

CORPORATE MEETINGS

Conference Center Opens at Historic Rose Hill

EVER since the first bride-to-be looking for a unique place to hold her wedding discovered Rose Hill five years ago, the historic plantation just outside Rocky Mount has played host to hundreds of murmured “I do’s.” Now that owner Mayo Boddie has positioned Rose Hill as a unique place to hold business meetings and corporate retreats, he’s hearing a chorus of “can dos” as well.

Set on 830 acres that Boddie’s ancestors were granted by the English king in 1762, Rose Hill Conference Center is located in a new wing of the mansion that Boddie was born in—and lovingly restored in 1982. Although brides were content with the pastoral setting, on-site catering, and lakeside gazebo, Boddie knew that business meeting planners would have more practical requirements.

So he built an 8,000-square-foot wing onto the main house to serve as the heart of the conference center. The wing, called Nathan Hall after Boddie’s great-great-great grandfather, consists of a ballroom, an adjacent patio and a professional-grade kitchen.

Boddie knows something about kitchens. He’s chairman of Boddie-Noell Enterprises, which operates 350 restaurants, including about 315 Hardee’s. In fact, the company is the largest Hardee’s franchisee in the country.

With 12,000 employees, it’s also one of the largest privately held companies in the country. Boddie and his brother and uncle started the Rocky Mount-based company in 1962.

Like the rest of Rose Hill, Nathan Hall features modern conveniences amid traditional architecture and furnishings. The ballroom may sport a 16-foot pull-down screen, a pricey audio-visual system and wi-fi service, but these high-tech amenities are complemented by 18-foot ceilings, eight chandeliers and a massive oil portrait of Boddie’s wife, Jean.

Whether a group wants nouvelle cui-

sine or good old barbecue, they can have either, or both. In addition to executive chef Charles Odom—who has been a Boddie-Noell employee for 45 years and is master of traditional Southern fare—there is young Walter Marrotta, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, who recently joined the staff.

Even before Boddie got into the events business, employees from Boddie-Noell and other local businesses frequently were invited to enjoy barbecue at Rose Hill as part of family day outings or celebratory meetings. Four massive, iron pig cookers dominate a wood-walled, screened-in



The pond at Rose Hill offers a scenic background suitable for reflection and strategic thinking. *Photo by Renee Wright*

room off the old smokehouse, which can seat 120. “They’ll flat cook a pig,” noted Boddie of the cookers.

Adding to its “best of both worlds” appeal, Rose Hill is remote enough to create that away-from-it-all feeling, but with the completion of the U.S. 64 bypass, it’s only about a 45-minute drive from Raleigh and an hour from Greenville. Most of Rose Hill’s corporate and wedding clients come from within a 70-mile radius.

When guests aren’t team building or hatching their latest new product launch, they can swim in the pool behind the main house or practice their skeet shooting skills at the range on the other side of the home’s main driveway.

Driving along the plantation’s nearly mile-long drive, visitors notice an ample but rustic-looking house. That’s the weekend home Boddie built to spend time with his wife, three children, two of whom work in the family business, and nine grandchildren. Despite this getaway, he still spends as much time as possible up at the main house.

Boddie’s interest in Rose Hill isn’t limited to renovating the home or retrofitting it for paying guests. Some call it an obsession, others a passion, but whatever it is, it began during the Depression, when Boddie, then a young child, watched his parents lose their home and land.

In 1979, already wealthy thanks to his success as a restaurateur, Boddie decided to get his home place back. He bought it from N.C. Wesleyan College, to which Rose Hill had been deeded by its most recent owner. The home had sat empty for many years and was decrepit. Many builders Boddie consulted advised him to tear the house down and put up a new one. Then he found a builder who embraced his determination to restore the home in which he was born to its former glory. The work was

completed in 1982, and an expansion was done in 1986.

Jokes Boddie, “Some people have yachts or cars as their hobby; I have Rose Hill.”

Although he is involved in every major decision at Rose Hill, Boddie is no micromanager. Rose Hill has a staff, led by Donna Holt, another longtime Boddie-Noell employee, who handle the day-to-day running of the place.

Boddie is just as comfortable inviting people to enjoy his family’s pride and joy as he is welcoming guests to his restaurants. “It’s a good feeling,” he says. “The thing I like about Rose Hill is that a lot of people get to enjoy it. It wouldn’t be much fun if my wife and I sat here behind locked gates.”

—Suzanne M. Wood