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SPRINGFIELD, Mo.--- Most rock n' roll gypsies know about the Chelsea Hotel in New York City. The original house of blues on West 23rd Street is where punker Sid Vicious checked out and gunslinger William Burroughs often checked in. Later this month Dee Dee Ramone, bassist of the Ramones, is releasing his memoir-novel Chelsea Horror Hotel, based on the storied dive.

Roll over Beethoven.

Tell Dee Dee the news.

The heartland version of the Chelsea is the Best Western Route 66 Rail Haven, 203 S. Glenstone in Springfield, Mo.

Elvis Presley crashed in room 409 at the Rail Haven. And alt-country artists such as Dave Alvin, Robbie Fulks and Syd Straw stay at the Rail Haven when they record at Lou Whitney's (Morells, Skeletons) Studio in downtown Springfield.

``The Rail Haven has a nice pool," Alvin said in a phone call from California. ``One of my favorite memories is during one of those hot, humid summer lightning storms, I was just sitting in the pool looking at old Route 66. It was in the midst of a light rain.

And Bobby (Alvin-Skeletons drummer) Hicks later showed me the Carter house, just a block up the street and to the right."

During the late 1940s the Carter Family singing group lived in a Springfield boarding house at 1719 E. Walnut St. while they were regulars on the Ozark Jubilee radio show.

In 1956 Elvis headlined the still-standing Shrine Mosque, west of the Rail Haven on Route 66. The four-story mosque is deeply influenced by Arabic architecture. It was a serendipitous gig for a future king.

At the time of its 1923 construction, the 45-by-50-foot stage was second largest only to the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. When Elvis played the Shrine Mosque, he was booked into the Kentwood Arms Hotel in downtown Springfield.

``Elvis was fond of two things," said Gordon Elliott, a 57-year-old Springfield native who has owned the Rail Haven since 1994. ``Mama and Cadillacs. Elvis brought his mother on the tour. She stayed here. And he didn't like being downtown."

You could say it was a heartbreak hotel.

So Elvis relocated to the Rail Haven.

“This was the best,” Elliott said while sitting in the motel's three-stool diner, the smallest diner in town. “This was the first motel to have direct dial phones. Up to that point, you had to go to the offices to use the phone. Robert Mitchum always stayed here when he came across country. He used to drive by himself.” I knew there was a reason I related to him.

Honky-tonk singer Gene Watson stays at the Rail Haven when he's gigging in the area and no one is sure if Springfield native Brad Pitt has ever spent a night in the historic motel. The Rail Haven does have a standing offer to his family for a free, confidential night to stay in any suite.

Springfield is recognized as the birthplace of Route 66.

It was 75 years ago on April 30 that officials met in Springfield to designate the new Chicago-to-Los Angeles highway as “Route 66.”

The Rail Haven dates back to 1938, when brothers Elwyn and Lawrence Lippman opened a motel court of eight bedroom and kitchenette cottages on Glenstone Avenue. The tiny cottages were surrounded by apple trees and playground equipment, including gliding horses that pointed west.

The motel was built on four acres of a former orchard at the intersections of US 66, 65 and 60. Elwyn was impressed with the circular sycamore groves he had seen at the University of California in Berkeley, so he re-created a grove with Missouri sycamores on the site of the present-day swimming pool. The majestic sycamores that watch over the parking lot are originals.

A full-service gas station with a two-tabled diner was on the current site of the motel office. Today, the Rail Haven celebrates that heritage with ornamental gas pumps that sit in front of the retro sandstone-colored rock facade of the office and diner (which serves complimentary continental breakfast for guests). The Rail Haven office still has its original working phone booth with rotary dial.

The Rail Haven got its name because of the split rail fence that surrounded the property. The fence was built to replicate an Ozark hillbilly ambiance, something Elvis probably appreciated.

During the 1940s the Rail Haven's first postcard said, “Look for the rail fence/For motorists who demand the best/Popular haven for women and children/and very good beds!” Portions of the rail have been restored. Elliott gathered the quartered-cedar logs for the rail from the same folks who make the split rails at the Big Cedar Lodge in Branson, about 30 miles south of Springfield.

Elliott said, "All the cabins were what you would call 'duplex' today. You won't see much difference from the outside as to the way it was then. It was pretty stark. We did lighten the (olive green) colors. We put in landscaping. We remodeled the pool.

"Many cabins had a garage in the middle and a kitchenette adjoining the garage. In the 1950s those became obsolete. The old owners removed some of the original cabins to make way for new sections where they were able to add 30 units with a flair of the '50s. They kept the remaining units, converted the garages (into rooms) and built the buildings together, creating more units."

Today the Rail Haven is a rustic compound of 93 units; 42 of them are original converted cottages. The last time I stayed at the Rail Haven, I was lucky and drew Room 408. Request it.

First, you're in the aura of Elvis, and second, 408 has an old-fashioned vibrating recliner near the front window. I felt like a jiggy Wilfred Brimley. Alvin laughed and said, "I've had a recliner every time I've stayed there. Its pretty cool." Elliott said 15 rooms were recliner-equipped.

Elliott's parents Rebecca and John were immigrants from Northern Ireland. Once they arrived in New York City, John was dispatched to minister at the Southeast Gospel Chapel in Springfield. "They actually drove Route 66 into Springfield," Elliott said. "They had never stayed in a hotel. They'd drive 200 miles and stay at another Irish friend's house. I grew up right down the street. We'd always pass the motel on the way to church."

As is often the case on Route 66, I found someone with Chicago roots during my visit to the Rail Haven. Author Reta Spears-Stewart is a sweet, Aunt Bea kind of woman who wrote the book *Route 66 Rail Haven: An Offspring of the Mother Road* (Barnabas Publishing, \$19.95). She left Hinsdale for Springfield in the early 1980s to be with her mother, who is originally from Ozark County.

"When I was a kid we traveled from Chicago to Los Angeles on Route 66," said Stewart, a native of Chicago's West Side. "We'd pick up my grandmother up in Ozark County. We were driving a Nash Rambler. We'd take biscuits and hams to eat along the way. We made that trip just before World War II."

Stewart's late father Tom was a traveling Camel cigarette salesman. Of course, he smoked three packs a day. One day he decided to quit. "Every time he wanted a pack of cigarettes, he'd put a quarter in the bank," she recalled. "That's what they cost then. He saved enough in a year for us to go to California."

Elliott is the president of Elliott Lodging, which operates five motels in Springfield, two in Joplin, Mo., and one in Branson. But the Rail Haven may be the property dearest to his heart.

“It was a piece of history that was about to disappear,” he said. “Nobody was doing anything but kicking these things out of national brands. They were getting worse and worse, where people wouldn't stay in them.

"Our vision was to keep as much of the original motel as we possibly could, yet make it modern enough for a brand like Best Western, which is more tolerant to be different." I like that phrase. That's the beauty of Route 66. The tolerance of its gentle souls are what makes it so different.