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America's Taj Mahal

BY EDWARD W. BOK

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: I have ventured to write of the Mountain Lake (Florida) Sanctuary, universally conceded by every visitor to be the most beautiful spot of its area in America, and of the Singing Tower there erected, unanimously christened by every one who has travelled and sees its superlative beauty as the "Taj Mahal of America," because both are the work of other men's genius: the Sanctuary that of Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape-architect of Brookline, Massachusetts, the Tower that of Milton B. Medary, the Philadelphia architect. My own part was simply that of the conception of the idea: these men did the more important part of carrying the conception to realization. Hence I feel that I may praise their unquestionably marvellous work the same as is the privilege of any other person.]

ON Friday, the 1st day of February, the President of the United States will journey, unless public business interferes, from Washington to Mountain Lake, Florida, to dedicate and present, for visitation, to the American people the most beautiful spot of verdure in the United States, which five years ago was a dreary sandhill devoid of growth and beauty.

There was little or nothing to encourage the landscape-architect in this sandhill when half a decade ago Frederick Law Olmsted was given the commission to change this dreary spot into a spot of beauty second to none in the country. There were but two natural advantages: the presence of a hundred virgin pine-trees and a natural elevation of 324 feet above the level of the sea. But Florida has no equal in the reward which it offers and gives to the planter of flower, shrub, and tree, and this Mr. Olmsted knew. He had laid out Mountain Lake Park, of which this spot was a fourteen-and-a-half-acre part. He knew that the

problem of Florida was water, and for a year he did naught but dig trenches and lay water-pipes, so that the entire acreage would be irrigated and water could be distributed from every point in the proposed Sanctuary. For a natural sanctuary it was to be, beautiful but reposeful and full of the spirit of a quiet, lovely place.

After a year of providing irrigation the landscape-gardener began to plant. This planting was to be, in character, Floridian and largely to consist of bushes with berries suitable for the migratory birds which flew over Florida twice a year in their flight from the frozen north to Cuba and the West Indies, where thousands of birds lost their lives from exhaustion on their long migration. The verdure to be planted grew in the swamps and lowlands of Florida, and the miracle to be performed was to transplant this verdure from its moist habitation to dry, high ground. But Mr. Olmsted knew this was a question of water, and this saver of the green

growth was in the Sanctuary, with its spigots every hundred feet. The planting was now begun, and it was decided that it should be of large specimens: blueberries and gall-berries shoulder-high, and magnolia, gordonia, suriname cherries, and live-oak trees from ten to forty feet high. This called for the most careful transplanting from distances of five to forty miles away. It was also decided to plant closely, so as to allow for a generous loss in changing the shrubs and trees from a damp to a dry location. For five successive years this transplanting went on, and so successfully was this accomplished that the loss throughout the Sanctuary was less than one per cent, the result being due to care in planting and a continuous watering. When success was demonstrated, the experiment of transplanting flowering trees and shrubs was entered on, and thousands of dogwood, wild-plum, acacia, and currant were transferred. A lower color effect was attempted by the planting of 8,000 azalea shrubs and groups of iris and lily. The result was here equally successful. It is not an unusual experience to transplant a tree barren as a telephone pole and have it blossom into leaf within three weeks, and have a fully leaved tree within six months. Of course such a result is achieved by the addition of a black soil to the sandy deposit, and thousands of loads of a rich black soil were drawn into the Sanctuary to help the transplanted green growth, with a thorough watering added each day.

To-day the Sanctuary is complete so far as its planting is concerned, and its visitors are amazed at a scene which looks more like a planting fifteen years old. Each year there is added four feet to some of the planting—a reward which no other State in the Union gives to its

planters. Two lakes were dug and added, and from their banks the impression is conveyed that they have always been there, whereas one is four years old and the other a little over a year. In these ponds teal-ducks, the colorful wood-ducks, and the only flamingoes in the United States live and add an interest to the water. A wonderful panorama of a forty-mile view which gives the visitor the impression that he is in hilly Vermont rather than in flat Florida was made accessible to the visitor by the change from a sharp sandy declivity to a filled-in plateau more than an acre in extent, covered with a grass base suggesting the perfect lawn of a private residence, with live-oaks picturesquely planted at different points. The mammoth pine-trees were used and transformed into flanking sentinels for beautiful vistas of long-distance views toward the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean; soft, shaded grass-covered walks abound and lead to every part of the Sanctuary; the colors of the azalea enliven every path; the unusual and superb song of the nightingale, imported from England, and nowhere else to be heard in the United States, is heard in the paths adjacent to the aviary; while the myriads of birds who have quickly found the haven where they could rest, bathe in the fifty or more shallow bird-baths provided, and eat the millions of berries offered as their food, fill the air with song. It is nothing unusual to hear the mocking-bird, the thrush, the robin, the Kentucky cardinal, the bob-white, the blue jay, the towhee, the warblers, all singing and whistling in concert, producing a combination of note and song entrancing in its effect.

In short, the miracle, which so many discouraged at the outset, of transform-

ing a hill of sand to the most beautiful spot of its area in America has been accomplished, and fills the visitor with amazement and admiration.

It was while this transformation was going on and its practicability being demonstrated that the decision was arrived at that the rest of the dream could also be realized: the erection of the most beautiful carillon tower in the world, with a carillon of bells second to none in the United States or Europe. Hence, the other half of the "mountain," as it is called,—for it is, according to the United States governmental survey the highest spot of land in Florida and also the highest between Washington and the Rio Grande within sixty miles of the Gulf or Ocean,—was purchased as the ideal location for a sylvan surrounding for such a tower. It was likewise unequalled in its proper height to give the necessary sweep for the sound of the bells, which under other conditions would require a height of 500 feet. But here nature had provided a height of 324 feet, so that a tower of 205 feet was all that was necessary, with a surrounding country noted for its quietful repose and an atmosphere known for its resonance. But, to further insure this quiet from the horn of the automobile, some 25 acres of surrounding land were added, so that the tower would stand in the middle of an area of 50 acres, with a protection of more than two city blocks from the nearest point of access of the automobile.

The commission for the Tower was given to Milton B. Medary, of Philadelphia, for a tower to be as beautiful as that at Malines, Belgium,—the inspiration for architects for over 400 years,—but adapted to the gentler and warmer climate of Florida. Mr. Medary worked for months at sketches until he

was himself satisfied with the final Gothic example he produced. How beautiful is his conception may best be proven by the fact that every travelled visitor who sees it now, in its completed state, is immediately reminded of the Taj Mahal, in India, and unhesitatingly ranks it with that world-renowned tomb, both in its whole and its detail of stone and its wealth of sculpture as designed and executed, in this instance, by the sculptor, Lee Lawrie.

In order that the enormous weight of the Tower—5,500 tons—might have a sufficiently stable basis on which to rest, there were sunk into the ground 160 reinforced concrete piles, varying in depth from 13 feet to 24 feet under ground, with a concrete covering mat 2 feet 6 inches thick. The Tower rises from its foundation base of 51 feet to a height of 205 feet, changing its form by graceful lines at the point of 150 feet until it becomes octagonal, measuring 37 feet at the top. Its 8 windows are of Gothic lace pattern worked in faience, each window of a height of 35 feet, behind which are suspended the bells. The first structure was of steel construction to the top, then a brick wall beginning at the base 4 feet 4 inches thick, and finally, as the outer covering, a layer of the most beautiful pink marble from the Georgia Marble Quarries, with the base up to 150 feet of native Florida coquina rock,—tan in its color,—the same as was used by the Spaniards in the old fort at St. Augustine. It is the perfect blend of these mixtures of stone that gives the Tower its soft and unbelievable tone of beauty, particularly at sunrise when the rising orb fairly bathes the pink marble and brings out its marvellous tone. The same is true in the ruby glow of the setting sun.

Just as the sculptural work of the European singing towers is reminiscent of the history of the country and its local legends, so is the sculptural work of the Mountain Lake Singing Tower suggestive of Florida and its neighboring life and legend. The first sculpture work is above the main door leading into the Tower, and represents the crane, the heron, and the flamingo of Florida. This band is sculptured around the entire Tower. The first windows, 130 feet high, have a grill of colored faience of under-sea life, such as the sea-horse and jellyfish, which as it rises develops the creation of life in light, flower, and fauna in richly colored faience in the large windows of the bell-chamber, the whole culminating at the top with nests of birds in the tree-tops. Two-thirds of the way to the top, where in European singing towers would be found the gargoyles, it is embellished by the American eagle. The main door leading into the Tower is, in reality, a museum piece, hand-wrought in golden bronze, depicting the creation of all forms of life in 24 hand-wrought panels—the work of Samuel Yellin, the well-known iron-worker.

The question is asked by many visitors: "Why the name 'Singing Tower'?"

This definition comes from the Netherlands, and is the traditional name of a carillon tower. From early mediæval times, in the Netherlands, Belgium, and the north of France, watch-towers were erected from which sentinels could see the flooding of the dikes or the coming of invaders. In such a crisis the blowing of a horn by the watcher would summon the people to the threatened danger.

Gradually a bell replaced the horn. Then clocks were introduced into the

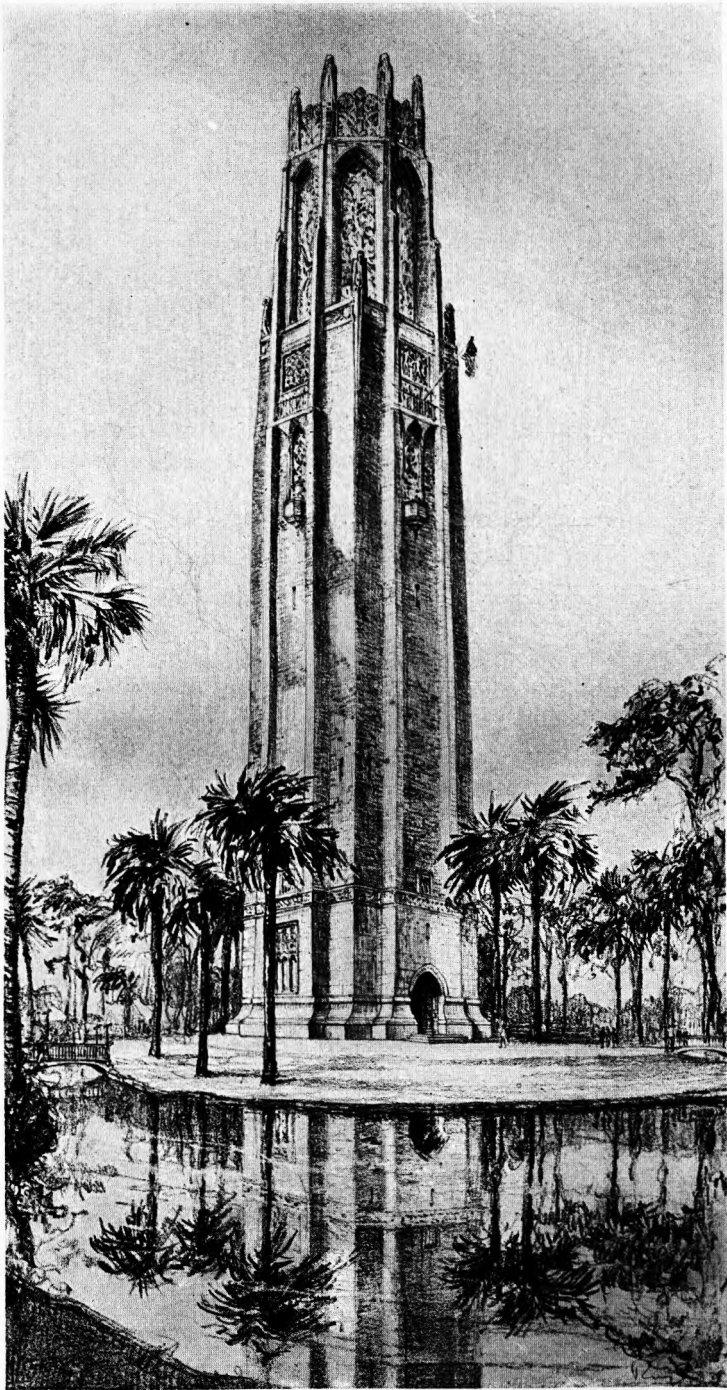
towers, and bells were struck to mark the passing of the hours. More bells were added; then chimes, on which simple tunes were played at the quarter-hours, and more fully before the big bell struck the hour. Slowly through the succeeding centuries still more bells were added, until in the seventeenth century that majestic instrument, the carillon, was evolved.

These towers were of great national importance in the community life, calling their people to war, to peace, to prayer, to work, and to feast. As each country saw its national history reflected in the architecture of the tower, as well as in the music of the bells, both became a single unit to its folk and known as a "singing tower." When you hear the carillon at the Sanctuary send out its glorious melodies from the Tower's heights you lose the idea of the Tower as just a building, or of the bells as bells. Instead you feel the whole unit alive, a wonderful singing force, the noblest expression of democratic music, a true Singing Tower.

Another question often asked is: "What is a carillon?"

The word "carillon" is really a misnomer, being the French equivalent for chimes, whereas what we know today as a carillon has absolutely no resemblance to a set of chimes.

An exact definition of the term demands too many details of the technic of tower music. Perhaps it is enough to say that a carillon is a set of bells tuned to the intervals of the chromatic scale (that is, proceeding entirely by half-tones, the compass being three octaves or more), the lowest bell being often many tons, so that in the highest octaves the weight of each bell is but a few pounds and all the bells hang "dead" or fixed—that is, so as not to swing.



The Great Singing Tower.

No conception of its beauty can be had from drawing or photograph, since the effect depends so wholly on the soft pink of the Georgia marble and the tan of the Florida coquina stone of which the tower is composed, apart from the colors of the faience of the upper cathedral windows.



Two artificial lakes were made at the summit of the Sanctuary: one a reflection pool for the Singing Tower; the other (shown here) a pool for the flamingoes, six of which are portrayed. They are probably the only living flamingoes in the United States.

Many people confuse a carillon and a chime.

Whereas a chime, ring, or peal is a set of bells not more than 8, 10, or 12 in number tuned to the notes of the diatonic scale (that is, proceeding by a definite order of tones and half-tones), the carillon is played on a keyboard or clavier, similar to an organ or piano. In the Mountain Lake Singing Tower there is installed an additional automatic keyboard which plays automatically from rolls the same as the Duo-Art rolls on an organ. This is an emergency adjunct in case of the illness or absence of the bell-master.

Inside the Tower one enters into a private room created for the owner, superbly made, as is the outside of the Tower, entirely of pink marble and coquina rock, with two large windows beautifully carved above the glass, an elaborate carving over the open fireplace, and a superb treatment of the most delicately traced ironwork in the way of stairs leading up into the Tower for those who choose to walk. But there is also an electric elevator for those who prefer to ride the Tower's 205 feet—the equal of a 20-story skyscraper. Above the private room the utilitarian enters, by the introduction of two thirty-thousand-gallon water-tanks insuring the Sanctuary's private water-supply drawn by electric power from Mountain Lake, a few hundred yards distant. Above these tanks is the bell-master's room, where is the playing-consol, and above that the bell-chamber, which is thirty-five feet high.

The carillon of bells is the largest ever cast by the Taylor Foundry at Loughborough, England. It consists of 61 bells with 48 tones, or four octaves, the 13 upper tones being duplicated and ringing two at a time so as to avoid

the inevitable tinny sound of small bells. The largest bell, the tenor bell as it is called, weighs 11 tons, or 23,400 pounds; the smallest bells weigh each 17 pounds.

A 15-foot-wide moat, suggestive of Old World castles, surrounds the Tower, with pockets of earth in the inner side of the walls, so as to allow of rock plants being introduced.

A year ago over 300 live-oak trees from 20 to 40 feet high were lifted from a grove 30 miles away and planted around the Tower. These trees are already in their evergreen luxuriant leafage, and will in time form an over-arching effect so that the Tower will rise out of a dense forest of everlasting green.

Between the Tower and the moat is a majestic series of palms, which were obtained from the grounds of an old residence where they were brought in seed from Honduras by an old sea-captain, and are now softening the corners of the Tower. These palms are already 40 feet in height, the constant wonder being the height and width of girth of the trees you can transplant in Florida, invariably with gratifying success.

In front of the Tower a reflection lake has been made, presenting a complete picture of the majestic piece of architecture at the feet of the visitor. This lake of reflection heightens the comparison of the Tower with the Taj Mahal, as does the coquina stonework, which is of the same color-note and texture as that of the Indian masterpiece, with its wealth of sculpture equally generous and of similarly glorious beauty.

The purpose of it all? Simply to preach the gospel and influence of beauty reaching out to visitors through tree, shrub, flowers, birds, superb archi-

ecture, the music of bells, and the sylvan setting. And a restful, quiet, beautiful spot where visitors may feel, as the sign at the entrance declares by an extract from John Burroughs:

"I come here to find myself. It is so easy to get lost in the world."

That is what thousands of visitors are doing each week now: tired and exhausted from the world, they are seeking and finding repose and quiet amid the stillness and beauty of a marvellously conceived and beautiful Sanctuary.

But why, it is often asked, was it placed in Florida, and not in the North? Because there is nowhere in the North a spot which is destined to be preserved for so many years in its present sylvan simplicity and beauty; because the gentle climate gives a reward in green growth impossible in the colder North; and because the character of the Sanctuary and the magnificence of the Tower will draw, in Florida, the same number of visitors as if it were in the North. The winter-tourist traffic in Florida is increasing year by year, and to such visitors the Mountain Lake Sanctuary will in increasing numbers become a Mecca for visitation; and where to thousands each week it has already be-

come an objective this is liable to grow into the tens of thousands. At each recital of the carillon there are already found hundreds of parked automobiles, with visitors listening to the soft musical quality of the bells. The question is not how will people be attracted to the spot, but rather how many automobiles and persons will it be possible to accommodate at each recital.

The bells are played at sunset each day, when on account of the quiet of the park the music is played to the greatest advantage, with an extra recital at the noon hour each Sunday and on each recurrent Washington's, Lincoln's, and General Lee's birthday, with a special programme suited to the day, as well as on Christmas Eve and at midnight of the old year on New Year's Eve. Anton Brees, the Belgian bell-master, is in residence at Mountain Lake from December 1 to May 1, and presides at all of these recitals.

Where is Mountain Lake? In the centre of inland Florida midway between the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean, 67 miles from each. The nearest town is Lake Wales, one-and-one-half miles distant, from which a driving boulevard directly leads to the entrance of the Sanctuary.

