

ROCK CREEK TAVERN

Cycles of Change and a River of Continuum: A History of a Community Landmark

Bombed in the 1930s, closed up at the end of the '60s, run over by a car in the late 1990s, and twice destroyed by fire over its 80+ years, and yet, here Rock Creek Tavern stands, invigorated for another go 'round—again— fueled by what's happened before and that which is upcoming: Its next incarnation.

Obviously change is a defining characteristic of the tavern, but surprisingly so too is continuity. How is that possible when the tavern's physical structure was almost always in a state of flux (not to mention that not even one piece of the tavern's original construction survives?) It's because the tavern's patrons have remained loyal, its rural setting has remained constant, and then there's that intangible quality. Regarding the latter, longtime "Rock Creeker" Mark Connaughton said it best: "The thing about the tavern was it was a state of mind as much as anything else."

BEGINNINGS

The starting point of Rock Creek Tavern's story is a small country store. It opened in the mid-1920s on the same site occupied by the tavern today. The place was a hub from the beginning. Residents from the surrounding German-Swiss farming community made regular stops here to buy groceries, livestock feed, hardware and gas, or to sit by the woodstove and engage in the latest gossip.



The 'new' Fuegy store & tavern (actually the old blacksmith shop), c. 1942

and Myrtle Fuegy took over as proprietors. Even before donning storekeeper aprons, the Fuegys were fixtures of Rock Creek. Their families (the Fuegys and the Pezoldts) had lived in the community since its establishment in the 1880s. Also, Bill for many years had run Rock Creek's other hub, a blacksmith shop. This blacksmith shop, located just south of the store, was a big old barn of a place where men and their ailing machines congregated regularly. The Fuegys lived across Old Cornelius Pass Road from the shop and store in the Victorian-style house, which still stands today.

THE BOMBING

Bill and Myrtle served the first post-Prohibition mugs of brew at the store in 1933, thus inaugurating the tavern end of the business. Ironically, these first beer sales also unwittingly drew the couple into the fray called the Beer War of 1935.

Essentially a union turf war, this notorious event actually had nothing to do with the Fuegys. They just got caught in the crossfire. The Fuegys served Marinoff brand beer exclusively at the tavern.

Unfortunately for them, the brewery's owner, Peter Marinoff, was playing a dangerous game of chicken with the Teamsters Union at the time. The Teamsters insisted

Almost a decade after the store's opening, Bill

Union at the time. The Teamsters insisted

that Marinoff allow their union members to distribute his beer. When Marinoff refused to yield, his Brewery Workers Union-associated truck drivers began to get harassed. Then Teamsters started bombing the taverns carrying Marinoff's products.

In the middle of the night on May 30, 1935, three goons came calling at Rock Creek Tavern. They tossed a dynamite bomb just to the south of the dark building. Fortunately, the explosion did little damage, save for shattering several windows and leaving an ominous crater. The crater still remains off the tavern's southwest corner, preserved as a goldfish pond—Bill Fuegy's way of defusing its intimidating characteristics.

DEATH AND REBIRTH OF THE TAVERN

The Fuegys dodged a bullet in 1935. They weren't so lucky in 1941. In June of that year, the store mysteriously went up in flames. The cause of the fire was never determined, though, the question remained whether it may have been the work of Beer War participants, several of whom had just been convicted and incarcerated after lengthy court battles. Either way, it was a devastating loss for the Fuegys. Yet, with characteristic stoicism

and defiance, the family quickly did what was necessary to resume their business. Re-azing the time involved in building a new store from scratch, they instead moved a well-seasoned structure—the neighboring blacksmith shop—onto the site, did some renovations, and reopened within a comparatively short period.

The war years of the 1940s proved a real boon for the newly fashioned Rock Creek store and the Fuegys recouped their losses from the fire and made a tidy profit to boot. Business was

so brisk that they extended the store's hours to a 17-hour day: 7AM to Midnight. A jukebox, stocked with pop songs of the day, and a pinball machine were installed to encourage customers to linger. It worked. Folks—including whole families—came and stayed, listening to music, chatting, drinking beer and playing pinball. (A klatch of brothers determined to beat the pinball machine went so far as to drill holes in the side of the game, through which they pushed baling wire to guide the balls. Their victory streak came to an abrupt halt when management got wise to the scam.)

At the end of the '40s, despite their recent good fortune, Bill and Myrtle Fuegy ended their successful and eventful 16-year run of the store, due to Bill's declining health. Rock Creek Tavern, however continued uninterrupted, with

a succession of proprietors, through the 1950s and into the '60s. During this post-Fuegy era, the place gradually assumed a less familial character, as the store component of the business was phased out and the tavern atmosphere was bolstered, with such time-honored bar-related accoutrements as a pool table.

In the late '60s, the tavern actually closed, apparently because of declining business and the

mounting costs of maintaining the aging former blacksmith shop. There was a valiant attempt at this time to do a thorough renovation, but the project proved to costly and the party backed out. This failure made possible the remarkable and complete reinvention of the Rock Creek Tavern in the 1970s.

REINVENTING THE TAVERN, 1972-73

The leading lights of the reincarnation were Gary Homchick and Matt Britton, both local boys and both disenchanted with the corporate



The tavern just prior to its early '70s reinvention

world. It was a partnership of complements: Gary brought construction and tavern experience to the table, while Matt contributed strong business acumen. Both men, though, are the first to admit that their dream would never have become reality had it not been for an overwhelming spirit of giving and cooperation from friends and strangers. It was like an old-



Reinvention of the old tavern begins with a lean-to addition, 1973. Courtesy Gary Homchick

fashioned barn raising.

“We kinda had an idea on the layout” Gary recalled, “but a combination of a lot of different talents, like Bill Marvin, and a guy by the name of Pickle (Gary Anderson), and a guy by the name of Casey Spengel, who was instrumental all the way through, just a jack of all trades... and Earl, the guy who built the fireplace. All these people, at that time in history—the early ‘70s—things were kind of free and open and people were drifting around [who possessed] different talents... They just kind of gravitated, you know...”

Matt concurred: “We weren’t wanting for anything. We wanted a plumber—we got two plumbers. We had guys come out and volunteer to do the wiring. We had the whole place wired for free... we’d be working and we’d have friends come out and put in a [day’s work] many a time.”

The communal spirit carried over to the feeding of the ever-changing crew. Lunch was a feast every day, such as a whole turkey, homemade soup, and bread. Ironically, all this creative,

cooperative work was going on against the backdrop of the Watergate hearings, which aired every weekday from Noon until 1pm during the summer of 1973. “I just have fond memories of going back at noon [for lunch],” Matt remembers with a chuckle, “sit down and turn on Watergate and just hoot and holler... It was a summer you’d do for free if you could... it was just fun.”

NEUTRAL GROUND

So while President Nixon’s political career succumbed, Rock Creek’s old blacksmith shop-turned -tavern emerged with renewed vigor and a thoroughly new, though rustic, look. Britton and Homchick’s Rock Creek Tavern debuted in September 1973, and from opening night it was a smash! And when live music was introduced the scene was completed—a destination place, a roadhouse fantasy.

The place would get so packed that people waiting outside could not go in until someone left. Matt Britton recalls such nights: “When they’d start to dance, the floor would rock... The whole barn would rock. The gaslights would shake and the tap standards would fall open. You’d look over and the beer’s just coming out.”

“Rock Creekers” liked their beer, there’s no question about that. The tavern sold 200+ kegs of Schlitz per month, the highest consumption of Schlitz in the state at the time.

The makeup of a Rock Creek crowd on a given night depended on what style music was scheduled—and the tavern booked a great range of music, from rock ‘n’ roll to bluegrass, solo piano to country rock. Local jazz legend Monty Ballou became a regular performer and periodically a guy with a hammer dulcimer came in. Then, there was the old man with the musical saw who appeared from time to time.

Though often a wild scene, the tavern also regained the familial character it had enjoyed in years past. It was like the place was neutral

ground, where people from all walks of life dropped their gripes and preconceptions—biker guys pouring accountant guys a beer, that was an image burned in the memories of some regulars' minds. The parking lot also told the tale: a Ferrari, VW bus with dogs inside, an old pick up, Buick station wagon and maybe a horse or two, all parked alongside one another.

A more striking illustration of the tavern's friendly atmosphere was recalled by Mark Connaughton, a Rock Creek regular from this time. Mark remembers that it was customary for everybody to come in and throw their coat, purse, backpack, or whatever, in a pile beneath the mushroom stained glass window. And incredibly, at night's end, everything would still be there waiting for their rightful owners. "Nobody would ever mess with anybody else's stuff," Mark said with a smile.

The charms of Rock Creek Tavern were broadcast far and wide by word of mouth and wildly enthusiastic newspaper reviews. Soon people were coming from all corners of Oregon and Washington to stop in and check it out. It's said even the famous dropped by, such as Clint Eastwood and members of the rock bands Santana, The Eagles, and Tower of Power. Hollywood even came to Rock Creek in 1989 to film scenes at the tavern for the promising Tom Berenger film *Love at Large* (unfortunately,

very few people noticed the tavern scenes—or the movie for that matter).

By the late '80s, the tavern had changed hands—and gears. New owner Bob Bates created more of a fine dining, country club setting at the tavern, which wasn't a popular change for many of the old regulars. They went in search of other places to dance, play pool and have a beer.

THE MARCHING BAND, MISGUIDED PEACOCKS & A MARAUDING CAR

Then in 1995, McMenamins became custodians of the community landmark and we've had a fun and sometimes wild ride with it ever since. The bands were called back to play and old customers returned. One of the returning prodigal sons became famous for taking a bite out of the bar. Another returnee, a repentant woman, came with a stone in hand; it was a part of the tavern's chimney she had appropriated years earlier. When we opened the deck off the north side, the McMenamins Marching Band accelerated the celebration—and caused a traffic jam in the process. Later, a car speeding down Phillips Road didn't heed the stop sign and careened over the same deck—*almost*, that is. No serious injuries resulted, but the deck needed some shoring up.

The restored deck became the domain of 'herds' of misguided peacocks and chickens. The birds amused some customers (and annoyed others). The peacocks' ill-advised practice of pecking at motorcycle chrome led to them being given their 'walking papers.'

In September 2002, just when we were finally ready to clear the thick carpet of moss from the tavern's cedar-shake roof, a fire whipped up and did it for us, but cleared the rest of the old blacksmith shop as well. It was a very sad day, but part of the pattern of the tavern's history of regeneration. And now, with an imaginative and faithful rebuild completed, change and continuity continues at Rock Creek Tavern. *Thanks and Cheers!*

