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Say so long to 1907 hotel

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Author: GOSIA WOZNIACKA, *The Oregonian*

SUMMARY: The Tiller Hotel will be torn down for the Discovery Block

The smell is musty, the only sound is a steady drip-drip of water, and the floorboards are weakened by rot. Yet little signs of daily life are scattered here and there, as if everyone had just left.

Ten small rooms hold metal and wood beds with headboards, the mattresses stained and box springs rusted. Small chests of drawers, some missing a door, stand open as if awaiting new clothes. Newspapers from 1974 and 1975 crumble underfoot near sunk-in chairs. A large sink and cast-iron tub in a bathroom look indestructible. In the common room, an ashtray still holds a cigarette butt.

The Tiller Hotel dates to the early 1900s and is a Troutdale landmark. But the weathered green building on the corner of Dora Street and Historic Columbia River Highway has seen no guests in more than 30 years. The furniture is covered with thick layers of dust, soaked with water from leaky ceilings. Mold crawls up baby blue and cream-colored walls.

The building was erected in 1907 by Martha Tiller and her husband, who ran the hotel and restaurant for about 50 years. Later, the upstairs rooms were rented by the week, and a succession of owners cooked up home-style food in the cafe downstairs.

Sometime in March, the historic hotel and cafe will be torn down to make way for building the Discovery Block, one of the three proposed sites for the Troutdale library. With it will vanish stories of working men and boys, of ghosts, and of the best pie and ice cream in town, according to longtime residents.

Joe Lunday still remembers the hotel: bare bones, rustic and cramped. He rented a room there in 1963 for \$5 a week, paid in advance to Johnny Sukkau, the fellow who operated the place after the Tillers.

Lunday, now a real estate appraiser who lives in Portland, was a 17-year-old high school junior and decided he wanted "to get some freedom." So while his family lived on the hill in Troutdale, Lunday moved into the hotel room for two weeks, taking only his school clothes and some books.

He remembers the bare light bulbs hanging from ceilings, the competition for the communal bathroom each morning, and walking to the general store to buy cans of peaches and chunks of baloney. He continued attending school, his friends visited, and his parents hollered from the sidewalk. The other renters, older men who worked on the railroad, paid little attention to him.

After Sukkau, the next owner was someone called "Crazy Max" and his wife, said Neil Handy, who grew up in Troutdale and whose father, Ike Handy, often walked from his service station to the Tiller Hotel for pie and ice cream.

In the 1970s, the fire marshal shut down the upstairs hotel, Handy said, but a succession of families ran the cafe until four years ago, when a fire swept through the block, sparing the abandoned hotel but driving out the cafe business.

The U-shape counter and red leather chairs can still be seen through the bare facade, coffee cups lining the cupboards, napkins standing in the napkin holder.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Betty Espenel operated Betty's Troutdale Cafe there, serving family-style fare to clients

who sat around the cafe's large fireplace.

"She had one heck of a trade," said her husband Robert "Bud" Espenel. "People on the weekends, they'd line up outside the door to get in."

Espenel said he knew the building was in disrepair, but he was sad it would have to be torn down.

"I hate to see the old part of town go," he said. "I've lived here for so long."

The cafe continued to be home-style and popular with each new owner. After the Espenels, Shirley Welton, a longtime restaurateur, reopened it as Shirley's Cafe. Then Sherri Bonwell and husband, Howard; her mother, Janet Parsons; brother Robert Hutcheson and other family members ran it as "Rainbow's End Cafe" for nine years.

As with many old buildings, there were stories of the supernatural.

"My sister and I thought the place had a spirit," recalls Hutcheson, now chef at Gresham's Main Street Ale House. "More than once, we sensed a presence. One day, it sounded like somebody was dropping change from one hand to another. We both heard it."

Hutcheson said he was told the Tiller Hotel had been a brothel in its heyday, though the Troutdale Historical Society could not confirm this. He also recalls hearing stories of a tunnel that went from the Sandy river to the hotel, so that ship hands who got shore leave could come directly there. But that could be just a myth.

Hutcheson said the city condemned and sealed the upstairs hotel while his family operated the Rainbow's End because homeless people would stay there. The cafe closed after the 2003 fire devastated the block.

Lyn's Cafe, operated by Gal-Lyn Gayner, opened in 2004 but did not last long. The block, as city leaders like to say, was an eyesore and did not attract customers.

City officials hope the building of the Discovery Block by Mike Greensdale and Brent Parry of Troutdale-based Bremik Construction will reverse the block's fortune and make it the community gathering spot it once was. The Discovery Block will include retail space, restaurants, parking spots, possibly the library, as well as rowhouses on the south side of the block.

Through the years, the block featured a pharmacy, the town's general store, Troutdale's pool hall and a barber shop, among other businesses. The pool hall next to the Tiller Hotel will also be torn down, while the former general store, now home to Troutdale Vision, will be preserved as part of the Discovery Block.

Greensdale said he wishes he could preserve the old hotel but that the building is beyond repair.

So, all that will remain of the memory of the men and women who stayed and ate there is the stuff of collectors: large, dusty cardboard cutouts of Babe Ruth, Betty Boop and John Wayne; a couple of antique lamps; one claw-foot tub and several scraps of old newspapers.

And maybe, for those who believe in such things, the sound of coins changing hands.

Gosia Wozniacka: 503-294-5936; gosiawozniacka@news.oregonian.com

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