

At five o'clock on Friday afternoon, June 28, 1935, the creators of The Spar extended a genial invitation to all residents of the community to come and explore the new business. People came from all over the region--by plane in some instances--to see downtown Olympia's new sporting man's paradise, the "finest eating and recreation parlor" around. By all accounts, none were disappointed. This was no accident as owner Guy Hayden and his associates had previously opened two other Spar Cafés and were accustomed to big grand openings. The new Olympia establishment was clearly their best, however, and with its Art Moderne styling and great location near one for Olympia's busiest intersections, the Wohleb-designed Spar was busy right from that first day.

Local residents at that time noted that The Spar's slick new facade replaced a more rugged sort of building that had been around for some 60 or 70 years. There had been a saloon, beer hall or store on this spot of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue since at least 1880--well before Washington gained statehood--with some sources pointing back as early as 1867. The best known of these establishments was the Oxford Saloon, The Spar's direct predecessor, which began business about 1905. The Oxford was run by the notorious Taylor brothers, three brothers



who became well-known in town through their roles at the saloon, as well as through their colorful exploits outside of the business. The place was a mini-resort for the blue-collar men that worked in nearby ports, mills and forestland. Featuring a billiard room, variety theater for dance hall girls and burlesque performances, barbershop, shoe shine, lodging rooms upstairs (likely for sporting women) and of course, lots of liquor,

the rough-and-tumble watering hole offered plenty of ways for a man to spend his paycheck.

Washington's dry laws changed much of the way the Oxford did business--at least on the surface. While stories of bootlegging and prostitution still surrounded the old saloon during prohibition, from 1916 to 1933 its public face was that of a soda fountain, café, poolroom and bowling alley. Scenes from the Oxford's early years can be seen throughout the pub in photos and in a pair of paintings by McMenamins' artists Myrna Yoder and Jenny Joyce.

Now though, in 1935, Hayden's thoroughly modern Spar left that throw back of the Old-West behind and looked towards Olympia's future; for decades it would never look back. Customers pouring in on opening day were treated with pool tables, pinball, a card room where folks could play the house--or each other, prominent cigar and lunch counters, gambling apparatus and for the first time in nearly a generation, beer! A crack staff of 22 men made the whole thing hum like a '35 Packard.

The Spar's success continued well after its launch, but after a solid 10 years Hayden reluctantly let his crown jewel of restaurants go, selling it to a group of business partners that included Ronald "Mac" McWain. Four years after going in on the restaurant the partnership dissolved and Mac became the sole owner; it would remain in the McWain family for the next 57 years.



This view east on 4th Avenue shows The Oxford's dark sign hanging prominently over the sidewalk, some 25 years before The Spar would replace it. *Courtesy Ed Echtle.*

The long run of family ownership was significant for the 70 year-old building's endurance, but it's The Spar's eclectic staff and diverse customers over the years that seem to make the place what it is. The diner has always brought in the out-of-towners just stopping in for a bite and a smoke during their travels along highway 99, but it is the regulars here that are the businesses' lifeblood. One of the well-known symbols of The Spar's past, Vi Lenhardt, a bartender who worked 1947 to 1973 (26 years!), knew many of them. During her time here she watched the clientele change largely from a blue-collar set, longshoremen and mill workers and the like, to politicians, their staffers and college students; she happily set them all up. She even remembered pouring for the likes of Marlon Brando, Joan Crawford, baseball great Sandy Koufax, boxer Joe Lewis and comedian Dick Gregory.

often interrupted patrons meals out front, and a day never passed that people failed to approach Stan Parsons at the front desk to place bets on a fight, game, or horse race. Previous owner Alan McWain remembers those bygone days: "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 ... Hell, they bet on elections!"

Like the clientele, the character of this place has changed over the years too. In the past, these walls have seen a pool hall, a card room, betting of all sorts, a separate lounge, telephone booths, smoking room, several different bars and a string of major remodels in the '40s, '60s and then again in the late '80s. Throughout those changes though, The Spar's period charm and hospitable service continued to resonate with the community. Iconic characters like Vi the bartender, servers Shirley Allen and Genia Sutter, and Stan "the money man" Parsons have also resonated.



The Spar is the standout attraction in this 1945 view of 4th Avenue.  
 Courtesy Ed Echtle.

It would be an impossible feat to tell the stories of the thousands of people who have had connection to this place. From wedding proposals to back room legislative dealings and practical jokes to jackpots, this place has at once served as a modern hub and a link to Olympia's public history. 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 hands--and why not? With its blue-collar chic and cafeteria feel, it too has been a family-owned icon of downtown Olympia for 70 years. While its place as the undisputed "soul of Olympia" has waned over the last decade or so, the 1935 Art Deco styled restaurant still has plenty of good times left to offer. Now, part of a new family, McMenamins Spar once again extends a genial invitation to all residents of the community to come and explore the new business on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Welcome to The Spar. Again.

These people all came for different reasons, some to find a quiet spot along the bar to have a cup of joe and mill over the *New York Times*, some for the oyster stew. Others for the familiar food and faces offered here. All in all, though, it was perhaps a timeless trio that brought the most people through The Spar's doors: tobacco, liquor and gambling.

Until the State Gambling Commission was established in 1973, The Spar was Olympia's undisputed gambling headquarters. The sound of poker chips and heavy sighs from the card room