

ESCAPES



Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau

An aerial view of Mackinac Island and its harbor shows The Grand Hotel, upper left, where Carleton Varney has been the interior designer for more than 40 years.

TRAVEL

Grand, indeed

By Diane Cowen
STAFF WRITER

MACKINAC ISLAND, Mich. — Long stems of bright-red geranium blooms bobbed in the breeze as guests mingled on one end of The Grand Hotel's 660-foot front porch, an impressive welcome if there ever was one. Legendary interior designer Carleton Varney was holding court, greeting guests and signing copies of his newest book, "Rooms to Remember," a tribute to his more than 40 years of work at the historic Michigan hotel.

On one cool evening — it was late June and never got much over 70 degrees — about 100 people sipped champagne and nibbled snacks while the 82-year-old Varney worked the crowd as if he'd known each person forever. Mixed in with Grand Hotel staff members and his Dorothy Draper & Co. colleagues were hotel guests here for his annual Dorothy Draper Decorating Class weekend — an event filled with tales of his mentor's start in the decorating business, Varney's own celebrity clientele and a behind-the-scenes look at The Grand, where he has been the decorator for more than 40 years.

Three railroad companies built the hotel in 1887 on Mackinac Island — in Lake Huron between mainland Michigan and its Upper Peninsula — as a destination for summer steamboat passengers. A couple of expansions eventually took the hotel to 397 rooms, but until Varney and his staff arrived, the place was very brown and beige and in need of attention.

It was 1976, and hotel owner Dan Musser Jr. was in a tight spot: He would soon host the Hotel and Resort Owners Association's annual meeting and needed to impress his competition. By then, Draper had passed away and Varney was running her famous namesake business, so Musser flew him in, gave him a tour of the place, then sat down for a talk.

Bob Tagatz, the Grand Hotel's historian and a born storyteller, gave this account of their exchange: "Mr. Varney looked at him and said, 'The jig is up. I know why I'm here — you're hosting the hotel convention, and you want to frou-frou this place up.'"

Varney was blunt.

"If you sign up with Dorothy Draper, we do everything, everything you see coming and going. That's when Mr. Musser knew it was going to be really expensive," Tagatz continued. "You



The Grand Hotel

The Grand Hotel served as the setting for the romance/science-fiction/time-travel drama "Somewhere in Time," set in 1912, and now has a Somewhere in Time Suite.

know, Carleton Varney is the only decorator who can out-spend an unlimited budget."

Varney's plan was to bring everything outdoors to the interior.

The lilacs, trilliums, geraniums, marigolds and roses blooming outdoors were woven into carpets, upholstery and wallpaper in every room, from the lobby to the dining room, guest rooms and even the ice cream parlor. Varney created a color palette covering the spectrum, without, most notably, neutrals.

Just as the theatrical Draper demanded that her staff "show her nothing that looked like gravy," Varney banned beige from The Grand Hotel. Ceilings are Jefferson Blue to match the sky, and walls are even more vivid: Grand Green, Cameo Azalea, Presidential Yellow or even Tuxedo Red, all from the Draper/Varney paint collection with the Fine Paints of Europe.

"I'm not against beige as a color — some people think we are — but when I design a hotel room, I have to dream it. I walk through a hallway and stand in a lobby, and I have to dream it," Varney said. "I stayed in a hotel and everything was beige, the travertine floor, the tile. I got out of the shower and thought, 'I'm naked in a bowl of oatmeal.'"

Early on, The Grand Hotel and Mackinac Island were a summer retreat for the wealthy and in time became a popular destination, mostly for Midwesterners in search of a wholesome vacation, despite the fact that the no-cars-allowed island isn't the easiest place to get to.

But Varney's floral prints, stripes and bold colors turned The Grand Hotel into something

Mackinac Island's famous hotel an immersion in design

no one had imagined: a design immersion.

It's not uncommon to see repeat visitors dressed in suit jackets or dresses made in the patterns used in hotel draperies or seat cushions or other prints from the Draper/Varney designs. A boutique in the hotel sells bathrobes, scarves and leggings made in Draper's iconic Braziliance pattern with banana leaves and clusters of grapes.

You can buy men's neckties in the preppy pink-and-green Petal Design or phone cases in the more contemporary Akakina floral print.

Last year, one family visited with an infant who was their fifth generation to vacation at The Grand. Mothers and daughters come for weekend girl getaways, and baby boomers celebrate landmark birthdays and anniversaries here.

"We sell summer memories, an experience," said Tagatz of The Grand experience. "It's not one thing we do, it's everything we do. It's a memory, a heart and a soul and a spirit. We are acutely aware there are cheaper places to stay and cheaper places to eat, so what we offer has to have value."

Decorating like Dorothy

The people who show up for hotel decorating classes might surprise you.

There was a young girl in

About the trip

Mackinac Island: This 3.8-square-mile island sits in the Straits of Mackinac in Lake Huron between mainland Michigan and its Upper Peninsula. There are some 1,600 lodging rooms on the island. For information, visit mackinacisland.org.

The Grand Hotel: 286 Grand Ave., Mackinac Island, Mich.; 800-334-7263; daily room rates are \$345 and up (per person, double occupancy) and \$615 and up (single occupancy) Sundays-Thursdays and \$380 and up (per person, double occupancy) and \$685 and up (single occupancy) Fridays-Saturdays. Children 9 and younger stay free; ages 10-17, \$65 per night; 18 and older, \$149 per night. The hotel has a no-tipping policy.

Getting there: From Houston, Spirit, Delta, United and American airlines all fly to Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport. From there, you can rent a car and drive about four hours to Mackinaw City, where you take a ferry to the island. Another option is to take a small commuter flight on Sky West Airlines from the Detroit airport to the Pellston Regional Airport, then a shuttle ride to Mackinaw City for the ferry ride.

pigtails and braces, wearing a sweet dress made of a pink-and-blue Draper/Varney print, and older couples who've been to the hotel many times. Some of Varney's decorating clients were there, and a few were interior designers who simply love color and want to hear from a kindred spirit.

Sharrie and Stephanie Schacher, both dressed in colorful summer prints, were there for a mother-daughter trip — both love Mackinac Island, The Grand Hotel and Carleton Varney.

The Schachers, residents of Auburn, Mich., first came to The Grand five years ago to celebrate Stephanie's college graduation. They returned this year because Stephanie, 27 and a registered dietitian, just finished her master's degree.

"If I need a happy place, I just walk into Stephanie's room," said Sharrie Schacher, 58. "I could listen to more stories, the personal history. How can you come here and not be happy?"

Varney talked about his firm's history and what he learned from his mentor, Draper, a debutante from an old-money New

Hotel continues on G16



The Grand Hotel

Motorized vehicles aren't allowed on Mackinac Island, so you get around on foot, bicycle or horse-drawn carriage.

ZEST

HOTEL

From page G15

York family with important social connections. Eleanor Roosevelt was a cousin, and a niece was social secretary for the Kennedy White House. Though the Drapers divorced in 1930, her husband, Dr. George Draper, was Franklin D. Roosevelt's personal physician.

After World War II, when the Greenbriar Hotel in West Virginia was used as a military hospital, Draper was called in to restore it. After her death in 1969, Varney continued on as the keeper of Greenbriar style. (Yes, it's the same Greenbriar where the Houston Texans have gone for summer training camp.)

Varney can do some name-dropping of his own: Famous clients include Judy Garland, Ethel Merman and Joan Crawford, who was so loyal to Varney that she accompanied him to TV interviews to make sure his makeup was right for the lighting.

Draper's style was theatrical and eclectic, mixing pieces of every genre and having no qualms about sawing off the legs of a Chippendale table or lacquering a valuable French antique. Today we might call it "maximalism" – she liked a lot of stuff – but back in the day, wealthy clients couldn't get enough of it.

In fact, Draper – who made interior design a profession – was so influential that famed broadcaster Edward R. Murrow interviewed her on TV in 1957, the duchess of decorating taking him on a tour of her own home.

Varney still practices her style in updated fashion, living and decorating by his own rules. He often wears the scarves he designs as neckties, and when one snooty dinner club showed him the dress code, he famously replied: "I've worn this scarf to Buckingham Palace, and it was good enough for the queen."

'Somewhere in Time'

Those who've never been to the place might recognize the hotel as the setting for "Somewhere in Time," a 1980 romance/science-fiction/time-travel drama starring Jane Seymour and Christopher Reeve.

Critics didn't love the movie, but it still has a cultlike following with the International Network of Somewhere in Time Enthusiasts, which Tagatz said is the second-largest movie fan club, behind "Gone With the Wind."

Some 95 percent of the movie was filmed on the island, with 90 percent of it at The Grand. For one weekend every summer, the hotel looks like a return to the movie set, as fans return in Edwardian attire to live as if



The Grand Hotel

Afternoon tea is set up in the lobby of The Grand Hotel, where the décor incorporates colors from the landscape.



The Grand Hotel

The Laura Bush Suite is airy and bright. Carleton Varney talked with the former first lady about its design.



Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau

Kayaking is popular recreation around Mackinac Island, Mich.

they're part of their favorite film. Some two-thirds of guests that weekend bring trunks of clothes and huge hatboxes for two to three clothing changes a day, strolling the grounds with parasols as if they're living in 1912.

"Love transcends death, time travel. If that movie touches you, you can come here and live it," said Tagatz, mentioning a movie-related tour he leads. "Every time I give that tour, someone starts crying, 'I love that movie so much.'"

The rest of the island

The Grand Hotel has a huge presence on Mackinac Island, but there's much more to see and do. Because cars aren't allowed, you have to take a ferry across the lake to get there. That makes bicycling, kayaking and horse-drawn-carriage tours popular.

There's some history to soak up since Fort Mackinac, originally a British outpost, dates to the Revolutionary War, and the island has plenty of Native American history.

Tribes who first inhabited the island called it "Mitchimakinak" – or "Big Turtle" for its shape – and French fur traders spelled it "Michilimackinac," later shortened by the British to "Mackinac." Incidentally, you'll get to the island from a ferry launched from Mackinaw City on the mainland, a city whose spelling was Americanized with a "w."

The island, an 8.2-mile run, walk or bike ride around its perimeter, is just 3.8 square miles and has hotels and bed-and-breakfasts with about 1,600 rooms for its May-October vaca-

tion season. Beyond that, it's too cold to go because Lake Huron freezes over, and the 600 or so year-round islanders have to travel across on snowmobiles for everything since island restaurants and shops all cater to the 1 million annual seasonal visitors.

Bird watchers will spot eagles and hawks in April and May, and in early summer you'll see yellow warblers, American redstarts and indigo buntings.

Even Mackinaw City is tiny outside of summer, when those with summer homes close up and head south, and the already small village shrinks to about 800 residents.

All of that makes seasonal staffing an issue, so don't be surprised if you hear Caribbean accents when you head out for lunch or dinner. Many from Jamaica or other Caribbean islands come to Mackinac during their own off-season. And culinary students get valuable training in hotel kitchens during the summer.

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Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau

Bicycling is a popular form of transportation on Mackinac Island, which has a perimeter of 8.2 miles.

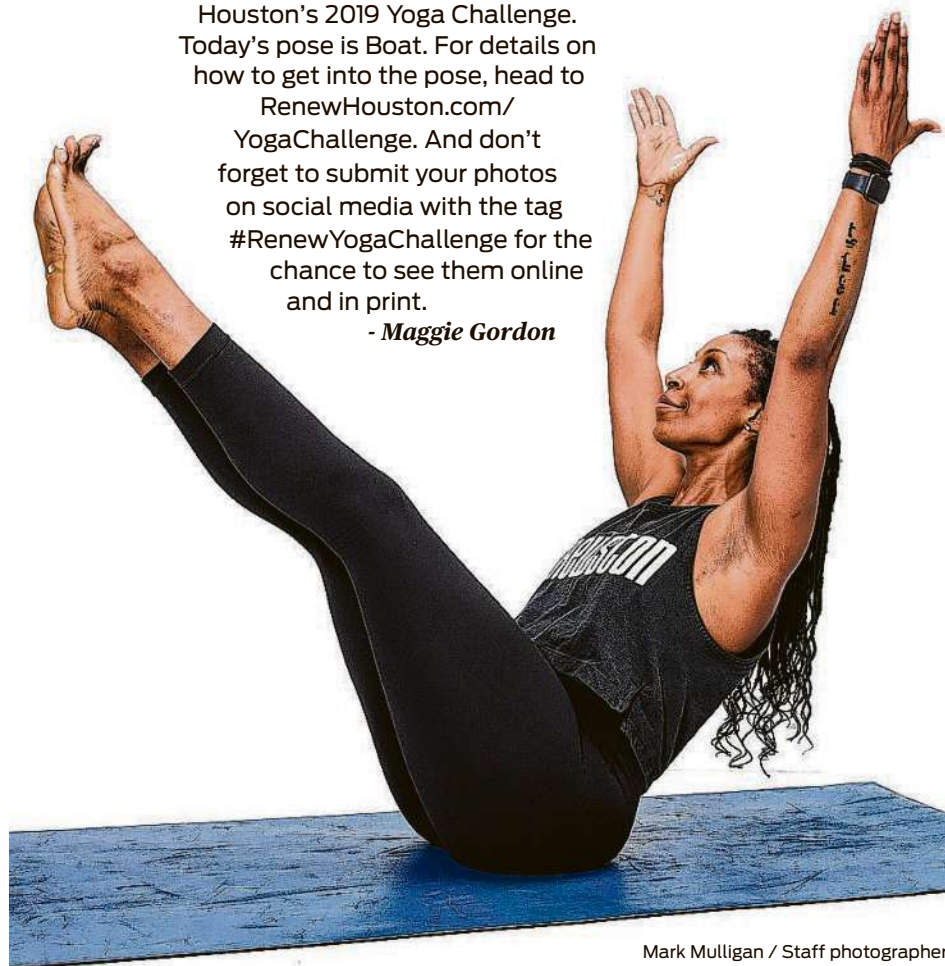
YOGA

#RENEWYOGACHALLENGE

DAY 14: BOAT

Welcome to the 14th day of ReNew Houston's 2019 Yoga Challenge. Today's pose is Boat. For details on how to get into the pose, head to RenewHouston.com/YogaChallenge. And don't forget to submit your photos on social media with the tag #RenewYogaChallenge for the chance to see them online and in print.

- Maggie Gordon



Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer

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