

Legendary Casino building sold | Ketchum

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 18 April 2018 06:08 -

It was a popular haunt for Hemingway, and two bartenders have sworn the place is really haunted—they've seen the ghost.

It's been a hideout for some of Hollywood's most famous and America's most powerful; celebrities and politicians alike can blend in with a crowd and enjoy a drink in peace. Plenty of blue-collar types have found respite from their workaday troubles there, too.

But after 82 years, it's no longer owned by members of the Werry family. The Casino bar, a fixture on Ketchum's Main Street since the 1920s, has new owners.

Earlier this month, siblings Kerry Ann Armstrong and Kevin Werry agreed to sell the Casino and the adjacent property, which houses Rico's Authentic Italian restaurant, to Rick Rooney and his wife, Patti Romano-Rooney.

The Rooneys control a recently formed limited liability company, DQ Properties, which is based in Boise and is officially the new owner of both Main Street properties.

Armstrong said Rick Rooney was going to be their real estate agent as they put the properties on the market. They sold the half block next door to the owners of the Warfield Distillery & Brewery several years ago.

But after fielding several offers from buyers who wanted to knock the Casino building down, Armstrong said she and her brother decided to sell to the Rooneys and a group of investors they represent. She did not disclose the purchase price.

Rooney wants to keep the property as it is, and even retain the same crew of bartenders, Armstrong said. His plans for the property include some improvement projects, but he wants to keep the essence intact.

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The historic nature of the building is important, Rooney said.

“We want to keep it the same,” Rooney said. “The town needs the Casino. It’s going to stay the Casino, period.”

Armstrong said she and her brother have known Rooney for 30 years, which made the decision to sell easier.

“We’ve been friends all these years,” Armstrong said of Rooney and his wife. “He was going to be our real estate agent. They decided to make us an offer.”

Armstrong, 62, said she’s nearing retirement age and wants to spend less time bookkeeping and more time traveling and with her grandchildren.

“It was a difficult decision,” she said. “We’re just old enough to retire. It was time.”

The building was originally constructed in the 1920s from logs chopped and hauled down from Bald Mountain. Elmer Ebbe worked as a carpenter from Twin Falls and constructed the building and some adjoining cabins, which were knocked down years ago, according to an article in the Sun Valley Guide.

The original log-frame structure of the building is still visible on Main Street.

A fire on Main Street in 1904 wiped out many of the structures on that block, and it took years for the Casino—then called the Ketchum Kamp Hotel—to fill the vacant lot.

The Casino has a reputation as Ketchum’s lively, late-night hangout spot, but initially it was a popular place for anglers to catch an early-morning breakfast before heading out to the Big

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Wood River for a day of fishing, according to the Guide article.

A week of meals and boarding at the hotel cost \$12, or \$20 for two people, according to an oral history by valley resident Edith Ellis Hyde that's kept at The Community Library.

Ebbe sold the property to William Russell "Slavey" Werry and his wife, Dora Mae Goodman Werry, in 1936 during the Great Depression.

Slavey Werry died in 1944, leaving his wife to run the property by herself, said Armstrong, who is their grandchild.

"She took it over," Armstrong said. "That was pretty unusual for that day and age."

The Werrys purchased the building in the same year that the Union Pacific Railroad opened Sun Valley Resort. The Legislature legalized some forms of gambling in the 1930s, and by the 1940s the property had a new name: the Ketchum Kamp Hotel and Casino.

Ted Merrill, who worked at the resort when it was converted to a convalescent hospital for the Navy during World War II, remembered the fallout of a high-stakes poker game at the Casino, in the Sun Valley Guide article.

"A guy went out back, and I heard him retching out there," Merrill recalled. "I asked the waiter what he was doing and if he was OK. I was told that the man had just played a big poker game and had bet the farm and lost."

Sun Valley hosted plenty of glamorous celebrities in its early years, and many wandered their way into the collection of bars and clubs on Main Street. Famed author Ernest Hemingway was among them—he first started coming to Sun Valley in 1939—and the Casino was a frequent destination.

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Armstrong remembers that Hemingway struck up a friendship with Slavey Werry, and heard that Werry and some friends were going on a hunting trip one day.

They told Hemingway to meet them at 5 a.m. By 5:05 a.m., Hemingway hadn't arrived, and the rest of the group left without him, Armstrong said.

"They left him and he was never late again for hunting," she said.

Armstrong said her grandmother lived in an apartment upstairs. Armstrong said she was recruited to clean the 12 rooms in the upstairs of the building, earning a sum of 50 cents—plus whatever money she found tucked into couch and chair cushions.

Dora Werry had an open-door policy. Late-night visitors interested in a six-pack of beer after closing hours would stop by the Casino.

Dora would call out, "Who's there?" The interlopers would explain their purpose, and Dora had them leave the cash on the bar in exchange for the beer, Armstrong said. Despite owning a bar for years, Dora Werry never drank, she said.

The property was passed down to her father, Ted Werry, a former mayor of Ketchum during the 1960s.

Ketchum didn't allow liquor sales on Election Day, but Ted Werry found a way to work around that, Armstrong said. He offered it freely.

"He gave it away," Armstrong said. "He said, 'I'm not selling it, I'm giving it away.'"

The Casino appealed to celebrities and famous politicians because they could fit in with the

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crowd, Armstrong said. She has photographs of her father with former House Speaker Tip O'Neill and actor Steve McQueen.

“That’s why they came in, because nobody would bug them,” she said.

The Casino has a barbershop at its front entrance, which has been run by barber Paul Webster since the 1960s.

In an interview with the Mountain Express last year, Webster recalled the days before Sun Valley was a year-round tourist destination.

“Everybody shut down,” he said of the slack seasons. “Sun Valley bolted their doors and didn’t open up their doors until the 17th of December.”

The state had outlawed gambling by the early 1950s, but poker games continued at the Casino for years afterward because Ketchum’s lone police officer looked the other way, Webster said.

“If you had too much to drink, he’d warn you not to drive, but he’d let the [poker] game run because some of his buddies from out of town would sometimes be playing,” Webster said.

Armstrong said actor Bruce Willis recruited Webster to be his personal barber—until Willis started shaving his head.

She said the Casino has changed a great deal over the years, but its history is etched in the walls. She knows where to find the burnt char marks on the walls upstairs, evidence of a fire that nearly took the building down when Dora Werry owned it.

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“We were lucky it didn’t burn down then,” Armstrong said.

Stories about the Casino being haunted have persisted for years, she said.

“There is rumored to be a ghost,” Armstrong said. “[Two] bartenders have seen her and describe her the same way.”

Armstrong and Kevin Werry took over the Casino in 1988, a year after Ted Werry died.

They bought out other family members in 1989 to become the sole owners of the property, but decided to lease the business to a tenant, Shannon Beall, in the 1990s.

Beall ran the bar for years until she died in 2014, Armstrong said. After Beall’s death, Armstrong and her husband, Mark, resumed managing the Casino.

Armstrong said she was never a fan of bookkeeping, and is looking forward to retirement.

She wants to play tennis, travel and spend time with her grandchildren.

She said she will miss the Casino’s regulars, but many are gone.

“They’re all dying off anyway,” she said. “We’re the old-timers now, we’ve decided. We want to make sure we have everything in a row. I just feel really good about it.”

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