



M C M E N A M I N S



HISTORY



McMenamins Brings New Life to Olympia's Historic Café



THE SPAR



Olympia, Washington, is known to many in the Northwest as one of the most scenic, peaceful and easy-going small towns in the region.

The waterfront community has been the capital since the territory first broke off from Oregon in 1853, but old timers from the area will tell you that it hasn't always seemed so, well, stately. Long before the city was associated with white-collar state workers, college students and public art it was a union town populated – especially on weekends – by railroad brakemen, loggers, longshoremen and the like.

One such old timer is Alan McWain, lifelong Olympia resident and longtime owner of The Spar, one of the town's oldest restaurants. The Spar, soon to become the newest McMenamins pub, has been in McWain's family since 1945 when his father purchased the place. There has been a saloon, bowling alley or billiards hall on this spot since the 1860s; the current structure was built in 1935. Of course, McWain's memories of growing up in and around his father's place paint a different picture of The Spar than one sees today.

With its early roots as one of the first ports of entry to immigrants and as a major transportation hub, Olympia's early days were largely defined by an economy of



A working-class stomping ground for decades, this 1964 view of The Spar shows off the building's 1935 Art Moderne styling. Courtesy Washington State Archives.

resource extraction and shipping activities in its busy port. The Spar's early days were defined by these activities too; its proximity to the waterfront ensured that it was the workers' favorite off-hours watering hole. McWain remembers some of these days from when he was a boy. "Back in the '20s, '30s and '40s the Port of Olympia was all along here. This place was built as a rooming

house ... to cater to that crowd." And McWain's father did all he could to encourage it. "In fact," he says with a laugh, "my dad would go to the bank on Fridays and get an extra ten grand to cash the paychecks."

After cashing the paychecks his father offered as many ways as he could for them to give the cash right back. Tobacco, liquor, cards and gambling were just a few (and probably the most popular) of the options. "Back in those days, we had unregulated gambling, and we'd have the ticker tape out there. And my dad used to take in bets on the horses, the football games, the baseball games ... mutual betting. Hell, they bet on elections!"

It seems they weren't afraid to get creative, either. One popular betting event was for the Rose Bowl, where customers could buy into the (...continued page 2) **The Spar**

(continued from page 1...) pool by purchasing squares on a large board. “There were floor-to-ceiling football pools for the Rose Bowl ... and [my dad] hired a cartoonist for those that [bought a square].

Whether an individual or business, if they bought a square for twenty-five bucks, they’d get a caricature of themselves or their business. And the board paid off \$2,500. Back in those days, we could fill up about three of [the boards.]”

Alan practically grew up at The Spar. Holding his hand just a few feet off the floor, he declares, “I’ve been having meals here since I was this tall.” When he became old enough to work at his father’s place, he did. “I used to wash dishes here. [I was] probably like 13, 15.” Later, when he began working as a bartender, he got a taste of the true-blue spirit of The Spar. “The bar used to open at 6 o’clock [in the morning] in those days, and the counter would be lined up with longshoremen. They’d be drunk by 8 o’clock in the morning, and then some would go do a shift and come back and start over.”

Of course, Alan also recalls the light-hearted ribbing he used to get from some of the unruly clientele. “Here I am, this punk kid, 5’5”, waiting on all these goddamned longshoremen.” They were fond of giving him a hard time, “Alan, when are you going to join the union?” they would kid. “You’ve got to have a union card to be back there.” To many of The Spar’s customers, however, it was not much of a joke. “My bartender [Vi Lenhart] had been here 28 years and she was head of the union [currently the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union]. It was really, really very heavy union in this town,” McWain added.

In addition to connecting with this blue-collar tradition, McMenamins will revive a practice first started in this town in 1895: brewing beer with Olympia’s famously

pure spring water. At one time there were as many as ninety known artesian wells springing up in and around Olympia. The wells supplied the city with drinking water for decades, and some of our more discerning readers may remember the slogan “It’s the Water” from a certain tasty beer once brewed in the area. A lesser-known source of this pure artesian water is The Spar; and it’s no historic

curiosity either – the natural well in the cellar pumps out 11 gallons a minute, and they’ve been serving the water to customers from that well since they opened in 1935.

“It’s a better product [than the city water],” McWain proclaims. “On the rare occasions that I switch over to city water for maintenance reasons, my customers can tell right away.”

Some say that walking into The Spar is like stepping back to 1935. It has long ceased being the men-only, smoke-filled place it once was, but it has managed to retain its original charm.

There is no doubt that its down-home food and slightly dated atmosphere has caused a few locals to mourn The Spar’s change of hand. And why not? With its blue-collar chic and cafeteria feel, it has been a family-owned icon of downtown Olympia since 1935. When McMenamins remodels the place in the coming months it will aim to continue that decades-long, family-owned tradition of welcoming comfort and great atmosphere – all with a McMen-amins twist! So don’t turn in your union card just yet. 🍷

