

# 12-Mile House long gone, but old timers remember

By Sharon Nesbit  
Staff Writer

"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 tar-

nished, 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

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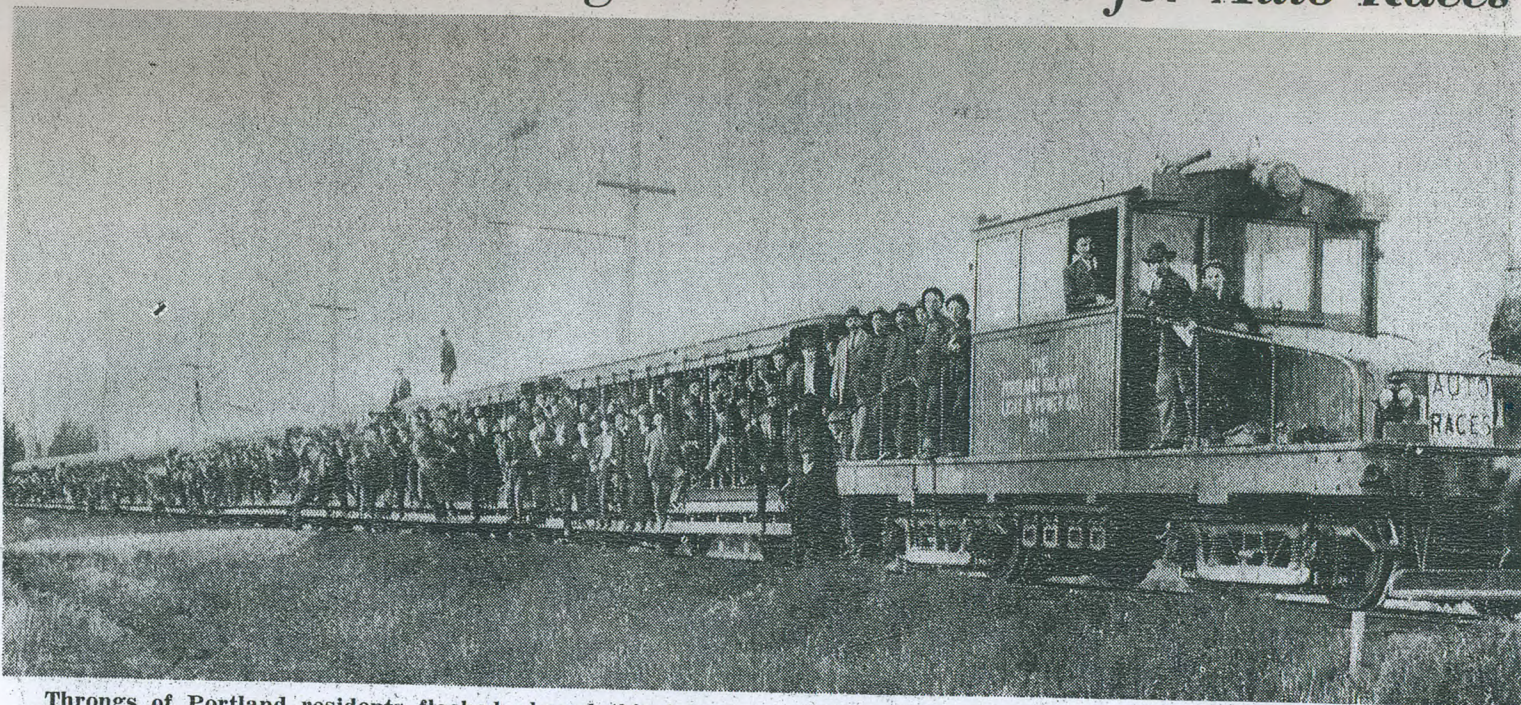


**RAFFISH ROADHOUSE** of the Roaring Twenties was Merrill's Twelve-Mile House located until 1938 at the Southeast corner of Stark and 212th Streets. The building, formerly the Telephone Building of the Lewis and Clark

Exposition, housed a ragtime band, dining rooms, a dance floor and attractions for the "sportin' crowd" of t



## Racing Fans Throng to Gresham Area for Auto Races



Throngs of Portland residents flocked aboard this interurban electric railway train for the journey to a race track in the vicinity of Gresham. The fans usually stayed on board to watch the races and when the show was over would make the trip from the track back to the city, often without bothering to even get off the line. Users of the line said the electrically powered unit nearly always carried the racing banner on its

front. Pictured in the photo are 2 company employees that are identified as G. C. Fields, superintendent of the company, far right standing on the motor, and Gus Reinke, motorman looking out of the window of the cab. The picture was taken in 1900 of one of the major sporting events of the day and constituted another use for the electric interurban lines.

## 'Twelve-Mile House' Blooms as Roadhouse Pioneer

It is said that the era of the automobile opened up the countryside to the city folks, and for the east Multnomah county area, a colorful but almost too robust example of this was the Twelve Mile House.

Opened at what is now known as Twelve Mile Corner in 1906 by Fred T. Merrill, it was a popular attraction for some 20 years in what was known as the "roadhouse" era.

A decorative building, which, it seems had been moved to the eastern location after serving as the Telephone building at the

Lewis and Clark Exposition a year earlier, it was designed to cater to a promising stream of automobile parties from the metropolis to the west.

A 28-room affair, it had a dining room served by the best of chefs, a dance floor with ragtime band, and a handsome new bar, an important asset in that period. It also had a cockfight pit, with Merrill credited with having a special collapsible pit, the better for covering up if the law took a close look at the activities of the gay spot.

affixed to the roadhouse included claims of visits there by even more glamorous personalities, among them, according to Stewart Holbrook, Oregon Historian, Blanche Walsh, the actress, and Barney Oldfield, leading auto racer of his day.

While competition of other roadhouses, and the threat of overly-close scrutiny by the police, were cause for concern to the Twelve Mile House management, it was shaken to its very foundation with the state's vote of prohibition in 1916.

Proprietor Merrill thusly as the beginning of the demise the Twelve Mile House: "One night I was arrested on a fraud up. A stool pigeon planted so booze in my office at the Twelve Mile House, then the place was raided. Because my guests that evening were all prominent Portland people, and I did not feel I should call on them as witnesses in my behalf, I was convicted."

"After that, any rumpus, any sort, any accident that took place anywhere in eastern Multnomah county was automatically laid to the 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."

## Twelve Mile House Robust Pioneer In Roadhouse Era

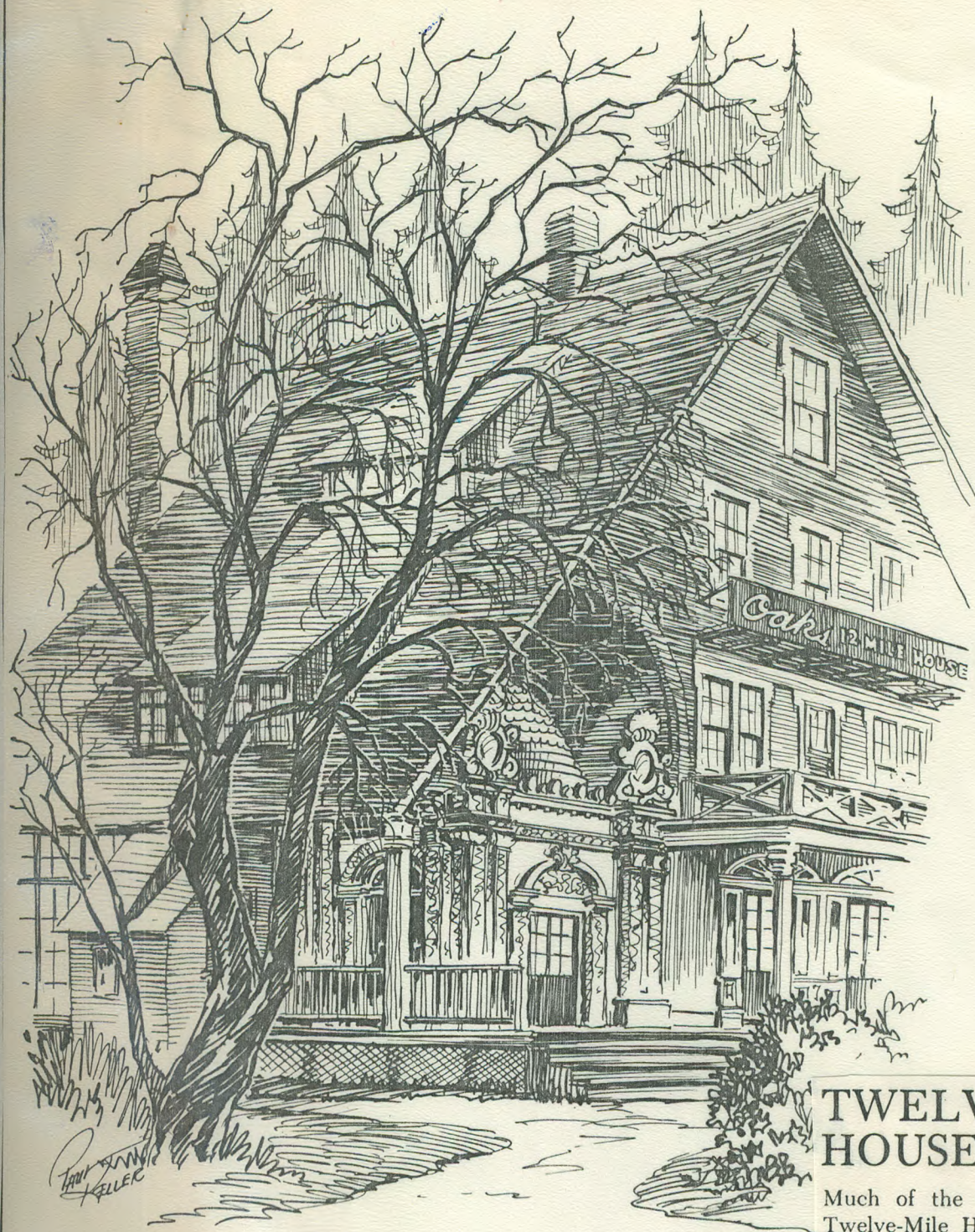
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nomah county was automatically laid to the Twelve Mile House. You have no idea of the many terrible things that were blamed on my place but in which my place actually had no part."

Thus the once robust pioneer of roadhouses fell victim of seeming mountains of abuse and began to fall into public as well as official disfavor. It also began falling into disrepair. Repeal of prohibition did not bring new life to the famed house, which Merrill had sold sometime in the late '20s or early '30s. Perhaps public tastes had changed more than the ornate building had fallen into dilapidation. By the late '30s it was little more than a marking point for the endless stream of automobile traffic that passes it on busy Stark street at "Twelve Mile Corner."

GRESHAM JULY 23, 1959  
OUTLOOK





## TWELVE-MILE HOUSE

Much of the gimcrackery of the facade of Twelve-Mile House at S.E. Base Line (Stark Street) and Fairview Roads had been widely displayed (and perhaps even appreciated) before the late Fred T. Merrill ordered the oasis constructed in 1906. Its gingerbread, gilded lilies and little cupids had bedecked buildings at the Lewis and Clark Exposition in Portland the year before, and earlier they had been part of an attraction at the St. Louis Exposition.

In the prohibition era the oasis had a naughty if widely appreciated reputation. Revenuers closed it for awhile in 1923 and sent the proprietor to jail—much to the distress of thirsty travelers.

Also known as Plantation Inn, the gaudy Twelve-Mile House was among those landmark buildings of Oregon that met its end by



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## Roadhouse saga in east county

By CATHERINE TREVISON  
THE OREGONIAN

GRESHAM —

Couples gyrating in risqué dances. Pints of moonshine and fortified wine. A “disgusting scene of drunkenness” was how liquor agents described Twelve-Mile House, where Fred T. Merrill — once a famous Portland cyclist, bicycle dealer, politician and sports pro-

moter — operated one of east Multnomah County’s most notorious roadhouses.

Raiders had taken their war on vice across the county in the spring of 1923, and their exploits gave readers a front-page view of Prohibition in action.

Merrill’s 1923 trials for selling liquor played like a comedy against the backdrop of the doomed 18th Amendment. Jurors didn’t back the police. Yet for Merrill, the Prohibition era

was devastating, turning his once-lucrative east county investment into a battered white elephant.

The Twelve-Mile House, at the intersection of what is now Stark Street and Eastman Parkway, “was the greatest mistake I ever made in my life,” he later told a writer for The Sunday Oregonian magazine.

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## Roadhouse: Road trips were the craze when cars were new

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The roadhouse phenomenon sat at the peak of several American trends.

One was jazz. The music and dancing scandalized upright people who thought it was too close, too lewd, compared with traditional ballroom styles, said Tim Hills, a historian for the Portland-based McMenamins company. Portland cracked down even harder than other cities, Hills thinks, passing a “standardized dancing position” to be enforced by the city’s dance hall inspector. The jazz backlash was coupled with the temperance movement, which started with local liquor regulations and crested with federal Prohibition in 1920.

Those restrictions coincided with the growing craze for automobiles and good roads. The Sunday papers were filled with fashionably dressed Portland motoring parties photographed in front of gushing waterfalls and snowy peaks. The first roadhouses sprang up on the most-traveled routes, offering refreshments and rooms, said Richard Engeman, public historian of the Oregon Historical Society.

But some roadhouses also offered jazz, gambling and liquor in the relatively lawless countryside, where Portlanders — often young

them. ... The good but misguided people who defeated me, and who will defeat anyone who openly declares for what I did, thought they could ‘put down’ gambling and prostitution. It is pretty obvious that they failed in putting down anything.”

Merrill lost the mayoral primary, and his bicycle dealership was faltering; the bicycle craze had peaked several years earlier. He decided to turn to a new business that would capitalize on cars.

The roadhouse he built fit the showman he was. He bought a building left over from the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition and had it moved to his land on Base Line Road, now known as Stark Street. For \$26,000, he outfitted the 28-room structure with a bar, dining rooms, dance floor and orchestra. Later, he added an outdoor horse-racing track.

Business boomed. People came to eat, drink and attend Merrill’s big dances and races. Cock-fighting tournaments attracted hundreds of people at a time, he said later. Within 18 months of its summer 1906 opening, Merrill had made his money back, he said.

“Food, drink, and entertainment for automobile parties was the idea,” he said later. “I didn’t want anything but the best for my place, because I planned to cater to the best people only.”

That may have been Merrill’s intent. But it wasn’t Merrill’s reputation, particularly among some dis-



rived from a May sweep of eight county roadhouses. The second was from a raid in June that focused on him alone.

The June case was tried first. But prosecutors didn’t want to take Merrill to district court. Juries had already acquitted three roadhouse operators, and the authorities were beginning to suspect that the laws against liquor weren’t backed by an enthusiastic citizenry.

The authorities decided to game the system with an unusual move. They would pick a jury in Gresham and have the local justice of the peace try the case.

“Merrill’s place is only a short distance from Gresham and within the jurisdiction of Justice of the Peace Brown,” Sheriff Thomas Hurlburt told a reporter. “The peo-

ple the U.S. attorney, making it one of the first roadhouse cases seen in federal court.

Undercover agents had taken a taxi to Twelve-Mile House a few days before the raid. They said they’d bought moonshine and witnessed the “disgusting scene of drunkenness.” Prosecutors also called female Twelve-Mile House patrons, who said other guests were so intoxicated that they had to be removed from public gaze. Investigators displayed 10 bottles seized in the raid; the state chemist testified they were liquor.

But Merrill’s defense attorney, Barnett Goldstein, went on the attack. Under his questioning, the taxi driver said investigators were passing around a pint of moonshine on the way to the roadhouse, and that their leader had been drunk. A roadhouse waiter backed up the taxi driver, saying the only alcohol in the place was the bottle that the chief investigator took from his pocket.

Merrill took the stand in his own defense, saying he served only ginger ale.

Goldstein pleaded Merrill’s case “almost tearfully,” according to a newspaper, saying his client was “65 years old and with the Maker’s arm already about his neck.”

After a day of deliberation, the jury hung, with eight of them voting to acquit. Afterward, the Portland Baptist Sunday school superintendents fired off a resolution to the district court judges deploring the “farcical parody enacted” in



could escape into anonymity, Engeman said.

East Multnomah County residents could be shocked by the behavior of city folk, such as the five Portland "autoists" who died in 1920 after drinking moonshine, speeding in the fog and plunging into the Sandy River. But partying at roadhouses in east Multnomah County generally remained outside the law.

Merrill was famous in sport and successful in business when, as a second-term Portland councilman, he ran for mayor in 1905 on a "keep-Portland-wide-open" ticket. He didn't win, but he later justified his platform to a writer for *The Oregonian*.

"It is the same in every city in every land," he said. "There always has been, and there always will be both gambling and prostitution. And my idea of handling those things in the least objectionable form is to segregate and license

residents remembered their parents' forbidding them to go inside, according to an article for the Gresham Historical Society.

"It was one of 'those places.' It was a roadhouse," said Lyla Schweitzer, a Gresham Historical Society volunteer, who rode the school bus near Merrill's place when she was in her teens.

Merrill later said police kept a close eye on him because a "certain clique" was jealous of his money and wanted a piece of his business.

But when Oregon banned liquor sales in 1916, and the 18th Amendment and Volstead Act brought national Prohibition four years later, Merrill and other roadhouse owners had bigger problems. Local, state, and federal authorities began conducting raid after raid on area roadhouses, hoping to make Prohibition stick.

In 1923, Merrill faced prosecution for two charges. The first de-

who know more or less of the actual conditions at the roadhouses are the ones to try these cases. They are vitally interested."

The deputy sheriffs who had raided the Twelve-Mile House at 1 a.m. June 23 told of wild dancing and intoxicated men, who were later convicted of drunkenness in district court. But Merrill said his guests were only four young married couples eating eight chicken dinners and disguising the claret wine they'd brought with them in a bottle of ginger ale.

At the trial two weeks later, the Gresham courtroom was filled. Many spectators were members of prohibition enforcement bodies, *The Oregonian* reported. But on July 6, it took just four hours — minus an hour for dinner — for the jury to acquit Merrill of maintaining a public nuisance.

To prosecute the May raid, Sheriff Hurlburt tried another new tactic. He turned Merrill's case over to

the roadhouse trials. They urged constables to look for moral people to sit on juries.

But ultimately, the government came around to Merrill's way of thinking. Congress repealed Prohibition in 1933. The state gave up on "putting down" liquor and decided to tax and regulate it instead. Decades later, it started treating gambling the same way.

The Twelve-Mile House outlasted Prohibition, but the raids took their toll. By 1936, when the defiant Merrill told his life story for a three-part *Oregonian* series, the building was empty and decayed.

"(O)nce in awhile, I drive out

Base Line Road and take a look at the old Twelve-Mile House," he said. "It looks pretty old and pretty worn and pretty quiet these days, but, like me, it has known better and busier days. But like myself, it was made of good stuff that can 'take it' and it will last a good many more years."

But just two years later, fire destroyed Twelve-Mile House. All over town, people said they'd seen the blaze, Schweitzer said, and heard the organ inside groaning as it finally gave in.

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