

## **A Monumental Back Bar Comes To the Monumental Back Stage Bar Location**

It's a beauty - stunning in size, age and craftsmanship. Gorgeous cherry wood spanning 30 feet in length and 13 feet in height, believed to have been built in 1889 by Brunswick Balke-Collender Company, the famous bar and pool table manufacturer of Chicago.

This epic relic has certainly borne witness to many strange and wondrous things over its 130 years, a half-century of which was spent at the legendary Lotus Café & Card Room in downtown Portland.

It didn't arrive at the Lotus until 1962, though, by which time it was already 70-plus years old, sported a bullet hole and, no doubt, a storied past. But we can only guess at what that may have been. Some people say it first served in a saloon in Yakima, Washington. Others state it was in Tucson, Arizona.

For sure, once at the Lotus, the behemoth back bar soaked up decades' worth of the characters and atmosphere that had populated the place to that point. And going forward, the back bar definitely helped define and add to the Lotus's allure.

“It was one of the first bars I went to when I was 21. I might have even gotten in before I was 21. My brother [Mike] was quite a bit older than me and we'd go in together. That place was a classic.”

-Brian McMenamin

The Lotus opened in 1925 at the corner of SW 3<sup>rd</sup> and Salmon Street. Veteran café and bar man Peter Richen was at the helm. In a wonderful bit of synchronicity, Richen's great-grand-nephew - John Richen - was a longtime brewing manager for McMenamins. The elder Richen succeeded in creating a workingman's oasis, boasting a restaurant, card room, pool tables and cigar stand. And during the federally mandated dry spell known as Prohibition, Pete did his best to keep his customers from getting too parched.

The boom period of WWII saw the Lotus's business soar. The infusion of thousands of war-time workers into the city and the wide-open conditions that prevailed here proved to be a magic combination for new proprietors Pete and Sally Trappen. A lot of businesses at the time, including card rooms, were allowed to remain open 24 hours a day, to cater to the workers as they got off the various shifts. The Trappens were able to ride this wave of prosperity well into the '50s.

Another factor in the Lotus's popularity and success was its location: just a short, couple-blocks walk from City Hall. Powerful officials could, on any given day, be found at a corner table or at the bar.

Not surprisingly, "night people" and folks of varying shades of legality also frequented the place, mingling with the city fathers and card players, including the nefarious Big Jim Elkins and Teamster president Dave Beck. "Torchy" Jessing, confidant of Elkins, was even on the payroll during the '50s. Yes, deals were brokered within the Lotus's walls.

By the 1960s, the once-vibrant downtown neighborhood surrounding the Lotus had aged and so had its residents. City officials called for urban renewal, leading to the tearing down of many neighboring old hotels that for years had housed many Lotus customers. Additionally, the city demanded increasingly stricter regulation of card rooms and gambling in general.

Into this atmosphere of change and challenges, the 1889 back bar was introduced into the realm of the Lotus, instantly injecting new gravitas to the old café and card room. Owner/manager Kenneth Wilkinson had, unbelievably, scored not just the one monumental back bar, but also a second identical one. And for a time, in 1962, both of the majestic back bars were housed at the Lotus. The first was permanently installed in the main barroom; the second was stashed in a back storeroom until he could find a buyer for it.

And a perfect buyer he did soon find: Portland entrepreneur Harvey Dick, who right at that moment was lavishly renovating and decking out the Hoyt Hotel near Portland's downtown train station into a grand "Old West/Gay Nineties" extravaganza. Dick made the Lotus back bar's twin a centerpiece in his hotel's Barbary Coast Lounge.

At the Lotus, new owner Larry Rinella became its caretaker over the next three decades, bolstering the sense of community within the place, taking good care of his customers and keeping the card games going, despite official interruptions from city ordinances and the continuing decline of the neighborhood. Lots of celebrations of all types were held around the colossal back bar . . . even a baby shower.

Special Thanksgiving dinners were served annually and on Christmas, free to all who showed up.

One notable regular throughout this period was Grace Peck, State Representative for the Downtown district and champion of the disadvantaged and disabled. Grace came to the Lotus every Friday night for dinner.

More on the celebrity side, Gus Van Sant and Matt Dillon were familiar sights at the Lotus in 1988, when *Drug Store Cowboy* was being filmed (though none of that movie was shot at the Lotus). Conversely, part of a Madonna movie (*Body of Evidence*) from that time was filmed at the bar, but those scenes were ultimately deleted from the final cut.

Over the last quarter century, the Plew brothers breathed new life into the Lotus. No longer a card room, but for sure, it remained a classic gathering spot to the end, which came with its closing in 2016 (and the demolition of the building a year later). But thanks to the Plews, the grand back bar was saved and made available to McMenamens. And now it is here in the Back Stage Bar for the duration and for your enjoyment and amazement!