

Higgins Beach Inn

By Rodney Laughton



After the death of Hiram Higgins in 1892, his three children capitalized on their inheritance by selling or developing the property we know as Higgins Beach. Brothers Walter and Edward Higgins both built new homes on Ocean Avenue. Edward's was an eight-room house on the corner of Greenwood and is the subject of this story.

These brothers had learned from an early age that there was an opportunity to make money from people who liked to come to the beach and they were pleased to have the business. Their development plans had been slow due to the lack of a good water supply. In time, the water problems were resolved and more and more people came to the growing summer colony. Early in this century there was only one hotel at the beach, the Lawson House on Pearl Street. We know it today as The Oceanside Apartments, but years ago it was a rooming house and had a dining room open to the public. When the Lawson House was full, it was common practice for people with cottages to rent rooms and Ed Higgins found a steady source of income from accommodating people in his home. As time passed, Ed saw the potential for a second hotel at the beach. In the winter of 1922/23 he built The Higgins Inn. The hotel structure was actually an addition to his home. There is only one known photograph of the original two story house built in 1903. The design of the hotel was an extension of the architectural style of the house. The hotel had 30 guest rooms and the dining room seated eighty people. The rooms were furnished with wool blankets that had "Higgins Inn" woven into the fabric. A few of these blankets survive as treasured mementos. Ed acted as innkeeper and his wife Ora did the cooking. Ora is remembered as an accomplished cook. I have several letters complimenting Ed and Ora on their hospitality and invariably they mention the wonderful meals that Mrs. Higgins had prepared. Ed and Ora continued to operate the hotel through the war years, finally selling to Maurice Warner in 1945. Retirement did not suit Ed and Ora for they went on to establish the Conora Restaurant on Ocean Avenue. However, that is a story in itself. Maurice Warner operated the hotel for ten years through the summer season of 1954. The only significant aspect of his tenure was that when he sold the property he retained the building next door which was used as quarters for the help. This property is now owned by Dennis and Beverly Smith.

For the period 1955 to 1964, I can speak in more detail about the hotel operation, because the next owners were my parents, Kenneth and Dorothy Laughton. The room rate in 1955 was three dollars per night in the off season and thirty-five dollars a week per person in the summer--and this included three meals a day. The following season, a potential customer came to the door and my mother told him a room would be five dollars, and he walked out. I guess

they dropped back to the three-dollar rate for that spring season as well. In 1957 Kenneth and Dorothy purchased The Breakers on Bayview Avenue as an annex. They operated both properties serving all the meals at the Inn. On an average night they served dinner to 100 people. After the season of 1964, they sold the Inn to concentrate all their efforts at The Breakers. John Derry purchased the hotel and operated it for three seasons. It was during his tenure that liquor was first served. John M. "Jack" Harrison purchased the Inn in 1968 and with his wife Carlene operated the business for twenty-eight seasons, longer than any of their predecessors. They changed the name from Higgins Inn to Higgins Beach Inn and had a sprinkler system installed. In 1997 the Harrisons sold to Bob Westburg and Diane Garofalo. The first year of their ownership seemed like a rebirth at the Inn. Bob and Diane have invested time, money and their talent to restore the property. Large groups of people once again enjoy the charm of this gracious summer hotel.