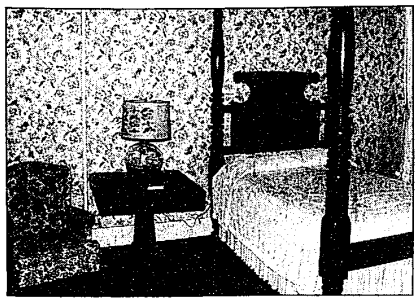
travel

The more things change, the more this inn stays the same



When the door is closed it means the room is occupied. Furnishings include four-posters and samplers. (Photo by Iris Sanderson Jones)

By IRIS SANDERSON JONES

You would not be surprised to see the Golden Lamb hotel in a setting like Greenfield Village or Williamsburg. In either place, it would seem perfectly natural to peer across a retaining rope into an historically perfect bedroom full of antiques.

You don't expect to find it on the main street of Lebanon, Ohio, within a half-hour drive of Cincinatti, and with a sign on the wall that tells you not to open any closed doors along the hall.

A closed door means that the bedroom is occupied, for the Golden Lamb's regular rate is $26 single and $32 double a night.

The Golden Lamb is the oldest inn in Ohio but it is not a place of musty carpets and cabbage odors in the hall. Nor is it a place of history and silence.

The 20th century motorists who stamp their feet against the cold in the lobby daily are headed for one of the five dining rooms on the main floor, or for one of the four small banquet rooms on the second floor.

THIS PLACE has been popular and at the center of town life since the first log-cabin hostelry was built on this spot in 1802. Local politicians knew the hazards of fording streams and riding muddy trails on horseback during those post-revolutionary days, so it was here they talked about the first great highway across the continent, now U.S. 40.

The Shakers came to town to build nearby Union Village, the First Division Ohio Militia gathered at the inn during the War of 1812, opera singers and roving minstrels presented theater in the Grand Ballroom. Townfolk celebrated the 1815 Battle of New Orleans in the dining room of "Mr. Henry Share's Hotel."

Everything that happened to 19th century America happened in some way in the Golden Lamb: the canal builders checked in, the stage coach stopped at the door, the first trains brought their passengers for dinner.

And most of the famous people who traveled in those hard-to-travel days left their names behind on one of the bedroom doors: Henry Clay, Daniel Webster and even Charles Dickens.

Not everybody liked it, of course. Dickens was furious because it was a temperence hotel and he wanted a drink:

"We dine soon after with the boarders in the house, and have nothing to drink but tea and coffee. As they are both very bad, and the water is worse, I ask for brandy; but it is a temperence hotel, and spirtis were not to be had for love or money.

This preposterous forcing of unpleasant drinks down the reluctant throats of travelers is not uncommon in America, but I never discovered that the scruples of such wincing landlords induced them to preserve any unusually nice balance between the quality of their fare and their scale of charges . . . perhaps the plainest course for persons of such tender conscience would be a total abstinence from tavern keeping."

Despite this low rating, the Dickens Room is the only bedroom in the inn preserved for looking and not for sleeping.

APPROACH THE Golden Lamb along Ohio State Highway 63. It is half way betweeen I-75 and I-71, near the intersection of Highway 48.

You can easily drive past the four-story red brick building with the white pillars unless you watch carefully for the small old-fashioned tavern sign that reads Golden Lamb.

Closer to the door you will see other signs: National Historic Register, and one verifying it as the oldest hotel in Ohio by the Turtle Creek Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

A contemporary traveler with a thermos bottle in her hand waits on the scarred antique bench in the lobby, where antiques and historic curios are displayed against a reproduction of 19th century stenciled wallpaper.

The inn is rightfully considered a Shaker museum, and you will find authentic Shaker furniture and crafts in all of the dining rooms on the main floor. They are also scattered judiciously up the staircases and throughout the bedrooms on the second, third and fouth floors.

The first two questions most travelers ask are: "Can you really sleep in those four-poster beds, amid all that valuable furniture, without worrying about damaging things?" and "Don't the guests steal things."

According to assistant manger Fred Compton who grew up in a neighboring town and has spent all of his working life so far at the Golden Lamb, guests neither damage nor steal.

"People have a great deal of respect for authentic old furniture like this, so they are careful of it and they don't steal it," he said.

"We have all kinds of guests, from regular weekenders to the overflow crowds from Kings Island. We never have any problem."

THE BEDROOM furniture is not original to the inn, nor was it acquired for historic purposes. Robert H. Jones, who has owned the inn since 1926, bought the furniture cheap from second-hand stores after a fire in the hotel several years ago.

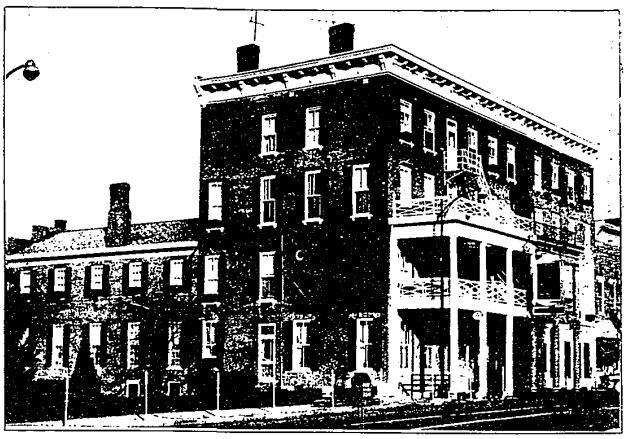
The Golden Lamb has been operated for the last 11 years by the Comisar family, a name famous among restaurant-lovers in Cincinnati. Grandfather Comisar came from Russia more than 50 years ago, and his family have run a traditional French restaurant called the Maisonette there, an award-winning five-star restaurant known among gourmets.

Fortunately, they knew a good thing when they saw one, and have never attempted to change the purely early American character of the Golden Lamb or its dining rooms.

Lunch runs from roast lamb with glazed carrots ($4.35) to chicken salad sandwich with fruit cup ($3.85). Dinner ranges from roast turkey ($7.95) and Long Island duckling ($9.95) to filet mignon ($10.75).

But it isn't the building or the menu or the antiques that make a fine house now, any more than they made a fine house 178 years ago when Jonas Seaman built his log-cabin tavern here in 1802.

THE DIFFERENCE between an inn in a restored village and a living inn like this is in the sound of people's voices and the clink of glasses at the bar and in the dining room.



The Golden Lamb Hotel is Ohio's oldest and has been at the center of Lebanon, Ohio, life since the first log-cabin hostelry was built on the spot in 1802. It is considered a Shaker museum, with crafts and furniture scattered up staircases and throughout the inn's rooms.

travel log

Iris Sanderson Jones

Take a break, learn a skill, or plan a springtime fling

In Pine Mountain, Ga., where spring workshops are in full swing by February, they have already started talking about flowers. If you drive down Interstate 75 into the sun, you might want to stop and smell the gardens. Don't forget to send me a postcard.

Calloway Gardens workshops run from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and cost about $10. You can learn landscaping Feb. 11, garden planning Feb. 14, flowering trees Feb. 20, vegetable gardening, Feb. 22, and map reading for field trips Feb. 28.

If you want to know more, contact the gardens at Pine Mountain, Ga. 31822. It's too painful for us chilly snowbirds to talk about it further.

BY THE TIME you get to Florida, Cypress Gardens will be in the middle of its rose festival, a salute to the flower of love, friendship and peace, featuring special lectures by several of their top horticulturists. Cypress Gardens is an All-American Rose Selection test site for future rose winners.

IF YOU INSIST on punishing yourself with these warm weather thoughts, and you must stay home, there are two other spring and summer events you might want to plan for: the second annual Houston Festival, which opened with quite a bang last year, will be held March 20-30; and the New Mexico D.H. Florence Festival will take place in Santa Fe July 16 and 20.

Let me know if you want more information on those.

COLD WEATHER CAN be fun, too, remember. Michigan Tech's Winter Carnival is in full swing through Feb. 10 at Houghton, and the Mardi Gras de Snow will be held Jan. 18-20 in Paradise. (Yes, but is it warmer in Hell?)

Grayling's Winter Sports Carnival is scheduled for Feb. 8-10 and Feb. 15-17. Write for a "Winter Calendar of Travel Events" to the Michigan Travel Bureau, P.O. Box 30226, Lansing 48909. Call toll free 1-800-292-2520 for ski and snowmobile conditions.

"Winterfun in Southeast Michigan" describes all the exciting winter activities in southeast Michigan. Write to the Southeast Michigan Travel and Tourist Association, American Center Building, Suite 350, Southfield 48034.

If that's not enough snow activity for you, the Brockway Mountain Ski Race takes place in Copper Harbor March 1 and the Heikki Luntta Snow Festival in Delaware, Mich., March 15.

I like snow, but I like it best when I see the first tiny little crocus coming up through its whiteness in spring.

In the meantime, don't forget the Snow Train that runs Saturdays and Sundays, through March 30, out of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Tours leave the train depot at 8:50 a.m. every Saturday and Sunday and returns at 4:30 p.m. after a trip up into Ontario snow country. Reserve in advance by telephone: 1-705-254-4331. Adults $17 and children 5 years old through high school, $9. Younger than 5, free.

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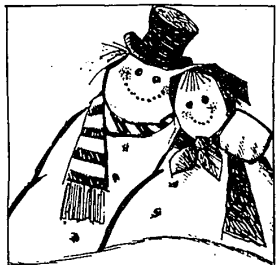

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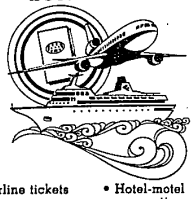

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