

Family's history buff seeks information on early years of business that became landmark in downtown Port

Lloyd Smith, whose surname is synonymous with downtown Port Washington, is looking for information about his family's famous restaurant at the corner of Grand Avenue and Franklin Street.

He's writing a history of the business, and is seeking information on the expansion of the restaurant's early dining rooms.

Specifically, he's looking for information on when each of its six dining rooms was added.

"Although it is a very long shot, I am trying to contact anyone still alive who may have worked there between 1934 and 1940 or who can answer any part of the question," he said. "I have ideas, but nothing solid. Today, there is no family member alive who can answer that question."

Smith, a history buff, is working to ensure the landmark Port Washington business is not forgotten. He is writing a history of the business for a Web site maintained by Lincoln Smith's son Brian.

"It's a collection of all sorts of things Smith," he said. He's already done a history of the Harborside Motel — today the Holiday Inn Harborview — which the family built in 1973, and edited the memoirs of Evelyn Smith, who started the family restaurant.

"This is my last project, the restaurant," Smith said.

The history will not only include a chronology of the restaurant but a collection of factors that led to its successes and struggles, Smith said.

Among the factors that hurt the business were decisions to route Highway 141 and later I-43 along the outskirts of Port Washington, shuttling traffic away from downtown Port.

"That really hurt us," Smith said.

The steady increase in fish and seafood prices were also tough on the business, he said, noting that for decades fish was much less expensive than meat.

"We prided ourselves in having meals cheaper than the Port Hotel," which was known for its steak dinners, he said.

Smith Bros. restaurant has its roots in 1924 when, after a week of rain, a cloudburst forced the already swollen Sauk Creek over its banks. The fishing shanties that lined the west slip were washed away.

Fishing for Smith Bros. restaurant history

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
Wednesday, 04 August 2010 18:39

Within days, an old harness shop at the corner of Franklin Street and Grand Avenue was rented and converted into a fish market. Soon, Evelyn Smith installed a fryer and began cooking fish to sell.

During a skat tournament, a man suggested the fried fish be made into sandwiches that would be easy to eat while playing cards. The sandwich was an immediate success.

By 1934, the family bought a neighboring fruit market and set up a counter and three tables there.

During its first six years, the restaurant grew from 18 seats to 250 seats in six dining rooms.

“Each time there was a new dining room, they had to redo the kitchen,” Smith said, noting that by 1940 the restaurant encompassed five buildings and had 13 fryers.

The restaurant, which was on Highway 32, was ideally located for success, he said.

In 1934, the 200-mile trip from Chicago to Door County took one day.

“You’d start out in the morning and halfway through, in Port Washington, you would stop for lunch,” he said. “Highway 32 took traffic right past our door.”

In November 1953, a fire destroyed the restaurant, leaving only the market and bar unscathed.

The family rebuilt the restaurant. The next major structural change occurred in 1982, when the Harbor Room on the east side of the building was constructed.

In 1988, Joe DeRosa purchased Smith Bros. Restaurant. He added a second-floor open-air dining area in 1991.

The business was purchased by the William Goldammer family in 1997. They, too, renovated the restaurant after a fire in 2001.

Lighthouse Development bought the business in 2005 and spent the next year renovating the building, which they dubbed Smith Bros. Marketplace. It is currently occupied by a coffeehouse, but the bulk of the first floor is vacant. The second floor is being renovated for the headquarters of Franklin Energy.