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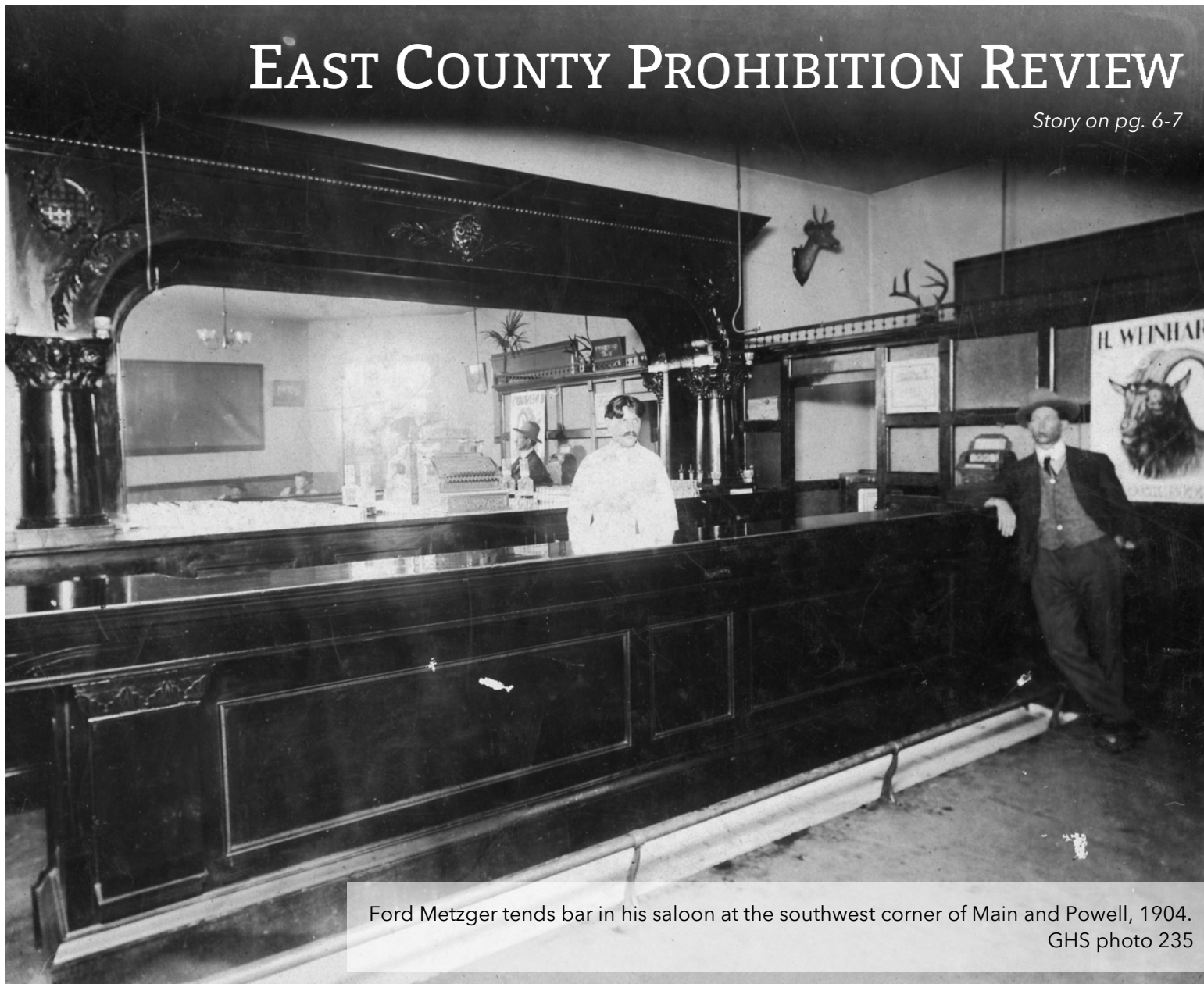
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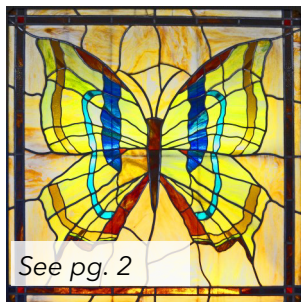
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EAST COUNTY PROHIBITION REVIEW

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Ford Metzger tends bar in his saloon at the southwest corner of Main and Powell, 1904.
GHS photo 235



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EAST COUNTY PROHIBITION REVIEW

By Anne Endicott

The early Rockwood community may have been known for its “famous potatoes,” but from the early 1900s to the mid-1920s, it was also home to a thriving roadhouse and speakeasy business. Most were scattered along what is now Stark Street, from 12-Mile Corner to 162nd Avenue. Along with good food, entertainment, and an occasional meeting with a lady of the evening, the hallmark of a roadhouse was usually chicken dinner and the common knowledge that owners and management turned a blind eye to the consumption of “spirits.”

The most popular roadhouses at the time were the Twelve Mile House (near what is now 223rd and Stark), the Taxi Inn and Birdleg’s Place (also on Stark), the Old Homestead near Rockwood, and Canary Cottage on Foster Road. Although patrons knew which establishments brought moonshine in through the back door or allowed guests to carry their own flasks, the real reason roadhouses were so popular was because they stayed open after 1 a.m., when Portland dance halls closed for the night.

Members of the temperance movement were fully aware of the questionable goings-on at roadhouses. They enlisted the help of the local sheriff to conduct raids and were successful in temporarily shutting down places like the Twelve Mile House and the Old Homestead in March 1918.

In January 1920, Multnomah County commissioners considered a bill to shut down dancing



Twelve-Mile House, circa 1915.

at 1 a.m. in roadhouses and dance halls in the county outside the Portland city limits.

“It is necessary for the protection of our girls,” said one commissioner, adding that dancing used to begin at 8 p.m. and conclude before midnight. “Now, my daughter doesn’t expect to get to a dance before 9:30 o’clock.”

The bill was expected to face stiff debate and opposition among county commissioners, who were concerned that legislation against roadhouses would mean a loss in tourist attractions.

But once the Prohibition Act became law in 1921, making it illegal to manufacture, sell and transport “intoxicating liquors,” the battle between law enforcement, local temperance groups, and roadhouse proprietors heated up.

In April 1922, a Portland woman died in a car accident while returning from an “alleged jamboree” at the Twelve Mile House. Her death sparked a debate over whether “pleasure palaces” (roadhouses) should be held to the same regulations as dance halls, which were required to take out a license and close at 1 a.m.

Proprietors argued that roadhouses served dinner, differentiating them from dance halls, which only served sandwiches and soda. Sheriff T. M. Hurlburt conceded that raids conducted by his deputies had failed to uncover any liquor sales or consumption, even though it was common knowledge drinking did occur.

A month later, dance hall licenses were issued to eight roadhouses and “dance resorts,” but were subject to revocation should dancing continue after 1 a.m. General belief was that roadhouses wouldn’t survive under the regulation because the bulk of their patronage arrived after Portland’s nightlife shut down at midnight.

But Anthony J. Tully, owner of the Homestead Inn (formerly the Old Homestead) took umbrage to the new regulation and filed for a temporary restraining order in July 1922. Tully called himself a “restaurateur” and claimed to have built a reputation for fine dining, not dancing. He requested time to prove that his establishment did not fall under the provisions of the new regulations that defined dance halls.

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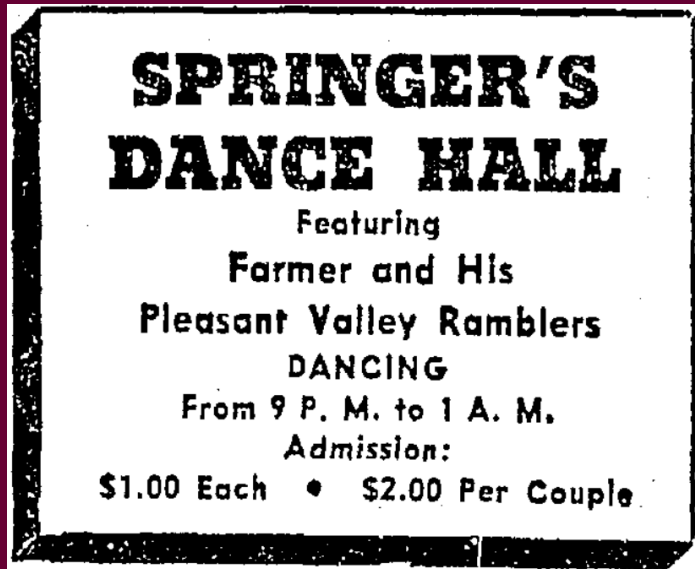
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Tully went on to say he had been jailed for allegedly violating the law and that county deputies had threatened to ruin his business. The restraining order was to keep deputies from interfering with his business, and he called their actions “inoperative and unconstitutional.”

“It is discriminatory and a violation of the bill of rights,” Tully said.

There was one dance hall, however, that avoided the bullseye on other Gresham-area establishments.

Arin Springer operated a small wood shop on Richey Road, between 190th and Foster. In the evenings, he opened the building to his neighbors for dancing, with music provided by Felix Chiodo and the Dahlquist Orchestra. Word got out, and soon, Springer’s wood shop was busting at the seams with merry-makers. In 1928, he built a barn to accommodate the crowds. Though larger digs were appreciated by dancers, women did complain of catching their high heels in knotholes on the dance floor.



Oregonian ad for Springer’s, dated July 22, 1953.

Springer’s operation was nominally above board. The seven-piece Dahlquist Orchestra played “the latest dance tunes,” a public address system was installed, and food was served during intermission.

Festivities were carefully monitored by floor manager Frank Eberhardt, whose assistant, Floyd Burch, was an off-duty Portland Police officer who also sang with the orchestra. Still, dancers managed to imbibe by hiding bottles of hooch in barn benches with hinged tops.

Despite all the controversy over to regulate or not to regulate, one element of the seemingly questionable party business remained mostly under the radar – moonshiners. Consumption or purchasing home brew wasn’t something talked about at Sunday dinner, but local residents knew where to go if they wanted a jar.

With liquor sales illegal, moonshiners found themselves exercising some creativity to keep law enforcement and local temperance groups out of their business. Some strung wire across the driveway, which rang a bell when someone approached; one “shiner” built a ledge part way down inside his well to hide his distillery and tools; and another dug a tunnel from his house to the chicken coop, where his still was located.

To further conceal their identity, shiners would pay local youngsters 50 cents a gallon to deliver their product on bicycles to area roadhouses.

The Twelve Mile House made an attempt at rebranding in the early 1920s, changing its name to the Cross Roads Inn. Still, it was obvious the glory days of the notorious roadhouse were waning. In 1922, three Texas men bought the property with intentions to build “a new grandstand, stables other equipment necessary to maintain a first class racing track and facilities.” Race cars eventually replaced the grand parties and entertainment at the Twelve Mile House, and by 1935, it sat neglected and deteriorating. The building was destroyed by fire in 1938.

Springer’s retained its identity as a music venue until the 1970s. Known as Springer’s Ballroom, it hosted fans of big band, swing, and country and western music until 1969, when it became an attractive site for the likes of the Grateful Dead, Boz Scaggs and the Byrds. A shift in the music scene to larger and Portland centric facilities gave birth to Springer’s Flea Market in the mid-1970s, which operated at the same site until it burned to the ground in 1987.

Did you know? Fred T. Merrill, owner of the controversial Twelve Mile House, originally came to Oregon as a champion bicycle racer and later claimed credit for popularizing the bicycle in Portland. He owned a bicycle store called the Cyclery before coming to Gresham.