

THE CHICAGO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION HOTEL A WINDY CITY CLASSIC

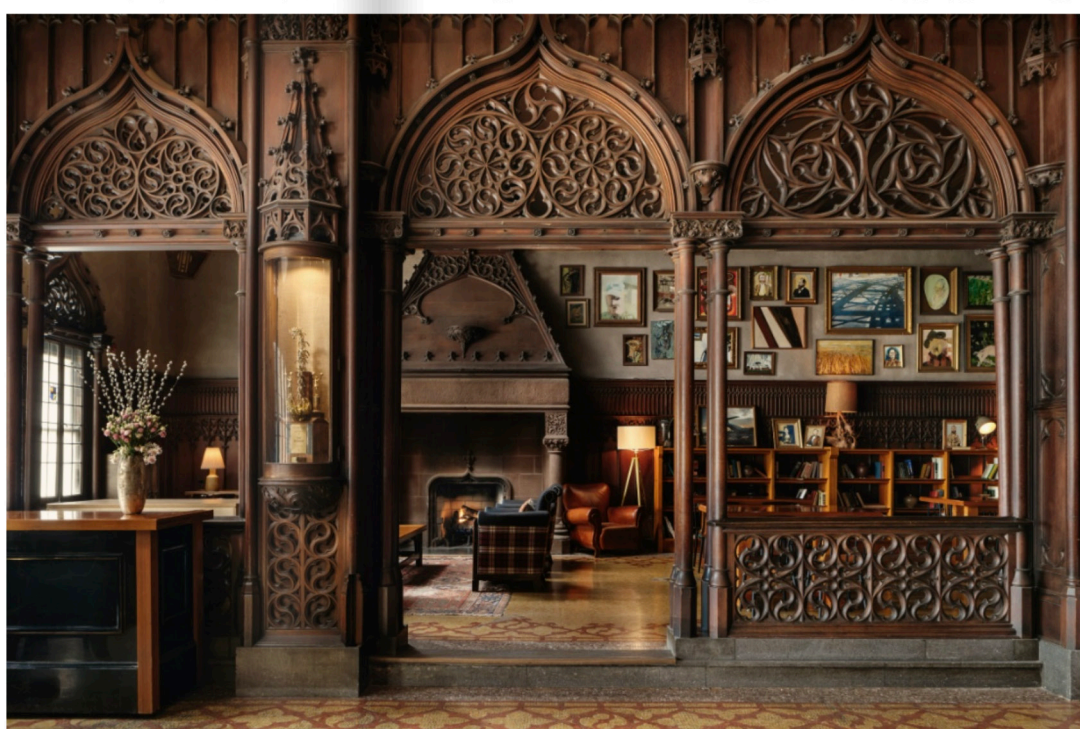
BY BRIAN E. CLARK

With its arched, criss-crossed windows and Venetian Gothic design reminiscent of the resplendent Doge's Palace in Venice, Italy, the Chicago Athletic Association (CAA) hotel looks like it could be right at home fronting the Piazza San Marco.

But it's not on the Laguna Veneta, which links La Serenissima (one of the many sobriquets for Venice) with the Adriatic Sea.

Rather, it's on the Windy City's busy Michigan Avenue, right across the street from Millennium Park with its shiny, bean-shaped Cloud Gate sculpture, the Crown Fountain and the Pritzker Music Pavilion. The Art Institute of Chicago is just a long block away as well. And Lake Michigan is another short walk.

Which makes the hotel an ideal spot to base a visit to the City of Broad Shoulders, especially if you are a fan of architecture and Chicago history, to say nothing of craftsmanship of late 19th Century German carpenters and Italian mosaic artisans.



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"This beautiful building has a wonderful vibe and not only for the way it was painstakingly restored," Jean Lieber, a CAA concierge, told me and several guests on a recent tour.

"When it was built to coincide with the Chicago Columbian Exposition in 1893 - just a little more than two decades after the Great Chicago Fire that killed 300 and left more than 100,000 homeless - city fathers and the backers of the hotel wanted to show that Chicago had recovered and was much more than a meatpacking town."

"And it wasn't long before many of the men who were movers and shakers in the Windy City belonged to the Chicago Athletic Association," explained Lieber, who

said the hotel cost \$800,000 to build, which is roughly \$21 million today.

William Wrigley, owner of the Chicago Cubs; five-time Olympic gold medal swimming champion Johnny Weissmuller, who later played Tarzan in movies; and architect Daniel Burnham, a founding member of the CAA who designed the 1893 Chicago World's Fair; were members. So was Marshall Field of department store fame.

"But not all of Chicago's bigwigs got in," she said.

Charles Comiskey, who owned the Chicago White Sox, applied repeatedly, but was never accepted, she said. It didn't help that Comiskey, a notorious skinnflint, owned the White Sox during the 1919 World Series "Black Sox" scandal, when eight of his players were accused of throwing the series in exchange for money.

The hotel was designed by Henry Ives Cobb, a famed 19th Century architect. It opened as a private men's club with an ornate Drawing Room, a swimming pool, Turkish baths, several restaurants, small, almost dorm-like hotel rooms and, during Prohibition, a speakeasy. Though they were permitted in some spaces, women weren't allowed to be members until the 1970s.

In its heyday, Muddy Waters, the father of Chicago Blues, performed here. Jazz pianist and composer Duke Ellington "ticked the ivories" at the CAA, the hotel proudly notes.

Alas, membership dwindled and the building had fallen on hard times by the turn of the 21st Century. It shut down in 2007 while its fate hung in limbo.

But after what the Chicago Architecture Center calls a "few perilous years," the billionaire Pritzker family, who own the Hyatt Hotels chain, bought the building and initiated what Lieber called a "meticulous restoration," led by Chicago-based Hartshorne Plunkard Architecture.

The result was a posh, 240-room bou-



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tique hotel with several restaurants, as well as two ballrooms overlooking Millennium Park that opened in 2015. Unfortunately, the pool where Weissmuller swam is gone.

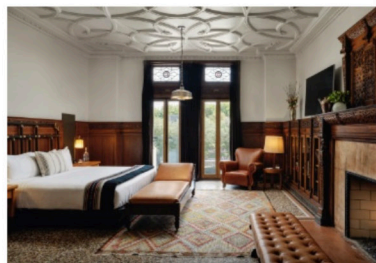
The extensive rehabilitation included the restoration of 18,000 square feet of or-

namental plaster, 32,000 square feet of historic wall paneling and bas relief and the white ceiling "stalactites" in the White City Ballroom.

The Architecture Center praised the Pritzkers for restoring the landmark struc-

ture that, for more than a century, most people could only appreciate from the outside.

Now, anyone can enjoy it. When my friend and I spent two nights there and were sipping drinks in the lobby late one



evening, we noticed a few college students were studying in the lobby.

The exterior of the hotel, with its limestone columns and intricate windows, stands out along Michigan Avenue between - by comparison - several somewhat nondescript buildings.

And the interior has restored details such as stone fireplaces, terrazzo floors, leaded glass and wooden bas relief carvings that show athletes playing football and other sports. In another nice touch, the modern elevators have flooring from an old squash court and some guest rooms have pommel horse-shaped leather benches.

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"Fortunately, there were hundreds of pictures of the hotel that were found in the building," Lieber said. "Plus, there were other photos in the newspapers and from various other sources so that they could restore it back to its original glory."

"And our (former) general manager was here for the entire renovation to oversee the process," she added.

On our concierge-led tour, Lieber took us up a marble staircase where we could look down upon the now-gone natatorium where Weissmuller once worked out. President Teddy Roosevelt also swam there, Lieber said, during a reunion of Roughriders whom Roosevelt led in Cuba in 1898 during the Spanish-American War.

"The pool was filled in during the 1950s

or 60s," she said. "But they saved the tiles and placed them on top of the new steel plate flooring, so you can still see the markers for the swimming lanes and that's pretty neat."

Lieber also showed us the fourth floor gymnasium and basketball court, where a class of novice roller skaters were doing their best to stay upright. Named in honor of Amos Alonzo Stagg, who coached football and other sports at the University of Chicago from 1892 to 1932, Stagg Court has its original floorboards, hoops and a running track that overlooks and encircles the court.

And she took us to the amusingly named "Milk Room," which she said served alcohol to members and, perhaps, a few

police vice squad members who were tasked with making sure the club followed Prohibition laws.

During the renovation, she said workers found a vintage "recipe book from back in the day. Which is one of the reasons why it's won a 'Best Bar in the World' award," she said.

The building's basement once had a bowling alley and even a shooting range. Those are gone, but the hotel does have a Game Room off the lobby where visitors can play skill ball, play shuffleboard, billiards and chess. A recent addition is two electronic games for kids.

We also stopped in at the Cherry Circle Room restaurant, which Lieber said was once something of a "gentleman's club,"

where members were entertained by women who were, ahem, not always their wives.

To top things off, Lieber led us to Cindy's Rooftop, a popular restaurant perched atop the hotel's 13th floor under a glass atrium. It boasts local wild and seasonal produce and fresh seafood prepared by Top Chef contestant Executive Chef Kaleena Bliss.

The restaurant, which has sweeping views of Lake Michigan from its terrace, is named for Cindy Pritzker, a centenarian and matriarch of the Pritzker family. A smiling, Andy Warhol-painted portrait of her from 1982 hangs in the restaurant's private dining room. Reportedly still spry, Cindy turned 101 in December.



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