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Southern Hospitality: The Historic Version

With a desire to expand my knowledge of a historic plantation home in Tuscumbia, Alabama, Belle Mont, I thought that there could be no one better to talk to than the people who spend hours each week maintaining this grand mansion. I first contacted Melissa Beasley, the current site director of Belle Mont, via email after I found her contact information on the Alabama Historical Commission’s website. We exchanged a few brief messages, and after discussing our schedules, we arranged to meet at Belle Mont in late February of 2012.

On a chilly Friday morning, I made my way up the long, gravel driveway that I remembered so well from my first visit to Belle Mont almost a month earlier. I noticed a familiar car parked at the top of the driveway and pondered who its owner must be since I had never met Ms. Beasley.

When I opened my car door, a gust of wind rushed past me, shaking the dead leaves in the trees so that they sounded like an old librarian telling children to be quiet. I hurried to grab my notebook and voice recorder so that I could retreat from the cold inside the warm mansion. I briskly walked through the yard towards the home, and the side door began to open. There, standing in the doorway, was a man I recognized from my previous visit. It was Jim, my tour guide.

Jim welcomed me back to Belle Mont and informed me that he had just spoken with Ms. Beasley; she was on her way. He led me to the dining room, where a few chairs were placed for visitors, and told me that I could sit down while I waited. I had not expected to see this man again, but since I had learned so much of the history of Belle Mont from him during my first visit, I knew that his presence during the interview would be quite beneficial.

A few minutes later, the front door opened, and Jim welcomed Ms. Beasley in to the salon. She greeted me with a warm smile, and after agreeing that Jim should partake in the interview as well, we sat down in the plastic chairs in the corner of the dining room to begin.

Ms. Beasley began by explaining to me that she has been the site director of Belle Mont since the year 2000. “I worked for the Alabama Historical Commission, and I was working at the Joe Wheeler Home, and they needed a site director over here. So, I started working over here in 2000,” she said. I also quickly learned that Ms. Beasley, who has been working with historic homes for nearly twenty years, has been an employee of the Alabama Historical Commission since 1994.

When asked about his work experience, Jim explained to me that he first began substituting as a tour guide at Belle Mont in the year 2001. “I started working here every other weekend in ’02, then it became a permanent position, and I applied for it and got it,” Jim replied. “I got laid off in ’08, came back in ’07. I mean, ’05 and in ’07, then I’ve been here ever since. I’ve loved old houses all my life,” he claimed with passion in his voice.

Hoping to start from the very beginning, I asked Ms. Beasley if she could tell me a brief history of Belle Mont and explain who built it and its original purpose. She smiled and immediately pointed to Jim, claiming that he was the best person to ask. I shifted left in my chair, and Jim told me that, “the house was built by Dr. Alexander Mitchell. He started building the house in 1828. He came to Alabama in 1818. He was kind of a genius. His father was a neighbor of Thomas Jefferson. They started building the house. There was a log house to the east side of the house first, and then they finished the house.” I then asked Jim if the Mitchell family had resided in this log house while Belle Mont was being constructed, and he replied in the typical polite, Southern fashion with, “yes, ma’am.”

I had learned from Jim during my previous visit that Belle Mont was bought by the Winston family in 1833 and had been abandoned in 1940; therefore, I asked Ms. Beasley what condition the mansion was in when she became the site director. She took a moment to reflect and replied, “Well, it was in pretty good shape in 2000. Uhh, when the state acquired the house in 1983, it was pretty much a ruin.” I nodded in agreement, and she continued. “But, uhh, by 1994, a lot of work had been done on it. And we’ve added some of the missing mantles, and the conference station, and done some plasterwork and painting since I’ve been here.”

Unaware of the conference station, I asked Ms. Beasley if this was a new building. “The conference station in the backyard, it’s there,” she replied. I then asked her to describe it. “Well, it’s a new building. It’s based on uhh, the way the little barns used to look around here. It’s a bathroom: two stalls on the girls’ side, one stall and a urinal on the boys’ side. We added that in 2010, and we have to do archaeology because we went underground with the water systems. So, you have to always survey before you start digging near these cultural sites,” she explained.

I was excited to learn that archaeological digs had taken place on the grounds of Belle Mont and even more thrilled to find out that these digs had produced objects that had once belonged to slaves. “We know about the slave quarters because of archaeology, because of the cultural resources underground. So, when we do archaeology, we find the evidence of the buildings and of the people that lived in those buildings,” Ms. Beasley stated. Jim then explained to me that the slave quarters were surveyed in 2001 and 2002 and that there had originally been 13 slave cabins.

I was actually privileged enough to see some of the artifacts that were retrieved during the archaeological digs. In the back right bedroom, known as bedroom number three, Jim lead me to a tall glass case, which contained a black and white photograph of a small log cabin, tiny blue pieces of china no bigger than a nickel, and what appeared to be worn-out pieces of metal. “These are some of the findings from the area where the slave cabins were. It’s our most popular exhibit,” he told me. “It’s awesome. And, the pieces of plate here date between 1828 to 1832,” he said as he pointed inside the glass. “This is some little piece from Greece, parts of a clay pot, belt buckles, shoe buckles, and arrowheads from Creek and Cherokee Indians,” he said as he showed me each of the tiny, wonderful treasures that were found in the dirt.

After hearing Jim mention that the findings from the archaeological dig were the most popular exhibit at Belle Mont, I asked my two interviewees about the present-day use of the mansion. “It’s mainly for tours. We talk about history and the people who lived here and how people lived in that era, from the 1830s to the 1850s; that’s our period of interpretation. That’s the story we tell,” Ms. Beasley told me. She also informed me that there is charge to tour the house, which is five dollars for adults, four dollars for seniors and military, and three dollars for children; however, there are group rates for those who qualify.

Ms. Beasley mentioned to me that on the day prior to our interview, a group of forty-four people had driven to Belle Mont on a bus from Huntsville, Alabama to tour the home. “We probably average thirty or forty people on the weekends, and then the bus tours, of course they’re bigger. Then, we do school groups, too,” she said. “Probably most of the people are local, well I mean Huntsville. And then the bus tours, they come from Birmingham, Nashville, Memphis, Tupelo, Mississippi,” she added. I then asked Ms. Beasley about the number of school groups who toured the home as I mentioned that I had attended high school less than 10 miles from the home but had never visited it prior to beginning my current research. She sullenly replied, “Well… I wish we could get more.”

Everyone who tours Belle Mont is given a brochure, which gives a brief history of the home and describes some of the events that happen at Belle Mont. One of these events is the annual quilt show. I asked Ms. Beasley about the quilt show that I had read about in my brochure, and she responded with, “Yea, that happens the first week of October. It’s local ladies, and we display the quilting, either historic or later period quilts, in the house for a month.”

Although tourists by the busload shuffle through the home each weekend, the main event of the year at Belle Mont is the Plantation Christmas. “We have a big Christmas open house the first Sunday of every year, of December, the first Sunday of December,” Ms. Beasley said. Jim quickly followed her with an elaborate description, saying that, “the Colbert County Landmark Association puts this on as a fundraiser for the house. And, they’ll come in with live greenery, boxwood wreaths with fruit on ‘em, and they’ll have a twelve to thirteen foot Christmas tree. The ornaments are made by the Winston descendants, and it has clear lights. That’s the only thing electrical about it: the lights. It’s all natural.” Ms. Beasley also informed me that, on occasion, local men dress up as Civil War soldiers and perform a reenactment on the grounds during the Plantation Christmas. “They do different things. They camp out and cook and live like people would have lived during that period,” she said.

The Plantation Christmas is an event that many in the community look forward to each year. A reporter for the local newspaper interviewed a Tuscumbia resident about Belle Mont’s Plantation Christmas for an article written in 2010. “For Jade Thomas, the Christmas season hasn’t truly begun until she’s visited Belle Mont mansion’s annual event, ‘A Plantation Christmas’,” the article reads. “‘I go every year, and especially love the dancing. […] I also pick up a lot of decorating ideas from the home because there’s always fresh greenery throughout, and I love to decorate that way for the holidays,’” Ms. Thomas is quoted to have said (Rickman 1). The Plantation Christmas strives to keep the history of the home alive while offering an entertaining, family-friendly event and raising funds for renovations at the same time.

As the interview was winding down, I asked my two new friends if they could each describe their average day at Belle Mont so that, after hearing about the history of the home and its present-day functions, I could really get a sense of what it takes to maintain the mansion for the public. Ms. Beasley replied first. “Well, I pick up the money and the receipts, and go to the bank and make deposits, and mail those deposit slips to Montgomery for the auditors. And then, yesterday, I was over here with Jim, helping with that big bus tour. And then, uhh, sometimes I have to come meet the contractors if Jim is off because he works on weekends; he’s off on Mondays and Tuesdays,” she told me, looking at Jim as she finished.

I turned in chair and asked Jim if he would mind sharing his average day with me as well, and he nodded. “Well, I get here in the mornings. I open up the house, come in and sweep, do whatever I need to do, get ready for tours, get my brochures lined up. If I have people come in, then I of course give them a tour. I mean, whatever needs done to the house, I do it.” Melissa chimed in and added that, “he meets with the bug man and the contractors, too,” and Jim agreed. “There’s all sorts of maintenance that goes on in these old houses. It’s just like a modern house; you gotta keep ‘em painted and… Those leaks have been fixed, but we still need to repair the plaster and repaint. It’s all a money thing. It all depends on the amount of money the state has to spend on those kind of things,” she added about Jim’s job.

As I wrapped up the interview with Ms. Beasley and Jim, I thanked them both for being so kind to me and asked for permission to walk around the house one last time before departing. They happily consented, and Ms. Beasley left as Jim accompanied me up the stairs to the second floor of Belle Mont.

I wandered throughout the house for nearly half an hour after Ms. Beasley left, listening to Jim’s descriptions of pieces that I found particularly fascinating and reflecting on everything I had learned that day. As I went to leave, I asked Jim if he had any final thoughts that he would like to add to my research. “Well, I hope everyone comes to see the house!” he exclaimed. Me, too, Jim. Me, too.

Works Cited

Singleton-Rickman, Lisa. “‘A Plantation Christmas’ is Dec. 5 at Belle Mont.” *Times Daily.* 26 November 2010. Web. 5 March 2012. <http://www.timesdaily.com/stories/8216A-Plantation-Christmas8217-is-Dec-5-at-Belle-Mont,34591>.