

A Peek at the Past

Where the buffalo roam: A look back at a Dunnstable landmark
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Years from now, when people drive the heavily-trafficked stretch of Route 150 between Lock Haven and Woolrich, a few may cast a glance at a large vacant lot about three miles outside the city. Unless they're over the age of 60, however, these passers-by are unlikely to think much about this lonely stretch of pavement.

Today, after all, it's just a patch of gravel and asphalt. But it was once home to a collection of buildings with a truly extraordinary history, and one that shouldn't be allowed to pass unnoticed into the forgotten past.

It begins in November, 1947, when a local farmer named Jake Kohberger decided he had had enough of the U.S. Office of Price Administration's (OPA) price freezes on consumer products like beef and processed foods. The OPA was at one time a powerful agency of the U.S. government charged by Pres. Franklin Roosevelt with moderating consumer prices in the wake of World War II rationing.



At its peak, the OPA reportedly froze prices on 90 percent of retail food items.

So the feisty farmer fought the federal beef-price freeze by selling all of his beef cattle and starting a buffalo ranch on Old Route 220 (now 150), located about where the now-shuttered Asperline log home construction company buildings currently stand.

All this was on the advice of Kohberger's father, Gottlieb, who first suggested Jake consider raising the bison-like animals, which are cheaper to raise and feed and require less day-to-day attention than beef cows.

Before long the ranch was drawing crowds of visitors - particularly children - interested in seeing a rare buffalo up close and in person.

"It is commonplace to see as many as ten cars parked at the Kohberger farm," The Express reported in May of 1948. "Great fun for the kids, it is a delight for the grown-ups as well, to watch the animals, considered an oddity in this section."

Then Kohberger decided to branch out into other business endeavors. At about the same time Jake was re-introducing buffalo to the West Branch Valley, automobile entrepreneur Preston Thomas Tucker was launching the Tucker Torpedo. That ahead-of-its-time vehicle contained many features commonplace to modern automobiles - like safety belts - that were not standard on cars of that era.

Tucker was making a big splash in the automotive world at the time, and Kohberger decided to start a Tucker car dealership about a half-mile from his farm on Old 220.

"In the 1940s, when the Tucker automobile was being developed, Jake Kohberger bought one of the Tucker franchises and started to build his automobile franchise," said Fred Brown, whose parents managed a later business with Kohberger (see below). "But before he got them finished, the Tucker automobile company folded. So Jake's out there with the property with two buildings on it, up and roofed but not finished up on the interior."

Tucker went to trial over some unconventional business practices, and on the day he faced the jury for the first time, October 4, 1949, the Tucker Auto Corporation closed up shop for good. In 1988 the Preston Tucker story was turned into a movie, "Tucker: The Man and His Dreams," directed by Francis Ford Coppola and starring Jeff Bridges.

Now Kohberger had two beautifully-constructed buildings he had hoped to use as Tucker auto showrooms, but which were now unutilized. What to do? Well, Harvey "H.H." Brown, Fred Brown's father, had a few ideas. He thought the buildings would make a great restaurant-bar complex. Problem was, local Dunnstable Township ordinances forbade the sale of alcoholic beverages.

But that didn't stop H.H. Brown.

"My father was the foreman for that section of PennDOT," begins Fred Brown. "He and a partner approached Jake about his buildings and told him that if he was to finish them off into a tavern and restaurant, they would get Dunnstable Township voted in wet and Jake would have a purpose for the buildings. That's how that came about."

"So Jake went ahead and did his part and my father and his friend did their part and got the township voted in wet and it was time to put this thing together," Fred Brown said. "The buffalo theme and all that was all Jake. He was really a pretty colorful fellow."

Indeed, Kohberger was a visionary and energetic individual who once drove to Alaska and back in a station wagon and was believed to have been a trusted Lieutenant to famed bootlegger Prince Farrington.

"Now the place is built and it's time to open it, but Jake can't get a liquor license because he had been busted for bootlegging with Prince Farrington during prohibition," said Fred Brown. "So my father and mother got the original liquor license and opened the tavern. (Future Starlite Bowling Lane owner) Karl Nihart and his wife opened the restaurant end. I think it was a success from the get-go."

It was the 1950s, the era of the family-style "roadside attraction" on major highways like Route 66, and the Buffalo Inn and Buffalo Tavern - with a gas station and auto mechanic also on the property - fit the bill perfectly. It advertised the largest buffalo herd east of the Mississippi and buffalo burgers and steaks on the very reasonably-priced menu.

Mounted buffalo heads decorated both the interior and exteriors of the two properties and a large painted buffalo - executed by Kohberger's talented son-in-law, Donald Tibbons - was the signature image of the property.

Within just a couple of years, however, H.H. Brown and his wife, Beulah, left the Buffalo to start a hotel in Mill Hall. Kohberger's daughter, Geraldine, then took over both the tavern and restaurant sides of the business. But when H.H. died suddenly of a heart attack in 1951, Beulah returned to manage the Buffalo Inn eatery on her own.

That turned out to be a very lucky break for Beulah and her family. In the mid- and late 1960s construction on Interstate Route 80 began at both ends of Pennsylvania - at the Ohio and New Jersey borders - and commenced toward the center of the state. By 1967 a large portion of I-80 was completed, but travelers were still forced to detour onto Old Route 220 (now Route 150) through a large section in the middle of the state before hooking back up with 80 again and resuming their journeys east and west.

That detour ended up taking hundreds of thousands of travelers past The Buffalo Inn every day until Route 80 construction was completed.

"So you come barreling along from New Jersey or Ohio and have to get on Old 220," Fred Brown said. "The Buffalo Inn was the only place between New Jersey and Ohio for 24-hour food and fuel. It just started happening, and when it did, it was most incredible. It just busted open. All the sudden it was just pandemonium. My mother's business multiplied from September to December, 1967, at least 20 times."

It was like winning the lottery, but it didn't last. As soon as Route 80 was completed traffic patterns on Old 220 returned to their previous levels, and the Buffalo Inn, Buffalo Tavern, and the more recently-constructed Buffalo Motel, in a lot adjacent to the restaurant-bar, went back to doing steady (but not spectacular) business.

A few years later, in 1973, 81-year-old Jake Kohberger, described in his Express obituary as the "County's buffalo man," died of a heart attack at his Dunnstable home.

Without its buckskin-clan, cowboy-hat wearing creator at the helm, the Buffalo properties soon went into decline. By 1976 or '77 the properties were mostly shuttered and vacant, and sporadic efforts by future managers to run businesses out of the former Buffalo properties were largely met with only meager success.

Kohberger's buffalo herd was said to have been auctioned off to an Upstate New York gas and oil firm, which combined the Kohberger bison with their own existing herd. Much of the rest of the fixtures and furniture from the inn, tavern and motel were also auctioned off prior to 1990, when Kohberger heirs sold the properties to Mansfield accountant Elmer Peake.

"When Jake died, the whole thing came to an end," Fred Brown said. "They eventually ended up selling the whole complex. Some people tried to run the bar for a while but there was no vestige of what had been the Buffalo Inn complex. It was supposed to be a strip bar for a couple of years...and then there was the Shangri-La era."

In 1992 the former Buffalo Inn then known as "The Shangri-La Health Spa" found itself in the news again. This time, though, it was because the state attorney general named the Shangri-La as one of six establishments in the state that were fronts for prostitution rings.

A report from the attorney general provided a glimpse into how far the formerly family-friendly location had drifted since its glory days. According to the report, a patron of the Shangri-La typically selected a female employee and then went with her to a private room. The client was allegedly required to pay in advance - cash or credit card only, please - for a massage ranging in price from \$50 to \$70.

Then both the employee and client undressed and, shortly after the massage began, a new set of negotiations commenced. The employee would quote the client on the "services" provided and the cost associated with those "services." Prices ranged from a low of \$25 to a high of \$150.

The "twilight doves" engaged in these endeavors typically got to hold onto slightly less than a third of their service charges, with the rest going to two gentlemen - Robert Sheely and Lester Zimmerman - who managed the operation.

In September, 1993, Zimmerman was found guilty of operating a corrupt organization, conspiracy, money laundering and operating a house of prostitution. Sheely went on the lam and became a fugitive from justice.

Since then the old Buffalo Inn-Tavern-Motel locations have changed hands several times. Currently, according to County Chief Assessor Keith Yearick, the land upon which the facilities once stood are owned by Oakland, Md. resident George Jochum and his wife, Patsy. The Jochums, Yearick believes, were owners at the time the properties were torn down several months ago.

"The day they tore it down I deliberately drove down that road from Jersey Shore and they were knocking down the back corner of what was our kitchen," said Fred Brown, who for many years worked with his mother at the old Buffalo Inn. "Everything was down except that last part. I was rather stunned."

Now those buildings - which represent such a colorful, vibrant era of Clinton County history - are simply no more.

But a few bits and pieces of the Buffalo Inn do linger on. Brown, for example, owns a couple of souvenirs from the Buffalo Inn, and he says at least one local man is still in possession of one of the mounted buffalo heads that once graced the establishment.

Most significant, perhaps, is the story of the old Buffalo Tavern bar. For many years the bar remained in the otherwise vacant shell of the old building on Route 150, becoming covered in dust and cobwebs, until Brown encouraged former Sal Assante's Avenue Cafe owner Wes Settle to rescue the old mahogany piece.

Settle finally decided to purchase the bar and brought it to local furniture restorer Tom Svec for refurbishment.

But then Settle sold Sal's before work on the Buffalo Tavern bar was completed. He died of a heart attack soon thereafter, and a few years later the building that once housed Sal Assante's was torn down.

Meantime the Buffalo Tavern bar remained in limbo, gathering dust in Tom Svec's workshop. Finally, Lenny Gugino, then-owner of Uncle Albert's bar on Vesper Street in the city, took notice of the piece and fell instantly in love with it.

"I knew it was a beautiful, practical piece of art," Gugino told The Express in 2003. "It was so beautiful and it wasn't even being used. I spoke with (Tom Svec) and I knew this was something I wanted to get."

Eventually - when Gugino's aesthetic ambitions caught up with financial reality - the Buffalo bar made its way to his drinking establishment, where it remains to this day.

Earlier this month Gugino sold Uncle Alberts to new owner Howard Karichner, Jr. As a result of the series of circumstances described above, Karichner today is in possession of one of the last surviving pieces of a Clinton County icon that is now gone forever.

May he guard it well.

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Two of the original "Peek at the Past" books are available for purchase at Ross Library. Matt Connor can be reached at mbconnor4265@gmail.com.

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