

12-Mile House Long Gone, but Old Timers Remember

By Sharon Nesbit, Staff Writer

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“When I was a child my father gave me a pony. There are two places you can’t go, he told me, one is the main street of Troutdale and the other is Merrill’s Twelve-Mile House.”

“Even when I grew up,” recalls Mrs. Morris McGinnis, Gresham, “we stopped by there with friends and I couldn’t bring myself to go in.”

Orville Johnson, grade school principal and a longtime resident, remembers the Twelve-Mile House as “a real playhouse, the talk of the town and a thorn in the side of the W.C.T.U.”

County Commissioner Larry Aylsworth who grew up across the street remembers the night a lady customer got ‘a little whistled’ and was thrown out. She took off her shoes and busted every window she could reach. There was glass everywhere.”

Merrill’s Castle Edel Brau, or Twelve-Mile House as it came to be known, contributed the roar to the Roaring Twenties. In 1906 Fred T. Merrill, known as Portland’s “Bicycle King”, set out to establish the first roadhouse of the gasoline era. Merrill is remembered as “quite a character” by Aylsworth who recalled he had a large scar on his face, which prompted all sorts of stories about how he got it. “He was a man who covered all the angles saying ‘If you can hook ’em---do it’”

Merrill purchased an ornate three story building frosted with domes and cherubim, moved it from the recently closed Lewis and Clark Exposition and set it up on the Southeast corner of Stark and 212th.

In this 28-room structure described as “showy but not particularly beautiful” he installed a bar, a maple dance floor, a rag time orchestra, stiff prices, good food, chefs and waitresses and then, for good measure, threw in a horse-racing track, a few cock-fighting facilities, and a little gambling. He sat back and waited for the sportin’ crowd to drive out in their automobiles and they did.

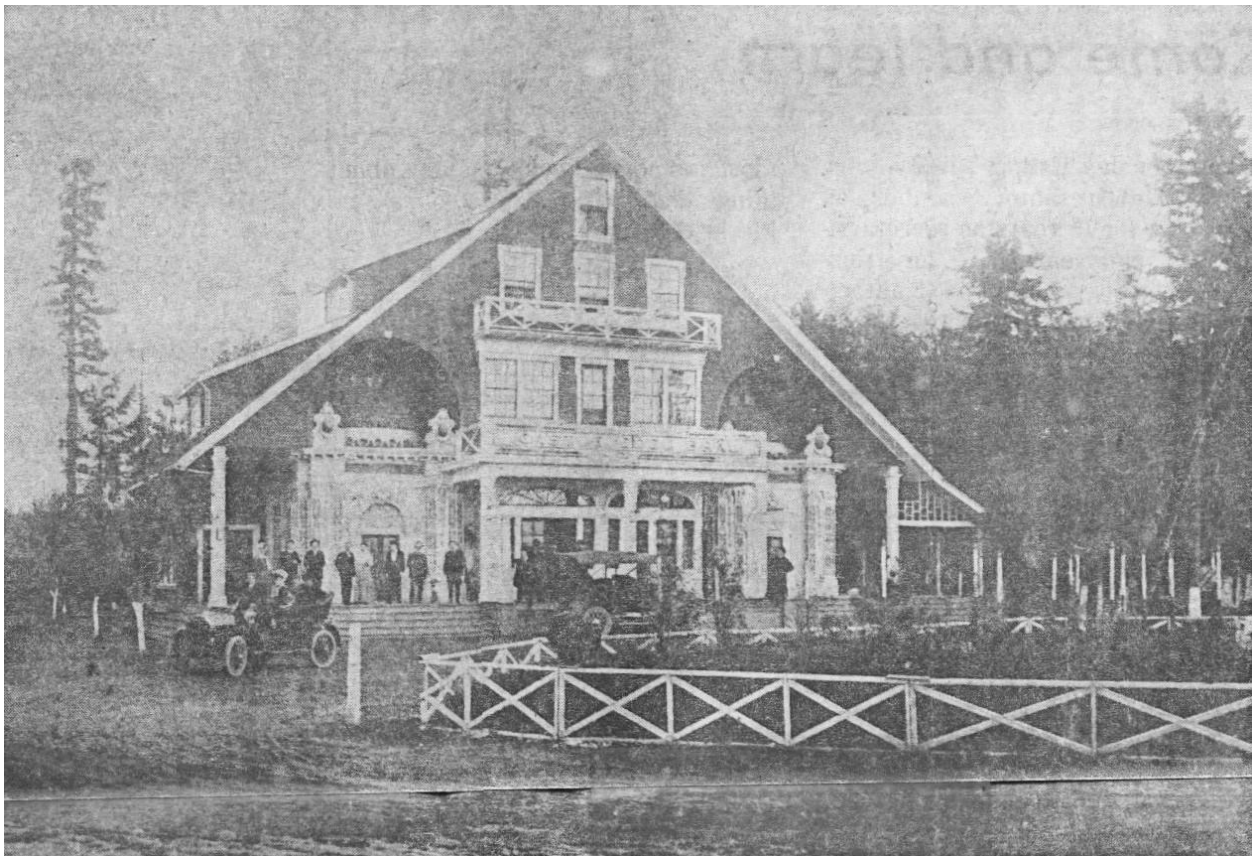
Merrill is recorded as saying Twelve-Mile House paid for itself in less than a year.

The focal point of the building was a gigantic stone fireplace with recessed niches housing bottles of champagne. For 10 years liquor sales were legal and Merrill’s was ‘a noisy, booming, if somewhat tarnished, success. Then in January of 1916 Oregon beat the nation to the punch and voted in prohibition.

Aylsworth remembers Twelve-Mile House as maintaining its same active pace. It may have had something to do, he recalls, with the fact that the local bootlegger lived less than a block away. Merrill told writer Stewart Holbrook he was “framed” on one occasion when a stool pigeon planted some booze in his office. The place was raided, an action that was apparently not infrequent, and Merrill was arrested. He claimed his guests that evening were prominent Portland people who wouldn’t appreciate being called into court as witnesses, so he was convicted.

Merrill claimed the close police scrutiny on his establishment was due to “political enemies”. He claimed, “any rumpus of any sort, any accident, that took place anywhere in eastern Multnomah County was automatically laid to Twelve-Mile House. You have no idea of the many terrible things that were blamed on my place but in which my place actually had no part.” Perhaps Merrill's indignation was righteous but the rumors flew, and sometimes still do, about the “goings-on” at Twelve Mile House.

Eventually Twelve-Mile House started to decline. Merrill was aging, fires took their toll, the police visited frequently and when the Roaring Twenties gave out the roadhouse went right along with them. A final fire in 1938 took care of the last remains. There's a gas station on the corner now and houses where the race track was. It's a whole lot more peaceful but as Aylsworth says, “I wish that old place was still there. It would really be something now.”



RAFFISH ROADHOUSE of the Roaring Twenties was Merrill's Twelve-Mile House located until 1938 at the Southeast corner of Stark and 212th Streets. The building, formerly the Telephone Building of the Lewis and Clark Exposition, housed a ragtime band, private and public dining rooms, a dance floor and other numerous attractions for the 'sportin' crowd' of the gasoline era.