

Back in the day



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

The RoeMarks building has been a fixture on Hermiston's Main Street for years dating back to the time when it was the Union Club. A group of investors is planning to return the building back to its former glory days as a bar.

Memories of former Union Club inform its rebirth

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

A fixture of Hermiston's Main Street in the 1940s and 1950s is about to be restored to its former glory.

Longtime residents remember it as the RoeMarks building, but those who have been in Hermiston for a really long time might have a story or two about drinking in the Union Club.

A few of them gathered in the space — a two-story red brick building on the corner of Main Street and Northeast Second — to share their memories of the bar with a group of partners planning on turning it back into the Union Club, re-imagined for a new generation.

Those memories might be taken with a grain of salt.

"In the men's bathroom there was a sign in there that said 'Please flush the toilet, Umatilla needs the water,'" Bill Meyers said as he ribbed Sam Nobles about growing up in Umatilla.

"Now that's fake, B.S. news!" Nobles said.

"It was in there for a while," Meyers insisted.

That particular debate was never settled, but Nobles did say despite being from Umatilla he has fond memories of time spent in the Union Club.

"They had a poker room and it was downstairs," he said. "I could go down and play poker when I was 18 even though I couldn't drink."

Meyers said Umatilla boys like Nobles used to come into town and "try to steal our girlfriends" before being chased back home. The running rivalry between the two towns, which has since faded somewhat as Hermiston has grown, was the subject of some discussion on Wednesday. Meyers remembers an old chamber pot — known by its slang term "white owl" — that a schoolmate found and tied to the back of his truck. Umatilla students stole it (Nobles claims to have had no part in the heist, although he knows who did), and for a while stealing the



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Sam Nobles of Hermiston gestures while recounting a story about the old Union Club on Wednesday during a gathering in Hermiston.

chamber pot from the other town was a frequent target of weekend teenage hijinks.

The Union Club started in the 1940s as hundreds of men from various trade unions flooded the area to work first on the igloos at the Umatilla Chemical Depot and then on the McNary Dam. Its exact closing date was unknown by the group but they guessed it was in the mid-1960s.

When asked if he had ever gotten kicked out of the Union Club, Meyers said he might have a time or two.

"Sammy knows, we'd get in here and everyone would get louder and louder," he said. "Every beer you'd drink, you'd get louder, and they'd say you either quiet down or get out."

Butch Shockman said he remembers the Union Club, but he wasn't old enough to be drinking there during its heyday.

"I was too young," he said. "I was just looking in the window."

His brother Don was old enough to go there but preferred to spend his time at Hale's, which predated the Union Club and outlasted it too.

The Shockman brothers remembered plenty of other Hermiston history that came up during the luncheon, however. That included the "rabbit drives" that Hermiston used to encourage people to kill hundreds of rabbits that were eating the crops, and memories of "Pop" Swayze, who ran the First National Bank of Hermiston.

"He was a pretty progressive guy," Don said as the group remembered how Swayze would "repossess" mules, buildings or even entire farms during the Great Depression but would allow the farmers to keep working "his" property, setting the groundwork for families to have a way to pay off what they owed.

"I think everyone on this street owed Swayze money," Butch said.

The purpose of all the memory-sharing that went on during Wednesday's luncheon was to help inform a project to turn the space into a coffee-by-day, bar-by-night establishment called

"We want to connect more with the heartbeat of Hermiston."

— Justin Doyle, one of the partners in the project



Photo contributed by Steve Mills

The Union Club tavern in 1961, located in what is now commonly referred to as the RoeMarks building on Main Street in Hermiston.

See UNION CLUB/4C