

Louise Ward Flint Slansky

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Interviewer: Edward Woodward

Louise Ward Flint Slansky was born October 14, 1918 in Goodwater, Alabama. Slansky's family acquired the Manhattan Hotel in St. Petersburg during the mid-1900s (Track 1). Her father, James Lawson Ward, was in real estate. Her mother, Alma Elizabeth Carr Ward, ran the 87-room hotel, which also had cottages in the back (Tracks 1 and 2). The rooms cost \$40 a month (Track 1). A small staff included several white maids; maid service was an extra fee (Track 6 and 10). Guests were expected to keep their rooms clean.

The Manhattan hotel included the historic Williams house, built in 1891 by St. Petersburg founder John C. Williams (Stebbins, 1993, 1). Slansky described the converted house: it had nine apartments; the porch was enclosed for bathrooms and kitchens; and the top floor was a honeymoon suite (Tracks 5 and 6). The first floor was converted to a television room (Track 5). Looking at a picture of the Williams House, she recalled a tangerine and grapefruit tree in the yard (Track 13).

Many hotel guests were Europeans who fled their home countries during the World War II era, Slansky recalled (Track 2). They were of German, French, English and Greek descent (Tracks 2 and 5). Her guest from Greece returned to his home country. However, a few months later, he returned to the hotel, preferring St. Petersburg's sunshine (Tracks 2 and 7). Gifts from hotel guests were common. One European guest gave Slansky's mother a chalice purportedly looted from Versailles in 1776 (Tracks 1 and 2). Other guests were retirees, many in their 70s, from Michigan, Chicago, and New York (Track 3). Slansky credited the St. Petersburg Chamber of Commerce with recruiting the retirees.

Some local draws for hotel guests included The Million Dollar Pier, professional baseball, and dining downtown (Tracks 3 and 9). Dancing at The Pier was popular; Slansky's mother was a good dancer (Track 3). Her family also frequented dances at the Coliseum (Track 4). Meanwhile, the hotel hosted parties for their guests about every month, often for occasions such as Christmas, Valentines, and Thanksgiving (Track 6). Slansky also recalled a party celebrating the hotel's anniversary that drew local dignitaries such as the mayor of St. Petersburg and the president of the chamber of commerce. At one time, the hotel had a plaque made by Slansky's father that listed famous occupants, such as evangelist Billy Sunday (Track 1). However, the plaque was stolen.

In the 1930s, Slansky frequently modeled for the chamber of commerce (Tracks 2 and 3). She recalled modeling at Sunken Gardens and the Soreno Hotel waterfront (Track 2). At about age 18, during her college years (Slansky attended Howard College and Auburn University ((Track 3 and Biographical data sheet))), Slansky was crowned princess of the Festival of States (Track 4). As princess, Slansky won a free trip to Cuba. She described

dancing with “handsome” Cuban boys, going to casinos, receiving gifts and carrying an arm-full of three-foot long gladiolus.

One summer Slansky worked at Webb’s City selling kitchen ware. She described its owner, “Doc” Webb, as a “character,” who spoke to everybody (Track 13). Slansky recalled a one-game stint playing softball for the “world champion” Hall Girls at Al Lang Field when she was about 18 to 20 years old (Track 2). Slansky described her one at-bat: borrowing cleats, which she was unaccustomed to wearing, she got a hit, but tripped about ten feet from first base. She crawled safely to first base, anyway. Slansky told her family about the experience, speculating about making the team (Track 3). Slansky said her father, who played college baseball at Jacksonville State in Alabama, told her: “If you go with them, we’ll disown you. We’d just soon have a lady wrestler in the family.”

From about the 1950s to 1960s, Slansky traveled world-wide: safaris in Nairobi, Kenya; flying over Mount Everest; climbing the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Slansky showed her slides at schools and the hotel (Track 10 and 11).

In the 1970s, Slansky, who as an adult lived for many years in Alabama, returned to St. Petersburg to operate the hotel for her mother, who was ill. (Tracks 5 and 8). Slansky’s work included routine maintenance, such as climbing a ladder attached to the Williams house to repair its roof with tar (Track 6 and 13). On Wednesdays, her one night off, she danced at the Coliseum (Tracks 7 and 8). Slansky noted she was in the movie *Cocoon* as an extra in a dance scene (Track 8).

When Slansky took over the hotel in the 1970s, she had about 100 guests (Track 5). Some guests lived at the hotel as long as 30 years. It wasn’t uncommon for guests to die in their rooms. Slansky would check on guests she hadn’t seen regularly to ensure they were alive. When Slansky’s mother died, Slansky continued to run the hotel until she closed it in 1993; the costs of ownership were prohibitive (Stebbins, 1993, 1).

Summary note: Follow-up questions to this interview are included in the narrator file.

Reference List: Stebbins, John. 1993 City hopes to preserve historic Williams House. *The Tampa Tribune*, 4 October, 1.