

126 N. Interocean - Mystery of downtown building partially solved, intrigue remains

Written by Jes-c Brandt



Nestled in the middle of the 100 block of North Interocean, the building currently occupied by First Dragon Chinese Restaurant has a mysterious history. Having changed several times, it's difficult to express just how much variety there has been in the businesses that have passed through 126 N. Interocean. Certainly, if this building could talk, it would have a lot to say.

The unfortunate truth about this building, however, is it can't tell its own story, and the history isn't entirely known. What is known is the building has housed a number of restaurants over the years, as well as art stores, book stores, clothing stores and probably many others.

First Dragon, the current restaurant at the location makes use of the entire building, seating customers in the front half, while the kitchen is in the back. In years past, though, the building has had four distinct sections, divided by the front and back, and the north and south halves. The sections have been used in many combinations, and an assortment of odd matches have found themselves as neighbors.

A timeline of businesses

Most Holyoke residents, and countless individuals passing through, know the building at 126 N. Interocean as a restaurant, as it currently serves as the First Dragon.

Traveling farther back in time, the exact history is a bit fuzzy. In one of the only historic photos of the building, taken in the 1940s, it is shown as a café. It was most likely Norman's Cafe at the time of the photo. Norman's was located in the building in the late 1930s and into the 1940s. Other than that, what was in the building is a mystery.

Starting in the 1950s a more concrete, although still incomplete, history becomes available. George Zeiler had a plumbing business on the south side, and Mildred McCormick had her café in the north side of the building for a few years. Sunny Taylor then had a bakery, followed by Edna Taylor's cafe.

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Helen McMillan opened her restaurant, Mac's Fireside Inn, at the location around 1973, and had it until she sold it to Bob and Valerie Wilson, who then opened The Inn in June 1975. Before opening it, the Wilsons changed the decor to create a cozy, old-fashioned feel. The south eating area was filled with antiques and called the barn room. The north eating area was kept as a day cafe.

The Inn later was remodeled; the barn room was converted to a cocktail lounge/bar, and the front room became the new dining room. The Inn continued to be a favorite for locals as well as many from surrounding towns, until it closed in May 1979.

After housing The Inn, the building was once again used by a different business on each half. In May 1979 The Kloset, a clothing store, relocated to the south side of the building. In June that year, Steve and Anita Heubert opened a Daylight Donuts on the north side, which remained there until the December fire. The Gingerbread House, owned by Charlotte Harms was also there a short while.

The Kloset remained there until February 1982, when Alta's Art Gallery relocated to the south side of the building. In June, Detta Bjorklun opened Hobby Haven on the north side. Hobby Haven remained a resource for ceramic enthusiasts for about five years.

April 24, 1987, Holyoke's Centennial Store opened. The store was established in the year preceding Holyoke's centennial celebration, to make t-shirts, caps, sweat shirts, plates and belt buckles, all touting the centennial celebration, available to the public. The store was manned by senior citizen volunteers.

The Book Stop, owned by Clark and Judy Ginapp, was located in the building after moving from Central Street Shoppes and remained there until the Ginapps sold it to the Krogmeiers in May 1995. Following the relocation of the book store, Chas' Accounting Service moved into the south side of the building, from 1995-99. Alta's Art Gallery stayed at 126 N. Interocean until May 1999.

Steve Abbott opened Chalupas, a Mexican restaurant, in July 2000 and closed December of the same year. La Familia Ruybal Mexican restaurant was then located there from December 2000 to December 2001. Finally, in January 2005, First Dragon Chinese Restaurant moved to its

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current location.

For many years, even as the businesses changed, the building served as the bus depot for travelers passing through. It's truly impossible to tell just how many people have passed through the doors of 126 N. Interocean.

Renovations

This building has undergone an exceptional number of renovations. On several occasions, the interior has been redecorated to match the style of the time or of a restaurant theme, and the exterior has seen changed itself.

The current design of the Chinese restaurant is certainly a change from the businesses of the past. The uniform storefront covers the fact that the building used to be divided in two. A close look, however, at the top of the building or the south entrance are a glimpse of the building in its former state. The interior is unrecognizable as any of the previous businesses, but some elements still spark the memory of its old inhabitants.

Notable Events

Daylight Donuts fire

Dec. 12, 1979 the north side of 126 N. Interocean caught fire. Then a Daylight Donuts owned by Steve and Anita Heubert, the business was shut down only six months after the establishment's grand opening.

The fire was determined arson, and the Heuberts were charged with first degree arson, fourth degree arson and conspiracy to commit the two. Throughout the year of 1980, the public was kept informed by Enterprise notices of updates to the Heuberts' trials.

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The neighboring business in the south side of the building at the time, the Kloset, suffered smoke damage after the fire. Doing what they could to make the best of the situation, the Kloset had a lengthy sale, offering smoke damaged clothing at reduced prices.

Bricks fall from facade

In the March 16, 1989 edition of the Enterprise, the building was likened to the Wall of Jericho. Apparently strong winds are what caused an entire section of bricks to come crashing down from the front of the building.

Above where the actual building ends, there is a wall of brick that runs along the front of the building. One witness of the event said the whole south side fell down in one piece, breaking when it struck the ground.

Happening during the day, right along main street, it is amazing that no one was hurt. In fact, there wasn't even any damage done to the cars parked on that section of the street.

To this day, even after renovations to the building, the mismatched section of new bricks is a reminder of the wall that fell over 20 years ago.

First Dragon temporarily closed

It hasn't even been long enough since the fire for it to become history, but it is a part of the building's list of notable occurrences. On Aug. 4, Holyoke volunteer fire fighters responded to First Dragon Chinese Restaurant.

There were no flames as the result of an electrical problem in the kitchen area, however the smoke damage was extensive enough to close down the restaurant for a period of time.

History beyond the archives

While most of the history of 126 N. Interocean can be pieced together from newspaper archives and other various resources, the history that isn't included within those books is sometimes the most interesting of all.

Take the fact that Mildred McCormick was a fiery redhead, with a personality no one could forget. She was known to feed anyone who came into her cafe, turning away no one. She trusted they would pay their bill when they were able.

Another detail the history books fail to include is that while teens would convene in front of the buildings on main street, younger siblings would often make their way to the back alley for a game of tag.

Unless they'd eaten there, most probably don't know of the famed Saturday night prime rib at The Inn or that people would wait extra time just to be seated in The Inn's barn room in the south side of the building.

Researchers in the future may never know about the friendship that grew between Alta Brandt and Detta Bjorklun when they operated their stores side by side, but these tidbits are just as much a part of the history of 126 N. Interocean as anything.