

### **311 W. Foothill Blvd. The Aztec Hotel – A Bizarre Chapter**

To quote the pre-eminent architectural historian Robert Winter in describing the Aztec Hotel, “Words fail”. Or as Will C. Davis said in 1924, “I cannot begin to describe it to you”. And finally, as local editor and newspaperman Charles F. Davis said in 1938, “One of the most bizarre chapters in Monrovia’s history has to do with the Aztec Hotel”.

The construction of the Aztec Hotel grew out of the post-World War I boom in Monrovia and the spirit of optimism that drove the Roaring Twenties. Money was plentiful, and even the most far-fetched schemes seem plausible. The orange groves north of White Oak Avenue, as Foothill Boulevard was originally known, were being subdivided into residential lots, and sleepy White Oak Avenue was about to be widened to four lanes, re-named Foothill Boulevard, and incorporated into the famous Route 66.

And the stodgy old Board of Trade was re-organized into an aggressive, dynamic Chamber of Commerce in 1922.

In June of the following year, 1923, the chamber fostered and led the movement to build a new hotel in the community. The Hockenberry System, Inc. was contacted and asked to conduct a survey of Monrovia. Their survey revealed that a new hotel was needed in Monrovia, that the money to build it was available locally, and that a community-based organization to fund and build the hotel could be perfected.

In the meantime, flamboyant architect Robert B. Stacy-Judd had arrived in Los Angeles from Canada. He established himself in practice one again and was awarded several commissions in the summer of 1923 to design hotels for the west coast division of Hockenberry. Stacy-Judd was in the habit of buying books from a traveling bookseller, and in the fall of 1923, he made a fateful purchase: a book published in 1841 on the Mayan ruins of Central America. Stacy-Judd was intrigued by the drawings he saw in the book, and his active imagination began to consider the possibility of adapting the Mayan architecture to one of his hotel designs. The Aztec Hotel was the result. Stacy-Judd, ever the competent salesman, reasoned that the better-known Aztec name should be used even though the style was Mayan. The new design was presented to and enthusiastically received by the Monrovia Community Hotel Committee.

Plans for the new hotel were announced to the general public in January of 1924. A very successful pledge campaign, one that raised \$138,900, was conducted in March, and additional funding was obtained through a \$75,000 loan. (It was this loan that turned out to be the Aztec’s Achilles heel.) The contract to build the new hotel was awarded on November 7 to W.H. McCune of Monrovia, the low bidder. \$140,000 was the contract price.

Construction on the hotel was completed by August of 1925, with the grand opening on September 1. Among the Hollywood figures in attendance was Sid Grauman of Graupman's Chinese Theater. The furniture in the public spaces of the Aztec was designed by Stacy-Judd himself, while Barker Brothers in Los Angeles provided the furniture for the private rooms. Patrons could dine in the main dining room, the Mayan Room, or in one of the small private dining rooms. Or they could enjoy the ambiance of the Aztec Cafe and Coffee Shop on the corner, and dance to the music of the Aztec Syncopators and the Aztec Melody Five.

Even given its auspicious beginning, things did not go well for the Aztec. Charles Davis had this to say in his 1938 History of Monrovia and Duarte, "The hotel never made money. It opened with great fanfare, but somehow was too fantastic in appearance for success." By November of 1927 the hotel was in serious financial difficulties, and on December 17 of that year it was sold at a sheriff's auction to satisfy the foreclosure proceedings. The stockholders in the Aztec Hotel Corporation lost their entire investment.

The Monrovia City Directory for 1935 indicates that the hotel was vacant, but it re-opened January 1, 1938 under new management and with a greater measure of success. 1983 marked the opening of the Brass Elephant restaurant and bar in a space formerly occupied by four small store fronts along Foothill Blvd. The present owner began the ongoing process of restoration in September of 2000. One of the most notable accomplishments of that restoration is the re-creation of the murals in the Mayan Room. Stacy-Judd's archive at the University of California, Santa Barbara provided the documentation that allowed the hotel's artist-in-residence to meticulously design and execute copies of the originals. Future plans include the restoration of the original color scheme, as created by Stacy-Judd, on the exterior of the hotel. Come visit the Aztec, dream of the days when Hollywood personalities stopped by on their way to and from Palm Springs and let some of the ghostly guests whisper in your ear.

By Steve Baker, City Historian  
Before 2008