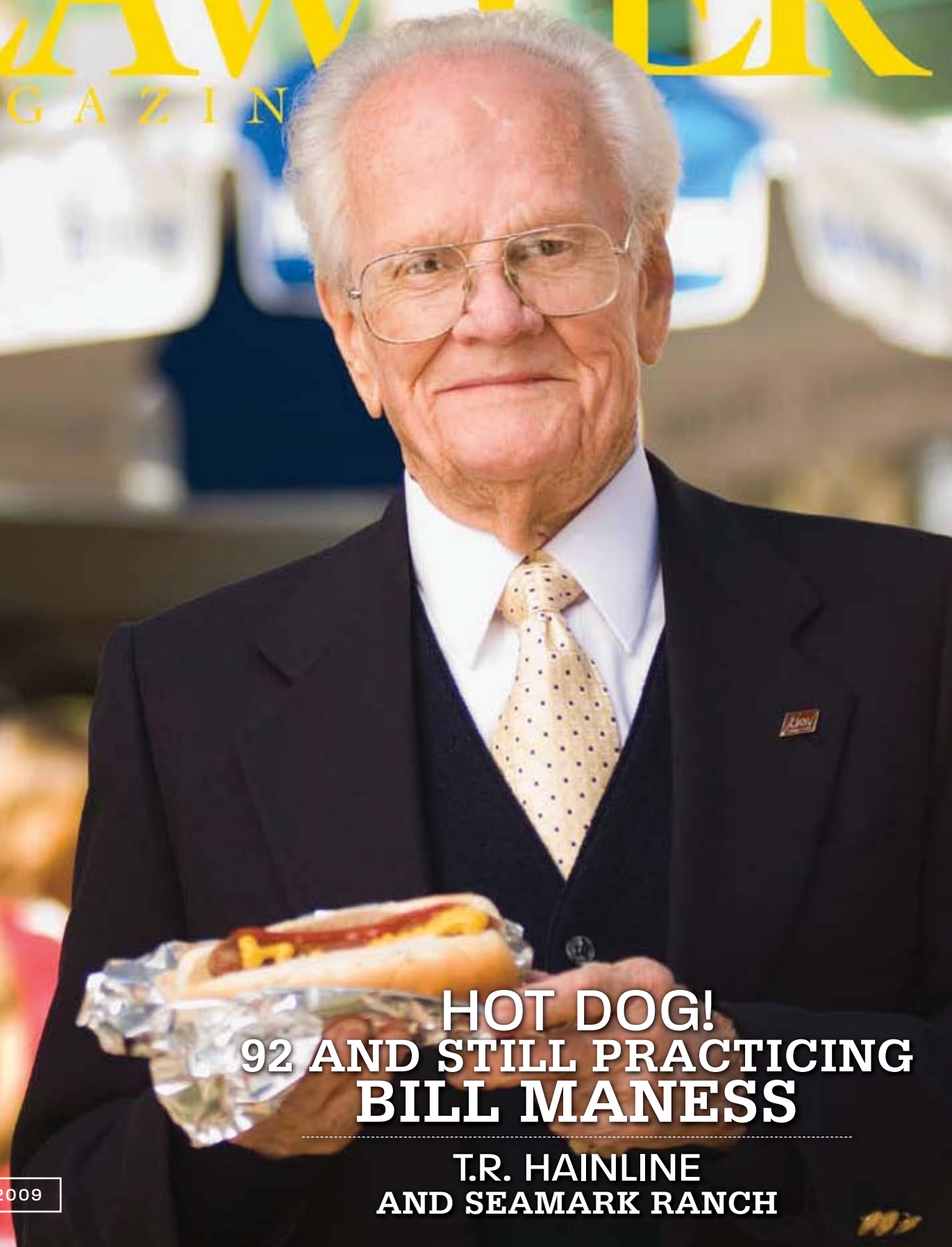


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**HOT DOG!
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BILL MANESS**

**T.R. HAINLINE
AND SEAMARK RANCH**

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CHARLESTON: Land of History, Hospitality, Homes, Gardens and the *French Quarter Inn*

by diann catlin

We have just returned from our fifth visit to Charleston in six years. That alone will tell you what place she holds in my heart. She is a handsome leather bound manuscript of colorful history, all tied up with the Charleston charm found from ancient sidewalks, transformed gardens, and Southern ladies who really understand charm and manners. She mixes world class restaurants with historical tours which enlighten and inspire. Her King Street antique shops and one-of-a-kind boutiques demand half a day's exploring, and yet so do visits to the Battery and neighboring antebellum homes. Just peering through massive wrought iron gates into gardens with plants passed down through generations kindles the gardener in each of us.

Charleston massages the soul, stimulates the creative juices, and seems to wrap herself around her visitors like no place on earth. Yet for the visitor it can be overwhelming to have so many choices of what to see and do without a guarantee that those few days away will provide the best of Charleston.

Each time we have planned a jaunt to Charleston, I have set aside a few hours in my garden to reread the literary treasure, "Mrs. Whaley and Her Charleston Garden". The wit of the charming Mrs. Whaley offers endless giggles, but the descriptions of her garden preview all you will see in Charleston. Gift wrap the book and surprise someone you love with a note: "Please mark your calendar for March 5-9+. I plan on whisking you away!"

Above: Home gardens near the Battery lie just behind antique wrought iron.

Below: Golden & Associates on King Street is packed with gorgeous Period American, English and Continental antiques



We left Jacksonville early to make it to Middleton Place (www.middleton-place.org) to tour the historic eighteenth century house and gardens. (We would enter Charleston on US 17 for Middleton Place, and exit her including a bypass into Walterboro three miles west of 95 which is full of small town charm and fine shops.) Hearing of four generations of Middletons and other well-known South Carolina families including the Pinkneys, Draytons, and Rutledges will make downtown Charleston come alive. Love the tour, love the gardens, but hustle away before lunch to find your destination hotel, The French Quarter Inn (www.fqcharleston.com) just off the City Market.

Quiet and elegance abound at this beautiful boutique hotel, with valet parking right next to it and the Tristan restaurant on the ground floor. You will be welcomed with chilled champagne and some of the most hospitable hosts anywhere. The second floor lobby is lush and incredibly elegant. The wood paneled elevator is central, but there are quiet nooks with refreshments of iced tea and sweets and »



Top: The French Quarter Inn offers ample space for gathering on balconies.

Center: Rooms at the French Quarter Inn welcome with charm.

Below: The nearby Episcopal Church whose Rector Hayden McCormick is one of Jacksonville's own.



coffee on each floor. The lobby also opens out onto a spacious walled balcony with fountains and seating for the afternoon gathering hour at 5:00 and the scrumptious Continental breakfast.

There are only fifty rooms, many with balconies, fireplaces and oversized tubs, but this is one hotel where each room is as lovely as the next. They are clean and so quiet, and from our room the beautiful view of the neighboring Episcopal church and its heavenward steeple almost kept us from leaving the room and seeing the sights. The beds are so comfortable with a variety of many pillows to insure great sleep. In short, I will never stay anywhere else in Charleston.

The location next to the Market is the perfect central location for exploring Charleston, so despite our comforts at the inn we continued sightseeing right after a late lunch at Tristan. We toured the Edmondston-Alston House. Either drive to the Battery and park, or walk there and enjoy the fifteen minute journey through Old Charleston. Once there, you will enjoy the beautiful old architecture and also delight in hearing more of Charleston history. After the tour, linger in this area, peering over the wrought iron gates and into the fabulous gardens.

Returning to the French Quarter Inn you'll find the afternoon wine hour with a potpourri of business executives and fellow travelers. This hotel is the perfect destination for smaller business meetings or seminars, with several well appointed meeting rooms just off the lobby balcony garden. The hotel is thoughtfully designed. There are three floors of bedrooms, and each floor has a balcony for common use.



Top: Statues in the Battery remember Confederate soldiers.

Center: The staircase at the French Quarter Inn.

Below: Quiet places abound at the Inn.

So if you don't have a balcony in your room, there is a marvelous one just down the hall. Charleston is not a quiet town. Carriages and college students mingle beautifully, but the quiet at this inn is part of its attraction.

Restaurants abound in Charleston. I think we've tried them all, but no trip is complete without lunch at my favorite, Mistral, a small French restaurant on the Market and steps away from The French Quarter Inn. We have a tradition of dining at Fulton Five near King Street on our last night in the city. It too is a short, three block walk. The wait staff will guide your choices, but don't go there without sampling the fresh veal. Other favorite restaurants are McCrady's on Unity Alley which boasts warm ancient woods and history, S.N.O.B. (Slightly North of Broad) and the ever boisterous High Cotton.

The next day, tour Fort Sumter by boat and strolling, and save the afternoon for King Street and its beautiful antiques. You will find some of the most serious collections of silver, chandeliers, and porcelains in this location. Then, if your feet hurt and a panoramic view of Charleston is in order, make your way back to the Market and the Market Pavilion Hotel where the rooftop bar and charming bartender Buddy await your afternoon drink order.

Oh, Charleston! What town could ever compare? Your hospitality and courtesy are unsurpassed and your restaurants a delight. The peeks into your homes and gardens are worthy of inspiration and dreaming. But combine all of that with a stay at the French Quarter Inn, and I need a yearly fix. Let me rethink that; I may need to visit Charleston twice a year! ☺

