Old hotel typifies sleepy fishing village

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CEDAR KEY --- One of Florida’s most picturesque communities is this fishing village 22 miles off U.S. 19 midway between Tampa and Tallahassee. Easy does it is the way of life here.

Headquarters for peace-seekers and lazy vacationers is the old Island Hotel in the heart of "downtown." It’s not known just how old the weather-beaten structure is, but it’s over 125 years old. Now operated by Mrs. Bessie Gibbs, who is also the town’s mayor, it is known far and wide for its outstanding food, featuring native dishes such as swamp cabbage salad, and turtle steaks.

For years Cedar Key was under the "curse" slapped on her by the railroad magnate, Henry B. Plant. Back in the 1880s, when Cedar Key was a swingin’ place, had a population of 5000 and the second largest port in Florida, Plant wanted to build a railroad here. He was stopped cold by Florida’s first U.S. Senator, David Levy Yulee, who already had a railroad operating here and controlled much of the land. Plant fumed: "I'll wipe Cedar Key off the map! Owls will hoot in your attics and hogs will wallow in your deserted streets!" He came to Tampa, instead, and triggered development there.

Cedar Key once was the home of pencil factories of Eberhard Faber, but the supply ran out due to exploitation of timber resources. Indians and pirates once lived in this and the other 99 keys in the group.