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December 5, 2002

Centralia relives its bawdy past in restored Olympic Club hotel

By [Nancy Bartley \(http://www.nwsourc.com/authors/nancy-bartley\)](http://www.nwsourc.com/authors/nancy-bartley)

The Seattle Times

CENTRALIA — "Hi, honey! We're staying in a brothel," my friend Deb Smith said when she telephoned her husband, Randy, from the Olympic Club, a hotel and pub that is the most recent "rescue" project of Portland's McMenamain brothers. It's a place full of Prohibition-era history and local lore.

After a train trip to Centralia and a day of checking out the outlet stores, the antique shops and then the historic Olympic Club with its theater, restaurant, brewery, pool hall, pubs and hotel, my friend tells her husband of ghosts, buried bodies, bootleggers, bawdy women and billiards. Not your typical weekend away "with the girls."

But this is a town that hugs its lively past like a favorite book. And with little prompting, citizens tell the stories.

"During Prohibition there was a tunnel running from the hotel, beneath the tracks, to a house on the other side. They were running hooch through there," said Kenneth Moore, the manager at the vintage, red-brick Union Station where the Amtrak from Seattle stops. "When they put in the new platform, they found a body."



Scott Rose, left, and his dad, Gordon, share a conversation at one of the hotel bars. The Olympic Club Brewery next door to the hotel makes seasonal brews.

(TIM LOTT / THE SEATTLE TIMES)

At the Centralia Antique Market — in a former fraternal organization lodge — Pauline Howard pauses while ringing up a purchase to tell how "ladies of the evening" plied their trade on the lodge's fourth floor and how on the third, couples waltzed and foxtrotted during festive holiday balls.

Today, heavy, red-velvet draperies hide the old third-floor stage and the spindles, arms and legs of time-worn furniture take on ghostly forms in the dim light.

But nothing in town quite matches the Olympic Club for bawdy history. The club opened in 1908 as a "gentleman's resort," and had a barber shop, shoeshine stand, cafe, bar, card room, pool room and cigar counter, complemented by urbane furnishings such as Belgian crystal and Tiffany lamps. The elegant trappings were meant to coax loggers and miners to

(JIMI LOTT / THE SEATTLE TIMES)

leave their week's salary behind. And they often did.

Next door, what began as the Oxford Hotel and New Tourist Bar was built in 1913 for railroad travelers. The hotel became especially noteworthy when in 1921 the train-robbing bandit Roy Gardner was captured in the hotel after escaping from federal guards days earlier and riding to Centralia on the cow-catcher of a slow-moving train.

The New Tourist Bar was the Olympic Club's main competition but eventually faded as the Olympic Club flourished through Prohibition.

Even today in the Olympic Club basement is a pickle barrel with a false bottom, leading to a trap door where liquor could be hidden.

After many years, the Oxford Hotel closed, but the Olympic Club continued on — a mere shadow of its earlier days — until the McMenamins purchased it, the hotel and New Tourist Bar in 1996 and began to restore and combine them, decorating them with many of the original items, from pool tables to lights.

The Olympic Club and pool hall opened in January 1997, and the hotel and theater portion opened this past Oct. 31.

Mixing present and past

After a bus trip to the outlet stores, we walked about a block from the train station on a dark and drizzly late afternoon.

The Olympic Club sign glowed neon-orange and as we stepped across the old tile, we noticed the sign above the door to the bar indicating "ladies patronage not solicited."

Inside the dark club the air was spiced with wood smoke from a large iron stove. There were pools of candlelight and jewel-colored shadows from the Tiffany glass. Although it was early, there were customers — mainly locals — sitting at the mammoth mahogany bar, brought around the horn of South America about 1908.

The staff scurried to pour the Olympic Club-brewed beer, and the aroma of garlic drifted from the kitchen.

Todd Chaput, the property manager, gave us a tour. Next to the New Tourist Bar, a smaller version of the club bar, was the theater. Its walls were covered with paintings, depicting local characters — the police chief who (Chaput said) ran the poker games, and his wife who ran the brothel, and Gardner, the "gentleman bandit."

The ceiling was the original hammered tin, and wizened faces had been painted on the elbows of pipes along the ceiling.

Movigoers sat in sofas and comfy armchairs and ate dinner and had drinks during the movie. We ordered pasta dishes with hazelnuts and spinach. Salads appeared at the table of the family in front of us and others dined on burgers as the lights lowered for the first of the evening's movies, "Monty Python and the Holy Grail." The matinees are typically G-rated, the 6 p.m. movies PG-rated and the 8 p.m. are PG- or R-rated. Movies may be as recent as a month old, or old favorites — like Monty Python.

The movie appealed to the couple behind us, but their two small boys settled onto a sofa, holding their teddy bears, and went to sleep. But dining and movies don't always mix; at a gruesome part of the movie, one man shouted, "Please! I'm eating!"

Tales of old

For locals and visitors alike, the Olympic Club is a happening place brimming with stories, and Tim Hogan, the movie projectionist, needed little encouragement.

During Prohibition, the manager always sat in a booth surrounded in mirrors and Tiffany glass, Hogan said, pointing to the booth just around the corner. The mirrors made it possible to see all entrances to the club. An ivory button (still there) at the back of the booth would allow the manager to alert others to the presence of federal agents so all the liquor could be disposed of. Another version of the story is that the button rang to the rooms at the hotel, summoning the ladies of the moment, Hogan said.

No building with a history of bootlegging and bandits would be complete without a resident ghost.

"One of the managers was closing up one night and put out all the candles and left the room," Hogan said. A few minutes later, the manager returned to find the candles glowing.

"And I was upstairs in the hotel when one of the end curtains began to sway back and forth," he said.

After the 6 p.m. movie, some guests played board games by the wood stove and others played pool. You can still see the motorcycle sidecar, displayed in the pool room, that the illustrious former sheriff is said to have lost in a poker game. The locals and visitors alike gather around the pool tables, probably with as much enthusiasm as the generations before them.



The Olympic Club is not the place to go to bed early. The second movie begins at 8 p.m. and the music in the bar reverberates into the hotel rooms above until it ends at 11 p.m.

You can only access your room by going out the front door of the pub and walking a few feet down the street to the hotel door, which opens with the room key. The rooms are up two flights of stairs; there is no elevator.

Just as you wish the walls could talk, they do. Newspaper clippings and quotes from oral histories and paintings of illustrious local characters festoon the walls. The rooms are small with a sink only, but there are plenty of bathrooms — kept immaculately clean — just across the hall, and the hotel provides white terrycloth bathrobes.

The rooms are named for local characters. Mine is named for sawmill worker (and Olympic Club pool player) Lester Webster. From beneath the white cotton bedspread, I stare at Webster's image and wonder about his words written on the wall, "I learned snooker the hard way 'cause when I went in there they played a penny a point ... and that runs into money." And I think of the words from a song written on the wall across the hall, "All you need is faith to hear the diesel comin'."

And it does come, in the night when all else is quiet, hooting and clattering its way to other places, other adventures, back to other times.

Nancy Bartley: 206-464-8522 or nbartley@seattletimes.com



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<mailto:nbartley@seattletimes.com>

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Article photos



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Kimm Johnson, top bunk, and Joanne Kershner share a laugh. The hotel's rooms have king-sized, queen-sized or bunk beds.

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