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PEABODY DUCKS

Resident Ducks at The Peabody Hotel Have Been Charming Memphis Visitors for over 70 Years

By Jon A. Deinzer

It isn't everyday you come in contact with a group of hotel-dwelling ducks. But this was Memphis, after all, a city where the seemingly impossible came true for a Southern boy named Elvis who could play the guitar like the devil himself, and had the good looks to get him into just as much trouble. So when I heard there were ducks inhabiting a penthouse suite, and that they used the elevator to get down to the lobby, I decided I had to take a look for myself.

Arriving at The Peabody Memphis early one morning, I noticed a service technician standing inside one of the elevators. Figuring this was my best shot at getting the inside track, I jumped into the elevator with him and rode it up. As it was just the two of us, I opened the dialog by exchanging a bit of friendly elevator-speak - and then began to ask a few questions about the hotel's ducks. He smiled at me and asked if I had a moment. This was the south, after all, so of course I had time to listen to a good yarn. "I do have a couple minutes for a story," I said. And so he proceeded:



"The 'Peabody ducks' have been an institution here in Memphis since the early 1930's," he told me, "and the story is that they're the product of a wry sense of humor and far too much alcohol. Turns out the General Manager, a Mr. Frank Schutt, and his friend Chip Barwick decided after returning from a hunting trip in Arkansas that it would be great fun to place live ducks in The Peabody's fountain - which is smack-dab in the middle of the lobby. So three small ducks were selected for the initial stunt."

He leaned back against the wall and continued. "However, the fledgling swimmers were such a hit that soon five North American mallards were chosen to replace the original ducks. In 1940, a bellman by the name of Edward Pembroke, a former circus animal trainer, offered to help with the care and delivery of the ducks to the fountain each day. Mr. Pembroke taught the ducks to march to the fountain each day to the sounds of accompanying music, and for fifty years he was known as the 'Peabody

Duckmaster’.”

As we reached the rooftop level, he told me that this was his stop. I thanked him kindly for his time, and for sharing another piece of Memphis’ magic with me. Then, punching the “L” button, I made my way back down to the lobby to see what all the fuss was about.

For those who make the journey to The Peabody, it’s hard to describe the sights and sound of joy and laughter the waddling waders bring as they wiggle their way out of the elevator and onto the red carpet, bound for a small fountain in the middle of the hotel’s lobby. Small children can barely contain their desire to hold them, and grown-ups fall all over themselves trying to capture the moment on film. For their part, the ducks seem oblivious to the commotion they cause and are quite content to march themselves to the fountain for their twice-daily aqua-aerobics session.

In Memphis, it could be said that the spirit of ‘the King’ lives on through his worshipping fans. It could also be said that though Mr. Pembroke and the original ducks are long since gone, after seventy-five years their spirits live on at The Peabody in the eyes of the adoring fans who can’t get enough of a good thing.



FAST FACTS

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Photo credits: Courtesy of The Peabody Memphis

Posted January 2010

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