

## Sunset Hotel

*“The Sunset Hotel was an imposing structure 276 feet long, sitting atop Sunset Mountain with a dramatic view of the surrounding area. Two wings containing 65 sleeping rooms extended from a huge lobby northward and southward at a slight angle to follow the contour of the mountain.” (From Vision to Reality, by Gil Fite, 1993.)*

The Sunset Hotel was built by the Linebarger Brothers and opened in 1929. It was a popular destination in the 1930's and 1940's before the Linebargers sold it, along with the rest of the Lake Bella Vista resort, to E. L. Keith in 1952. In his autobiography, Keith wrote, *“I operated it as a hotel for the first two years, then I rented it to the Baptist Institute of the Ozarks, rent free....I told them if they could make a success of the school, I would give them the building, but the school lasted only five years.”*

In 1960, Tex Newman of Oklahoma City leased the Sunset from Keith with an option to buy, but he failed to make a profit, so Newman turned it back over to Keith in 1963. It was never again operated as a hotel.

John Cooper Sr. bought the Sunset from Keith in early 1964, when he purchased the entire Lake Bella Vista resort prior to opening Bella Vista Village in 1965. Cooper restored it and opened it as an office building for his company. Renamed Village Hall, it held their sales and marketing departments, some offices of the Property Owners Association, and Cooper's monthly newspaper, the Village Vista, which later became the Weekly Vista.

The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991, but was emptied in 1992 when all the offices were moved to Town Center. From that point on, the building remained vacant. It was sold by Cooper in 1997 to Larry Wilson of California. Wilson had also purchased Wonderland Cave from the Linebarger family in 1996, after his brother, who lived in Searcy, Arkansas, read about the Cave being for sale and told Wilson, who on a later visit saw that the hotel building was also on the market.

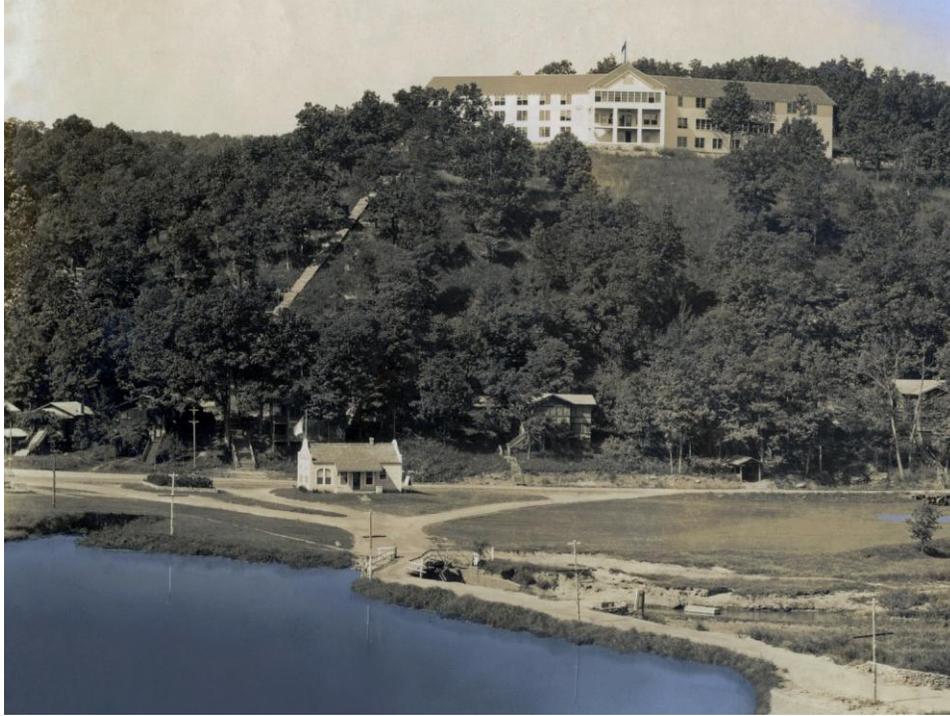
However, Wilson did not go ahead and develop the hotel site, so the building continued to remain vacant and vulnerable, resulting in Lloyds of London cancelling their insurance policy on it just a few months before it was partially burned by an

arsonist in a daytime fire in early 1999. A second arson fire in the middle of the night in July, 1999, totally destroyed it. Wilson announced plans to rebuild but instead in late 1999, he put the property on the market, and in 2000, he sold it to another company he had formed, with an announcement in 2001 of plans to develop both the hotel site and the Wonderland Cave.

However, for financial reasons, the plans did not materialize on either project, and lenders foreclosed on the hotel property in 2003. It was sold at auction in 2004 back to Cooper Communities, so the 15-acre vacant site is now their private property. All that remains is the foundation of the building and some of the paved parking lot. No plans for the site have been announced.



Volunteer Gene Heezen built and donated this model of the Sunset Hotel to the Bella Vista Historical Museum in 2001. Original drawings of the hotel design, donated by historian Randy McCrory of Rogers, Arkansas, are also on display at the museum.



**Steps leading from the hotel went down to the highway for guests to use who were without cars. The steps were named “Jacobs’ Ladder” after Elmer Jacobs of Tulsa, who owned a cottage on the side of the hill overlooking the road. He had built steps from the road to his cottage, and they were extended to the hotel after it was built. If the steps still existed today, they would come down into the north parking lot of the Highway Welcome Center.**



**The Sunset was renamed Village Hall by Cooper Communities in 1965 and used as an office building until 1992. This photo was taken of the abandoned building by aerial photographer Greg Stanton shortly before it was destroyed by fire in 1999.**







