

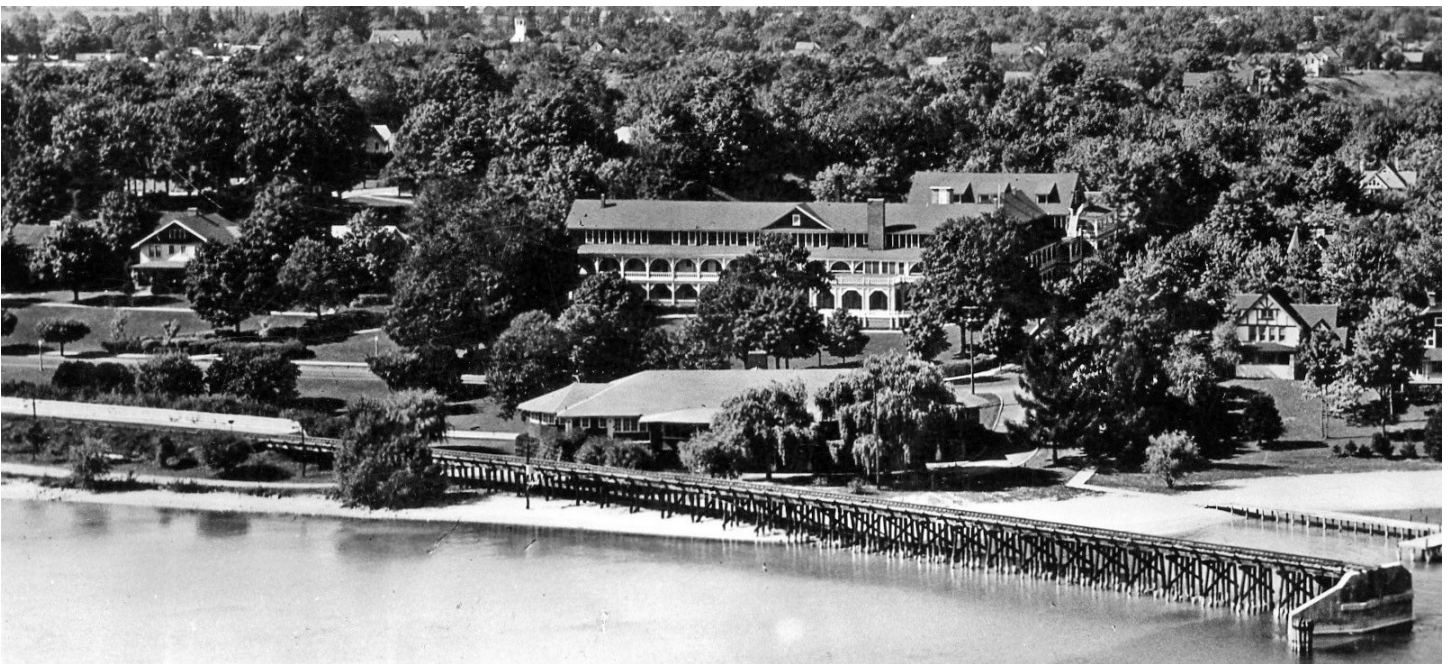


Looking Back #26

A Tribute to the Belvedere Club Casino



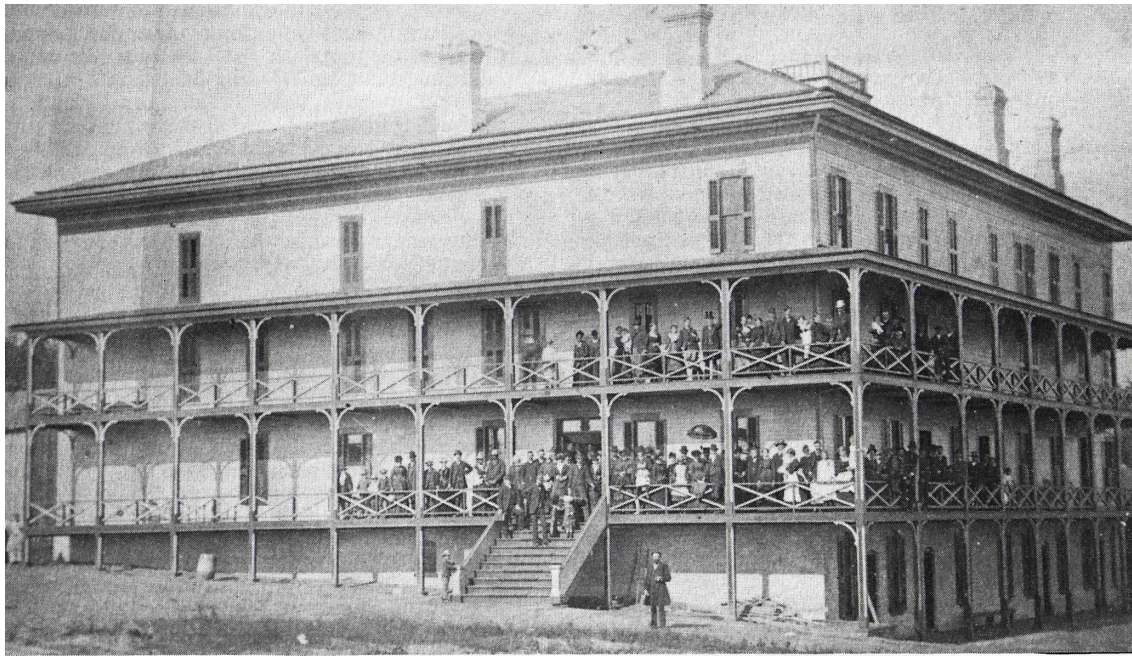
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Belvedere Club casino, lower center beside the railroad trestle, 1923-2025. The 84-room Belvedere Hotel appears above it. The hotel was demolished in 1960, and the trestle was removed in 1983.

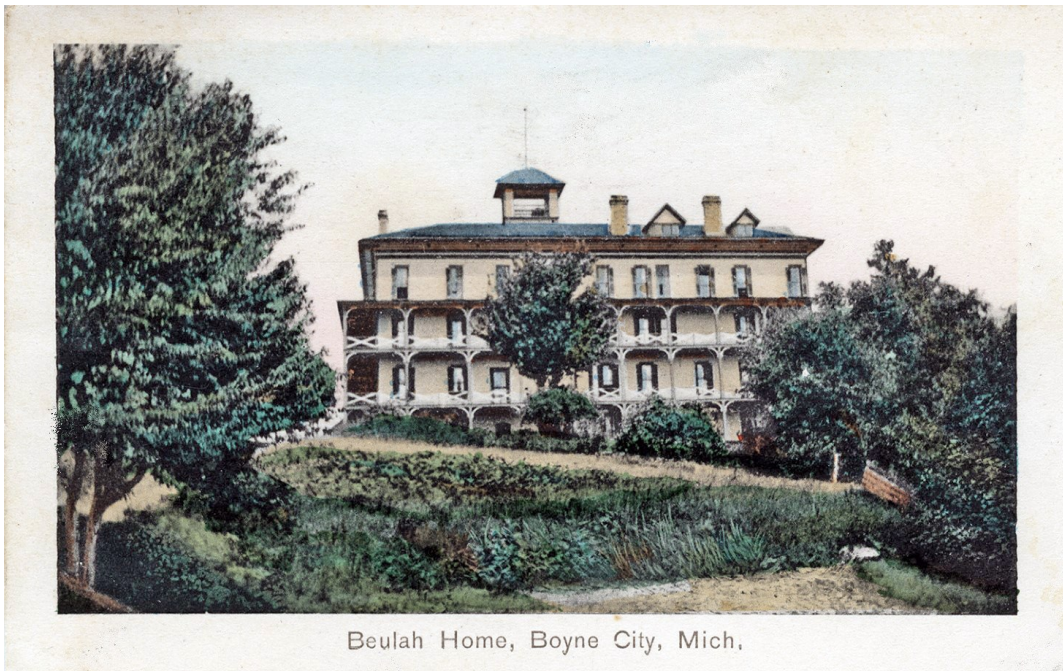
On October 23, 2025, Charlevoix, Michigan awoke to the shocking news that it had lost one of its most iconic structures, an arson victim, just after 3 a.m. that morning. The casino of the Belvedere Club Resort Association had stood for 102 years at the turning of Belvedere Avenue onto Ferry Avenue that borders Lake Charlevoix on the city's east side. Everyone in town and the immediate area knew the casino. Thousands upon uncounted thousands of people outside Charlevoix knew the casino. Many of them knew it without even realizing exactly what it was, how it got there or what the name meant. "Casino" here had nothing to do with the word as it is best known today, denoting a gambling establishment. A diminutive of the Italian "casa," the English "house," in 1923 the Belvedere Club named their new addition to assume the not often used alternate meaning of "social center," which the building was in spades for multiple generations of resort members every summer season.

How did this all begin?



H.B. CHAPMAN'S HOTEL IN BAY SPRINGS

The structure itself began life near Boyne City, at the far southeast end of Lake Charlevoix in that town's small, lakeside north suburb of Bay Springs. There, a four-story hostelry was built in 1885 by H. B. Chapman of Saginaw, MI with the intention of making it a luxury summer resort hotel. However, the building, which Chapman dubbed "The Tourist Home," was far distant from a convenient railroad stop since Boyne City had yet to see its first train. The closest station was at Boyne Falls seven miles east. That seven miles was covered by bumpy stagecoach. So, with so little business arriving, he soon turned the sparsely tenanted hotel into a "state soldiers home," which also failed, as did a couple of other ventures by other people. Then, what had come to be called "Chapman's Folly" was taken over by the Valparaiso Normal College for teacher education late in the 1890s, itself followed by an apartment house. In 1904 came the soon-to-be notorious Beulah Home for (delinquent) Boys, ages six to fifteen, most of them off the streets of Chicago. During its first year, it was reported that ninety-eight boys were in the building. But the venture ended in scandal in 1909.



Beulah Home, Boyne City, Mich,

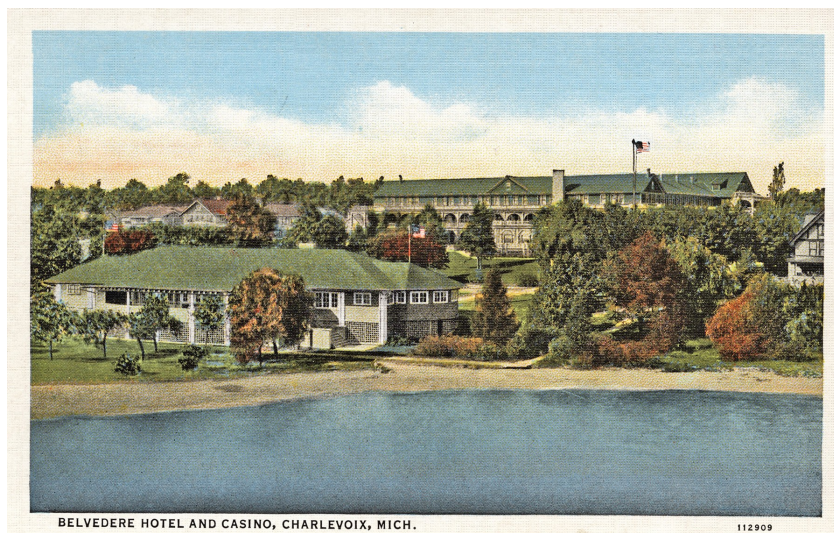


The resort in Charlevoix had begun in 1878 when Baptists from southern Michigan and northern Indiana purchased land for a summer getaway. Their first five cottages, left, went up immediately. A year later a members-only clubhouse was added, itself soon to turn into a *de facto* hotel. That was enlarged as demand increased until it reached its fullest 84-room capacity, seen below in 1906. The Belvedere Hotel quickly became one of the most popular in the region with guests from across the country.

However, both the resort members and hotel guests had long needed a place to gather and spread out for various functions. It took three decades before an idea was born. What better place than the land across Ferry Avenue where the coming of the train had left much unused space? In 1922, word was put out to local contractors. But first, back to Boyne City . . .



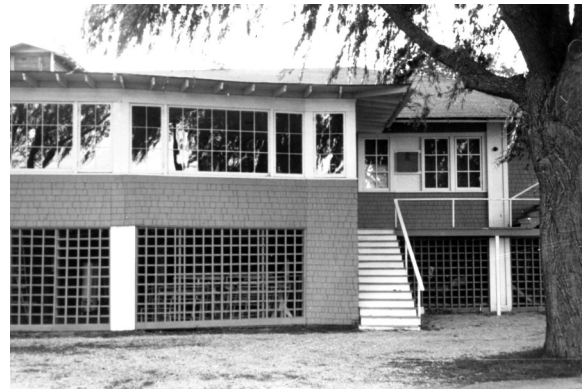
After the boys home was shuttered, the old hostelry was converted, this time into another so-called apartment house whose unit walls in the former dormitories were blankets that had been contributed to the home, were rescued from storage, and hung on wire rods for what was called "light housekeeping." Many young couples began their married lives here. That must have been interesting with blankets for walls. In the early 1920s, the building was put on the market for salvage. James Saunders of Charlevoix bought it in 1922 for the lumber, and hired his son and some of his friends to take "Chapman's Folly" apart board by board. They transported the former walls and flooring in a Maxwell truck to Charlevoix where, having been awarded the contract, they put much of the wood back together as the uniquely designed Belvedere casino a year later, structurally strengthened and beautifully refurbished not too many years ago.



Vintage postcard of the era showing the casino, left front, view taken from the train trestle



Ferry Avenue entry elevation



Lake Charlevoix elevation



Two views of the spacious interior, adaptable for so many different functions



View northeast over Ferry Avenue. Only the chimney remains standing.



Singing interlude in the casino for a group of men, organization unknown



Sit-down event, apparently no food served, for group possibly members of the resort



Most likely an end-of-season Casino Party and Cabaret with skits and musical numbers all performed by Belvedere Club members, rehearsed over weeks to a fare-thee-well for a rousing climax to the summer



Left: The “Untouchable” himself, U.S. Treasury agent Eliot Ness, who put away mobster Al Capone in the 30's, speaking at a civil defense meeting in the casino in the early 1940s while he was in the employ of the city of Cleveland, OH. Right: actor Chris O'Donnell (Scent of a Woman, Batman & Robin, Fried Green Tomatoes, NCIS Los Angeles), attending a wedding reception at the Belvedere casino

From the day it opened its doors, the Belvedere casino saw non-stop use by both the resort, the town, the county, and the surrounding region. It was just the right size for weddings, receptions, small conventions, reunions, fun and games, meetings, exhibits et. al., a “social center” in every sense of the word. Several names of note have probably been within its walls: President Truman’s Secretary of State Dean Acheson; soon-to-be Senator Barry Goldwater; actor Willam Talman for sure (TV’s Perry Mason show); Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson, twice Democratic candidate for the presidency in the 1950s, also for sure; Tarzan creator Edgar Rice Burroughs; founder of the Oldsmobile auto company Ransom E. Olds; crooner Bing Crosby.



Club members gather to trip the light fantastic in the casino, encapsulating the gentle welcoming spirit which pervaded the building for over a century, now sadly lost.



Before, June 7, 2023, showing added exterior viewing balcony .



... and after, October 23, 2025. Both photos courtesy of John Duskoch