

Press Room at Laguna Beach Serves As Modest Museum of the Nixon Era

By **ROBERT B. SEMPLE Jr.**
Special to The New York Times

LAGUNA BEACH, Calif., Aug. 11 — Quite unintentionally — for how could they have known? — the managers of the Surf and Sand Hotel here may have created something that is at once a modest museum of the Nixon years and a reminder of how quickly a sitting President can become an ex-President, and how total and even sad that transformation can be.

Some months ago, in an effort to increase revenue, the managers decided to tear apart and rebuild an adjacent building that consisted of two huge rooms.

One room was a poorly patronized Polynesian restaurant of dubious origin and menu known as the Outrigger. The other served as headquarters for the White House press corps whenever President Nixon decided to visit what was known, until Thursday, as the Western White House, about 20 miles down the coast in San Clemente.

So they hauled in tons of ancient planking, tacked up real and contrived memorabilia from the nineteen-twenties, flew in fresh fish, installed a piano player and rechristened the place The Boardwalk.

Press Room Pictures

They also carved out a new press room. It had room enough for 150 reporters and White House staffers, and its walls were adorned with photographs portraying the daily interplay between press and government: Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, announcing some new point of policy; Secretary of State Kissinger reporting on his preliminary trip to China, and the President himself conveying some new turn in Administration strategy before a massed phalanx of pencils, cameras, wire microphones and people.

There is a plaque on the door and a brochure beckons the restaurant's regular patrons with the following words: "If not in use, you may stroll through this room and view these historic photographs."

The writer of that brochure deserves praise for his prescience, not for his grammar. All these photographs are indeed part of history, a history that will not repeat itself in these parts.

Mr. Ziegler is here, but he is hard to find — and he is no longer press secretary. Mr. Kissinger is serving another President in another city. Mr. Nixon, shorn of his authority to announce public

policy, remains isolated at his villa in San Clemente with friends and family.

In short, the photographs are really that remains to remind one of what it must have been like to hold power.

The man most acutely aware of the difference between past and present is obviously Mr. Nixon himself, but the small band of reporters on hand are sensitive to the difference, too.

In the pre-Watergate days, the hotel — which does well anyway — drew extra revenue from 100 newsmen, commentators and technicians. A big event, such as the arrival of the Japanese Premier, might command the presence of 200 or more.

Buses waited outside to whisk reporters down the coastline to the Presidential compound. Announcements were made, typewriters put to use. The local saloons did a land-office business, their beery atmosphere mad thickened by portentous discussion.

Small and Confused

The present group, numbering no more than 20, is not only small, but also confused. Some reporters are here because they were ordered here; others, who covered Mr. Nixon from the beginning, were driven westward by some curious sense of nostalgia. Still others hope Mr. Nixon will open himself for one last interview. And nearly all have trouble getting news from what was once the Presidential compound.

One reason, of course, is that there are not so many people to answer the phones as there used to be. Mr. Nixon's "support staff" is now next to nothing.

There is Mr. Ziegler, Stephen B. Bull, an aide-de-camp, two secretaries, another assistant to Mr. Ziegler, and a military aide, in addition to military personnel who guard the gates, the crew of a Coast Guard craft that sits offshore to protect the beach, and an undetermined number of Secret Service agents whose service Mr. Nixon is legally entitled to for life.

Work of Transition

Mr. Ziegler, Mr. Bull and their assistants work hard and they hold meetings — small meetings — but their work is the work of transition: the necessary task of figuring out how large a staff, and how many services, a man who once made \$200,000 a year and who once commanded a large official budget can afford now that he has been reduced to a \$60,000 pension and a stipend of \$96,000 for office help.

All of them realize that the

larger issues — Mr. Nixon's legal problems, for example — are not immediately theirs to decide. The balls in other hands: those of Jon Jaworski, the special Watergate prosecutor, who may decide to push ahead with his investigation of Mr. Nixon, and those of the lawyers for various defendants in various trials who once worked for the former President and who might wish to summon Mr. Nixon to testify in their behalf.

A Matter of Money

Not much is known of Mr. Nixon's frame of mind. He is said to be "comfortable" with his decision to resign, but he has real and potential problems. There is, for one thing, the matter of hiring a new lawyer to replace James St. Clair, and there is a matter of money.

Mr. Nixon has promised to pay a 1969 tax deficiency of some \$188,884 next Jan. 15 for the final payment on the San Clemente house.

Not surprisingly, therefore, two additional guests arrived at the compound yesterday: Charles G. Rebozo and Robert H. Abplanalp, who helped him buy the villa in the first place by purchasing much of the surrounding land.

The two men were observed having lunch at a nearby restaurant today, but they declined to characterize their talks with the former President.

"We're out here as friends to do what we can that's all," Mr. Abplanalp said. Asked about Mr. Nixon's mood, he replied, "He seemed fine; he is not upset."

Least Affected

The people who seem least affected by the momentous changes in the last few days are the residents of San Clemente and neighboring towns.

Here in Laguna, as it is called, the beach remains jammed with wall-to-wall youths who worry about the surf, not politics.

San Clemente is a sleepy place, and the pace of life seems to be unchanged, as are the loyalties of at least some of its residents.

When Mr. Nixon last visited his home some weeks ago, Paul Presley, owner of the nearby San Clemente Inn, posted a sign saying "To Be Great is to Be Misunderstood — Hang in There, Mr. President."

Now the sign is shorter, but no less defiant: "Welcome Home, Mr. President." To Mr. Presley, Mr. Nixon remains today what he was in those photographs in the Press Room at The Boardwalk.