

# The Greenbrier Hotel

By Howard Dean

George Francis Gimbel, my uncle, was born on March 26, 1888 in Hoboken, N.J. He attended public schools in West Hoboken (now Union City), where he had moved with his family. He became a printer and operated the Gimbel Press at the rear of their home at 314 Warren St. (now 11th St.). In 1920, at the age of 32, he went to White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., and worked at the world-famous Greenbrier Hotel, where he was in charge of their print shop until he retired in 1952. This hotel is located on the west edge of White Sulphur Springs, Greenbrier County, Virginia.

Our story all started when Nicholas and Kate Carpenter settled on Howard's Creek about 1750. In 1752, Nicholas was killed in an Indian raid. Kate and her child were saved by hiding in the thick forest, now called Kate's Mountain. Their land went through several owners, and in 1809, the Calwells built a small tavern near the spring and this was the beginning of the world famous resort.

The Lester Building, now used as a dormitory for the employees, is one of the oldest structures still standing. The spring enclosure dates back to about 1815. A cottage was built in 1834 that soon became

known as the President's Cottage because many presidents made it their summer "white house." Henry Clay was the first known prominent American to visit the spring in 1817. President Jackson is said to have been the first president to stay at the resort. However, many people came to enjoy the spa in the mid-1800s.

The Greenbrier soon became a five-star resort, and for most of its history, it was owned by the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. It is now (2006) a wholly-owned subsidiary of CSX Corp. For the first 125 years, the resort was known as the White Sulphur Springs. The hotel was built in 1858 and in 1910, the C&O Railway became its owner. It was the C&O that built the Greenbrier Hotel in 1913. Soon tennis courts, golf courses, and other amenities were added. The old White and the Greenbrier hotels operated as separate units until 1922 when the old White was razed. The owners, C&O, spent a few million dollars (in 1931) to improve and expand the number of rooms to a total of 580.

After Pearl Harbor, Cordell Hull (who later became our Secretary of State) suggested that the hotel house interned diplomats and other foreign suspects. On



The Old White Hotel was erected in 1858, including a gigantic dining room on the first floor. It seated 1,200 people, the largest in the country at the time. In 1869, the tracks of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway connected the Greenbrier Valley to eastern Virginia. The resort was then able to offer new kinds of food - pineapples, bananas, lobster, shrimp and soft-shell crabs - that had been out-of-reach during the stage-coach days. The railway also brought many more summertime guests to White Sulphur Springs. The grand hotel and dining room were filled by the bigger summertime crowds, arriving on the new railroad. The Old White Hotel was torn down in 1922, after the new Greenbrier Hotel was built next to it.

December 21, 1941, 159 Germans and Hungarians arrived by a special train. Soon after that came a contingent of Japanese to make the total number of internees about 1,400. These were soon exchanged for American diplomats (July, 1942) and the Greenbrier reopened for civilian use. This only lasted one month, as on September 1,



The Greenbrier Hotel, circa 1872.





Greenbrier Hotel, circa 1915.



Aerial view of the Greenbrier, circa 1940.



Main Street entrance to the Greenbrier.

In 1910, the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway purchased the historic resort property and embarked upon a major expansion. By 1913 the railroad had added The Greenbrier Hotel (the central portion of today's hotel), a new Mineral Bath Department (the building that includes the Indoor Pool) and an 18-hole golf course (now called The Old White Course) designed by the most prominent golf architect of the day, Charles Blair Macdonald. In 1914, for the first time, the resort was open year round and that year President and Mrs. Woodrow Wilson spent their Easter holiday at The Greenbrier and Joseph and Rose Kennedy traveled down from Boston for their October honeymoon.

1942, the U.S. Army took it over and bought it for \$3 million.

Many murals, pictures, engravings, etc., were hastily packed into storage, loaned to museums and/or donated to the Washington and Lee University. Some furnishings were auctioned off. The hotel was quickly converted into a hospital, and by November of 1942, the "Ashford General Hospital" was in business. Ashford specialized in vascular and neurological surgery and reached a peak of 2,720 patients. For four years the resort served as a surgical and rehabilitation center and 24,148 soldiers were admitted and treated at the facility. Also, more than 2,000 prisoners of war were housed in a camp near the Greenbrier airport. Generals Jonathan Wainwright, B. Sommervell, Mark Clark, Dwight D. Eisenhower and retired Secretary of State Cordell Hull were among those who were

treated at the hospital.

Peace came, and the Ashford General Hospital closed on September 5, 1946. The railroad repurchased the property, and in April of 1948, celebrated its reopening. My Uncle George stayed through those hard years and had many stories to tell. I only wish I had taken notes as he talked. As I mentioned, he retired in 1952. Many improvements were made in 1954, 1962, 1974 and 1976.

The job of putting this elegant hotel back in business was an overwhelming task that was given to a woman, Dorothy Draper. Some of the original historic furnishings were still in place, or could be taken from storage, and some which had been sold were able to be bought back. It was a huge undertaking that led to the opening party held on April 15-18, 1948. One socialite remarked there had been "nothing like it

since the Bradley Martin Ball in 1896," and Cleveland Amory (a reporter) called it "the outstanding resort society function in modern history." The Greenbrier was back in service as before, but there is more!

In the late 1950s, the U.S. government approached the Greenbrier for assistance in creating an Emergency Relocation Center to house Congress in the aftermath of a nuclear attack. This highly secret facility was built in conjunction with an above ground addition to the hotel, the West Virginia Wing, between 1959-1962. This is very interesting in itself, but does not belong in this article. Its secret was well-kept for years in spite of the fact that some employees of the hotel were in on the secret bunker until it was officially revealed in 1992 by an article in the *Washington Post*. Public tours of this huge bunker are now available. For more information, see:



George F. Gimbel at Greenbrier Hotel, circa 1924.  
Left, with other employees in the kitchen; above, at his printing press.



During the 1770s, a few years after the British and the French settled their differences in Europe and America (the "French and Indian War"), word began to spread through Virginia that the mineral springs at White Sulphur Springs would cure rheumatism. People flocked to the place from far and wide to drink from the spring waters there. They camped on the spot where the spring house (illustrated above) now stands.

[washingtonpost.com/svr/local/daily/july/25/brier1.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/svr/local/daily/july/25/brier1.htm).

It was in the late 1960s that I became a bottle collector and suddenly found out about the White Sulphur mineral water bottles and began a search for one. In the spring of 1980, just after I retired, I ran an ad in the *OBX Bottle Magazine*, then published in Bend, Ore., and soon received a letter from a collector in Spottswood, Va. Al Hickin, who had the bottle for sale at \$75. It became mine! Some of you may recall Albert T. Hickin, a collector of flask and squat sodas, who became a good friend. Lillian and I spent many happy hours with Al and Jane in their home, and between visits, we carried on a very interesting correspondence, mainly regarding antique bottles. I have often been tempted to write a story on "Letters from Al." Maybe someday, I will. Al died in April of 1988, and Jane followed him a few months later. Glassworks Auctions sold his collection.

My second White Sulphur Springs {arc}/Greenbrier/W.Va. was found in November of 1986 in a bottle show in New Orleans for \$5, and it cleaned up nicely. These are listed in Tucker's book under M-60 and are described as: tall quart 9 7/8 x 3 1/2 inches in teal blue, aqua, amber and green. I think mine are aqua and teal blue. But all are considered rare - no pontil.

Because West Virginia became a state

in 1863 from part of the state of Virginia, these later bottles are embossed: W.Va. The earlier ones are listed in Tucker's book as M-59 and are embossed: White Sulphur {arc}/ Water / Greenbrier, Va. {rev. arc}. These come in green and aqua, a variant in light emerald and light olive (with double collar), while the others have a blob top or flange. There is also one in light green with an iron pontil. All are rare or very rare.

My third bottle, one from Va., came as a result of my ad in a bottle magazine again. So, I guess I'd have to agree that "it doesn't cost to advertise, it pays." I only wish my Uncle George could enjoy these with me.

Lillian and I have visited the Greenbrier on several occasions in recent years where I purchased a book on its history. I also spoke with several employees and asked about the bottles. No one knew about them, but the beautiful domed house is still there, and on its top is the stature of Hygeia, the Goddess of Health.

Howard J. Dean

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White Sulphur Springs, Greenbrier, W.Va. bottle.