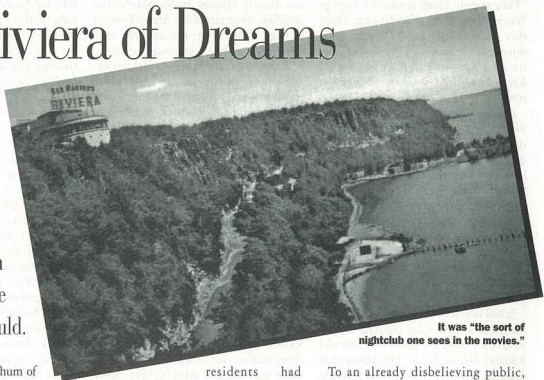


The Riviera of Dreams

Most people have never even heard of the art deco nightclub that catapulted Fort Lee into high society back in the thirties. They should.



It was "the sort of nightclub one sees in the movies."

With the constant hum of the parkway in the background, I duck under the cable fencing off an overgrown trail in Palisades Park and descend a series of crumbling cement stairs. A fieldstone foundation, broken by fallen tree limbs and a singular gaping window, reaches to the edge of the cliff. An eerie calm presides here, with branches possessively encircling the ruins. Wind off the river chases leaves about the collapsed floor. Some hand-digging reveals fractured pieces of marble and terrazzo, a sliver of thick china, a scorched segment of electrical wiring. One can almost imagine the scene here on a freezing night in November of 1936: the firemen from Coytesville linking hoses across Hudson Terrace to battle the 50-foot flames that brought the residents of Washington Heights, across the river, to their windows. It was Thanksgiving day, and Ben Marden's Riviera, the summer cabaret that had put Fort Lee into café society's vocabulary, was gone.

Summoned from a Broadway play he was attending, Marden arrived on the scene to be met by a crush of reporters. With the flames coloring his wide forehead, he detailed the losses: costumes and props, marble and carpeting, a \$20,000 cache of liquor. The toll, however, went beyond the tangible furnishings. Up with the flames went a whirlwind of mystery about the place that Bergen County

residents had watched with wary fascination. For four years, a who's who of Manhattan society had held court at the Riviera's bar, sleek convoys of Cadillacs and Packards slipping nightly down its driveway.

Another kind of fascination—my own, less wary and more romantic—has brought me to these cliffs. Describing it as a simple love of history would fall short. I am a connoisseur of the forgotten, the vanished, unsung things that didn't make the cut in history texts. Museums keep paintings and tapestries; I keep rusty hood ornaments and chunks of mosaic floor—someone has to. I've come here to get important dirt under my fingernails. The Riviera's story needs telling.

Ben Marden was more than a restaurateur. His was the business of spectacle, and his Riviera had been its holy shrine. Most rested in the finality of the fire, the impossibility of resurrecting mystique, but most didn't know Ben Marden. A scant four months after the fire the *New York Times* announced Marden's intent to build a new Riviera. Architect Louis Allen Abramson called his plans for the building functional, but "scarcely believable" was closer to the truth: seating for 800 in a terraced, circular ballroom, a movable revolving stage, a serpentine bar, all to cost \$250,000. This was 1937; dresses at Alexander's cost \$2.59, and breadlines were a very recent memory.

To an already disbelieving public, Marden promised an opening for the coming summer. All through the spring, construction crews worked frantically at his chosen site just south of the first Riviera's ruins. If the sky was to be the limit for the new Riviera, Marden would build the club close enough for his patrons to touch it. Looking like the wheelhouse of a great transatlantic liner, the Riviera's graceful curve of portholes and plate-glass windows would perch commandingly on the cliff top. Three hundred feet below, the Hudson would churn and match sparkles with the shimmering towers of Manhattan and the brand-new George Washington Bridge, 600 feet to the south. His penchant for booking several headliners on the same evening would infuriate rival club owners in New York. The cuisine would be rich, the orchestras flawless, the staff wearing bow ties and smiles. Marden later dubbed his club "The Riviera of America." As construction delays continually forced back the opening date, those in the know clamored for a spot on the guest list. Marden would later have to run an apology in the newspaper to those he turned away.

"I christen thee Riviera," said Marden's daughter, Gertrude, on June 8, 1937, tossing a frosty bottle of champagne from her hand. It was a small ceremony, with Fort Lee mayor Arthur Kerwien and a few

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STATEWIDE

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Tues-Fri, 11:30 AM-2:30 PM D-Tues-Sat, 5-10 PM; Sun, 4-7 PM. Brunch-Sun, 10 AM-2 PM. Expensive. AX, CB, DC, MC, V. ● (★★★ 5/94)

LA FONTANA, 222 Haddon Ave. West Berlin (609-788-7711). Italian cuisine. No liquor license. D—Tues-Thurs, 5-10 PM; Fri-Sat, 5-10:30 PM. Sun, 4:30-9:30 PM. Moderate. AX, MC, V. ● (NR)

THE MANSION, Kresson and Evesham rds, Voorhees (609-751-6060). International buffets. D—Wed, 6-9 PM. Brunch—Sun, 10:30 AM-2 PM. Expensive. AX, CB, DC, MC, V. ● (Brunch ★★ 4/93)

CAPE MAY COUNTY

ALEXANDER'S INN, 653 Washington St. Cape May (609-884-2555). New American cuisine, featuring sautéed sweetbreads in puff pastry and roast Cornish game hen with apple and wild-rice stuffing. No liquor license. D—Mon and Wed-Sun, 6-10 PM. Brunch—Sun, 10 AM-1 PM. Expensive. AX, CB, DC, MC, V. No-smoking section. ● (NR)

CUCINA ROSA, 301 Washington Street Mall, Cape May (609-898-9800). Southern Italian cuisine, featuring antipasto, and veal scaloppine. No liquor license. D—Daily, 5-10 PM. Moderate. AX, CB, D, DC, MC, V. Smoking not permitted. ● (NR)

THE EBBITT ROOM, the Virginia Hotel, 25 Jackson St., Cape May (609-884-5700). New American cuisine, featuring fresh seafood. Children's menu. L (Nov 25 thru Jan 1)—Mon-Sat, 11:30 AM-2:30 PM. D—daily, 5:30-10 PM. Brunch—Sun, 8 AM-2 PM. Expensive. AX, DC, MC, V. ● (★★★ 11/94)

410 BANK STREET, 410 Bank St. Cape May (609-884-2127). New Orleans, French, and Caribbean cuisine, featuring mesquite-grilled shrimp en brochette and swordfish with champagne-and-craisin cream sauce. Children's menu. No liquor license. D—daily, May thru Oct, 5-10:30 PM. Expensive. AX, DC, MC, V. ● (NR)

FREDA'S CAFE, 210 Ocean St. Cape May (609-884-7887). Eclectic cuisine, featuring fresh seafood. No liquor license. L—daily, 11:30 AM-2:30 PM. D—Mon-Thurs and Thurs, 5:30-9:30 PM. Fri-Sun, 5:30-10 PM. Expensive. No credit cards. ● (NR)

FRESCOS, 412 Bank St., Cape May (609-884-0366). Northern and regional Italian cuisine, featuring fresh seafood and veal. Children's menu. No liquor license. D—daily, Apr thru New Year's Day, 5-10:30 PM. Moderate. AX, D, DC, MC, V. ● (NR)

GLOBE RESTAURANT, 110 N Broadway, West Cape May (609-884-2429). International cuisine. No liquor license. Children's menu. D—Mon and Wed-Sun, mid-May thru June, 5-10 PM. Daily, July thru mid-Sept, 5-10 PM. Moderate. AX, MC, V. No-smoking section. (NR)

GOLD WHALE, Marquis de Lafayette, 501 Beach Dr., Cape May (609-884-3500). Family dining, featuring fresh seafood entrees and nightly specials. Children's menu. D—Fri-Sat, 8:30 PM-1 AM. Open daily 8—8-11 AM. L—11:30 AM-3:30 PM. D—4:30-8:30 PM. Moderate. AX, MC, V. ● (NR)

THE MAD BATTER, Carroll Villa Hotel, 19 Jackson St., Cape May (609-884-9979). Contemporary American and regional cuisine, featuring fresh seafood, beef, chicken, and veal. No liquor license. L, D—daily, May thru Oct, limited days, Nov thru Mar. Call for hours. Expensive. MC, V. No-smoking section. ● (NR)

MAUREEN, Beach Dr and Decatur St., Cape May (609-884-3774). Contemporary cuisine, featuring steaks, seafood and veal. D—daily, Apr thru Oct, 5-10 PM. Expensive. AX, D, DC, MC, V. ● (NR)

PEACHES AT SUNSET, 1 Sunset Blvd, West Cape May (609-886-0100). Contemporary cuisine, featuring salmon risotto and grilled duck breast with berry sauce. No liquor license. D—Fri-Sun, Nov 1 thru Mar 31, 5-10 PM. Daily, Apr thru Oct 31, 5-10 PM. Moderate/Expensive. DC, MC, V. ● (★★★ 11/94)

THE PETER SHIELDS INN RESTAURANT, 1301 Beach Dr., Cape May (609-884-6491). International cuisine, featuring a seasonal menu. No liquor license. D—daily, 5-10 PM. Brunch—Sun, 10 AM-2 PM. Moderate/Expensive. AX, DC, MC, V. ● (★★ 2/95)

THE ROSE GARDEN RESTAURANT, Perry St and Congress Pt., Cape May (609-884-8336). European cuisine,

featuring a seasonal menu. No liquor license. D—daily, 5:30-10 PM. Moderate. AX, CB, D, DC, MC, V. ● (NR)

WASHINGTON INN, 801 Washington St., Cape May (609-884-5679). American/Continental fare, featuring Fish Cape May and grilled American loam chops. Extensive wine list. D—daily, May thru Sept, 5 PM—close. Call for hours Oct thru Dec and Feb thru Mar. Moderate/Expensive. AX, D, DC, MC, V. checks. ● (NR)

WATERS EDGE, Beach Dr and Pittsburgh Ave., Cape May (609-884-1717). American cuisine, featuring local seafood, steaks, and range-fed chicken. Children's menu. Extensive wine list. B and L—daily, July thru Aug. D—daily, year-round. Call for hours. Moderate/Expensive. AX, CB, D, DC, MC, V. No-smoking section. ● (NR)

CUMBERLAND COUNTY

BENJAMIN'S, 101 E Commerce St., Bridgton (609-451-6449). American and French cuisine. No liquor license. Open Mon, 11:30 AM-3 PM; Tues-Fri, 11:30 AM-9 PM; Sat, noon-9 PM; Sun, noon-8 PM. Moderate. AX, MC, V. ● (NR)

SHIP JOHN INN, Pier and Market sts., Greenwich (609-451-1444). Seafood cuisine, featuring broiled fresh four-ounce Maine crab cakes, and prime rib. L—Mon-Sat, 11:30 AM-4:30 PM. Call for dinner hours. Moderate. AX, CB, DC, MC, V. ● (★ 7/93)

GLOUCESTER COUNTY

BARNBORO INN, 699 Main St., Barnabow (609-468-3357). Continental fare, featuring prime rib, veal, and seafood. L—Mon-Sat, 11 AM-3 PM. D—Tues-Sat, 4:30-10 PM; Sun, 3-8 PM. Moderate. AX, CB, D, DC, MC, V. ● (NR)

OCEAN COUNTY

THE BENTLEY INN, 694 Main Ave., Bay Head (908-892-9589). American fare, featuring fish dishes, pastas, and steaks. No liquor license. L—Sun, 2-5:30 PM. D—Thurs-Sat, 6-10 PM. Moderate. AX, MC, V. ● (★ 6/94)

THE BLUFFS HOTEL RESTAURANT, 575 East Ave., Bay Head (908-892-1710 or 908-892-1114). Seafood menu, featuring grilled swordfish topped with sun-dried-onion herb butter and grilled salmon filed with mustard-and-dill sauce. L—Tues-Sat, 11:30 AM-3:30 PM. D—Tues-Sat, 3:30-10 PM; Sun, 3:30-9:30 PM. Moderate. AX, MC, V. ● (NR)

THE ENGLISH INN, 30 Englewood Ave., Beach Haven (609-492-1251). American/Continental cuisine, featuring rack of lamb with garlic crust, Crab Imperial, and swordfish with sun-dried tomatoes, capers, and artichoke hearts. Children's menu. Entertainment May 15 thru Sept 30, Fri-Sun, 4-7 PM. B—Mon-Sat, 8 AM-noon. L—(outside bar) May 15 thru Sept 30, daily, noon-6 PM. D—Sun-Thurs, 5-9:30 PM; Fri-Sat, 5-10 PM. Brunch—Sun, 10 AM-2 PM. Moderate. AX, DC, MC, V. No-smoking section. ● (NR)

EUROPA SOUTH, 521 Arnold Ave., Point Pleasant Beach (908-295-1500 or 800-246-3818). Spanish/Portuguese cuisine. Entertainment Fri-Sat, 9 PM-11:30 AM. L—Tues-Sat, 11:30 AM-2:30 PM. D—Tues-Thurs, 4-10 PM; Fri-Sat, 4-11 PM. Moderate. AX, MC, V. ● (NR)

THE GREEN GABLES INN RESTAURANT, 212 Centre St., Beach Haven (609-492-3553). Nouvelle American cuisine. No liquor license. Call for hours. Prix-fixe dinner—five courses, \$52. Expensive. AX, DC, MC, V. house. ● Reservations required. (★★★ 2/95)

THE GRENVILLE HOTEL AND RESTAURANT, 345 Main Ave., Bay Head (908-892-3100). Creative American cuisine, featuring grilled seafood and veal. L—Tues-Sat, 11:30 AM-2:30 PM. D—Tues-Thurs and Sun, 5-9 PM; Fri-Sat, 5-9:30 PM. Brunch—Sun, 10:30 AM-2:30 PM. Expensive. AX, D, DC, MC, V. ● (★★ 9/93)

JOCK BAKER'S WHARFSIDE, Channel Dr., Point Pleasant (908-892-9100). Seafood fare, featuring shrimp scampi, crab cakes, and a seafood sauté of shrimp, scallops, and lobster with butter and sherry. L—Mon-Sat, 11:30 AM-3 PM. D—Mon-Sat, 5-11 PM; Sun, 3-10 PM. Moderate. AX, DC, MC, V. ● (★★ 6/94)

OCEAN GATE HOUSE RESTAURANT & TAVERN, 401 Monmouth Ave. and E Bayview, Ocean Gate (908-269-2688). American/Continental specialties. L—Tues-Sat, 11:30 AM-2 PM. D—Tues-Thurs, noon-9 PM; Fri-Sat, noon-10 PM; Sun, noon-8 PM. Moderate. AX, MC, V. ● (NR)

ROMEO'S CONTINENTAL CUISINE, 100 N Pennington Ave. at Centre St., Beach Haven (609-492-0025). Continental cuisine, featuring seafood, veal, and pasta. Children's menu. No liquor license. B—Sun, 9 AM-1 PM. D—daily, 5-10 PM. Moderate/Expensive. AX, MC, V. ● (★★★ 6/93)

EXIT RAMP

others flanking the Riviera's curving front steps. As the summer sun retired in the oranges and reds over the treetsops in the park, an employee raised an American flag in the driveway while another powered the circuitry. Cliff-mounted spotlights burned to life, and Ben Marden's sinuous creation glowed in taxicab yellow, turning the heads of motorists on the bridge.

A fortunate few in that traffic made a right turn onto Hudson Terrace and another quick right to the Riviera's broad and tree-lined driveway. Valets opened doors, held out palms, and eased Lincolns into parking spaces. Inside the crescent-shaped entrance, heels sank into the foyer's thick carpeting and the chatty sunlit into deep leather smoking chairs in the lounge. The Riviera's walls were a study in French curves—surrealistic sea and sky murals by Arshile Gorky wound past tall mirrors and draperies, while above, the muted glow of bulbs from ceiling coves bathed the bar in a light proper for drinking Bollinger '24.

Beyond the bar and lounge, the ballroom basked in the sounds of glasses clinking and the beams of pinhole spotlights over each table. With the flick of a switch, all fourteen of the Riviera's fifteen-foot-wide plate-glass windows slid silently down into their niches below the floor, filling the room with river air and the sounds of rustling maples. Forty of "America's Loveliest Girls" took the stage in revealing costumes; Josephine Huston sang; Buster Shaver's Midgets danced; and Marden readied the evening's coup de théâtre. Without so much as a pulley squeak, the Riviera's 52-ton dome above the dance floor rose six feet up and slid away on tracks, allowing—as the New York Post put it—"the stars to twinkle in your soup." Diners were transfixed, and the reporters scribbled down whom they saw for the gossip columns: New Jersey judges and politicians, Fanny Brice, Jack Dempsey, and Russia's Prince Mdivani. Ben Marden had built it, and they had come. A reporter for the *Bergen Evening Record* spotted him later in the evening at the brass railing, staring out at the ruins of the old Riviera with a smile on his face.

The Riviera had established itself as the final word in live entertainment. Newspapers called it "outstanding," "perfectly appointed," and "the sort of night club one sees in the movies." "Americans

no longer take the time and trouble to travel to the south of France," wrote Frank Catton in the *Journal-American*. "They merely chuff across the George Washington Bridge and bang, there they are at Ben's Place." It had a shoe-shine stand, a barbershop, a masseur, electric eye doors—nearly everything the old Riviera had done without. Except the rumors.

A week after the opening, a *New York Times* columnist wrote, "There is a mysterious door which opens, so they say, to the right people who are curious to know just how the wheels go around." I was curious myself about why, for instance, I could never find the blueprints for the Riviera's second floor, and why—decades after the club's demise—some people still spoke of it in hushed tones. My speculations were not new: Many of the Riviera's regulars had wondered about Ben Marden's deep pockets.

It had begun in 1935, when a Paterson man told an Assembly committee that he'd seen roulette games in the old Riviera's Marine Room. Detectives were dispatched and found nothing. Later, in 1939, a federal grand jury—assembled as part of a nationwide dragnet for "rackets and criminals"—subpoenaed Marden, ostensibly as an expert witness on metropolitan-area nightclubs. On August 29, after some perfunctory questioning, the U.S. attorney grilled Marden about the goings-on in a certain second-floor room of his Riviera. He refused to talk and was subsequently held in contempt of court. To avoid the six-month jail sentence, Marden responded to the question on September 11. But the newspapers never learned his answer.

If the plush rooms upstairs were something known and not known simultaneously, so was Ben Marden himself. He was the smiling impresario in publicity photos and yet, in the words of one Bergen resident, "the type you didn't see very often." His name glowed in red neon over the Riviera's roof—ironically, a color both festive and ill-reputed. The Ben Marden who nearly went to prison over his secrets was the same man who annually delivered hundreds of Christmas and Thanksgiving baskets—turkeys and trimmings hot from the Riviera's ovens—to the Depression-felled families of North Bergen. The man in the crisp fedora who sent an opening-night invitation to fugitive Samuel Rosoff, wanted for questioning in the murder of a union official, was also the man who gave jobs to scores of Fort Lee's unemployed at a time when

selling pencils on street corners was the only work around. He was the landlord who provided free air conditioners for the elderly tenants in his Manhattan building, a founder of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and the man who would soon make a quiet disappearance.

If the Depression gave Marden opportunities for charity, the war that finally ended it would not return the favors. Ever a playground for playboys, the Riviera suffered little during the initial belt tightening of most households. But December of 1942 brought nationwide gasoline rationing, and suddenly hitting the road became a luxury as much for the well-heeled as for weekend fishermen. By 1943, the party was over: the Riviera's front doors would be padlocked, its driveway standing empty.

While the Allies battled the Axis powers overseas, Marden left the café business for good. He bought the Playhouse Theater in Manhattan, and the Riviera's torch would pass to Bill Miller, a former vaudeville hooper from Jersey City. Apart from Miller's replacing Marden's neon name over the roof with his own, there were few changes when the Riviera reopened in May of 1946. Miller's prices, panache, and headliners would remain entirely Mardenesque. Jazz legend Ted Lewis headlined reopening night, and the tariff was \$12 a head—"20 percent extra," said *Variety*, "not counting the other extras." But happy days were here again, as were gasoline and the bons vivants it brought. Miller flew the flags of many nations for "French Riviera Night" and invited the United Nations Security Council. Marden's "Riviera of America" had become Miller's "Showplace of America," and the shows were good indeed.

Martha Raye played the Riviera in 1949 on a bill with Harry Richman. (Local lore had it that Richman used to arrive for his gigs in a seaplane and climb a set of cliff-hewn steps to the stage door.) Bill Miller, perhaps remembering his own days at the footlights, also seemed to have a knack for giving big breaks. Eddie Fisher, Henny Youngman, and the unknown duo of Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin (green wisecrackers fresh from Atlantic City) would be in his debt for it.

But the days of elegance were numbered. The Riviera's end, in fact, had been in the works even in the days before its construction. Fearing the commercial degradation of the land atop the Palisades, John D. Rockefeller had begun

buying it up in tracts in the twenties, finally donating 700 acres to the Park Commission in 1933. The public hailed him for his conservation but, ever the industrialist, Rockefeller had attached strings to his gift. His weighty "hope" that a parkway would be constructed through the land won the New Jersey Legislature's approval in 1947, and by 1951 a stretch of road in Englewood Cliffs was working its way south toward the Showplace of America.

Though the parkway as planned would slice through the driveway and not the club itself, it would effectively maroon the Riviera on an inaccessible strip of park land. Miller characterized the state as conducting condemnation proceedings with a "let the public be damned" attitude, but his financial horse sense was cooler than his rhetoric. Publicly demanding \$1.5 million for the Riviera, Miller privately accepted \$800,000 and packed his bags for Las Vegas, where he'd snared a peach of a job as booker for the Sahara Hotel. By March of 1954 the Riviera's splendorous store of banquet tables, brass railings, and Steinway pianos would be sold by public auction. Bulldozers did their work in the weeks that followed.

Just north of the Palisades Parkway toll booths, a bisected stretch of the Riviera's driveway now slips into the woods behind a rusting chain. The asphalt has been weathered to pebbles that crunch under my feet as I wander back and forth over the cliff's flat boulders, looking for anchor bolts or a ridge of foundation. There is nothing. A few yards south of the drive, a bartlement of bulldozed earth wanders vaguely west, covered with vines and fallen leaves. I'd had a strange dream of coming here and finding champagne bottles jutting cork-first from the soil. But the mounds of dirt give up only chunks of cement lath, bricks, and twisted copper flashing. I survey the mixed bag of progress: a protected stretch of rolling park, and four lanes of highway heavy with exhaust fumes. The Riviera's marked absence seems only more painful in the face of such a disparate pairing. My melancholy prompts a want of someone to blame, a direction to shake fists in. I'll shake my head instead, as surveyors of ruins often do. Destroying magical places is easier than building them, and I will take the pieces of this one home in my backpack. Someone has to. ■

Robert Klara is a New York City-based freelance writer.