

■ BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG

Special to the Jewish Exponent

66 **D**on't forget your hoop skirt," warned my wiseacre friend, only half-jokingly, when I told him we were headed to Mobile, Ala.

When we returned, I could hardly wait to pick up the phone to tell him I *did* see women in hoop skirts — two of them, actually — conducting tours through Civil War sites.

Otherwise, Mobilians show up in the same casual clothing — sneakers, skirts, pants and shirts — that pass for everyday Philadelphia street garb. The women look pretty much the same as here, but the men are *really* casual, rarely in suits, unless they're lawyers headed to court or some other august occasion.

The atmosphere in town, however, is thoroughly decorous, polite and pleasant. The Old South really does prevail in many ways, and is quite different from the hustle and bustle of Philadelphia.

Start with Mobile's architecture. There are many graceful antebellum homes scattered throughout the "downtown" area. These three-story red-brick houses often are liberally decorated with the elaborate wrought-iron work that's known as iron lace. Many of these gracious buildings have been converted to offices or bed-and-breakfasts, where visitors can stay to get a feeling for how people lived "back then."

One of these, Malaga Inn, located just a few blocks from the heart of downtown, is appealingly atmospheric as you approach, with plenty of iron lace festooning its exterior. You enter a towering lobby with huge beams, dating back to 1862, when two brothers-in-law built adjacent homes for their wives, who were sisters and wanted to live close to each other. These two homes have been converted, around a center courtyard, into what is now the inn.

#### Buildings with atmosphere

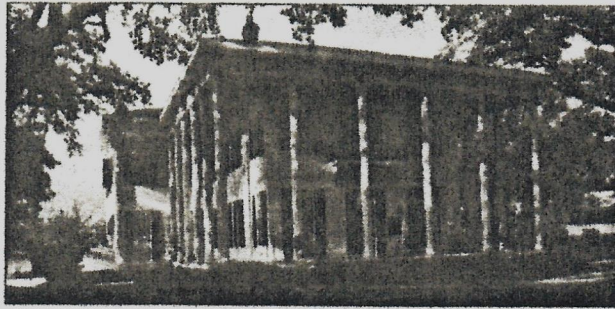
Another atmospheric, but younger, property is the Portman House Inn, dripping with charm, both inside and in its gardens.

Mobile's historical heritage is derived from France, Spain and England, all of whose flags flew over the territory, before it became Sovereign Alabama.

Visitors can make their way through many reminders of this multifaceted past. There's Fort Conde, built to protect the territory when the French ruled. In 1762, England took control and held onto the area until 1780, when Spain seized the town and ruled until 1813. Then Mobile finally became part of America.

Fort Conde has been reconstructed and serves as the city's visitors center, with a guide, dressed in ancient French garb, offering a fact-filled, wryly narrated tour of the fort.

Staying in the historical mode, you can visit the Oakleigh Period House



Among Mobile's many antebellum homes is the 1855 Bragg-Mitchell Mansion.

# Scarlett Lives!

*The charm and decorum of the Old South prevail in pockets of Mobile, Ala.*

Museum, a T-shaped Greek Revival house filled with collections of American and European furniture and silver. To add to the pleasure, take a tour with a costumed guide.

Stop at the Mobile City Museum and peruse its treasures. Then follow up with a walk through the Richards-DAR house, a town house that is one of the finest examples of Italianate architecture. Its wrought-iron railings are particularly interesting in their depiction of the four seasons.

When you arrange for a tour conducted by Mobile's Daughters of the American Revolution, one of the members will undoubtedly be gracious enough to sit behind a silver tea service and serve afternoon tea, often including home-prepared candied citrus peel, a local specialty.

#### Awesome military might

There's lots more. The gargantuan World War II S.S. *Alabama* is parked in the harbor and is available daily for tours. The size of the ship and its guns — the most powerful available at the time — are truly awesome. The ship is famous for its exploits against Germany and in the Pacific and for protecting American shipping along the Murmansk run to Russia.

Just so you know there's more to Mobile than history, there's Dauphin Street, home to many colorful music bars and spirited night life.

Beyond the Mobile city limits, Bayou La Batre is a quirky fishing village and home to the popular Forrest Gump shrimping industry.

Fort Gaines on Dauphin Island, about an hour from the city, is famous as a stronghold during the War Between the States. It's probably best-known for the Battle of Mobile Bay, where Adm. David G. Farragut spoke his legendary words, "Damn the torpedoes — full speed ahead!" Some local historians, however, ques-

tion the authenticity of the words and inflections — even changing the meaning of the hero's utterance to "Damn! The torpedoes — full speed ahead!"

The fort offers tours and a reservations-only "Living History" lunch, prepared by a woman in authentic garb, who cooks cornbread in a fireplace/oven and offers other foods common to the time and area.

Bellingrath Gardens, which bills itself as "one of America's five greatest gardens," lies along the water. A tour of the property allows for a peek into the family home, filled with artistic treasures. Adding to the pleasure of this stop is a boat ride on the Southern Belle to see the wildlife along the river and hear an explanation of how nature balances the river's flora and fauna.

#### Just like Jersey

About an hour away is the community known as Gulf Shores/Orange Beach, with 32 miles of the finest sugar-white sand. It's Alabama's answer to the Jersey Shore, looking a great deal like Ocean City and points south, even to the style of the buildings, most of them constructed since the area was leveled by the fierce winds of Hurricane Frederick in 1979.

For information, write the Alabama Bureau of Travel and Tourism, P.O. Box 4927, Montgomery, Ala. 36103-4927, or call 1-800-ALABAMA.