St. Paul Hotel

The St. Paul Hotel of the 1950s is what made me yearn to live in Minnesota, so this drawing is especially sweet to me. When I was a child, my dad sold women’s shoes to stores in Minnesota, Upper Michigan, and our home state of Wisconsin. All the travel was rough on him, and once a year he encouraged buyers in western Minnesota to come to St. Paul to see his hundreds of shoe samples. (Only the left shoes; another salesman had the rights.) He would fly to the Twin Cities, and my mother would drive the car with trunks of shoes—and me—to “our” hotel.

Such wonders! I loved the hotel lobby, room service, and the kind businessmen who paid attention to a kid. I spent hours staring across St. Peter Street into the Lowry Building windows to watch a dentist peering into someone’s mouth, a secretary busily typing, an executive on the phone. Someday, I vowed, I would move to the Twin Cities. And I did, to join the staff of the Minneapolis Tribune in 1970.

What I hadn’t realized is that by the 1950s, this once-classic hotel was already declining. Built in 1910, it had been an elegant destination—for decades a place to see and be seen. But in the ’50s, the city and hotel suffered as people and businesses fled to the suburbs. The owners wanted it to be more hip, more modern, and so the old luxury was stripped away. The St. Paul fell so far from favor that it closed, supposedly forever, in the summer of 1979.

St. Paulites and former guests objected, saying the city needed a premier hotel. Twenty-one months later, the St. Paul reopened. Under new ownership, it was greatly upgraded and furnished much like the original.

Now the 254-room hotel is known for top-hatted doormen, society weddings, fine dining, an English country garden, and ballroom brunches. Unfortunately, all that remains of the original interior are three lobby chandeliers. Menus, china, and postcards were auctioned off in 1979. Managers, expecting the historic St. Paul Hotel to be open far into the future, would be pleased to welcome them back.

—Peg Meier

Peg Meier’s nonfiction books about Minnesota include Bring Warm Clothes (1987), Wishing for a Snow Day: Growing Up in Minnesota (2010) and Through No Fault of My Own: A Girl’s Diary of Life on Summit Avenue in the Jazz Age (2011).

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