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NATCHEZ, Miss.--My favorite view of America is from the front room balcony of the Mark Twain Guest House, above the Under the Hill Saloon on Silver Street in Natchez. The balcony overlooks the Mississippi River.

Directly west of the balcony, twin Mississippi River bridges connect Natchez with Vidalia, La. The sun sets behind these truss bridges. When I was younger, sunset in Key West, Fla., offered distant possibilities. But as you get older, you understand rivers more than seas.

The "Under the Hill" district is an anchor of the oldest settlement on the Mississippi River. It gets its name because it is located at the bottom of a dramatic 217-foot bluff. Besides the saloon and three-room guest house, Silver Street consists only of a couple of restaurants, a gift shop and a gambling boat. Sunset is a quiet affair, reserved for solitary travelers or couples holding hands while walking along Bailey Park, which borders the river.

It wasn't always this way.

The brick saloon building dates back to the 1830s. The guest house used to be a bordello. One black and white picture in the saloon is from 1870, when warehouses stood across the street from the whorehouses.

The wharfs were stocked with merchandise ready to be put on steamboats that were heading down river. Seasoned timber from the upper reaches of the river was used in building America's first pre-fabricated houses in Natchez. Rapid rise in trade with Mexico and the Spanish West Indies brought all kinds of colorful characters to the Under the Hill district.

"It was rowdy down here," says Andre Farish, owner of the saloon and guest house, during a conversation over a glass of white wine. "Riverboat gamblers. Thieves. As a matter of fact my aunt--she died at 101--she worked downtown. She'd tell me how she used to see the whores from north Natchez coming down here to work every day. It was a port. We shipped all the cotton out of here. That is why we were Union sympathizers in the Civil War. We had all this cotton to ship to New Orleans to go to England and France and a bunch of rednecks wanted to start a war to put up a federal blockade at the end of the river."

Farish, 70, runs the bar, conversations and guest house with his son, Andre Jr. Regulars know them as "Big Andre" (for senior Farish) and "Little Andre" (for junior, 46). But "Little Andre" is bigger than "Big Andre." Farish says, "I'm old. Young just left. He's not little, but he's young."

However, both father and son have a deep appreciation of history.

Big Andre built the 11-seat bar with old cypress doors from a Natchez mansion. The gold keyholes are still visible. The tavern's ponderosa pine tables are Liberty ship hatch covers and they sit on classic Mississippi cottonwood floors.

The Liberty ships sailed from 1942 through 1945 and were the largest class of civilian warships ever built. The vessels carried cargoes of grain, mail, ammo and troops in convoys that crossed the Atlantic to the Allies. "I cut some of the hatch covers in two to make small tables," Farish says proudly. "The Liberty ships are what saved England until we got into the war."

Portions of the 1974 "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" musical were filmed here, and a later Twain-inspired film featured Drew Barrymore. Farish says, "Huckleberry Mary Barrymore stayed in Guest House 3 a smaller room which can adjoin Room No. 1 with the balcony. "That was her dressing room. She'd take naps up there. She was a doll."

On Saturday March 29, 1980, a crew from Columbia Pictures was filming scenes for the television movie "Beulah Land" about 300 yards away from the tavern. (Farish was cast in the movie.) A mudslide occurred, killing three people and injuring seven. One Under the Hill bartender perished, as did two people in the Bowie Knife sandwich shop next door, which had been open for business just one day. Farish points to the back bar and says, "This whole wall caved in. But I saved all the doors and beams and put it back the way it was."

The elaborate model ships that surround the bar were built by Capt. Howard Tate, who was the pilot on the Delta Queen for many years. The wooden ships depict the Delta Queen, the Natchez steamboat and the USS Sultana, which in 1865 went down in a bigger disaster than the Titanic. Just months after the Civil War ended, the Sultana picked up 1,866 Confederate prisoners and 75 cabin passengers near Vicksburg, Miss. The overloaded ship sank about 90 miles from Memphis after its boilers exploded.

"When Howard would take his month off every year, he would build those things," Farish says. "And those are not kits. He built them from scratch. Howard loved to shoot craps with the crew on the boat. As soon as the boat would come in, I'd ask the crew how the captain was doing in the crap game. They'd say, 'He's killing us.' So I didn't worry. But if they answered, 'We busted the old bastard,' then I knew Tate would come up here and get a \$500 cash advance to shoot more craps.

"A few months later he'd bring me one of his boats."

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Andre Farish set sail on his colorful life in Houston, Texas. He was reared on the Moro Plantation, across the river in Frogmore, La. Frogmore is on the other side of Ferriday, La.; the home of Jimmy Swaggart and Jerry Lee Lewis. Farish's great-grandmother was the sister of Jefferson Davis.

His father, Jefferson Davis Farish, died when "Big Andre" was 6. "He was an alcoholic," Farish says matter-of-factly. "And my brother was killed in an airplane crash on my mother's birthday in 1936."

Farish purchased the Under the Hill building at a 1973 public auction. At the time it was a shuttered grocery store. Farish remodeled the building and opened the saloon in 1975. "These buildings on Silver Street were owned by rich, free blacks before the Civil War," Farish says. "This building was owned by the McCoy Estate."

You can still see "McCoy Grocery" on a column outside the tavern. The saloon has also been a bakery and pool hall. Farish says, "Around 1967 we called this our 'Yacht Club.' We used to fool with our boats on the river all the time. This was a black beer joint. We'd come up here and get a beer."

As Farish fixed up the bar, he brought in a foosball game and cigarette machine. Hot tamales are served three for \$2.25. For more hearty fare, check out the fresh catfish amandine (seasoned and topped with toasted almonds, \$16.95), down the street at the Magnolia Grill, 49 Silver St. (601-446-7670).

The Under the Hill saloon has a television in a rear game room, but there will never be a TV above the bar. "That ain't what bars are for," Farish declares. The tavern features an old black piano and a jukebox with Bob Dylan's "Blood on the Tracks," Billie Holiday and Jerry Lee Lewis wailin' away on Charlie Rich's "Don't Put No Headstone on My Grave." A second back room/patio is defined by lots of hanging vines and a big bird cage with a wooden bird inside. I have visited the saloon five or six times, and I have never seen anyone in this patio.

Natchez (pop. 19,460) is 172 miles north of New Orleans. Natchez got its name from the Natchez Indians. The Indians were sun-worshippers who lived by the banks of the river. They vanished as a race when they were hunted down by the French after a massacre of Natchez colonials.

These days, former Chicago Bear linebacker Joe Fortunato lives in Natchez, where he operates "Big Joe's Oil Company." I discovered the saloon and guest house on a 1991 boat trip down the Illinois and Mississippi rivers with Berwyn club owner Bill FitzGerald, chef Tom Cimms, video documentarian Kevin Hoy and others.

Although we spent most of our two-week trip sleeping on FitzGerald's pontoon, we did crash at the guest house when we arrived in Natchez. We put the boat at the rickety Stevens Dock, which is now a parking lot. We were warmly served cold beers by bartender John David "J.D." Montgomery, who has been at the saloon

since 1981. Sometimes "J.D." can barely be seen behind the bar. He stands 4 feet 11.

FitzGerald came across the saloon and guest house in 1989 when he was traveling downriver with his future wife, Kate, on his tiny 1959 red Cruisette motorboat. "Andre took us under his wings," he says. "When he saw us coming down river on that little thing, he was all over it. He paraded all his drinking buddies down to look at it. He wanted to hear about our stories and he wanted to tell us stories, too.

"He's the mayor of that street down there."

Farish says he no longer has customers like us, who just got off the boat. "We got a few nuts," he says. "Not many, because there's no place to dock a boat anymore. The biggest nut we ever had was Mr. Oregon."

Mr. Oregon was a body builder who had won the state title of "Mr. Oregon." "He got in a wet suit and waded into the head of the Mississippi River and swam down river," Farish says. "Now, I was out in my boat and saw what looked like a black garbage bag floating in the river. I get close to it and see it is Mr. Oregon. He was calling ahead to towns and swimming all the way to the mouth of the Mississippi."

Once you get him going, Farish enjoys telling these stories. He generally can be found at the saloon just before sunset. Search him out. He is the third glorious bridge over the river, one between the past and present.

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The Under the Hill Saloon and Mark Twain Guest House is at 33 Silver St. in Natchez. Room One (with the balcony) is \$75 a night; the middle room is \$65 a night, and the smaller Room Three is \$65. Keep in mind the disclaimer on the guest house rate card: "Weekend entertainment in the saloon is not overpowering, but one demanding complete silence before 2 a.m. should probably stay elsewhere." (601-446-8023).

I just stayed there en route to Jazz Fest 2011...the rate card is correct!



