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Murphy Painting & Design Summer Memories

The Old Grand Hotel Glows on Mackinac Island

INTERIOR DESIGN BY CARLETON VARNEY, OF DOROTHY DRAPER & CO.
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY SOLURI



IN EVERY AMERICAN'S MEMORY of childhood there is an image of the perfect summer place. The picture—whether imagined or experienced—juxtaposes white columns, green shutters, wicker furniture, and beaches leading to blue, blue water. It occurs in literature and the cinema; it is part of American mythology. This timeless memory was drawn on by New York interior designer Carleton Varney when he was asked to redecorate that magnificent dowager of midwestern

hostelries, the Grand Hotel, on Michigan's Mackinac Island.

Mackinac Island has been a central point of importance in the Great Lakes since the eighteenth century, when the French built a fort there to control trade in the straits between Lakes Huron and Michigan. To accommodate the vacationers who sojourned on Mackinac in the opulent "Gilded Age" following the Civil War, when newly prosperous city dwellers began to take up the notion

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ABOVE: Overlooking the straits connecting Lake Huron and Lake Michigan, the ninety-four-year-old Grand Hotel rises from an emerald knoll on Mackinac Island. Owners Dan and Amelia Musser engaged designer Carleton Varney to return the resort to its original grandeur. Tuscan pillars delineate the 880-foot-long Greek Revival portico; an observation tower crowns the clapboard structure. OPPOSITE: Horse-drawn carriages convey guests from the ferry to the hotel; automobiles are not allowed on the island.

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preserves the amenities of the past.



of escaping for the summer, Senator Francis B. Stockbridge of Michigan conceived the notion, in 1882, of establishing a "grand hotel." The edifice was opened for its first season in 1887, and its 880-foot-long colonnaded portico has commanded the Straits of Mackinac ever since.

The grand resort tradition remembered by Carleton Varney from his own childhood in the summer community of Nahant, Massachusetts influenced him particularly in his work

with the hotel at Mackinac. "People are searching for quality," he says. "They want butlers, mint juleps, and afternoon tea. The world has gotten into the habit of piling concrete on sand and calling it a resort, these days, and people are tired of that." When Mr. Varney was first engaged by the hotel's owners, Dan and Amelia Musser, in 1977, he was asked to redecorate the lobby, the card room, the main dining room and several private suites. The hotel had been

sustained financially through the difficult years of the depression and World War II, when there were shortages of money and a work force, by Dan Musser's uncle, Stewart Woodfill, who at that time was the owner. Mr. Woodfill's dedication and perseverance had preserved the hotel in a somewhat piecemeal condition, however. "The carpet in the lobby was pure Roxy Theater," Carleton Varney says, referring to a red and gray feathered pattern. "That had to



OPPOSITE: Jewellike hues animate the traditional Lobby. Affirming the original Georgian theme—limned by dark walls, a pristine dado and fanlight-topped glass doors—are sconces with Baccarat chimneys and drops, and Sheraton chairs. Geraniums, the hotel's floral emblem, embellish wool carpeting, which underscores a seating area dominated by a velvet-covered sofa. Roman shades modulate the clear northern light. ABOVE: In the Audubon Bar, 18th-century furnishings and bold color contrasts evoke the flavor of a gentlemen's club, a mood fortified by antique decoys and Audubon prints. Hepplewhite and Queen Anne-style chairs and a George I camelback sofa, all upholstered in Carleton V fabrics, surround a walnut table; shell motifs adorn the Georgian console. Cove lighting softly illuminates the room.

go." He replaced it with a carpet designed in English needlepoint style, and incorporating geranium blossoms—the hotel's traditional emblem—with a trellis pattern of variegated geranium leaves on a black background. In addition, there was considerable architectural renovation by Richard Bos, and landscape architecture by John Grissim.

When the first year's refurbishing was complete, the Grand Hotel held a party, at which it was announced

that Carleton Varney had been the hotel's ninetieth birthday present to itself. "I was both touched and surprised," says the interior designer.

In the years following his first visit, he tapped Mackinac's tradition as a summer seat of power and political activity by redecorating the hotel's Presidential Suite and the Governor's Suite, which opened in 1981. Beginning with the visit of President Grover Cleveland, who arrived shortly after the hotel itself was opened, in

the late 1880s, followed by the subsequent visits of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the island has at times served as a summer White House. Mr. Varney, keeping in mind the presidential aura of the hotel, has combined such memorabilia as letters from Presidents Eisenhower, Theodore Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter with eighteenth-century furniture and Chinese Export porcelain, to give the Presidential Suite a fitting air.



ABOVE: A bank of windows unfurls a sweeping view of the island and lake in the Woodfill Suite, situated in one of the hotel's semicircular bays. Against verdant-hued carpeting, fabrics from Carleton V—including draperies, upholstery and trellis-patterned wallcovering—create a gardenlike setting for casual wicker furnishings. Roses bloom in a painting by S. Witlind. A patchwork quilt draped over the bed adds a touch of Americana. Reiterating the curved bay window, a stepped ceiling enhances the sense of spaciousness. RIGHT: Chaise longues dot an expanse of lawn leading to the swimming pool. Beyond a stand of cedars lie the azure straits.

A center of fashion and power in the summer, Mackinac has always been particularly isolated in the winter. There are no bridges to the island, and the ferries from the mainland cannot be used during months of deep winter, when the straits are covered with ice. Also, it has been a tradition for decades that no vehicles other than bicycles and horse-drawn wagons and carriages are allowed. Undaunted by these restrictions, Mr. Varney found that he could work efficiently with local people, and he found himself particularly receptive to the subtleties of light and color in such an attractive atmosphere.

With the advent of summer, the island's white silence is broken aurally by the tinkle of ice in cocktail glasses, laughter and the soft sound of tennis balls, and visually by a profusion of flowers. "The flowers for the boxes that line the enormous portico are important," Mr. Varney points out with his usual interest in detail. In addition to those traditional

geraniums, there are marigolds, hollyhocks and even lilacs as late as July. "It's an island of flora, but the flowers come later than in other places. Mackinac is so far north, and so cool because of the lake breezes, that they last much longer in this climate."

Immortalized in the memories of those who have visited it, the Grand Hotel preserves the amenities of the past; the summer air quivers with the vibrancy of the present; and for a guest, the future stretches ahead with the dependability of the portico columns, which seem as though they will hold up the blue summer sky forever. Carleton Varney says of the Grand Hotel: "It's a living museum, with my colors—daffodil yellow, sky blue, deep green—filling it." That oxymoron—"a living museum"—brings the Grand Hotel into the moment, laden, like one of the carriages that meet the Mackinac ferry, with happy memories of summers past, good times still recalled. □

—Jeffrey Simpson

