F - Fairhope

The South Before The Sun Belt

On an Alabama ramble, with porches and parks

By SCOTT NORVELL

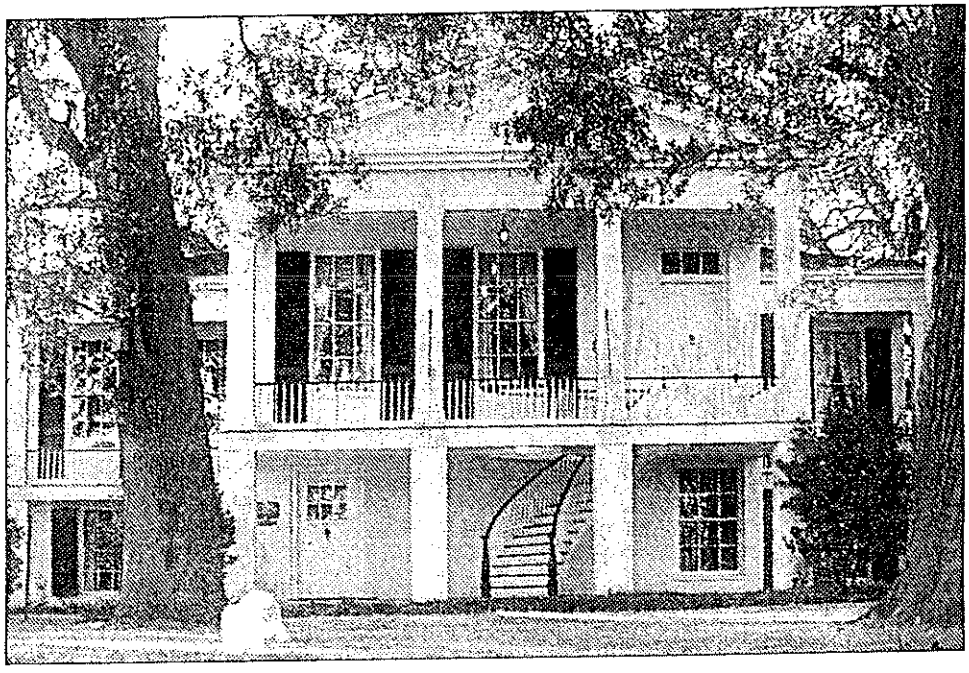
EVER since my series of binges with the books of Truman Capote as a teen-ager, my images of Alabama have been tainted by the Gothic glasses of a man who lived there nearly five decades ago. The pictures he painted — a region of dry, lonesome farmland, endless pine forests and brackish swamps — were not of the sort of place that invited idle visitors looking for an even mildly entertaining weekend.

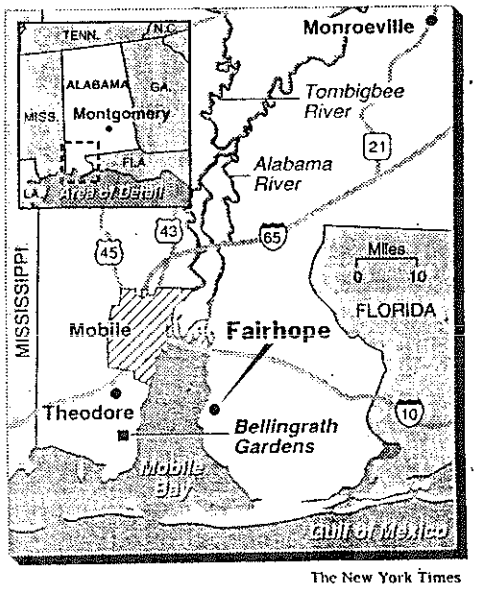
When I finally got around recently to exiting the Interstate that crosses coastal Alabama, however, I was pleasantly surprised. Instead of washboard roads and clapboard buildings, I found Fairhope, an immaculate village full of tidy cafes and smiling shopkeepers, and miles of shady roads nearby lined by 19th-century cottages with wide porches where smiling women sat in white wicker rocking chairs and stared out at the sea.

During a three-day trip to the area last December, I also ventured across Mobile Bay to find formal gardens alive and blooming while much of the northern United States was beset by sub-zero temperatures. In Mobile itself, I came across the sort of architectural diversity that is all too rare in Sunbelt cities these days.

But it was on the Eastern Shore, where I made my base for the weekend at a wood-frame hotel with a long history, the Grand Hotel, that reality and fiction deviated the most. In Fairhope, population 8,000, the smell of French roast drifted from the open doors of Andre's Wine and Cheese shop downtown and gaily painted Victorian cottages bordered by camellia bushes and vines of multicolored wisteria lined the residential streets. At a waterfront park, the town authorities had posted duck-crossing signs, and the owner of the Caribbean Spice Company had set out samples of jalapeño mango mustard to tempt browsers into buying.

More than 130 artists and nearly two dozen published authors call Fairhope home, a status that conventional wisdom traces to the town's history. Fairhope's settlers, Iowans dedicated to the single-tax theories of a Philadelphia journalist named Henry George, scouted locations throughout the South before incorporating the town in 1894. By pitching their homestead as the Riviera of America — touting the health benefits of the pine trees and pure Gulf breezes — Fairhope's founders had hoped to lure health-conscious northerners to their Eden-by-the-bay.





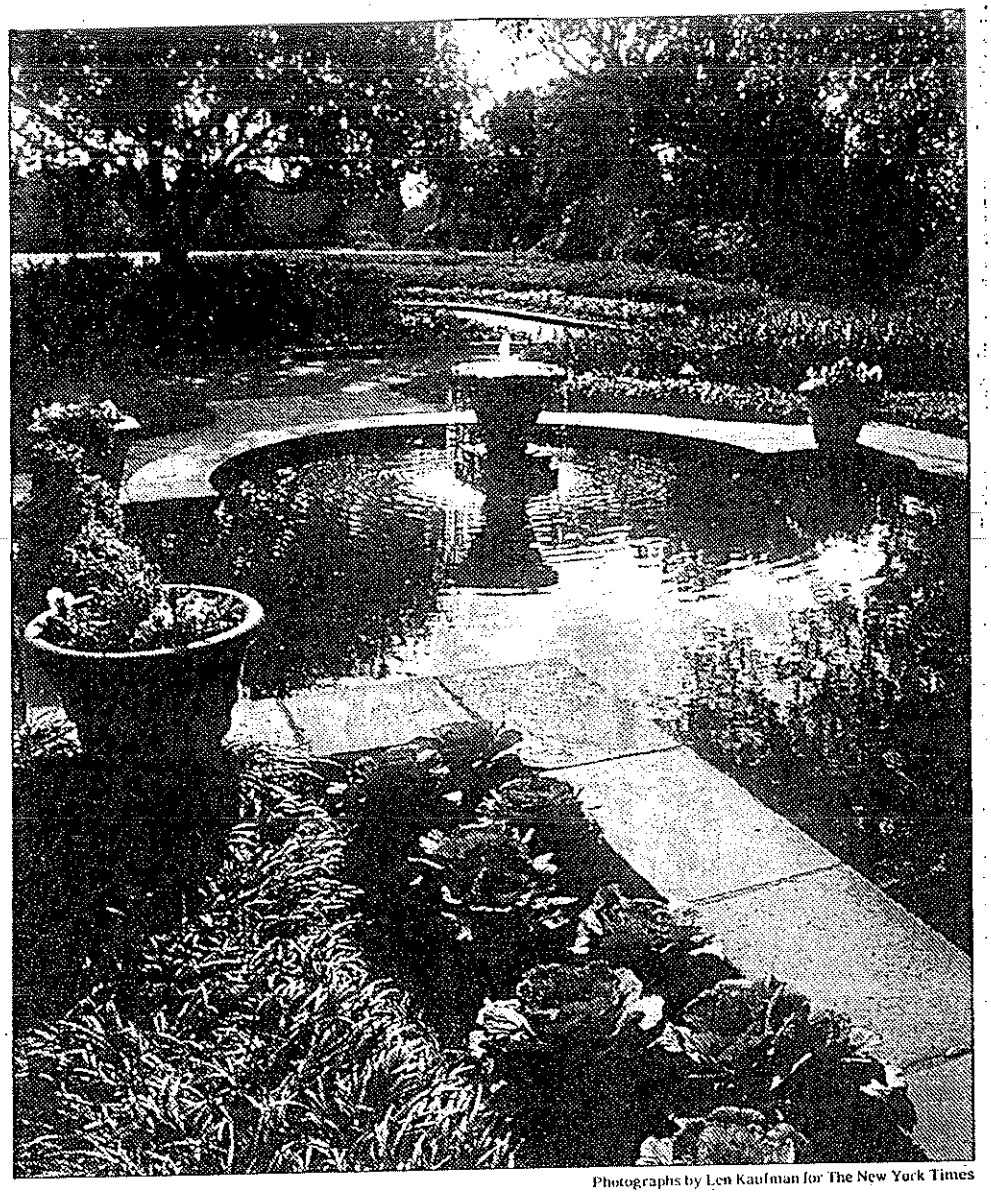
The New York Times

The land in this utopian new colony was to be owned by a corporation instead of individuals, and its inhabitants established the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation for such a purpose. The corporation, which celebrates its centennial this year, still owns about 9,000 acres in and around Fairhope, leasing it to homeowners and charging rent instead of levying taxes. The practice — tenants can build homes and make improvements to the land, but not sell it — was intended to check land speculation.

George's theories never did catch on elsewhere in as big a way as Fairhope's founders had hoped, so the town prospered in relative anonymity until upstate professionals and wealthy retirees rediscovered the area.

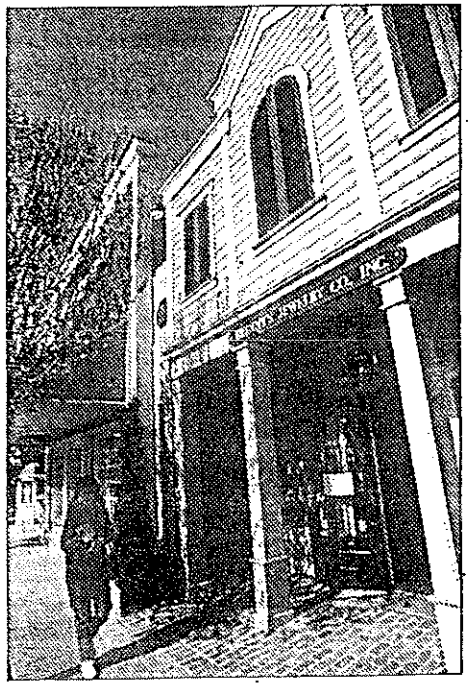
Fairhope's downtown is thriving. Gone are the farm-supply and dry-goods stores. In their place is an array of specialty shops, antique stores and restaurants serving fresh flounder and soft-shell crab from the bay. The bookstores are filled with signed copies of books by some of the nearly two dozen authors — Fannie Flagg, Judith Richards and Terry Cline, among them — who have homes in the area. Gallery windows display the works of local artists.

Set on a sloping bluff overlooking the bay, Fairhope is the sort of place Norman Rockwell would have painted had he lived in the South. The brick downtown covers no more than five or six square blocks, blending ef-



Photographs by Len Kaufman for The New York Times

ABOVE Bellingrath Gardens, 65 acres of year-round greenery. ABOVE LEFT Nineteenth-century Oakleigh House is open for tours. RIGHT A jeweler in Fairhope, where specialty shops abound.



fortlessly into neat residential streets where bed-and-breakfasts have proliferated and moss-drenched live oaks outnumber telephone poles. Down by the water, a restaurant sits on a lengthy pier where residents once waited for the ferry to Mobile. A couple of parks shaded by towering pines are frequented by bicyclers, joggers and walkers.

Cut off by the confluence of the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers, Mobile was once accessible from the Eastern Shore only by steamboat. Nowadays, Alabama's second largest city and only seaport is a half hour by car from Fairhope and ended up being the first stop on a day trip I took around the bay.

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Founded in the early 1700's as the seat of France's colonies in the Americas, Mobile's early history of repeated occupation — by English, French, Spanish and American colonists — has left an architectural legacy that could keep sidewalk gawkers busy for several days.

Government Street and the residential neighborhoods around it provide a taste of the two centuries of architectural relics to be found. One of the more interesting homes open to the public is Oakleigh House, an early 19th-century number run by the Historic Mobile Preservation Society just south of Government Street.

Simple by Southern antebellum standards, the impeccably maintained two-story Oakleigh House is furnished with period pieces gathered from Mobile's main-line families. The half-hour tour of the house, led by a matronly guide in a floor-length dress, included detailed descriptions of both the social scene (the lady of the house was apparently acquainted with the Queen of England) and the accouterments of the mid-19th century, when the house was first built — a kiln-like oven in the basement, gas chandeliers and windows that stretch to the floor allowing summer breezes to sweep through.

About 30 miles south of Mobile, on the banks of the Isle-aux-Oies River near Theodore, the Old South fantasy continued at Bellingrath Gardens, a 900-acre estate that Walter Bellingrath, the Coca-Cola bottling magnate, carved from a semitropical forest in 1918. Originally intended as a fishing camp, Bellingrath and his wife, Bessie, converted the forest to a 65-acre garden following a tour of the great gardens of Europe and North America.

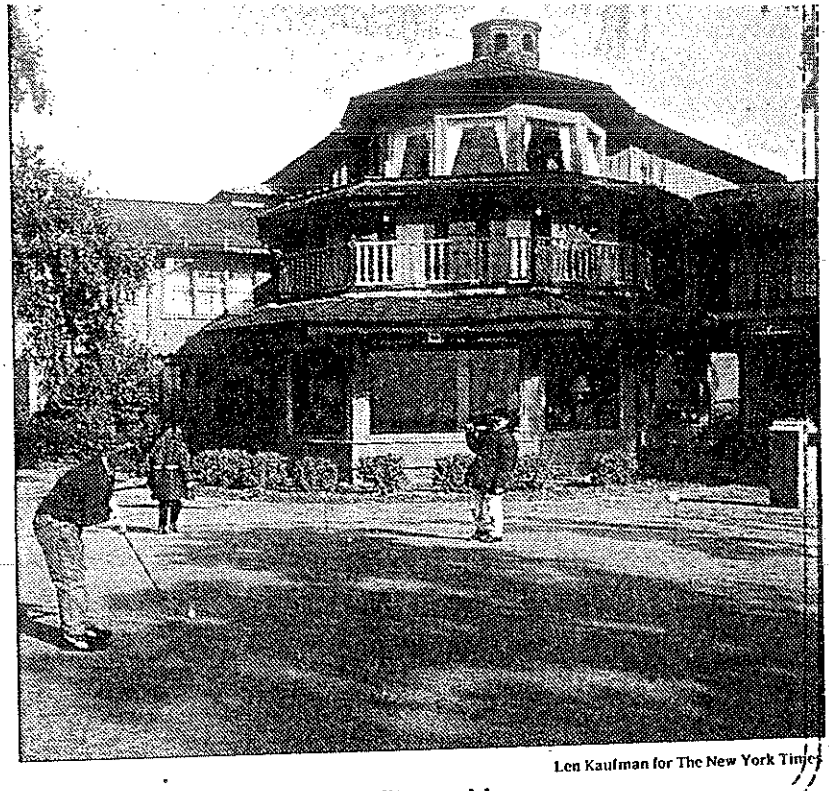
The warm winds of Mobile Bay give Bellingrath Gardens the rare distinction among its peers in the continental United States of being green throughout the year. Even in winter, its bright green lawns were dotted with patches of purple kale, red and white poinsettias and pansies of all hues. Along the winding sidewalks, spindly bushes dripped yellow flowers called golden showers and the last roses of the season perfumed the entire south end of the garden.

The gardens surround an unimposing brick house constructed in 1935 that now houses Ms. Bellingrath's collection of antique furniture, crystal and porcelain by the sculptor Edward Marshall Boehm, billed as the largest publicly displayed collection of the artist's work. Instead of taking the 30-minute house tour, however, I wandered among the stepping stones and gently bubbling waterfalls of the Japanese Garden and the frangipani trees and orchids that smelled of tarragon and honey in the conservatory.

RETURNING to my room at the Grand Hotel, I sensed a gulf between the two shores much broader than the narrow bay. On the west, I saw clapboard shacks with chicken coops out back; on the east, weekend cottages, their wide porches screened and crammed with white wicker furniture. On the west there were paper mills and petroleum processing; on the east, pecan farms and nurseries.

The Grand Hotel, which has long been the domain of debutantes and other wealthy denizens of the nearby cottages, fits squarely into the aristocratic mold of its surroundings. Fire destroyed the original Grand Hotel in the late 1860's and the place was rebuilt the following decade, only to be destroyed again in 1906 and 1917 by hurricanes. The building now occupying that spot, a wagon-wheel shaped structure with two of its three wings facing the water, was built in 1940, when the old hotel became a full-fledged resort with tennis courts, a golf course, a marina and a swimming pool about half the size of a football field.

The Marriott Corporation, which took over the hotel in 1981, has tried to maintain an air about the place — serving tea in the afternoon, requiring jackets at dinner and keeping the historic markers polished — but yacht-going northerners and Spanish-speaking golfers from the Caribbean were more in evidence during my stay than any holdovers of the Old South. Watching the sunset through the bay windows of the hotel lounge, I decided not to quibble.



Len Kaufman for The New York Times

The Grand Hotel at Point Clear, Ala.

Exploring the Eastern Shore

Getting There

To reach Fairhope and the Eastern Shore from Mobile, Ala., take Interstate 10 east to U.S. 98 South. Just south of Montrose, veer right on Alternate U.S. 98 to reach downtown Fairhope, Point Clear and the Grand Hotel.

Where to Stay

The **Grand Hotel,** a Marriott resort, at Point Clear, telephone (800) 544-9933, has all the amenities and services of a major resort (36 holes of golf, 10 tennis courts, huge swimming pool, health club, horseback riding). Despite a charming staff and cosmetic efforts to the contrary, however, it has the feel of a chain hotel. Double rooms in the 50-year-old main building, with sealed-up windows, range from $105 to $125 from late October to mid-March, $140 to $170 in the summer.

Another option is one of the dozens of bed-and-breakfasts in the Fairhope area, including the waterfront **Bay Breeze Guest House,** 742 South Mobile Street, Fairhope, (205) 928-8976, which has a 462-foot private pier jutting out into the bay and only two rooms in the main house (no children, pets or smoking). The **Colony House,** 109 North Church Street, Fairhope, (205) 990-8211, is another antique-laden inn, this one on a bluff overlooking the bay. The rooms are decorated almost to excess — English, French, antebellum, American primitive and even one militaria. One includes a fully stocked 50's ice cream bar and entertainment center. Another rec-

Room and Inn, 114 Fairhope Avenue, Fairhope, (205) 990-8520.

Where to Eat

Seafood is plentiful, fresh and good throughout the Mobile Bay area. The **Grand Dining Room** at the Grand Hotel is one of the better restaurant in the area. Entrees range from about $15 to $21.

For dinner in the Fairhope area outside the hotel, try the **Old Bay Steamer** on Fairhope Avenue, (205) 928-5714, for stuffed flounder, steamed shrimp and oysters. Dinner for two, with wine, will run about $40. Another possibility is the **Washhouse Restaurant,** one mile south of the Grand Hotel on U.S. 98 Alternate, (205) 937-5821. The more ambitious (but not always successful) entrees include soft-shell crab crammed with crabmeat stuffing to scallops, shrimp specials and one steak entree. Dinner for two, with wine and tip, will total about $70.

For daytime fare, the Grand Hotel has an abundant breakfast buffet ($10.95 a person) served every morning from 7 A.M. to 10:30 A.M. Get there early or stick to the freshly made waffles and fruit table.

A good lunch spot is **Julwin's Restaurant** on Fairhope Avenue at Section Street, (205) 990-9372, where the local literati sometimes drop in for coffee and diner fare at the Formica counters.

For lighter meals, or a late afternoon snack, you may wish to try one of the several tearooms around town. Among them are Marcella's or the **Tea Room,** 302 De La Mare Avenue, (205) 928-1004.

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