

Burris Hotel Inspired "Petticoat Junction" TV Series

By Peggy Smith Hake

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Burris Hotel (once called the Rock Island Hotel) was a hustling, bustling hotel in Eldon, located near the railroad tracks of the Rock Island Line. Willis and Martha (Bowlin) Burris operated this popular hotel. Their nine children spent many happy hours there as they grew up keeping watch on the daily trains and passengers who were transported across Missouri with stops at Eldon.

Willis and Martha had lived in the Osage River country near Tuscumbia for a number of years, but decided to move to Saline township after their children were older. They operated three different hotels in Eldon over a period of years. One was the Godfrey Hotel at 2nd and Maple Streets, the Burris Hotel #1 at Mill Street and Old Highway 52, and the Rock Island/Burris Hotel near the railroad depot.

One of their daughters, Alice Elizabeth, grew up experiencing the hotel life of a small railroad town in central Missouri. When

Alice was grown, she went to St. Louis, where she met and married Benjamin Barth in 1908. Alice and Benjamin had a daughter, Ruth Margaret. As a young woman, Ruth moved to Kansas City and was employed by KMBC Radio, which still sends out strong radio signals all over the Midwest today. While there, Ruth Margaret met and married a young man from Independence, Missouri, named Paul Henning. The couple moved to the west coast in later years and Paul became involved in script writing for the movies and later for television.

In the 1960's, Paul Henning was inspired to write the television series called "Petticoat Junction", a down-home, popular series that American audiences loved. Paul's "Shady Rest Hotel" in the "Petticoat Junction" show was patterned after Ruth's grandparent's hotel, the Burris/Rock Island in Eldon, Missouri. Her mother, Alice Burris Barth, had related so many wonderful stories of her life growing up in a small town hotel near the Rock Island Line. Paul Henning,

being a talented writer, brought his mother-in-law's memories to life and shared them with America. Paul and Ruth's daughter, Linda Kaye Henning, the great granddaughter of Willis and Martha (Bowlin) Burris, portrayed one of the TV daughters in the "Petticoat Junction" series.

When Benjamin and Alice Barth died, they were brought back home and buried in the Burris family cemetery plot in the Tuscumbia cemetery. There are four generations of the Burris family there. The progenitor of this old Miller County family, Mastin Burris and his wife Elizabeth, were among the earliest burials in the Tuscumbia cemetery. In 1844,

when Mastin died, it was called the Burris family cemetery, located in the southeast corner of today's Tuscumbia City Cemetery. Mastin's son, Miles Burris, had bought two town lots on the hill at Tuscumbia before 1844 from Isaac N. Goodrich for a family burial ground. Paul and Ruth (Barth) Henning had a rock wall erected around the grave sites of Ruth's ancestors after her mother's death in 1969.

The old Burris Hotel, sitting for many years beside the Rock Island railroad, was torn down a few years ago, but the memories live on in each re-run of the "Petticoat Junction" television show.



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