

COMMENTARY

End of the road near for tavern on Rt. 40

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MIKE HARDEN

LAFAYETTE, Ohio — The Red Brick Tavern is said to have been host to six U.S. presidents and home to one ghost. Unfortunately, the tale of the latter is more interesting than the combined administrations of the former halfdozen.



I don't much care where Warren G. Harding slept, though rumor has it that he gave Bill Clinton something to shoot for.

A portrait of "Wurn" (as he was known to his wife, Edith) hangs beside those of five other chief executives in the dining room. The framed presidents likely will be sold at auction on Feb. 3 along with everything else the Red Brick has become in its 170 years along the fringe of Rt. 40.

Shawn Freet was 18 in 1982 when his parents, Gene and Shirley, took their place in a long succession of managers.

The Freet's bought the inn outright in 1996, a couple of months before Shirley's cancer was diagnosed. She lived two years. Gene died in 2003.

"I can't keep it going anymore," Freet said of the landmark, which has had no takers at \$350,000. "It was one of those situations where we ran into some tough times. Business has fallen off over the years. I've done everything I can. I don't know what else there is to do."

On Monday, a day the restaurant has traditionally been closed, Freet lighted a fire in one of the tavern hearths and took a long, hard look at the business that has been a member of the family for a quarter-century.

Were this the early heyday of the Red Brick, stagecoaches would be arriving, switching out the teams of horses and disgorging bone-rattled, dusty travelers. A century later, tourists and salesmen would be pulling up in bullet-nosed Studebakers and slope-backed Hudsons, eager for a taste of the inn's signature prime rib and maybe "a shot of whatever you got," as the song goes.

The coming of the interstate spelled death to many businesses that had made a decent living off those roadbound on Rt. 40. Motels and tourist camps from Cumberland, Md., to Vandalia, Ill., shuttered up and shut down.

The place is loaded with antiques: hutches and cabinets, a pie safe and a drafting table, even an organ for serenading the purported wraith who paces the third floor.

No one seems to know the young woman's name or what it would have been changed to had her fiance not proved faithless. She is said to have embroidered the message "Remember me" before snuffing the candle at her own hand.

Some believe she can be heard whispering in the night or seen standing at one of the inn's upstairs windows.

As a people, we have gotten away from dining at road stops just because they boast a certain history and aging charm. No one wants a picture postcard of the McDonald's where he's just lunched. And not enough someones care to make it worthwhile for Freet and his staff of 15 to soldier on.

"We left Columbus yesterday at noon," wrote a stagecoach passenger from the decade the Red Brick opened its doors. "The road was very bad — a great deal of rain had fallen in three days and the mud was very deep. ... We were tossed about unmercifully, and an imaginative mind would have thought itself sometimes nearer the sky than the Earth."

"I kind of grew up in the business," Freet said yesterday. "This is kind of a sad thing."

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