

Welcome to the Rams Head. A step down from bustling NW 23rd places you in one of the most prominent buildings along the Avenue, a living artifact from an earlier era. This dining area was originally part of the venerable Campbell Hotel, an upscale apartment house known for its refinement and personal service. The Campbell is a neighborhood historic landmark and this

restaurant is perhaps the most distinctive and well-preserved space in the building. With its coffered ceilings, stamped-tin wainscoting and elaborate woodwork, its quiet sophistication remains much the same—with McMenamin’s flare—as when it was named for its first proprietor, Jean Campbell, in 1912.

Before this grand structure was built this area was a sparse—and elite—residential area known for its open fields, uncut timber and stately mansions. The only non-residential structure in the area was the nursery of the Burkhardt Brothers, pioneer Portland florists located on the lot just to the



World’s Fair that this area became an intensely urban concentration of residential and commercial use. The Campbell was part of this boom.

The National Register of Historic Places describes this building as, “undoubtedly...the best designed and most handsomely detailed of the several in the neighborhood designed by A.C. Ewart.” The ornate Campbell would have

appealed to the public’s growing sophistication during the ‘20s and census records show that the 93-unit building regularly housed well over 100 people. One local boy, Dick Randall, lived with his family in the Campbell in 1928 and 1929. His Aunt Sydney ran the restaurant at the time. Dick’s two-year residency left an indelible impression and today he still recalls that the

Campbell’s dining room was one of Portland’s biggest speakeasies during Prohibition. Of course Aunt Sydney kept it all very discreet in the classy Hotel dining room, “Everything came in coffee cups,” Dick recalls. There was an Italian ‘gardener’ who made deliveries in a Model T pickup truck, supplying the Campbell and other places with illicit liquor.

“The old boy would bring vegetables here to the kitchen,” Dick said through a laugh, “but under the boxes (of vegetables) were the boxes of booze.” The dining room was a very popular spot in the ‘20s and people came from all over the city for Aunt Sydney’s

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west of where the Ram’s Head now stands. It wasn’t until the building boom precipitated by the 1905 Lewis & Clark

The Burkhardt Brothers’ business started just to the west of here in 1883. The Burkhardts and the Campbell Hotel were neighbors until the 1950s when the nursery moved west. Now, Burkhardt does frequent business with McMenamins Cornelius Pass Roadhouse!

special “coffee” and some remarkable entertainment—dinner dancing to jazz, swing or even Hawaiian music!

In addition to the special coffee, the Campbell boasted elaborate special dinners as well. A newspaper ad from the era announces the “Dixie Dinner” featuring a variety of appetizers, fried spring chicken, country



The Campbell Hotel, c. 1920.

gravy, corn, red peppers and sweet potatoes. A Dixie salad, pineapple, biscuits and a mint julep dessert round out the bill of fare. At the time, the Dixie Dinner special would have put you back about a dollar.

The Depression hit upscale apartments hard in the ‘30s, and records show as few as 38 residents living in the Campbell. The dining hall suffered a bit too, but the alluring atmosphere of the place kept enough customers coming back. The influx of laborers and families to Portland during WWII brought boarders back to the hotel and the once again thriving dining room. By 1940 the hotel converted a house across Hoyt Street for the “Campbell Hotel Annex.”

The post war years changed the character of the neighborhood. People returning from the war began to flee high-density urban centers in favor of more affordable sub-urban homes. Eventually the high rents of the neighborhood declined. Ownership changed frequently and the aging brick building’s condition was overlooked. The restaurant remained busy for many years however, and they continued to serve their popular dinners to the hotel residents, as well as the public. Sometime in the early ‘70s the Campbell became low-rent housing, the number of residents fluctuating with the seasons. By the time of its closure in 1986, the Campbell’s restaurant had been dark for an extensive period of time. Of the hotel, *The Examiner* wrote, “Whether by design or circumstance, the Campbell has long been a refuge for people barely able to afford any housing at all, many elderly people and other single adults in transition, often from institutional settings.” The space was in disrepair and in need of major physical improvements.

With McMenamins’ opening of the Ram’s Head in 1990 the elegance and refinement of the once popular dining room came roaring back.

McMenamins respected the opulent history of the space and retained its ornate designs and upscale food offerings. For McMenamins, the fine dining menu and elegant atmosphere was a new direction, a turning point of sorts. It was our first pub to offer a comprehensive wine list and the earliest to experiment with exotic and gourmet foods.

With a few improvements and some updated style the Ram’s Head continues to offer the neighborhood an interesting destination to take refuge from bustling 23rd Avenue. Although the days of drinking illicit liquor in coffee mugs are gone, you can still enjoy a classic, locally produced ale, wine, or spirit in a grand old neighborhood setting.