

Gateway Inn . . .

Williamson Sells Famous Resort

Two of Wisconsin's most famous resorts, one a favorite hide-away of former President Eisenhower and his family, were sold last month to a Cable, Wisconsin-based development firm.

The Gateway Inn at Land O'Lakes, a motel-recreation complex once famous for its unique gambling casino, and Dolhun's Resort near Lake Tomahawk in Vilas County, were purchased in separate transactions totaling more than a million dollars by DeGayner & Co., a firm active in real estate development and pre-engineered housing manufacture.

The Gateway was owned since 1961 by Walt Williamson, Rockford, Ill., who also is the owner of another famous resort, Dell View Hotel at Lake Delton.

"There's a great demand for recreational resorts and convention facilities in northern Wisconsin," said Jeffrey DeGayner, president of DeGayner & Co., in announcing his firm's expansion into the resort-hotel field. "With the revitalization of these two resorts we hope to meet that demand."

The Gateway Inn, one of Wisconsin's most historically colorful resorts, was built in 1937 on the site of a grocery store and gasoline station by John H. King. Owner of a chain of radio stations and theatres primarily in the Detroit area, King was one of the founders of 1st American Artists which later became United Artists Studios.

Then called King's Gateway Inn, the building contained 12 bowling alleys, eight billiard tables and a small dining area. Soon after the Inn opened gambling became legal by county option and the building was converted to a casino with about 30 slot machines, three roulette wheels, and crap and blackjack tables.

"Those were the heydays," recalls Lloyd Turnquist, a cook at the Inn during the 1940's who is now a general contractor in Land O'Lakes. "They made millions then. The cashiers' money belts were always bulging."

To accommodate the hundreds of visitors, King built a 56-room motel which opened on Oct. 15, 1938. It contained a dining hall with room for 200 and a large lobby decorated with antiques collected by King and his wife, Sug. During the peak season, as many as 120 people were employed.

"I think nearly everyone in town worked there at one time," says Henry Mitchell, a former maintenance man at the motel who still tends bar there part-time. "When it opened, the place was unusual. There was nothing like it around this neck of the woods or the state."

Turnquist remembers one day in particular. "On the 4th of July in 1941, we ran about 1,500 people through the dining hall. We cleaned out the cooler and had to go to town to buy more meat."

King's contact with the entertainment world and the popularity of his manager, John Garber (a navy pilot in World War II who

now operates the Royal Las Vegas casino in Las Vegas), drew famous personalities from around the country. Catering to the special needs of this wealthy clientele, King constructed an airfield, with the help of the townspeople, that was one of only a few in Wisconsin built without state aid.

Soon after it was completed, King deeded the airfield to the town of Land O'Lakes (then called State Line because it is on the Wisconsin-Michigan border) for one dollar. Until four years ago, when North Central Airlines switched from its DCS's to the bigger Convairs, it was the smallest town in the nation with daily airline service. The Gateway, only a few thousand feet from the runway, also had several small planes of its own at the disposal of its guests.

Even before the gambling law was repealed, King, who maintained a home at Snapjack Lake about 18 miles from the Gateway, began constructing recreational facilities near the motel. A ski jump, the second in the state, was built in 1939. Although the jump has since been torn down, the hill, with its three towers, is still used. In 1944 a nine-hole golf course was added with five holes in Wisconsin and four in Michigan.

Later additions included tennis courts, riding stables, and trap and skeet shooting ranges. In the late 1960's, the largest live pigeon shooting tournaments in the country were held at the Gateway. Trap shoot tournaments with state-wide competition are still held there every May and September.

Before King died in January 1951, he had established the Gateway as "the show place of the North." Regular guests (whose pictures now hang on the motel's Hall of Fame wall) included the McCormick family of International Harvester (who always requested onion soup, according to cook Turnquist), Jack Carson, Dennis Morgan, Hildegard, Lee Remington, Bob Hope, Joe Higgins (the Dodge Safety Sheriff), and Abbot and Costello.

"Milton Eisenhower and his father-in-law, Roy Atkins, spent a lot of time here," recalls Charles McCormick, a Land O'Lakes grocery store owner who managed the Gateway for 15 years after Garber left. "Ike called the golf course one of his favorites and Mamie seemed to like the Northwoods. In 1967, we even hid Jim Lovell (the astronaut) here for about a week before it leaked out to the press."

Two years after King's death, his wife married one of the motel's regular guests — Charles Foy, of the world-famous Seven Little Foys. In 1956, the Inn was remodeled into a supper club with a dance floor and large picture windows installed. Four years later, the Gateway closed during the winter months for the first time since it was built. Early in 1961, the complex was sold to Williamson, who is also owner of an oil company based in Rockford.

That summer, the Inn was remodeled again and six bowling alleys were installed.

A second story was added to the motel increasing the number of rooms to 110 and an indoor glass-enclosed swimming pool was built. Shortly after, the Gateway became the only hotel in the country that had an AAU-approved swim team. Ribbons and medals are still being added to the wall-stocked swim awards display case in the lobby.

About five years ago the bowling alleys were once again removed from the Inn and the building was made into a convention center. Today all that remains of the by-gone gambling days is a basement game room with pin ball machines and electric games of skill. Even that closes at 10 p.m.

Since DeGayner bought the complex early this month, the fire in the motel lobby has been continuously burning just as it did when King was alive.

"That fire was one of King's pet peeves," Turnquist recalls. "No matter what time of year, if he happened to walk by and noticed that the fire was out, he would yell 'FIRE' at the top of his lungs and smoke would soon be rolling again."

Recreation director at the Gateway is William (Bill) Moyle, international swimming and tennis professional who has served as America's Ambassador of Sports in the Mediterranean for four years and is on terminal leave of absence from the University of Chicago where he has been a faculty member for 27 years.

Dolhun's Resort, the other motel-recreation complex DeGayner purchased this month, is 35 miles south of Land O'Lakes on 3,700 acre Lake Tomahawk which connects with other lakes in the 18-mile long Minocqua chain. It consists of a 3,200 ft. lighted sod runway, two hangars, nine motel units, 12 summer homes, 1,000 ft. of sheltered beach and boating area, tennis court and shuffleboards, and supper club.

DeGayner purchased the resort from Theodore Dolhun, Sr., who built the entire complex himself except for four summer homes that were on the land when he bought it in 1944.

Dolhun, who ran the resort from his home in Milwaukee, used one of the hangars for manufacturing fabricated skids, tote boxes and other material handling equipment. The motel units before being reconstructed, were used as car stalls by cottage residents and are now divided into single units and suites with two bedrooms.

The summer homes, all family units, range in size from one to four bedrooms. Each is named after a type of fish available in the area, including Muskie, Pike, Sturgeon and a two-room honeymoon cottage called Minnow.

According to DeGayner, the resort will be renamed Tomahawk Shores and the airstrip will be known as DeGayner Field.