**From Farm House to the Portobello Banquet Hall**

Recently discovered photos and written documentation provide a comprehensive history of the true origins of Portobello Banquet Hall. The roots of the building are deeper and more complex than you may realize. Walk with me now for a few minutes and discover the history of the building. Our little journey begins about 25 years after the American Revolution and over 100 years before Oakland as a town even existed.

In 1804 one Martin Van Hooten, a farmer and large land owner, had deed to the property where the Portobello Banquet Hall now sits. He built a small farmhouse complete with a well adjacent to the road as was the custom of the time. Original deed records show that over the next many decades his property changed hands and was divided several times.

Fast forward to about 1880.

At that time Oakland was fast becoming the South Hampton of New Jersey with the arrival of the rich and famous from New York City. They sought the pastures, the clean air, fresh waters and simple country life that Oakland offered. They also required homes and a lifestyle of which they were accustomed in the Big Apple. Since no such accommodations existed in Oakland at the time, they purchased local farmhouses and greatly expanded them into appropriate mansions. And since Oakland farmers built their homes adjacent to the road, the new mansions were also so located. It must be noted that we are very fortunate to have complete photo documentation of the transformation from a small farmhouse to the spectacular Portobello Banquet Hall from 1880 to 2020 with all its iterations in between.

Enter the Remington Vernam and his wife, Florence.

The Remington Vernam was a retired wealthy real estate developer from New York City. He and his wife moved to Oakland in 1882 and promptly purchased a small farmhouse on the site of Portobello Banquet Hall from Anthony Bartrim, a farmer and extensive land owner. Previously the house was owned by Adrian Post, a local farmer. The Vernams set out to greatly expand the small farmhouse into a mini-mansion in keeping with their well heeled neighbors. And they did so complete with ceiling paintings, drawing rooms and stained glass windows.

Also at that time across the road there existed the Ramapo Sanitorium, a huge 3 story Victorian mansion complete with elevators. Its purpose was to serve as a health and psychological respite place for burned out city dwellers. It was literally located on the hill where Shop Rite sits today. As fate would have it, the Ramapo Sanitorium went out of business shortly after Remington and Florence Vernam completed their new mini-mansion. Not to be denied of the opportunity to have a better and far larger home, the Vernams promptly purchased the Sanitorium buildings along with over 600 acres. Their new home was known as Lilac Manor. And so they moved leaving their existing, recently completed home with the unsuccessful hope of either selling it or renting it. Mr. Vernam died in 1907 and Florence Vernam died in 1916 without an inheritor. Even with no heirs, taxes still had to be paid and apparently weren’t.

On July 15, 1918 there was an unsuccessful sheriff’s sale of the Vernam’s abandoned mini-mansion. But on March 25, 1919 Agnes Boone of New York City purchased it along with 5+ acres. She in turn on December 15, 1928 deeded it to her son, Ilsley Boone. IIsley Boone was an associate pastor of the Ponds Church. However, the economic fates interceded. On June 14, 1935 the Boone family lost title to their house in a foreclosure sale to Pompton Lakes Building and Loan. It was then alluded to as the Candlelight House. It was the foreclosure sale of the Boone home, the former Vernam mini-mansion, that began the rise and development of the building into what is now Portobello Banquet Hall.

Enter Hans and Dagny Hansen – Founders of the Hansen House.

Hans and Dagny, both immigrants from Norway, met and married in a section of Brooklyn somewhat known as little Oslo. Hans was the superintendent of a luxury high rise in Manhattan in the 1930s. He and Dagny purchased the then vacant Boone residence on April 18, 1938 from Pompton Lakes Building and Loan for the princely sum of $3,000 after borrowing most from friends and relatives. While it is officially unknown, their awareness and interest of the former Boone house was likely stroked by Alf Nielsen who was a relative and real estate broker and who lived in the Nielsen House on Ramapo Valley Road (Now destroyed to expand the parking lot of the post office.)

And so it was that in 1938 Hans, Dagny and their 2 daughters, Sonya and Evelyn, alighted to Oakland. After extensive repairs they opened it as a Tourist Guest House with the ultimate goal of making it a smorgasbord restaurant if and when a liquor license became available. That blessed event occurred in 1949 initiating the legendary Hansen House Restaurant for the next 34 years. Interestingly, Oakland in 1949 had 11 liquor licenses serving a population of 900 residents for a ratio of 1 license for every 81 residents. The Hansens augmented their restaurant and guest house with a swimming pool and a new-fangled TV. It was also air conditioned which used the cooling power provided by the freezing water of the adjacent Trout Pond.

Hans and Dagny ultimately retired to Florida leaving the continuation of the Hansen House to their daughters, Evelyn and Sonya. Ultimately though, it was time to move on. But before Sonya and Evelyn left they obtained permission to remove the ceiling paintings and stained glass windows as they were precious relics of the original expanded mansion reflecting the 1882 sophisticated NYC tastes of Mrs. Vernam. These are proudly and lovingly displayed in the homes of Sonya and Evelyn.

Enter Victor Rallo – Founder of Molly’s Fishmarket Restaurant

The Hansen House was sold Victor Rallo of West Milford in 1972 to become the successful Molly’s Fishmarket Restaurant for the next decade. He completely renovated the Hansen House to create an old time nautical theme using old barn wood and timbers from New York State. Its theme and style appealed to casual diners with seafood and steaks as the main fare. Of course it had a cocktail lounge. Mr. Rallo’s renovations to the building were perhaps the most radical since those of Mrs. Vernam in 1890.

Molly’s continued successfully into the mid 1980s when it in turn was sold.

Enter Frank Amen – Founder of the Portobello Restaurant

Prior to the opening of the Portobello Restaurant, Mr. Amen had great success when he opened the Carnavalle Restaurant in Oakland in the early 1980s. It was a sophisticated and upscale establishment located where W’s is now situated.

Mr. Amen moved quickly to purchase the Molly’s Restaurant property when it became available. And as with any restaurateur, his vision for the theme and style was radically different than Molly’s. Specifically he developed a restaurant whose interior was elegant and sophisticated but whose menu was both delicious and affordable. His vision was a wild success. In fact it was so successful that he was able to convert his restaurant into the Portobello Banquet Hall and continue his restaurant with the purchase the Liberty Diner to create his fabulous current Portobello’s Restaurant.

Now you know the 216 year history of the iconic building. But one last point: There is a literal duplicate of the original small farmhouse that gave ultimate birth to the Portobello Banquet Hall and you pass it every day. It is the historic Mandingo / Johnson house, built in 1804, is located on RVR adjacent on the north side of the current BP gas station. So now you really know.