. Simmon, the hotel's demoted manager, who expected to be fired by his replacement, George Schonewald, was tried for arson.

Circumstantial evidence against Simmons was vast and varied. So varied in fact that a jury, after listening to four days of testimony, took only seven minutes to find Simmons not guilty. The trial took place in Salinas with most of the witnesses against Simmons employees of either Pacific Improvement or Southern Pacific.

Still arson does seem to be the root of the Del Monte's first fire, since the old hotel's sprinkler and firefighting systems had been rendered useless through sabotage.

Investigation revealed that plugs to central fire mains had been removed and that the eastern hotel grounds were flooded. The removed plugs dropped water pressure so low that firefighters could only throw water a scant 12 feet with a 200 pound system designed to throw a 3-inch stream over a distance of 50 feet.

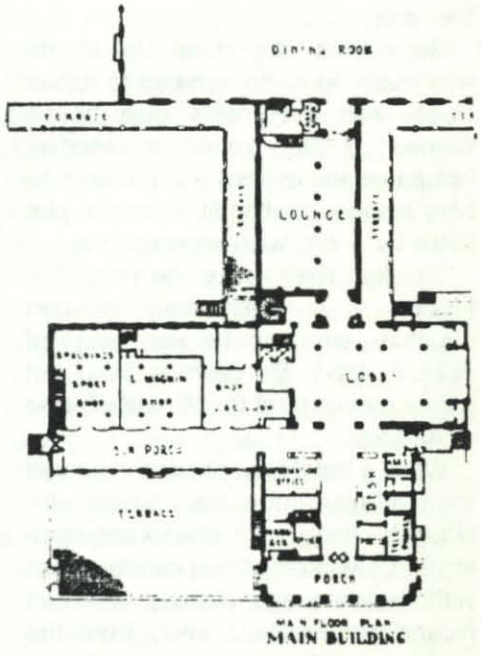
The fire was discovered shortly after 11 p.m., March 31, 1887. By 3 a.m. April 1, 1887 it was all over. Outright losses attributed to the fire ranged up to a million four hundred thousand dollars. No loss of life was attributed to the blaze.

SECOND HOTEL

Pacific Improvement announced the day of the fire that the hotel would be rebuilt. Southern Pacific, still under the direction of P.I., faced a loss of over 26 thousand dollars monthly in uncollected fares. The railroad men who had built the original Del Monte, were well aware that the hotel was a very profitable investment.

The second Hotel Del Monte rose promptly on the site where its predecessor stood. It retained the same basic design, that of a large central building, but added rambling wings. It was more splendid than before and was completed and ready for occupancy by the start of 1888. Again Charles Crocker's name headed the register.

The enemies of Pacific Improvement were not idle. Desperadoes Chris Evans and John Sontag, both nursing grudges against Southern Pacific



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formed a partnership based on the premise that the railroad should pay – and pay plenty – for its past wrongs.

Evans' differences with the Southern Pacific were based on a property dispute between his in-laws and the railroad company, while Sontag hated the company for alleged treatment at the S.P.'s hospital following a back injury he received while employed as a brakeman.

After railroad detectives increased vigilance on Southern Pacific trains moving through the San Joaquin Valley following Evans'/Sontag's successful holdups, Evans (laying low) and his wife and children spent a week in Monterey, where they visited all of the tourist attractions. It was the fall of 1891 and Evans learned of the Hotel Del Monte's affiliation with Southern Pacific.

Finances giving out, Evans returned to his outlaw gang. Following a raid on Train 17 west of Fresno, the two men were forced into hiding. During this hiding period, newly recruited gang member Ed Morrell was sent to case the Del Monte.

For two weeks Morrell played the role of tourist, evading the Del Monte's photographer, and mapping the interior of the hostelry. The positioning of telegraph wires, location of the vault and which rooms were used for wealthy guests received special attention. Evans/Sontag planned to raid the hotel at the height of the next gala social function. It was the summer of 1892. Heavily armed members of the gang were to register as guests and on signal cut every communications wire.

Plunder of the Grande Dame was to be the order of the day.

FATE TURNS A HAND

The shootout at Stone Corral, near what is now Tettem, Ca. ended the plot. A posse waiting in ambush wounded both Evans and Sontag. Sontag died in custody and Evans was left suffering from a shattered arm and loss of an eye. Evans was convicted of murder, but was freed by Morrell. Then in February 1894, a fake message brought the two to the Evans' family residence in Visalia. There both surrendered to law officers, the raid on

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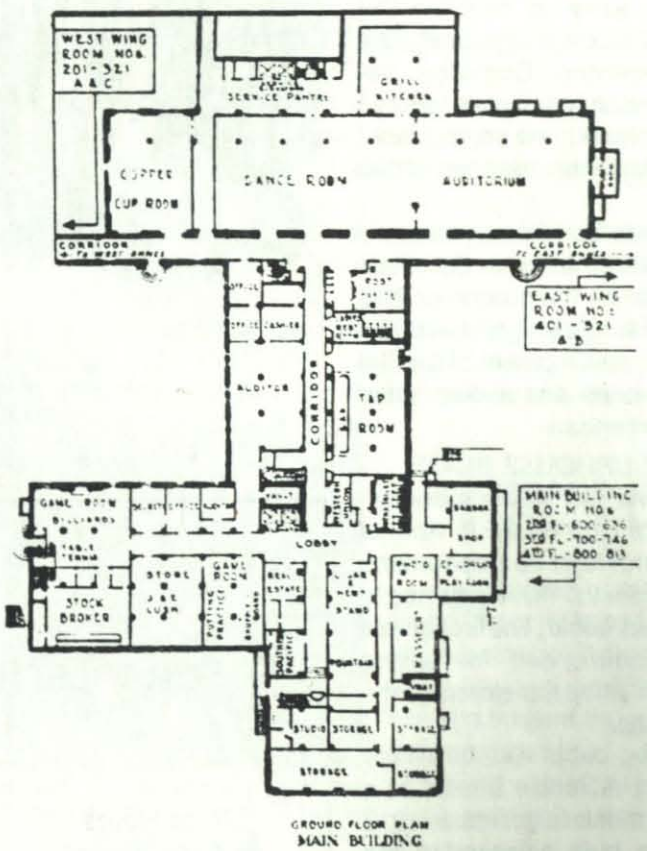

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the Del Monte planned but never completed.

Doing business briskly, Pacific Improvement Company's peninsula resort continued to grow, gaining international repute. Anyone who was anyone flocked to the hotel for their vacation.

Andrew Carnegie, President Benjamin Harrison, and later President Theodore Roosevelt appeared on the guest register.

During this period of time the Del Monte canned food line appeared. The Oakland Preserving Company designed the label in honor of its favored customer, the hotel. The original label appeared sometime between 1890 and 1895.

The Del Monte Golf Course was constructed in 1897, the first in California and believed to be the second or third in the United States. As golf swept the United States, development of the Del Monte as a sports and social center picked up momentum.

MEN'S CLUBHOUSE BLAZE

Fire, ever the Del Monte's enemy, took the men's club house in April of 1900. The Monterey Fire Department, unable to contain the flames, turned to saving what they could. The firefighters were later commended for saving $20,000 worth of spirits stored in the club house cellar.

In 1908 a log cabin was built near the 18th green in Pebble Beach, as a place to serve meals to golfers. In 1912 cottages were built adjacent to the

(Con't. on p. 39)

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(Hotel Del Monte, con't. from pg. 30)
cabin, starting Pacific Improvement's Del Monte Lodge.

NEW ERA

War in Europe introduced a new tempo to the Del Monte and as economic expansion slowed, Pacific Improvement sought new managerial talent. In that search Samuel F.B. Morse, a grand nephew of the inventor of the telegraph, was given the additional responsibilities of manager of the Pacific Improvement Company. At the time he was manager of the Merced-based Crocker-Huffman Land and Water Company. With Pacific Improvements he was tasked to liquidate the company's holdings.

While selling off Pacific Improvement's holdings, Morse envisioned his own version of the Hotel Del Monte. In 1919 he and associates formed the Del Monte Properties company and purchased all of the assets of the Pacific Improvement Company of the Monterey Peninsula. These holdings included the Del Monte, Del Monte Lodge at Pebble Beach, the Monterey County Water Works, 20,000 acres of land and a sand plant.

(Con't. pg. 41)

(Con't. from p. 39)

FIRE AGAIN

On October 24, 1924 fire was again to strike at the resort, destroying the central section of the hostelry. The fire, of undetermined origin, broke out at 3:30 a.m. in the tower above the hotel's entrance. The orchestra, still playing for robust dancers, is credited with spreading the alarm to the 700 guests.

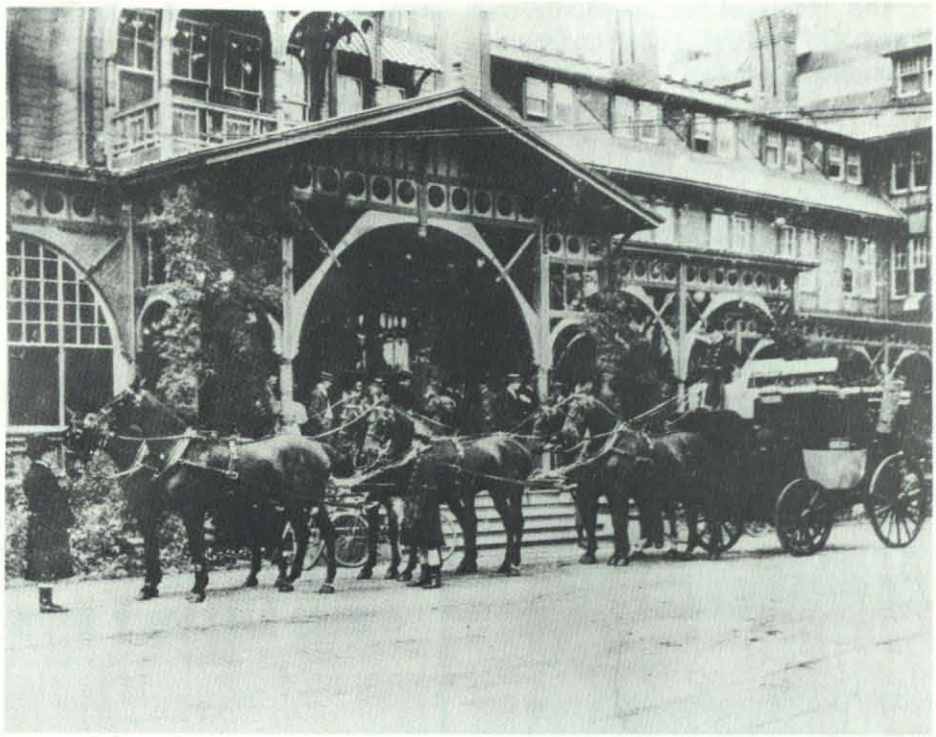
Again firefighters were not able to contain the blaze, but were able to save the kitchen area and hotel wings by dynamiting the corridors leading to them. There were no confirmed reports of serious injury.

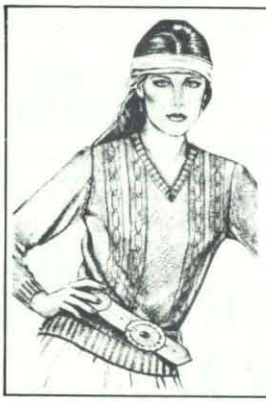
Faulty bricks, sound for 36 years, used in the building's flues were blamed for the holocaust.

FROM THE ASHES GRANDEUR

Morse immediately began rebuilding with an eye for an even grander hotel. Construction costs reached two and a half million dollars when the new building was opened on May 8, 1926. The hey-day of the Hotel Del Monte had started.

Mustached comedians in funny shoes, sex symbols of the silver screen, skinny-dipping in the Roman Plunge (swimming pool), world championship athletic competition, kings, presidents and Mr. and Mrs. America all flocked to the Del Monte.





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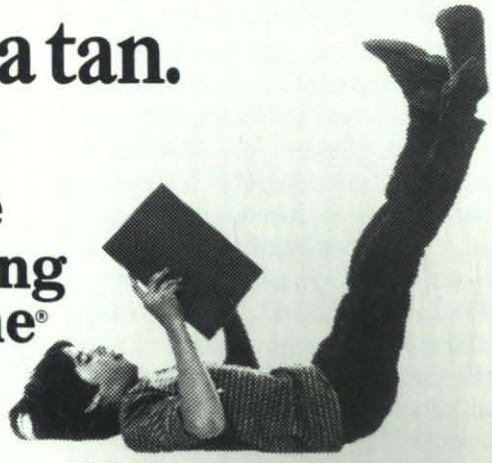

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The interior of the Del Monte was lavish. Original works of art and murals decorated the walls. One is a mural of the Monterey Peninsula by Francis McComas. It is unique in that it reflects the artist's sense of justice.

McComas, a man who enjoyed his spirits, was once jailed by the temperance-minded authorities of Pacific Grove. Outraged by Pacific Grove's handling of the matter, McComas refused to include the community on his mural.

Other artists represented included Ferdinand Burgdorff and Jo Mora.

Surviving each of its previous setbacks, the Del Monte's playground life style was coming to an end, global war loomed in Europe.

ENTER THE NAVY

The Del Monte struggled through the first year of American involvement in World War II, but in late 1932 threw in the towel. Offering the hotel to both the Army and Navy, the Navy took the Del Monte's management up on the deal, opening a pre-flight school on the grounds in February 1943. The Navy lease contained an option to buy. Following the war, Congress authorized the purchase of the hotel and 600 acres of the grounds for just under $3 million.

The Naval Postgraduate School originally started in 1909 as a department of the Naval Academy in Annapolis. There it operated until 1951 when it moved to Monterey and set up operation in the Hotel Del Monte.

PRESSING ONWARD

Operation of the Del Monte as a postgraduate school has not reduced the hotel's position in history, but has enhanced it. Seven of America's spacemen are graduates of the postgraduate school, for example. Daily research, that will eventually affect every American, if not every person on earth, is done on campus by officers of the armed forces, civilian employees of the defense department and officers of the armed forces of U.S. allies.

Curricula offered at the school include weather forecast research, laser application, computer science, energy conservation and alternatives, weapons and research. In its present day surroundings, the spirit of the Del Monte is unchanged as men and women still find its high ceilings and long corridors ever fascinating.

Today, however, an enviable part of the fascination is contained within the postgraduate school's simple but ample motto: Excellence through Education! □

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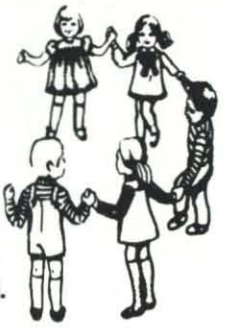

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