

Thursday March 29, 2007

Step back into yesterday

By Mike Moore
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For more than 150 years the Keene Springs Hotel has undergone many changes.

It first served as a spa resort before the Civil War, a boarding house after the war and it later served as a general store until the mid-1960s.

In its early days it was generally thought the mineral water that had been discovered there could cure many ailments.

“Boarders at the Keene Springs may have been attracted by reports of the mineral water that had been analyzed by Professor Peter of Transylvania College and found to contain properties that ‘would indicate it to be incomparably the best medical water on this continent,’” stated an information sheet.

From the mid-1960s until about six years ago, it mostly served as a reminder of the Keene community’s past.

That all changed when Keene’s Debbie Gill got an idea.

“My husband was redoing part of it, and I’ve always been fascinated with the building, and I just got an idea and talked to (owner) Bobby Wilson,” she said.

Her idea was to open up a restaurant.

“When I first started out, I served just lunch, but I found that dinner was more profitable,” she said. “It’s too far out to come out for a lunch hour and the workers around here all thought it was a tea room, so they didn’t come in. The dinner is turning out to be really good.”

Open Thursday through Saturday from 5:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. the restaurant serves down-home fare.

“The menu changes every week,” Gill said. “I’ll have the same thing Thursday, Friday and Saturday night, and the next week the menu is completely different.”

Aside from operating a restaurant, Gill has been doing a lot of remodeling, trying to restore the glory to the historic site.

“We’re trying to keep everything as original as possible,” she said. “Even paint (gesturing to the walls). The walls are buckwheat, that’s what the color is. You look over at the window. There’s only a few (glass) that needed to be replaced. You can still see how wavy the old glass is.”

Gill leases the hotel from Bobby Wilson Jr., whose family has owned the property since 1867.

“My great-grandfather bought it (but) he never operated it as a hotel,” Wilson said. “It had failed as a resort spa after the Civil War. They more or less operated it more like a boarding house.”



Photo submitted
Keene Springs Hotel served as a boarding house in the years after the Civil War.



Photo by Mike Moore
Debbie Gill looked out of one of the windows in the dining room of the hotel.

After nearly three decades of just sitting there, Wilson said he is pleased with Gill's commitment to making use of the property, and has enjoyed many dinners at the hotel.

"I think she does a very good job ... she's got a loyal clientele base," he said. "It's what I call country cooking. One of her big specialties is pinto beans and cornbread."

As a child Wilson spent many days exploring the hotel when it operated as a general store.

"My dad operated a store there, and my grandparents lived in the dwelling part of it. It was a good building to play in," he said. "You had all sorts of interesting things in the store and things in the house."

His favorite memories of his childhood revolve around the hotel.

"In those early days, before television, men in the community would gather to loaf and swap stories, and as a child, you were really fascinated to listen to the men talk and swap stories," he said.

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