

# The Salem Magazine

NORTH of BOSTON  
MAY 1997

SUMMER 2017



## INSIDE

REAYDING FOR THE  
RETURN OF THE  
FRIENDSHIP

DINING OUT: A  
TASTE OF CITY'S  
NEW HOTSPOTS

FAREWELL TO  
SALEM STATE'S  
PRESIDENT

# WARMING GLOW

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HAWTHORNE  
HOTEL

She's known as the woman who lived in the Hawthorne Hotel. In fact, Gretchen Kehn spent 19 years there in the 1950s and '60s, along with her husband, Robert, the hotel's manager and later owner, and three of her four children. The family eventually bought a house in Marblehead.

# A HOTEL TO CALL HOME

Life in the  
Hawthorne for  
the Kehn family  
had all the  
makings of a  
Hollywood script

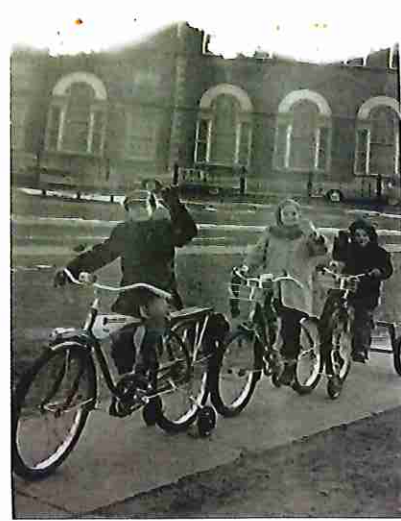
**T**he bellboy takes your bags. You cross the luxurious lobby and march into the elevator just behind the movie star and her entourage of interesting people. You get to your room and call up room service for a nice dinner.

That's the glamorized version of living in a hotel going back to movies like 1932's "Grand Hotel."

It wasn't quite that swanky for Gretchen

Kehn, who lived in Salem's Hawthorne Hotel for 19 years starting in 1953. But she did meet and mingle with movie stars like Bette Davis and Elizabeth Montgomery, even as she raised a family and never had to cook supper.

The experience was good enough that even now, so many years later, she is happy to make a regular pilgrimage from her Marblehead home to the hotel's restaurant.



FROM LEFT: While raising a family, Gretchen Kehn also pursued a part-time acting career as a card-holding member of the Screen Actors Guild. She was an extra in the "Bewitched" TV series, whose cast stayed at the Hawthorne while filming in the city in the early 1970s, and has had small parts in movies like the more recent "Grown Ups 2." The Kehn children had the run of the Hawthorne for almost 20 years, treating the hotel and the area around it, including Salem Common, as their playground growing up.



The Kehn family — Robert and Gretchen, and their children, Michael, Mitzi, Bobby and Chris — enjoy dinner after leaving the Hawthorne in the early 1970s and moving to a house in Marblehead.

The Hawthorne's current manager, Patrick Cornelissen, honors Kehn with a corner of the restaurant devoted to photos and documents of her family's stay. It brings an echo of "the good old days of travel and hospitality," he says. "It takes us back a little."

Kehn lived there as wife of hotel manager, later owner, Robert Kehn. It was a time when some staffers, even assistant

managers, were required by the company to live at the hotel, alongside some permanent guests. "That doesn't happen today," Cornelissen says. Hoteliers, he says, are more interested now in having the rooms produce revenue.

The Kehns' marriage would not last — although the couple would never divorce. But Gretchen Kehn is remarkably respectful of her late husband's role

at the Hawthorne. "He did more to save the hotel," she says. "It wouldn't be there if it wasn't for him."

And yet, she adds regretfully, "It seems his name is never mentioned."

### Life on the fourth floor

Situated in the heart of Salem, the Hawthorne Hotel was billed as a "modern hotel for the business traveler" when

By ALAN BURKE • Photos by KEN YUSZKUS



Life in the Hawthorne had its perks for Gretchen Kehn, who would often rely on room service to provide the family meal. Most nights, after feeding her children, she would join her husband, the hotel manager, for supper in the dining room.

it opened its iconic doors in 1925.

By the time the Kehns came to the Hawthorne in 1953, it was part of a chain of hotels owned by the American Hotel Company, based in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Gretchen's hometown. It was through hotel work that she met up-and-coming hotel manager Robert Kehn, a World War II veteran.

"We had a very short courtship," she says. Eventually, she followed him to a hotel in Bar Harbor, Maine, where they married.

In Salem, the Kehns and their three oldest children enjoyed the run of several fourth-floor rooms. (Their youngest son would not be born until after they departed the hotel.) The two oldest boys, Robert and Michael, shared a room, while daughter Mitzi had her own room. And they had a living room and dining room, too.

"The children had a wonderful grandmotherly nanny, Mrs. Finn," Kehn says. "I joined my husband for dinner most evenings. ... It was perfect for me. I didn't really like cooking."

She would not go downstairs to the

dining room until after the kids had enjoyed their supper. But then the fun would start, what she describes as a nightly "social event."

For the kids, Salem Common was their social outlet, an ideal playground where Kehn says they could ride their bikes.

"Very safe," she says of the Common. "I really loved living in the hotel."

The staff, in turn, "loved" the kids, she recalls. One of those room service waiters just happens to be current Hawthorne owner and former congressman Michael Harrington.

### Star treatment

While raising a family, Kehn also was able to indulge her passions, for writing — she's now at work on a book called "Growing Up at the Hawthorne"; painting and even acting. In addition to taking a course in early childhood development at North Shore Community College in Danvers, she has also been a card-carrying member of the Screen Actors Guild for years.

That came in handy when Hollywood stopped by.

There was the time in the late 1950s when the cast of the movie "Home Before Dark" — Jean Simmons, Rhonda Fleming and Efrem Zimbalist Jr. — stayed at the Hawthorne while filming the serious drama about mental illness in Marblehead and at Danvers State Hospital.

Kehn was invited to watch some of the production. And when filming ended, she was gifted with a photo of her and Zimbalist. The Kehns later attended a production party for the film in Los Angeles.

Then there were the summer theater actors, like Bette Davis and husband Garson Kanin, who were enjoying dinner with the Kehns' then-toddler daughter Mitzi. She hurried into the dining room to loudly complain to her parents that her brother had flushed the goldfish down the toilet. The stars got a laugh out of her, Kehn says.

The links were stronger still with the crew of TV's "Bewitched," which sought to juice up its ratings with some local work in the Witch City in the early 1970s. Kehn gives her husband credit for dragging them to the Hawthorne. "They stayed for quite a while," she says.

The Kehns enjoyed a good relationship with star Elizabeth Montgomery, who played the nose-twitching witch, Samantha Stephens. What's more, Gretchen Kehn was invited to appear as an extra in "Bewitched" episodes filmed at The House of the Seven Gables and in Gloucester.

While the celebrities garnered attention – the bronze statue of Montgomery at Washington and Essex streets is a popular tourist attraction today – many of the guests over the years were businesspeople, often drawn by the leather industry. A group of Australians came regularly.

## Checking out

After 19 years of hotel living, the Kehns packed their bags and moved to a home in Marblehead.

"When the kids got older, they wanted to live in a house," Kehn says. "The kids were really excited to be able to go in the front door and then go out the back door."

The children could not be persuaded to even visit the hotel for dinner in later years.

In the early 1970s, Robert Kehn purchased the hotel he had managed for more than two decades.

He made changes. He leveled some structures at the rear of the hotel and created a parking lot, while changing the name to the Hawthorne Motor Lodge. It was intended to exploit the explosion of road travel across the country. "It really increased business," his wife says. "My husband worked around the clock."

But it wasn't enough to undo bad luck. The heating system failed and had to be replaced, she laments. It was a million-dollar expense at a time when \$1 million was much harder to come by. Eventually, he was forced to sell.

As the Hawthorne investment failed so did the Kehns' marriage. It wasn't a good time, Gretchen Kehn says. But over the years, the separation became more "amicable."

Some of the children would later go into the hotel business, although only Chris, the fourth and youngest, who never lived at Hawthorne, remains in it today.

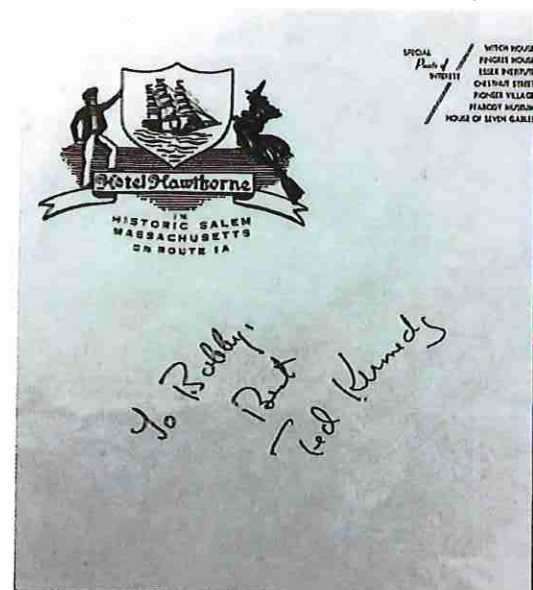
For her part, Gretchen Kehn still looks comfortable in the Hawthorne dining room more than 60 years after her first visit there.

It's changed, she says, explaining it now occupies what used to be the hotel's cocktail lounge.

But for all the differences, she says, "I do feel at home." 🍂



Gretchen Kehn has held onto this "Bewitched" glass as a keepsake from the TV show's visit to Salem and the Hawthorne Hotel in the 1970s. The cast and crew came to the Witch City at the encouragement of Kehn's husband, hotel manager and owner Robert Kehn.



Ted Kennedy penned this autograph on Hawthorne Hotel stationery to Gretchen Kehn's son, Bobby, on a visit around 1960. Bobby and his mother were in the hotel lobby when Kennedy stopped to comb his signature thick hair in the large mirror before entering the ballroom to speak at an event. Although Bobby was very young, his mother says he was aware of the Kennedy family, and Kennedy graciously obliged his request for an autograph.

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