



Banana Republic Revisited

75 Years of Madness, Mayhem & Minigolf in

MYRTLE BEACH



Will Moredock

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Frontline Press, Ltd. / Charleston, S.C.

Banana Republic Revisited:
75 Years of Madness, Mayhem & Minigolf in Myrtle Beach

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To Jimmy Chandler

1949 - 2010

May his work continue



What People Said About *Banana Republic*

“Brace yourself, Myrtle Beach.

“Will Moredock ... is about to level a roundhouse right with his publication of *Banana Republic: A Year in the Heart of Myrtle Beach*.”

Bob Bestler, *The Sun News*

“His narrative is well researched and documented...He writes in a gripping style that combines his journalistic and short story-writing talents, leaving no doubt that this is not fiction.... I couldn't put this book down....His research and excellent prose make for a great read...”

Laurie Stewart, *Grand Strand Magazine*

“Moredock is both a skillful writer and a thorough reporter and he supports his grimy portrait of the 'Redneck Riviera' with facts that chill the blood.”

Don McKinney, *Island Packet*

“Moredock manages the lurid story in a conversational style that makes for captivating reading.”

John Grooms, *Creative Loafing*

“Moredock is pissed. *Banana Republic* is his revenge.”

David Axe, *Free Times*

“Moredock is nothing if not entertaining. He is also a thorough researcher and sentimentalist, all of which come together to make his book, *Banana Republic: A Year in the Heart of Myrtle Beach*, a complex and touching memoir.”

M.L. van Valkenburgh, Charleston City Paper

“Moredock explores in detail the many dichotomies of Myrtle Beach, such as how the local ideals of decency and morality, seasoned with fundamentalist Christianity, simmer in a pot of institutionalized and pervasive corruption...*Banana Republic: A Year in the Heart of Myrtle Beach* is the first book to lay bare the secret underbelly of Myrtle Beach...”

Golfing News

“What a clever writer is Will Moredock.

“There you are, pleasantly reading about nude dancers, drugs, tattoo artists, body piercing, poker machine casinos and the high life. Then, you realize that for some 100 pages you've been reading about urban planning and zoning. You have been seduced.”

Terry Calhoun, *The State Port Pilot*

“It remains my firm assessment that Will Moredock came to Myrtle Beach and Horry County with the general intent of trashing the community, trashing Burroughs & Chapin Co. and denigrating many other aspects of life here.”

Pat Dowling,
vice president for communications,
Burroughs & Chapin Co.

That California get-rich-quick disease of my youth spread like wildfire; and it produced a civilization which has destroyed the simplicity and repose of life, its poetry, its soft romantic dreams and visions, and replaced them with the money fever, sordid ideals, vulgar ambitions. . . and the sleep which does not refresh. It has created a thousand useless luxuries and turned them into necessities and satisfied. . . nothing. It has dethroned God and set up a shekel in his place. Oh, the dreams of our youth, how beautiful they are. And how perishable.

– Mark Twain

*Know ye the land where the cypress and myrtle
Are emblems of deeds that are done in their clime?
Where the rage of the vulture, the love of the turtle,
Now melt into sorrow, now madden to crime? . . .*

– George Gordon, Lord Byron

Be careful what you wish for – you just might get it.

– Proverb



Contents

- Introduction – Myrtle Beach Ten Years Later
1. A Winter Night by the Sea • 1
 2. Inventing Myrtle Beach: Dreamers, Builders and Hucksters • 6
 3. Myrtle Beach Grows Up • 13
 4. They Called It Mayberry-at-the-Beach • 22
 5. Boulevard of Dreams, Boulevard of Tears • 28
 6. South Carolina Rolls the Dice • 38
 7. The Great Air Force Base Land Grab • 50
 8. Race and Memory in Horry County • 55
 9. Black Pearl on the Grand Strand • 63
 10. Rites of Spring • 68
 11. Mayberry Gets a New Mayor • 78
 12. Fire at City Hall • 83
 13. At Home in Myrtle Beach • 99
 14. Hog Heaven on the Strand • 103
 15. Thunder in the Streets • 111
 16. Golf: The Game That Built Myrtle Beach • 121
 17. Sacred Sand • 128
 18. Dirty Dancing by the Sea • 134
 19. Down on the Boulevard • 137
 20. Suffer the Little Children • 151

21. Horry County – Where the Frontier Lives •	155
22 Paving Paradise •	166
23 Environment: The Cost of Doing Business •	176
24 Republicans Ascending •	185
25 Who Owns This Town Anyway? •	194
26 B&C Plays Hardball •	206
27 Doug Wendel Wants A Park •	213
28 Larceny in the Blood •	221
29 Welcome to Never-Never Land •	228
30 A Gentler Side of Myrtle Beach •	237
31 Faith of Their Fathers •	247
32 A Long, Hot Summer on the Strand •	257
33 Stuck in Minimum-wage Hell •	263
34 A Flag of Dubious Honor •	276
35 Searching for Intelligent Life in Myrtle Beach •	291
36 A Bad Season for Democracy •	301
37 Memory and Metamorphosis •	315
38 Living in Hurricane Alley •	321
39 Myrtle Beach Dodges a Bullet •	327
40 A Miserable End to a Miserable Year •	341
Epilogue •	359
Acknowledgments •	366
Bibliography •	370
Index •	372



Introduction – Myrtle Beach, Ten Years Later

There is magic in Myrtle Beach. Millions of people feel it. They come to this golden stretch of Carolina sand each year to get a piece of it. With their dollars and their sheer numbers they have transformed this once remote southern backwater into one of the top tourist destinations in America.

The word I most associate with Myrtle Beach is youth. It is the place where people of a certain age come to feel young again, to relive a moment that slipped away long before. It is the place where spring-breakers, bikers, honeymooners, and young runaways come to create their own moments and memories, which they will carry for the rest of their lives. Youth is the essence of Myrtle Beach. It is the city that never grows old. It cannot age because it is constantly being reborn. Bulldozers are always at the ready, standing by to sweep away some house, hotel or store that has outlived its usefulness, that has become dowdy or unfashionable. In its place will rise something gleaming and modern, something with little context or tradition, something immediate and momentary, like all of Myrtle Beach.

Myrtle Beach is always changing, always churning. This is what makes it such a magnet to über-capitalists, to the young and the transient, and so appalling to so many others. And yet, for all the physical change, little seems to change in terms of attitudes and values. Myrtle Beach has been described as South Carolina on steroids. Horry is one of the most Republican counties in the United States. There is deep suspicion here of environmental regulation, cultural diversity, of democracy itself.

For all of Myrtle Beach's modern architecture and modern problems, it seems curiously trapped in the past, in its own adolescence. And like any adolescent, it is constantly fretting about its image, trying to create its identity.

On the one hand, it wants to be an international tourist destination; on the other, it fights to remain a small town with Southern

Baptist ways and traditions. Only two decades ago did the town get around to legalizing Sunday alcohol sales. And in the last year a local big-box store yanked all copies of atheist author Christopher Hitchens's international bestseller, *God Is Not Great*, off the shelves within an hour of a customer's complaining and threatening to organize a boycott.

In the spring of 2013, hackles went up along the Grand Strand as TLC Network premiered a reality show called "Welcome to Myrtle Manor," which followed the conflicts, crises and bad behavior of an extended family of local fools, who operated a trailer park, hair salon and hot dog business, amid bickering, brawling, drinking and courting. The show was roundly condemned by TV critics for being tasteless and stupid and by local residents for being phony and misrepresenting Myrtle Beach. All charges were true.

Myrtle Beach remains an enigma to itself as much as to the world. The eternal adolescent is strangely jaded and cynical. It frets and fusses and snarls at its critics, but the sun is always over its shoulder, the waves break and sparkle on its beaches and being there lets me feel young and adventurous and innocent again. That's what keeps me and millions like me coming back.



Frontline Press released *Banana Republic: A Year in the Heart of Myrtle Beach* in October 2003. *Banana Republic* was my report on one year in this fabled city – 1999. Ten years later, with Myrtle Beach celebrating its seventy-fifth birthday, I thought it was time to bring out my book again with an updated introduction, examining some of the issues of the last decade.

In about four hundred pages, *Banana Republic* presented an unprecedented historical, political and social profile of the town, along with the corporate shenanigans which kept its politics fractious and its growth frenetic and uncontrolled. To write this book, I moved to downtown Myrtle Beach in 1999 and spent three years researching. The book sold well and got generally good reviews everywhere but in the offices of the Burroughs & Chapin Co., which created the town and still dominated its politics and growth in 1999. In an op-ed column in the Myrtle Beach *Sun News*, then-B&C spokesman Pat Dowling wrote, in January 2004, "It is my assessment that Will Moredock came to Myrtle Beach and Horry County with the general intent of trashing the

community, trashing Burroughs & Chapin Co. and denigrating many other aspects of life here.”

As with so many of his assessments, Pat Dowling was wrong. I did not come to Myrtle Beach in 1999 with the intent of trashing anything, but that did not stop me from using his gratuitous comment in marketing my book.

Sun News columnist Bob Bestler devoted a couple of nice columns to *Banana Republic* and there were several other favorable mentions there. But local broadcast media seemed to take the position that it was their responsibility to protect the public from bad news. I had no luck getting air time on local radio talk shows. One television station scheduled me for an interview, then called at the last minute, saying they had a conflict and would have to reschedule. Of course, they never called back and never returned my calls. Another station kept putting me off, but requested a copy of my book every time I called. I sent them three or four copies over several weeks before they informed me that the book had been out too long to be newsworthy.

In the years following publication of *Banana Republic*, the nation has seen a dramatic economic downturn; Myrtle Beach and the Burroughs & Chapin Co. are no exceptions. B&C has fallen on hard times, in part because of the recession, in part because CEO Doug Wendel backed some bad development projects. The company has greatly reduced staff and has moved its corporate headquarters out of the prestigious Founders Centre on Oak Street and into a former real estate sales office in the Grande Dunes development. Along the way, Wendel and his sidekick Pat Dowling were both replaced. B&C stuck with its new CEO less than two years before bringing in James W. Apple, in 2010. Observers are trying to divine B&C's new corporate strategy. Early in 2013, the company sold ten thousand acres of inland real estate, land it had held for decades and, it was assumed, would ultimately develop. A few weeks later it plunked down \$43 million to purchase Barefoot Landing, the huge North Myrtle Beach shopping and entertainment center, which competes directly with its own Broadway at the Beach complex.

Myrtle Beach was hit hard by the Great Recession. When American families lose their paychecks, one thing they discover they can live without is a long-distance vacation, or even a long weekend at the beach. Those who did come to Myrtle Beach scaled down their visits, spending more time in their hotel rooms, eating take-out pizza and ramen noodles, watching DVDs and playing video games.

Golf is huge in Myrtle Beach and it was suffering even before the

economic downturn. South Carolina has approximately three hundred and sixty golf courses. A third of those courses are along the Grand Strand; fifty-one percent of traveling golfers in S.C. tee up in the Myrtle Beach area.

In 2004, Grand Strand golf courses saw more than four million paid rounds. They have not reached that number since. Green fees are down and twenty courses closed between 2005 and 2007. Paid rounds have increased somewhat from the depth of the recession, but they have been flat for the years 2010 through 2012, according to Myrtle Beach Golf Holiday, the local marketing conglomerate.

One thing that perennially holds back Myrtle Beach tourism is the lack of direct and dependable air service from points north. Myrtle Beach-based Direct Air became the latest local carrier to leave the market when it abruptly stopped flying and filed for bankruptcy in March 2012. This was particularly hard on the local golf industry, which depends on air service to bring many of its players to the area. As I wrote in *Banana Republic*, “. . . sixty-four percent of Grand Strand golfers were from out of state. . . a fact not lost on anyone who has stood in baggage claim at Myrtle Beach International Airport and watched the golf bags glide down the conveyor.”

But Myrtle Beach is nothing if not resilient. It has weathered hurricanes, bad press and economic downturns for decades and always comes back stronger, if not necessarily wiser. Tourist numbers were down 7.5 percent between 2007 and 2009, with tourists spending less per capita than they had before the recession. By the spring of 2013, the recovery was complete, according to the State Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism; Myrtle Beach was once again setting tourism records.

Likewise, the recession took its toll on the Grand Strand's phenomenal growth. Nearly 12,000 residential building permits were issued in Horry County in 2005. That number collapsed with the recession and by 2011 (the last year for which numbers are available) they were still languishing at 1,491. By spring 2013, single-family home sales had rebounded. *The Sun News* reported that closings for single-family homes along the strand in May stood at 473, just twenty-seven fewer than in May 2006, and 126 fewer than closed in September 2005, the highest monthly closings ever. But even in the face of this good news, Myrtle Beach had the nation's eighth-highest foreclosure rate among metropolitan areas, according to RealtyTrac.

When I moved to Myrtle Beach in 1999, the skyline along the beautiful Strand was pierced by numerous construction cranes erecting new and ever-higher towers to accommodate the rising tide of tourists. Construction

cranes along the beach were as much a part of the local scenery as the single-engine airplanes which flew up and down the coast with banners advertising seafood buffets and two-for-one T-shirt deals. But with the recession the cranes had vanished from the Strand.

By March 2013, construction was on the rebound. *The Sun News* reported that the Grand Strand would soon get its first new beachfront hotel in four years, a fourteen-story tower on South Ocean Boulevard. There were also plans for a new marina on the north end of the Strand and the first new fishing pier in decades. Myrtle Beach was back!



Standing in the 900 block of Ocean Boulevard on a chilly morning in March 2013, the evidence of change was all around. Most stunning was the disappearance of the famed Pavilion Amusement Park, an institution and a legend since 1948. The Burroughs & Chapin Co. had built and nurtured the park for over half a century, alternately threatening to close it down for more lucrative development and to keep it open as an act of philanthropy.

In 1998, Doug Wendel told *The New York Times*, “If we were not the magnanimous, loving, caring company that we are, we would abandon [the Pavilion].” In 2013, the eleven acres of empty Ocean Boulevard property stood as a weedy reminder of B&C’s magnanimous, loving, caring nature. To see that huge, empty, dark lot on a summer evening, when all around it is lights and noise and life, is like gazing into a hole in the fabric of the universe. A large zipline, with six parallel six-hundred-foot lines, now occupies the eastern end of the lot, adjacent to the Kings Highway, but it is no substitute for the great summer carnival which occupied the spot for more than fifty years.

The Pavilion Amusement Park was dismantled after the 2006 season with plans on the drawing board for a huge, upscale condo and retail complex that would transform Ocean Boulevard. Then the housing bubble burst, taking much of the economy with it. Weeds were growing along much of Ocean Boulevard in early 2013, evidence of others who had miscalculated. They got the land cleared, only to see their capital vanish. There were now weeds and parking lots where Mother Fletcher’s club, where Bon Villa, Pier View and other seedy oceanfront motels had stood a few years before. Bali Bay, a five-story oceanfront condominium complex, was ninety percent complete in 2009, when capital dried up and the developer shut it down. In 2013, it

Within days, angry citizens descended on a city council meeting to demand action against the bike rallies. Their organization was called Take Back May and their leader was Tom Rice. Myrtle Beach City Council voted to raise property taxes to pay for anti-rally efforts. Over the next year, the council passed a number of ordinances aimed at making the Myrtle Beach experience as unpleasant as possible for motorcyclists. These included laws against loitering in downtown parking lots, new restrictions on muffler noise, restrictions on vendors in the city limits and – most onerous and most controversial – an ordinance requiring all motorcycle riders to wear helmets.

The City was dragged into court over the new rules and most of them – including the helmet law – were eventually struck down. Along the way, the City spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in litigation in addition to the hundreds of thousands it had spent fighting the NAACP suits a few years before.

While Myrtle Beach lost the legal battles, the Harley riders got the message that they were no longer wanted and they have largely stayed away in recent years. As the 2013 Harley event approached, a number of local merchants made special effort to lure as many bikers as possible into the city and into their businesses. Numbers for the Harley rally have been slowly returning in the last four years, but they are far from what they were in 2008. One effect is that recent Harley rallies have been quieter, tamer, and less troublesome for police and residents. No bikers were killed in the 2013 Harley-Davidson Rally for the first time anyone can remember.

The Atlantic Beach Memorial Day Festival is another matter. Numbers remain high; behavior remains rowdy and deadly. Six bikers were killed in Horry County over the Memorial Day Weekend, half of the traffic fatalities for the entire state. Five of those fatalities were inside the Myrtle Beach city limits.

According to *The Sun New*, Myrtle Beach police arrested a twenty-seven-year-old Georgia woman for shaking “her bare bottom” while riding on the back of a motorcycle. The driver of the motorcycle, also from Georgia, was charged with “racing the motorcycle’s engine unnecessarily for the woman to shake her butt,” the newspaper reported. What *The Sun News* scribe witnessed was an amusement called “bouncing,” which I described on page 116 of *Banana Republic*: “A woman riding behind the driver must lean forward and put her arms around the man’s waist, thrusting her butt up in a provocative manner. . . . Drivers would race their engines while holding the brake, causing their bikes to shimmy from end to end. Their women’s upturned butts would bounce like jelly, as men closed in with their cameras.”

The campaign to drive the bikers away – at least the Harley-Davidson riders – proved divisive. While the average Myrtle Beach resident wanted to be able to sleep and use his roads and streets in safety, a loud and angry minority of people in the hospitality business decried the lost revenue. They called themselves BOOST – Business Owners Organized to Save Tourism – and their leader and spokesman was former mayor Mark McBride, who made himself the subject of much of *Banana Republic*.

I described McBride as a demagogue of preternatural instincts, a shrewd, manipulative office seeker, a disastrous office holder. Since then I have come to see him in a larger context. McBride is an American archetype, a man of limited skills or education (a degree in hotel and restaurant management from the University of South Carolina), but infinite ambition, who seeks to make his way in the world through politics. In McBride's case, he had endured several failed restaurant ventures and a brief fling at real estate before he was elected mayor in 1997, at age thirty-three. He was an instinctive populist and opportunist, always making himself the spokesman for the angry and resentful. He built his early career intoning piously against Gay Pride events in Myrtle Beach, against the Atlantic Beach Memorial Day Bike Festival, against the influence of the Burroughs & Chapin Co. It was not surprising to see that he had hooked up with BOOST by 2010.

As a candidate, McBride was tall, handsome, and articulate. His manner of speech was measured and moderate. He seemed like a breath of fresh air in a city hall full of good old boys. But as mayor, he proved to be uncompromising, sanctimonious, and devious.

And he scored points with his right-wing Christian base by defending “traditional values.” Here is what he told *The Sun News* about gays and lesbians: “We are going to set our community standards. We don't want this garbage on the Boulevard. . . I don't believe that kind of activity should take place in a family entertainment area. What you do privately is your own business, but I don't want to end up seeing transvestites and drag queens and people being led around on leashes in dog collars. . . I don't want to be a gay basher. But I'm not carrying their flag.”

McBride proposed an illegal and unenforceable ordinance to keep the Atlantic Beach Memorial Day Bike Festival out of town. He called for using the National Guard to control black bikers. It won him scorn and scolding from city council members and editors of *The Sun News*, but his base loved it.

At the same time McBride was preaching morality to the city and

trying to enforce it with the National Guard, he was using the city credit card for family vacations and keeping city travel money for personal use. When *The Sun News* brought this fact to light, he was forced to pay arrears – interest-free. And there were other financial irregularities as well as abuse of his city cell phone privileges.

His relationships with council members and city staff were so contentious and abusive that council had to pass rules to control the mayor's behavior. But even this did not prevent Mark McBride and Councilman Wayne Gray from famously coming to blows in 1999.

McBride won reelection in 2001, running against Wayne Gray. The victory seemed to confirm in his mind that he was a man of destiny. The next year, when centenarian Strom Thurmond retired from the U.S. Senate, McBride joined a host of Republican candidates vying to replace him. He was vastly overspent, overwhelmed and over his head, taking only two percent of the vote in the GOP primary. Lindsay Graham went on to take the nomination and the Senate seat.

Two years later McBride was in the GOP primary to succeed Senator Fritz Hollings and he did no better than before, gaining two percent of the vote. Jim DeMint won the nomination and went to the Senate.

By 2005, Myrtle Beach voters had had enough of the mayor's bad behavior and overweening ambition. They put him out in favor of businessman and sports promoter John Rhodes.

But McBride had not tasted enough defeat. In 2008, he did not have the \$10,158 filing fee for another U.S. Senate race, so he tried to get 10,000 signatures, which would put him on the ballot to challenge Graham in the Republican primary. He made it an ugly campaign against Hispanics and immigration reform, but he failed to gain the necessary signatures and Graham won easy reelection.

During that campaign *The Sun News* editorialized: "The important question about McBride. . . is whether he could actually be a senator. The gentleman, shall we say, is mercurial. During his terms as mayor, he often evinced a short attention span and was on the losing end of a goodly number of 6-1 City Council votes."

McBride lost a comeback attempt against John Rhodes in 2009. Along with his political defeats he had two more restaurant failures and his wife left him. He has struggled to keep his hand in politics, but his career seems to be over. The last I heard, he was waiting tables at a high-end restaurant in North Myrtle Beach.

My last encounter with McBride was on election night 2005, in the Myrtle Beach council chamber, where the votes were being counted and

McBride watched his political career come crashing down. Our relationship was never warm and after *Banana Republic* was published in 2003, his dislike of me could only have deepened. I did not approach him in the crowd that evening; I had no idea what to say. But in that moment – surely one of the most painful of his life – he walked over, shook my hand and wished me well. It was a moment of grace and humanity in the worst of circumstances. That’s the way I wish to remember Mark McBride.

I will also mention “Kevin,” the bright and spirited waif I met on the Boulevard in the summer of ’99. Kevin’s mother was an alcoholic who spent her evenings in local dives while her twelve-year-old son spent his days and nights hanging out on the Boulevard, getting in trouble with the law and eventually getting kicked out of school. The Department of Social Services took him into custody, placing him first in a supervised home for boys in Conway, then in another home near Columbia. His mother abandoned him without notice and moved to Florida. I tried to keep in touch with Kevin by phone for some weeks after he was taken away, until a DSS caseworker ordered me to have no further contact with him.

In preparing this book, I was able to find Kevin online. He is living in the upper Midwest, where he has had a couple of minor run-ins with the law – not surprising for someone of his background. We communicated briefly through Facebook in August 2013. In his initial Facebook message to me he wrote: “My life has turned from a crap chute of young and dumb, into a most successful and happy present. I have a girlfriend of 7 1/2 years, that I love and cherish dearly. We have a beautiful little girl together... along with her daughter from a previous relationship...”

There was more in a phone conversation that followed. Kevin appears to be healing himself with love and a small, quiet town far from the madness of Myrtle Beach. He is a testimony to the power of the human spirit to rebuild a broken life.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about environmental lawyer Jimmy Chandler. I interviewed Chandler a couple of times when I was researching *Banana Republic* in 1999 and 2000. He was warm and low-key, deeply knowledgeable about the law and passionate about the environment.

For nearly three decades he waged a David-vs.-Goliath battle against huge corporations and developers, winning more than his share of the battles. In 1991, he forced a large paper mill to reduce the level of dioxin it discharged into the Sampit River, outside Georgetown. In 2000, he

used the law to shut down a massive hazardous waste landfill on the shores of Lake Marion. He transformed coastal dredging regulations and won many other victories through his tiny nonprofit, the S.C. Environmental Law Project.

Jimmy Chandler died of cancer in 2010. He was sixty years old and left a sterling legacy of service and friendship.

The State newspaper of Columbia wrote this: “Since the early 1980s, the unflappable Chandler had been the face of environmental law in South Carolina’s Lowcountry and a leading advocate of protecting the marshes, beaches, rivers and lakes that define the Palmetto State.”

Chandler could have made vastly more money playing the other side, lobbying and litigating on behalf of polluters and despoilers, but he chose to stand on the side of reason, community and the Earth. He represented the best in all of us. That is why I dedicate this book to him.



Boulevard of Dreams, Boulevard of Tears

On a warm January day in the second week of 1999, I stood on Ocean Boulevard at 9th Avenue North, gazing across the street at the Pavilion Amusement Park. With the first breath of spring, it would roar to life once more. Hundreds of thousands of lights would flash and blink; music would pour from the old German band organ; engines would whirl and spin and toss squealing, gleeful revelers through the muggy summer nights, creating memories to last a lifetime. But now it hibernated in the gentle Carolina winter, waiting. . . waiting. . .

I closed my eyes and tried to picture this place as it must have looked a century ago, without the funk and litter and hip-hop music pounding from cars and pickup trucks, tried to picture women in bustle skirts and men in straw boaters strolling over the dunes. This is where it all began, with the Seaside Inn standing where the Log Flume now runs, with a string and brass band thumping out dance tunes under a small pavilion. Everything that is Myrtle Beach – the millions of tourists who come here each year, the billions of dollars in commerce and development, the fun and the filth, the greed and the glory – all started on this spot.

For me, this place is as historic as any battlefield. This is sacred ground. What happened here changed and brightened millions of lives. Yet there was no marker, no monument to remember that past. Indeed, there was no historic marker anywhere in the City of Myrtle Beach. Nothing has a chance to become historic; the bulldozers move too fast. Myrtle Beach exists only in the moment. What is here today will be swept away tomorrow, like the litter each night on Ocean Boulevard. A moment of pleasure and then – irrelevance. A historic marker on this corner would look as out of place as a Ferris wheel in front of Independence Hall.

Whatever else it is, Myrtle Beach is intense and immediate. It leaves emotions and impressions, rather than a visual narrative. There

was certainly nothing memorable in the mundane commercial architecture, the look-alike hotels and bars. I can barely picture Sloppy Joe's, the legendary restaurant and bingo parlor that once stood on this corner. It was open around the clock, through all seasons, and they made a hell of a cheeseburger. What I remember are the smells of chili and grease and the warm feeling of sitting with friends over a beer. There was a sign behind the counter: "We Doze, But We Never Close." Well, Sloppy Joe's was closed now and Ripley's Believe it or Not! Museum stood on the site.

In 1987, Ripley's set out to remodel its façade. The plan called for cracked and shattered walls, creating the effect of an air raid or an earthquake. The design was meant to be a visual grabber for an audience to view the collection of shrunken heads, six-legged cows and other oddities from around the world. The Community Appearance Board reviewed the plan and pronounced it good. "I thought the whole thing was done quite tastefully, and was rather interesting and appropriate for the area," a board member told *The Sun News*. "One side has a crack down it, a window has been split and it looks like a lot of jagged bricks on top."

Indeed, it did. Ripley's was perhaps the most distinctive piece of architecture in Myrtle Beach in 1999. That the project was deemed "appropriate for the area" said a good deal about the area.

The blocks immediately around the Pavilion were a clutter of low-rise commercial structures, housing seedy motels, bars, arcades, beachwear and T-shirt shops, all punctuated by flashing lights and garish signs. Season close-out signs were still hanging in the beachwear windows in January: "SAVINGS UP TO 85%!!!"; "T-SHIRTS – BUY 1, GET 1 FREE"; "SELLING OUT FOR '98—EVERYTHING MUST GO!" Mannequins stood nude in the windows, awaiting spring fashions. In some Boulevard flophouses, such as the Tides and the Castaways, the front entrance doubled as a convenience store, where the desk clerk could rent rooms and sell guests a six-pack to drink on the verandah.

To those who knew a tourist resort as an antiseptic, corporate-crafted experience, Myrtle Beach could be a shock. There were no green spaces on the Boulevard in 1999, no benches, no sidewalk cafés, no Mousecaterers with brooms and dustpans, sweeping up every cigarette butt. Even in January, the Boulevard was filthy. There were curbside garbage cans every twenty paces, but why use them? This was Myrtle Beach, after all. People came here to escape their jobs, parents, spouses, responsibilities. In Myrtle Beach, garbage cans are a symbol of repression.

Many tourists are surprised to discover they are in a real town. Disney's corporate fun factory has so insinuated itself into our public psyche that visitors find it hard to understand that Myrtle Beach is a workaday town, replete with children, schools and churches. Residents like to sleep at night. They want to have access to their roads and public places. They don't like going out in the morning to find beer cans on their lawns and drunks sleeping in their carports. To maintain order, Myrtle Beach maintains one of the largest police forces for a town of its size in the nation – 167 positions in 1999, to serve 25,000 residents – and the cops have a reputation for toughness. The thousands who spend a night in the Myrtle Beach jail each year can attest to that.

Another error that has ruined many a vacation is to think this is New Orleans. It may feel like a wide-open town, but make no mistake – this is Baptist country. State law forbids the consumption of alcohol on public property. The Myrtle Beach jail serves breakfast to countless tourists who mistake Ocean Boulevard for Bourbon Street. *Laissez les bon temps roulez!* does not play here.

Nevertheless, lawlessness is a part of Myrtle Beach culture. It starts on the Boulevard, where a spot check of thirty beachwear and souvenir shops revealed that eleven had no current business licenses; and it extends to the outermost corners of the county, where developers run roughshod over zoning and environmental regulations.

On the Boulevard that January day, drugs were bought and sold and used almost as casually as cigarettes. Marijuana smoke wafted from alleys and shop doors, along with the pulsing, pounding sound of techno-pop and hip-hop music. Nitrous oxide cylinders lay in the gutter, along with cigarette butts, food wrappers and pizza crusts. Boys with spiked, multicolored hair wore baby pacifiers on chains around their necks to protect their teeth from the grinding induced by an Ecstasy high. Drug paraphernalia had been outlawed in Boulevard shops for years, but it still made news when authorities conducted a sting and busted a shop owner. Police found a pharmacopia of drugs on kids when they made routine arrests for other violations. The Myrtle Beach Police Department reported 424 juvenile arrests in 1999.

In a town that has been called the T-shirt Capital of the World, City Hall fought a twenty-year war against “obscene” T's, including the ones that featuring Dr. Condom, the happy prophylactic; the ones scream “Eat Me!”; the ones that conceal male and female genitalia in obscure line drawings.

In July 1988, Myrtle Beach police arrested twenty-eight Boulevard T-shirt vendors. Mayor Bob Grissom said he couldn't "see what type sick person it would take to wear those T-shirts." Before it was over, the American Civil Liberties Union was called in, a review committee was established to determine what T-shirts violated community standards, and the city was written up in *The Washington Post* and *The Atlanta Constitution*. "The controversy may be one sign of the social pains in this increasingly urban area . . . as it tries to decide what kind of city it wants to be when it finishes growing up," the *Post* reported.

The paper quoted Jacob Garon, one of the merchants who was arrested: "The people who have lived down here for years are fighting it," he said. "Maybe it looks obscene to them, but it doesn't look obscene to the tourists."

In 1996, city council specifically defined and outlawed what it found to be obscene in the corporate limits of Myrtle Beach. The ordinance was almost as titillating as anything a T-shirt vendor could print. It prohibited selling or wearing "any depiction or description . . . of any sexual intercourse; masturbation; sadomasochistic abuse; sexual penetration with an inanimate object; sodomy; bestiality; uncovered genitals, buttocks or female breast; defecation or urination; covered genitals in an obvious state of sexual stimulation or arousal; or the fondling or other erotic touching of genitals, the pubic region, buttocks or female breasts."

With that perfectly clear, Boulevard T-shirt vendors were reduced to peddling tamer material. Today, the T-shirt trade celebrates Myrtle Beach and Southern culture, as well as such hedonistic and working class ideals as Fords, Chevrolets, spring break, biker rallies, drugs ("Why Go To High School When You Can Go To School High?"), alcohol ("One Tequila, Two Tequila, Three Tequila, Floor!"), misogyny ("Treat Me Like the Bitch That I Am"), alcohol *and* misogyny ("15 Reasons Why A Beer Is Better Than A Woman"). But no breasts, buttocks or pubic regions.

T-shirt vendors posed another problem for the city's image: many were accomplished con artists. Their scam involved finding some poor sucker who could be pressured into buying a customized T-shirt with various decals ironed onto it. There would be little discussion of price – especially the cost of the wax paper used to separate the iron from the decal or the "fluffing charge" imposed when the merchant shook the T-shirt after applying each decal. When the job was done, the shopkeeper presented the stunned vacationer with his new shirt and an itemized bill for as much as \$100. If the customer balked, the merchant

reached for the phone and threatened to call the police. It was a well-rehearsed, widely practiced scam, as attested by the numerous complaints to tourism and city officials. In 1995, city council required that T-shirt vendors present a written cost estimate to the buyer before any custom work was done. The ordinance specifically outlawed the threat of arrest to force a customer to make a purchase.



Another image problem for this very image-conscious town was body piercing. Piercing brought out the seamy side in both the piercers and the pierced. To promote their services, Boulevard piercers plastered Polaroid snapshots of their happy customers across the windows of their shops. Passers-by could see fat, hairy guys pointing proudly to the rings in their nipples; or teenage girls with tongues flopped out to show off their new stainless steel studs; or thrusting their pelvises to display rings in their navels.

Young shills stood outside the piercing pagodas, hawking and spitting, puffing on cigarettes and daring tourists to come in and “feel the steel.” The shills had felt the steel many times. Their ears, lips, tongues and noses were perforated with rings and studs. One young Boulevard denizen had at least seventeen pieces of metal sticking out of his head. Another had a horizontal bar sticking through the flesh between his eyes, giving him a Cyclops effect. As I walked past him, he beckoned me toward the door of a piercing parlor. “Hey, dude, wanna get pierced? I can get you a deal.” He shifted his weight from foot to foot, puffing on his Camel Light. There were multiple rings through his ears and one through his lip.

“Maybe next time.” Then I asked, “Why do you get pieced?”

He grinned broadly, showing a mouth of yellow, rotting teeth. “Fashion!” he said.

The fashion had seized the younger generation. Some piercers did as many as a dozen jobs an hour, sending hundreds of kids back home to mom and dad, after a weekend in Myrtle Beach, with jewelry dangling from body parts where none had been when they left home. City Attorney Joe Wettlin grew tired of taking calls from outraged parents, threatening to sue the city. In 1996, city council required anyone being pierced to be eighteen years of age or have the consent of a parent or guardian. Like other Boulevard ordinances, this one was tough to enforce. Piercing continued to



Suffer the Little Children

On January 20, 1999, Gene Chapman and his wife Jennifer Curtis were outside their 2nd Avenue North home, playing football with some local children, when they were approached by two rough-looking men and a woman. They told Chapman and Curtis they had arrived in Myrtle Beach from Oregon a few weeks earlier “to start a new life,” but things had not gone well. They had no jobs. They were living off canned beans from the welcome center and sleeping in their 1983 Datsun with a puppy . . . and the woman’s nine-year-old son. The boy was asleep in the car.

The twenty-eight-year-old mother and her twenty-six-year-old boyfriend told Chapman and Curtis that they were leaving the child with them and would pick him up the next day. The boyfriend awakened the boy and ordered him to pick up a stick by the roadside. “Get yourself your punishment stick,” he ordered, and proceeded to beat the child. According to later police reports, the boyfriend said it would be best for the child to stay with Chapman and Curtis, or he “would kill him and bury him three feet underground.” The three drove away, abandoning the boy, leaving without so much as a goodbye or an “I love you,” Chapman told *The Sun News*.

The couple took the terrified child inside, bathed him, washed his clothes, gave him the first good meal he had eaten in days. In the process, they discovered he was covered with bruises, scratches and cigarette burns. They called the police, who located a foster placement for the boy. By the time the police came to take the child, he had bonded with Chapman, Curtis and their two small children. “He started balling up in the corner. He didn’t want to go,” Chapman said. “I couldn’t even sleep, worrying about that kid.”

“I cried,” Curtis said. “I’d take him right now. . . . I’m not rich but I’d give him food and a place to live and I ain’t going to beat him.” The boy’s mother and her two male friends were arrested the next day in an Ocean Boulevard flophouse.

In a somewhat similar incident a week later, Myrtle Beach police arrested three men and two women at the Holiday Towers, on a variety of drug charges, and took into custody a twelve-year-old boy who was staying with them. Among those arrested was a common-law couple, charged with unlawful conduct toward a child.

Another makeshift family arrived in Myrtle Beach from Missouri in March 1999. Melanie Frizzell was 21; her boyfriend, Matthew Allen Clark, was 17. There was also Frizzell's four-year-old son, seven-month-old baby and three-year-old daughter Courtney. According to *The Sun News*, they stayed first in a tent, then in a small camper on Lot 3009 at Lakewood Campground. The yard around their little camper was cluttered with lawn chairs, garbage bags, toys, an inflatable child's pool and other urban detritus. Frizzell and Clark argued frequently, according to campground neighbors.

About 1:30 on the morning of July 18, Frizzell and Clark each dialed 911. They told EMTs that Courtney had fallen out of bed and hit her head. The child was taken to the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, where she died on July 22. Police investigators soon had a different explanation for Courtney's death. Clark, they said, had thrown the child into the shower stall repeatedly and shaken her when she refused to take a cold shower. He then put the unconscious girl to bed and left her until she began to convulse several hours later. Investigators found "a pattern of systematic abuse" in the home: "This child had literally no portion of her body where there was not a bruise or contusion." Her brother had "bruises literally from the top of his head to the tip of his toes."

Authorities charged Clark with homicide by child abuse; Frizzell was charged with unlawful neglect of a child.

Sometimes children are an unwanted burden in the lives of irresponsible adults. Sometimes they are pawns in their parents' pathological games. In November 1998, Michael Passaro parked his Chevy Astro in front of his estranged wife's apartment in Surfside Beach. In the back was his two-year-old daughter, Maggie. Passaro doused the vehicle with gasoline and set it afire, murdering his child to spite his wife.

For all the public talk of family values, South Carolina is horribly unforgiving to its vulnerable families. In 2000, the state ranked second in the nation for the percentage of separated couples. In 1999, it ranked forty-third in overall well-being of its children, according to a survey by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In Myrtle Beach, unstable families, a minimum-wage culture, an environment of transience,

violence and lawlessness all conspire to make victims of the most vulnerable.

At 10:00 on a July night, I dropped into Subs & Tacos to have their famous tuna salad sandwich and catch up on news from the Boulevard Rats who gathered there. That night there was a young kid in the place I had not seen before. His name was Kevin. He was twelve years old, bright, articulate, with short brown hair, blue eyes and a ring in his left ear. Kevin was a natural raconteur and that night he was entertaining everyone in the place with the chameleon he kept on a string as it climbed over his head and shoulders. He lived with his mother in a room in the flophouse above Subs & Tacos. The place was a notorious drug haven, called Roach Hotel by its seedy residents. It was the latest in a series of dumps Kevin and his mother had lived in. Yet he was cheerful and outgoing – apparently untouched by the squalor around him.

How had he come to Myrtle Beach? I asked.

He and his mother were living in Wisconsin the previous summer, Kevin said. She was parking cars for a traveling carnival when she met a man who worked on the midway. The three of them loaded into her 1985 Subaru with one of the gears stripped and they headed to Myrtle Beach. “She met this guy and it was so fast and – BANG! – three days later we were gone!” he told me. His mother had married her new boyfriend on the road to Myrtle Beach. The three of them had shared a room until his new stepfather moved out a few months later.

Over the next weeks I saw Kevin on the Boulevard and in local bars at all hours of the day and night. At Marvin’s boardwalk bar, he was regarded as a junior pool shark. He often had his lizard on his arm and some wisecrack about the local cops or merchants who had hassled him that day. And he always tried to panhandle me to buy something to eat. Rather than give him the money, I would take him to a Boulevard restaurant for a sandwich or pizza. The only thing he loved more than pizza was video games and he hit me up for a few quarters to play whenever we were together.

I wanted to learn more about Kevin’s life and made arrangements to interview his mother, Margaret. We met one evening at the bar in Marvin’s. Margaret drank Budweisers from the can and smoked Dorals, one after another. I could barely see to take notes or hear above the jukebox as she talked. Behind us, Kevin played on a Sega NASCAR simulator, interrupting us repeatedly for more quarters.

Margaret was forty-four, with plain features, thick glasses and long, straight, shapeless hair. She was a clerk in a Boulevard souvenir shop,

working for \$6.75 an hour, a job she started two days after she and Kevin and her third husband arrived in town in July 1998. Besides Kevin, Margaret had two grown daughters and an eight-year-old granddaughter she had not seen in five years. Kevin had never met his father. He was conceived in a brief encounter with a man who wanted nothing to do with him. “He wants to meet his daddy and it’s only natural,” she said. “He takes his meanness out on me ‘cause he can’t see him.”

In Wisconsin, Margaret had been bored with small town life, tired of the bitter winters. She met the man who became her new husband on a Sunday. They departed on Wednesday and were married on Thursday. Kevin was against the marriage, and for good reason. Margaret’s third husband, like her second, abused the boy. He bought a wooden paddle from Woolworth’s, she said, and used it on him frequently. Though they were still married, Margaret said she had not seen her husband since he moved out of their room in December. “If he wants to be that way, I can be that way, too.” She had since taken up with another man, who shared their room and the \$125-a-week rent.

Kevin had been arrested twice by Myrtle Beach police, once for carrying an illegal knife, another time for having a corn cob pipe with marijuana residue. Margaret grounded him for a month for the knife arrest, but that meant that she was grounded also, to stay at home and watch him. “He likes it when I’m grounded because he knows where I am.” She needed to be watched, she admitted, because she wandered the Boulevard too often, drinking late into the night. It was Kevin’s job to find her and bring her home. “I wind up back at my place, passed out,” she said, shaking her head.

“I know it’s hard on Kevin. I wanted him to see what this side of life is like, and I want to protect him from it,” she said. “I can teach him and show him and I can learn while he learns, but there’s got to be more to life than that humdrum place I was in. I had to get out and find something better and I have to protect Kevin.”

Margaret was staring away in silence and sipping her fourth beer when I left her at the bar. I said goodnight to Kevin and handed him some quarters. It was a good evening for a long walk on the beach.



Hog Heaven on the Strand

May is “bike month” in Myrtle Beach. First the Harley-Davidson Rally, then the Atlantic Beach Memorial Day Bike Festival descend upon the Grand Strand like a conquering army. The fact is widely known in the Carolinas and anyone who does not appreciate the sound of two-cycle engines is advised to stay away. That long-anticipated vacation to the Grand Strand can be traumatic for those not familiar with local tradition.

In 1940, the Carolina Harley-Davidson Dealers Association invited their customers for a weekend at the beach. They’ve been returning ever since. Over the years the annual rally swelled, reaching at least 50,000 by 1998. The Harley reputation for lawlessness had grown with the event. Along with regular complaints about the noise of thousands of V-twin engines, there were fights, shootings, drunkenness, drugs and many, many arrests. In 1983, a group of Hell’s Angels planned a showdown with the rival Pagans biker gang on U.S. 501; they were deterred only by a troop of armed law enforcement officers. Two Pagans were shot in a barroom brawl in 1990 and three blocks of Ocean Boulevard were closed to put down fighting in 1994.

City officials had considered getting tough on the event, when the Harley-Davidson Dealers Association took charge by organizing the rally, creating a task force to plan activities and spreading the event out to venues around the city. More police officers and better communications with bikers helped tame the celebration. Gang colors were banned in many bars and clubs.

To cope with the Harley-Davidson and Memorial Day bike rallies, Grand Strand municipalities banded together in 1994 to form the Bike Week Task Force. They met regularly to share information and study similar events in other cities. One outgrowth of the task force was the Friendship Team, a group of citizen volunteers who walked the streets in bright yellow T-shirts during biker events, handing out information

brochures, taking questions and complaints. The Bike Week Task Force had worked well, especially in taming the Harley-Davidson event.

“The weekend sort of each year has become calmer,” City Manager Tom Leath told *The Sun News*. “Now Harley has sort of mellowed into an uneventful weekend.” But as “uneventful” as it was, Myrtle Beach recorded 831 arrests and violations in 1998 and North Myrtle Beach recorded 135.



As 60,000 Harley-Davidsons bore down on the Grand Strand for the 1999 revel, it occurred to me that I had never been near a motorcycle rally; I had never even been on a motorcycle. The closest I had come to motorcycles was the iconographic films, *The Wild One* and *Easy Rider*, and Robert Persig’s novel, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. They are to bike culture what John Wayne movies are to American history.

Different bikes attract different followings, of course, and the Harley-Davidson crowd is the roughest, toughest, meanest, baddest of them all. At least that’s the image they cultivate with their black leather jackets and boots, their tattoos and chains – and I, for one, was not about to challenge them for the title. But based on what I had read and what I observed on the roads and in the bars where I traveled, most Harley riders were outcasts and losers, alienated and angry.

If this stereotype seems harsh, the vanguard of bikers who hit town on Saturday, May 8, did nothing to dispel it. It didn’t matter that the 60th Annual Harley-Davidson Rally would not start until Wednesday. These people wanted to party *now!* Parking lots filled up with glistening chrome Hogs and shattered beer bottles, while the streets filled up with black leather, graybeards and potbellies. The Harley-Davidson image does not strike the terror it once did, but the keepers of the flame still take themselves pretty seriously.

The Boulevard was lined with lawn chairs as the camp followers of these weekend road warriors watched the parade of chrome and leather go by. From hotel balconies and the beds of pickup trucks the spectators recorded it on camcorders. Women passengers on the big roaring Hogs carried their own camcorders to document the spectators in their lawn chairs and pickup trucks. The beachwear and T-shirt shops offered a breathtaking array of tacky biker T-shirts, the most popular

bearing the message: "If You Can Read This, The Bitch Fell Off." Anything with a Confederate flag painted, printed or stitched on it brought a premium.

Through the weekend the crowds and the noise built. Tens of thousands of Harley riders filled the hotels along the Boulevard and U.S. 17. From Pawleys Island in the south to Brunswick County, North Carolina, they cruised up and down U.S. 17 and the 17 Bypass, by ones and twos and forties and fifties. They focused on a prearranged "loop" from the Myrtle Beach Convention Center on 21st Avenue North to the U.S. 17 Bypass, south to Murrells Inlet and back up U.S. 17 to 21st Avenue. At both ends of the route, and several places in between, were trade shows and swap-and-shop markets for Harley paraphernalia. But this was all a pretext. The real reason 120,000 mostly middle-aged people came to town that week was to ride and drink and party. And they would not be denied. They filled the streets with the roar of their straight-pipe exhausts and megaphone extensions. There was no place in the city, no moment in the day or night when one could escape the noise. By the second night, I knew I was in for something unique in my experience: nine days of uninterrupted pandemonium, without silence or privacy of thought or a good night's sleep. Nine days of unmuffled internal combustion, coming from all directions at all times. Nine days of V-twin engines, straight-pipes and 6,500 rpm bursts.

Motorcycles are, by their nature, an antisocial technology, disrupting everything around them with their ear-splitting noise. It is not surprising that they attract an antisocial element and encourage antisocial behavior. Simply to switch on a Harley and throttle up is to violate the noise ordinance of every county and municipality in the United States, including Horry and Myrtle Beach. For most of the nine days the Harleys were in town, the decibel level at key intersections and vendor areas hovered between 90 and 110; keeping in mind that 110 is the level of a disco club and 120 is the threshold of human pain. Law enforcement officers did what they could, but noise enforcement was not on their agenda.

Myrtle Beach police were regarded as some of the toughest anywhere, and bikers got no special treatment. At Daytona Beach, Atlanta and Sturgis, South Dakota – three towns that draw huge rallies of bikers and black students – arrest rates were about half a percent of all visitors. In Myrtle Beach, the rate was one percent. And Myrtle Beach assessed heavier fines than other cities. But Myrtle Beach was also a symbol of personal freedom and the annual Harley-Davidson rally was a celebration of lawlessness. In that spirit, local police agencies tended

to treat bike rallies like hurricanes – as natural phenomena, beyond human control. They advised citizens how to prepare and protect themselves, including shutting schools early and staying off the roads. But, ultimately, bikers in such numbers were a force unto themselves. They transformed the environment around them. The rest of us had no choice but to adapt or leave.

One reason Myrtle Beach was so popular for bike rallies was that South Carolina was one of twenty-nine states that did not require bikers over the age of twenty-one to wear helmets. It also led the nation in biker deaths, double the national average. About 11:30 p.m., Sunday, May 9, James Fox and wife Amanda, both 36, both of Myrtle Beach, were rear-ended by a southbound Pontiac on Kings Highway. Neither was wearing a helmet. Both were rushed to the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, where James Fox died the next night. He became the first fatality of the 1999 Harley-Davidson Rally.

Whether bikers are an economic boon or the spawn of Satan depends to a large degree on what kind of business you're in. Harley riders essentially do five things in Myrtle Beach: eat, sleep, drink, ride their bikes and go to strip clubs. If you're in one of those businesses, you can make a lot of money. Local bars such as Studebaker's, the Beach House Restaurant, the Dog House and the Parrot Bar & Grill drew such throngs they hired their own security forces. On the other hand, bikers do not play miniature golf or ride merry-go-rounds. If you're in the family amusement business – as Burroughs & Chapin is – biker week is a disaster. "The bikers come here with very specific ideas of what they want to do," a B&C spokesman said, "and for the most part, we don't fit the bill."

It's not just that bikers don't like miniature golf; they keep away those who do. It's a phenomenon called "segmented tourism"; it's bad for the industry and bad for Myrtle Beach, City Manager Tom Leath told *The Sun News*. "Normally we attract a pretty good cross section of people, from golfers to shoppers to beachcombers. But when you start having lots of big events geared toward specific groups, be they bikers or gay pride activists, it alienates another part of the population and certain businesses will suffer," Leath said. "People either feel left out because they are not bikers, or they just don't want to mess with it. Either way, more and more people are choosing to avoid the area during biker events."

Of course, the real losers are the folks from Peoria and Steubenville and Terre Haute who pull up the MBA Chamber of Commerce Web page and decide Myrtle Beach is the perfect place to spend their vaca-



A Flag of Dubious Honor

The day was April 10, 1956 – one day after the ninety-first anniversary of the Confederate surrender at Appomattox. Newspapers that morning carried stories of President Eisenhower’s proposal to create a national Civil Rights Commission.

On the floor of the state Senate, John D. Long of Union County asked his all-white, all-male colleagues to hang a Confederate flag in the front of the Senate chamber. “The battle flag of the Southern Confederacy inspires our dedication to the resurrection of truth with glorious and eternal vindication,” his resolution read in part.

As a member of the House of Representative in 1936, Long had placed a Confederate flag in that chamber. In neither house was there any debate on the resolution or the meaning of the flag.

Commemorating the Confederacy and defending segregation were the twin demons that animated John D. Long. Following the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which struck down the doctrine of separate-but-equal in public education, Long introduced a resolution asking Congress to impeach the nine justices. “South Carolina has segregation in the schools and it intends to keep it,” he declared in 1959. A year later, he introduced a resolution asking Congress to convene a constitutional convention for the purpose of repealing the Fourteenth Amendment, which was the basis for federal civil rights efforts.

“South Carolina’s Confederate soldiers and brave Confederate women, the original Ku Klux Klan and Wade Hampton and his Red Shirts, their names and characters are as precious today as they were the day they were placed in sacrifice upon the altars of our country,” Long told the Senate in a 1960 speech celebrating the centennial of secession. “We honor them and we are proud of them. We will defend them from defamation to the death.”

In that same speech Long told senators to “dismiss from your con-

sideration any little-sister sob stories about the South's brutality to the slaves and its inhuman treatment of captive and fugitive slaves."

In February 1962 the General Assembly passed a concurrent resolution to fly the Confederate flag above the State House dome as part of the Civil War centennial celebration. Alabama had raised the flag over its State House in 1961, symbolizing defiance of the federal courts. Though the concurrent resolution was passed six weeks after the first black student applied for admission to Clemson University, South Carolina lawmakers who remembered that day said they meant no hostility toward African Americans or the federal government. "We did it to celebrate, not to divide the state," said former House Speaker Rex Carter of Greenville.

Whatever the motives of the General Assembly, the Civil War centennial passed but the rebel banner never came down from the State House dome. "There was no thought, at least on my part, of it flying forever," Carter told the Associated Press in 1999. Yet there it was – the conflicted symbol of a conflicted state – fluttering from South Carolina's most honored staff.

"The past isn't over," Faulkner wrote of the South. "It isn't even past." Never more so than in South Carolina.



July 15, 1999: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was meeting in New York when the South Carolina delegation brought an emergency resolution before the body, calling for an economic boycott of the state until the Confederate flag was removed from the State House dome, the Senate and House chambers. The resolution resounded through the state like the boom of cannons across Charleston harbor.

"There is no limitation as to what business and how long and how widespread the sanction will be," said the Reverend H.H. Singleton of Conway, a member of the NAACP national board. "The resolution gets the support of the national [board] in whatever the South Carolina conference decides to do in bringing down the flag."

It was a day of reckoning for the Palmetto State, as advocates on both sides recognized. Not only was the NAACP questioning a sacred symbol and a hallowed cause, but the descendants of South Carolina's slaves were dictating terms in a realm where they were still economically and politically second-class citizens. And they were doing it – not

with the threat of federal intervention – but with the media and economic muscle. The NAACP overture possessed brazenness and sophistication that caught the state’s white Republican establishment completely off-guard.

Glenn McConnell of Charleston, the Senate’s most outspoken flag supporter and owner of a Civil War memorabilia shop, denounced the NAACP’s “mean-spirited” action: “They have touted themselves as a civil rights organization and here they are carrying on a boycott. . . . They have almost reversed the tables. The oppressed are now the oppressors.”

It was not immediately clear what shape the NAACP boycott would take, but there was no question that South Carolina’s No. 1 industry – tourism – would take a hit. The prospect sent chills through the Grand Strand and sent Ashby Ward and other tourism promoters scrambling for their calculators. Figures on African American tourism were sketchy, though the NAACP’s resolution on economic sanctions claimed sixty-eight percent of all African American family reunions were held in South Carolina. Myrtle Beach certainly got its share. Black families came to town on chartered buses and rented whole floors of Boulevard hotels during the summer months.

The state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism offered these statistics: There were no numbers available on black tourism on the Grand Strand, but two million black tourists came to the state in 1997 – or about seven percent of the 28.5 million total – and accounted for \$280 million in direct spending. The Grand Strand saw 10.3 million U.S. visitors who spent \$2.24 billion in 1997. Extrapolating from these figures, *The Sun News* reasoned that some 721,000 blacks came to the Grand Strand in 1997 and spent about \$95 million.

Of course, there was more at stake than African American dollars, as Bob Bestler pointed out. When Arizona refused to recognize Martin Luther King’s birthday in 1987, blacks called a boycott, costing that state some \$340 million in tourism – including the 1993 Super Bowl. “That wasn’t all black money,” Bestler warned.

And Bestler reminded his readers of something else: “To many Americans outside South Carolina – not to mention many more who live here, black and white – the Confederate flag is a visceral symbol that represents our country’s worst instincts. It’s the Ku Klux Klan. It’s the neo-Nazi. It is an in-your-face insult to black America.”



Such well reasoned, idealistic arguments were utterly wasted on the ones who most needed to hear them. For not only was the Confederate flag a symbol of racism to most of the world, it was also a measure of the isolation, self-absorption and morbid sense of inferiority that have haunted generations of white Southerners. I had always viewed the Confederate flag with some amusement. If anything, it symbolized unreconstructed ignorance. If it made South Carolina appear backward and doltish, well, that's what we were. But it took years for me to understand the connection between the flag and racism. African Americans were never so ambivalent.

The man most responsible for making the flag an issue was Senator Kay Patterson, one of the first African Americans elected to the General Assembly in the twentieth century. Shortly after he was sworn into the House in 1975, he asked his colleagues to remove the Confederate banner from the State House dome and the two chambers. "Nothing from the other side. Silence," he said a quarter century later. "I was a lone voice crying in the wilderness."

The issue could have been quietly resolved when it briefly flared in 1987. With his political skills and telegenic, clean-cut image, Governor Carroll Campbell might have cast himself as a figure of moral authority and high principle. Like Jimmy Carter, he might have been a symbol of change and progress in Dixie. Campbell listened instead to the dark and primal voices of South Carolina, who warned that white people would turn against him if he turned against their flag. An opportunity for everyone was lost.

By the 1990s, Kay Patterson's little spark of protest finally caught flame. In 1994 the Democratic-controlled Senate passed a compromise bill that would have removed the flag from the dome, and assured that all other memorials, symbols and public names honoring the Civil War and its heroes would be preserved. With Campbell watching from the sideline, the Republican-controlled House killed the bill.

After eight years of public pieties and moral vacuity, Carroll Campbell walked away from the flag imbroglio. His hand-picked successor, David Beasley, was not so lucky. Elected in 1994, the young Christian conservative read the early notices describing him as potential vice presidential timber and took them much too seriously. Before he could be presented on the platform at a national convention, he had to address the flag issue. Beasley called for bringing it down and putting it on a monument to Confederate dead, to be erected on the State House grounds. His effort met the same fate as the 1994 compromise, but he paid dearly for it. Bumper stickers and signs appeared around

the state suggesting, “Dump Beasley – Keep The Flag.” They were a precursor of the rage that would make him a one-term governor.

Now, in 1999, the bitter banner was threatening to sweep up a new governor and take a bite out of the state’s burgeoning tourism industry. In a state that had spent a century and a half stumbling from one disaster to the next, the Battle of the Flag represented only the latest failure of leadership.



Like the dogma of transubstantiation, Southern history remains a sacred mystery, even to those of us who have lived with it all our lives. How could a disastrous war, in defense of an unholy institution, be transformed into the shining and glorious “Lost Cause?”

Faced with the consequences of their folly, faced with the ghosts of 258,000 dead and the burden of 150,000 disabled, faced with the memory of all they had believed and loved and lost, white Southerners turned inward in the years after the Civil War. Through a self-conscious act of intellectual alchemy, they transmogrified their loss into the Lost Cause. Southern history was not just retold but reinvented and internalized to create a whole new mythology. In the creed of the Lost Cause, the antebellum South was a bucolic paradise of dashing cavaliers, hoop-skirted maidens and their faithful, affectionate black servants. Into this Eden of magnolias and moonlight crept the serpent of Northern industrial capitalism – greedy, profane, irreverent of place or tradition, fueled by waves of Catholic and Jewish immigration. The disastrous but honorable war was fought, not to preserve slavery, but to preserve the ineffable Southern Way of Life. It was the responsibility of white Southerners to remember the sacrifices of the Confederate nation and to preserve the last vestiges of that tradition – states’ rights and white supremacy. These two shabby tenets were all that remained, all that white Southerners could salvage from the bleeding and dying. The mythology of the Lost Cause became the South’s secular religion, imbued with the spiritual qualities of memory, kinship and sacrifice. Generations of white Southerners have felt called to defend this religion with rope and torch.

For two generations after the Civil War, Southerners dedicated monuments and cemeteries to the memory of all they had lost. At each lugubrious ceremony they trotted out the sacred relics and shibboleths.

The Reverend Dr. John L. Girardeau of Charleston spoke on Confederate Memorial Day 1871, on occasion of the reinterment of South Carolinians killed at Gettysburg. According to historian Walter Edgar, Girardeau's address was "a detailed guidebook for the Lost Cause and a justification for the overthrow of Reconstruction."

"Let us cling to our identity as a people!" the reverend doctor intoned, and "tenaciously hold to the fragments of a noble past." He urged resistance to the Reconstruction government and told his listeners to institute "peculiar customs and organizations" to preserve the past; to set aside memorial days and create memorial associations; to collect and publish "materials of our own history"; to perpetuate memory and honor "by making our nurseries, schools and colleges channels for conveying from generation to generation our own type of thought, sentiment and opinion."

White Southerners have made a religion out of perpetuating "our own type of thought, sentiment and opinion." It has marked us as a people and set us apart from the rest of the nation and the world. For generations it was ingrained in our political rhetoric, in our public rituals, in our educational system. From the 1930s to the 1980s, South Carolinians were taught state history from the textbooks of Mary C. Simms Oliphant. Oliphant was the daughter of a Confederate Army officer and granddaughter of William Gilmore Simms, one of the antebellum South's leading writers and polemicists on slavery and secession. Oliphant's elementary and junior high school texts went through numerous editions and were the mandated texts for teaching state history in the public schools. Later editions of her books were purged of their most egregious material, but generations of young South Carolinians – black and white – were exposed to Oliphant's parochial and paternalistic views.

"Most masters treated their slaves kindly," she wrote in her 1964 edition of *The History of South Carolina*. "...the law required the master to feed his slaves, clothe them properly and care for them when they were sick." Elsewhere she wrote: "Most slaves were treated well, if only because it was to the planter's interest to have them healthy and contented." Slavery really wasn't so bad in Oliphant's South: "The Africans were used to a hot climate. They made fine workers under the Carolina sun." And besides, look at all the benefits: Slave owners "said that Africans were brought from a worse life to a better one. As slaves, they were trained in the ways of civilization. Above all, the landowners argued, the slaves were given the opportunity to become Christians in a Christian land, instead of remaining heathen in a savage country." That there were



Memory and Metamorphosis

September 13 was a melancholy anniversary for Myrtle Beach. On that day in 1974 the Ocean Forest Hotel was brought down by a dynamite implosion. The blast wasn't as dramatic as Hurricane Hazel or Hurricane Hugo, but when the dust had settled, Myrtle Beach was none the better.

For nearly half a century the Ocean Forest had been the proud reminder of a fabled age. At its opening in 1930 it was one of the grandest hotels in the world, offering fresh and salt water baths in its 220 elegant guest rooms, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, high-ceilinged dining and ball rooms, chandeliers of Czechoslovak crystal, floors and columns of Italian marble. Liveried doormen, maids and waitresses polished the sterling silver doorknobs and catered to every need. Balconies and terraces draped the ten-story central tower and two five-story wings. The brick and steel structure – painted white – stood gleaming against the gray Atlantic and the vast green Horry County forest.

With the coming of the Great Depression, the Ocean Forest went into foreclosure and then to a series of owners. Even so, there were grand times in the ballroom and the Marina Patio, where Tommy Dorsey and Tex Beneke played. In the 1950s, the Ocean Forest was ranked seventh best in the nation by Actors Equity for summer stock theater. Original Broadway plays came to the hotel, with such productions as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Witness for the Prosecution* and *Teahouse of the August Moon*. Gloria Swanson, Veronica Lake, Shelley Winters and Arthur Treacher were among the stars who performed for Ocean Forest audiences.

In the 1960s times caught up with the aging behemoth. A jungle of new family-priced motels cut into the Ocean Forest's meager profits, offering larger rooms and – most importantly – air conditioning. The hotel went into decline as maintenance was deferred and staff cut back.

Two small businessmen – Sonny Stevens and Dexter Stuckey – bought the building in 1970. They had dreams of restoring it to its former glory, but costs were prohibitive and insurers ordered them to upgrade the wiring and plumbing or close it down. In the condo boom of the 1970s, the 250-yard beachfront was worth more than the shabby old building.

Some still argue that the Ocean Forest could have been saved. Its sister hotel, the Cavalier, in Virginia Beach, still stands. But Stevens and Stuckey did not have the resources to pay the mortgage while they renovated the inoperable hotel. So the explosives were set, Stevens pressed the button and Myrtle Beach said good-bye to the only elegance it had every known.

The Ocean Forest is emblematic of what Myrtle Beach has done to all of its history. With no traditions, no architectural or aesthetic standards to guide them, developers have filled the Grand Strand with miles of glass and pastel buildings, neon and flashing lights, ugliness piled upon mediocrity, garnished with vulgarity.

The demolition left psychic wounds that have not healed. In the quarter-century since its demise the hotel came to occupy a mythic place in the collective imagination. An industry sprang up in relics and renderings. Paintings of the Ocean Forest, with gauzy skies and endless white sand stretching to the horizon, hang in fashionable homes and offices. Businesses boast windows, doors and mantelpieces salvaged from the hotel. A cluster of condos and shops in the area of the late hotel now use its name.

To fill the psychic vacuum, local businessman Bill Hussey briefly entered into negotiations, in 1978, to buy the Eiffel Tower, have it dismantled, shipped from Paris and reassembled on the Grand Strand. Others talk of building a 200-foot lighthouse, which would cast a rotating beam many miles across the sea.

A good psychiatrist would be a lot cheaper.



At City Hall a long, ugly season was far from over. Mayor Mark McBride made himself famous for coming up on the short end of 6-1 votes. He denounced his two strongest council adversaries – Rachel Broadhurst and Chuck Martino – for voting for a \$500 city grant to the Boys & Girls Club while they sat on that organization’s board. He called press conferences to criticize city staff and council and circulated

a petition calling for a mayor-council government that would make his job full-time – and greatly increase his salary. He accused city staff of unethical conduct and called for the firing of Tom Leath. “You can’t let him destroy your life,” a philosophical Leath told *The Sun News*.

Council members worried publicly that city staff might get enough of the mayor’s abuse and leave. Said Councilman Martino: “I can’t imagine anybody putting up with an employer who belittles them publicly, demeans them in front of their peers and chastises them without any regard for the facts.”

In the spring of 1999 McBride started running a weekly column in the *Myrtle Beach Herald* – paid for out of his own pocket – in which he roundly attacked city staff and council. In a typical piece, the mayor described going to the city-owned baseball park to watch the Myrtle Beach Pelicans. He ordered some boiled peanuts and soft drinks, but did not get a receipt. “In fact,” he wrote, “I couldn’t, because there were no receipts. . . . This is totally ridiculous. I am shocked that the city staff would have allowed for a contract that has no way to verify revenues or seek income from a project that uses the people’s money. . . . I am also surprised that the council . . . would have voted for such a contract.”

McBride’s column was a free lunch for Bob Bestler: “Now I don’t know a lot about the baseball business,” *The Sun News* columnist wrote. “But I’ve been to many games, here and elsewhere, and I have never received a receipt from a beer vendor. Usually, by the time the beer gets to me, I’m happy if most of it is still in the cup.” He quoted Pelicans general manager Steve Melliet as saying the team relies on inventory count to keep track of sales, a fact the mayor could have learned for himself, if he had picked up the phone and asked. “I guess [McBride] wants the vendors to wear little cash registers around their necks,” Melliet told Bestler.

The jabs between the dueling columnists got personal. On June 9, Bestler wrote: “In most cities, mayoral messages are used to explain to residents why the city is doing the right thing. Here, the mayor’s message tells why the city is doing the wrong thing – often by totally ignoring him.

“An example came right after Memorial Day weekend, when most everyone in a public position was saying things went fairly smoothly.

“Not our mayor. He used the column to renew his call for the National Guard to help keep order – an extension of his apparent modus operandi of confrontation over conciliation.”

McBride fired back in his own column: “This columnist [Bestler] . . . seems to believe that the only reason a politician or elected

official ever votes ‘no’ is for political gain. You see, in his world, there is no such thing as conviction, belief, individuality or fighting for what you believe. Only worn-out words of forgotten ideals that echo from an era of protest and liberalism that we are all trying desperately to forget.”

In former Mayor Bob Grissom, Myrtle Beach had a back-slapping, joke-telling, good-will ambassador in plaid sport jacket, who would go anywhere to extol the pleasures and virtues of his town. Perhaps he lacked the dignity some would have liked in their mayor, but there was something even more disturbing about the young Christian conservative who replaced him. When he wasn’t blasting City Hall or alarming the populace with his weekly columns, he was cruising the streets in his black Ford F-250 Super Duty XLT pickup, with tinted windows and giant mud tires. Shortly after he announced his desire to keep a gun in his City Hall office, the mayor addressed a convention of the National Rifle Association in North Myrtle Beach. At least one woman in attendance was alarmed at what she described as the mayor’s call to arms. City council was so alarmed at his behavior that they stripped him of his power to declare emergencies and curfews.

At a council workshop – with visiting dignitaries present – McBride surprised and embarrassed council members by introducing Cameron Viebrock as his new chief of staff – an unprecedented, unsalaried position without office or job description. The mayor learned that he could tie up city staff for hours with personal “requests for information.” The requests became so numerous and time-consuming that the city manager asked for relief. Council responded with a rule that any request for information requiring more than fifteen minutes of staff time be approved by full council.

In October 1999, McBride thought he had found a foolproof issue to discredit city staff and council incumbents before the November elections. He accused city council of failing to roll back the millage rate enough following a recent property reassessment. As a result, the city would illegally overtax its citizens by some \$2.6 million, McBride said. He called a surprise news conference to declare that he was ready to fight City Hall on behalf of the overtaxed people of Myrtle Beach.

“I had a problem with him calling a press conference to distribute ‘his’ numbers and say the council didn’t care about this and wouldn’t work with him,” Councilman Martino told a reporter. “That’s an out-and-out lie.”

Angered by the mayor’s sneak attack and what they regarded as spurious tax figures, council hired an independent accounting firm to