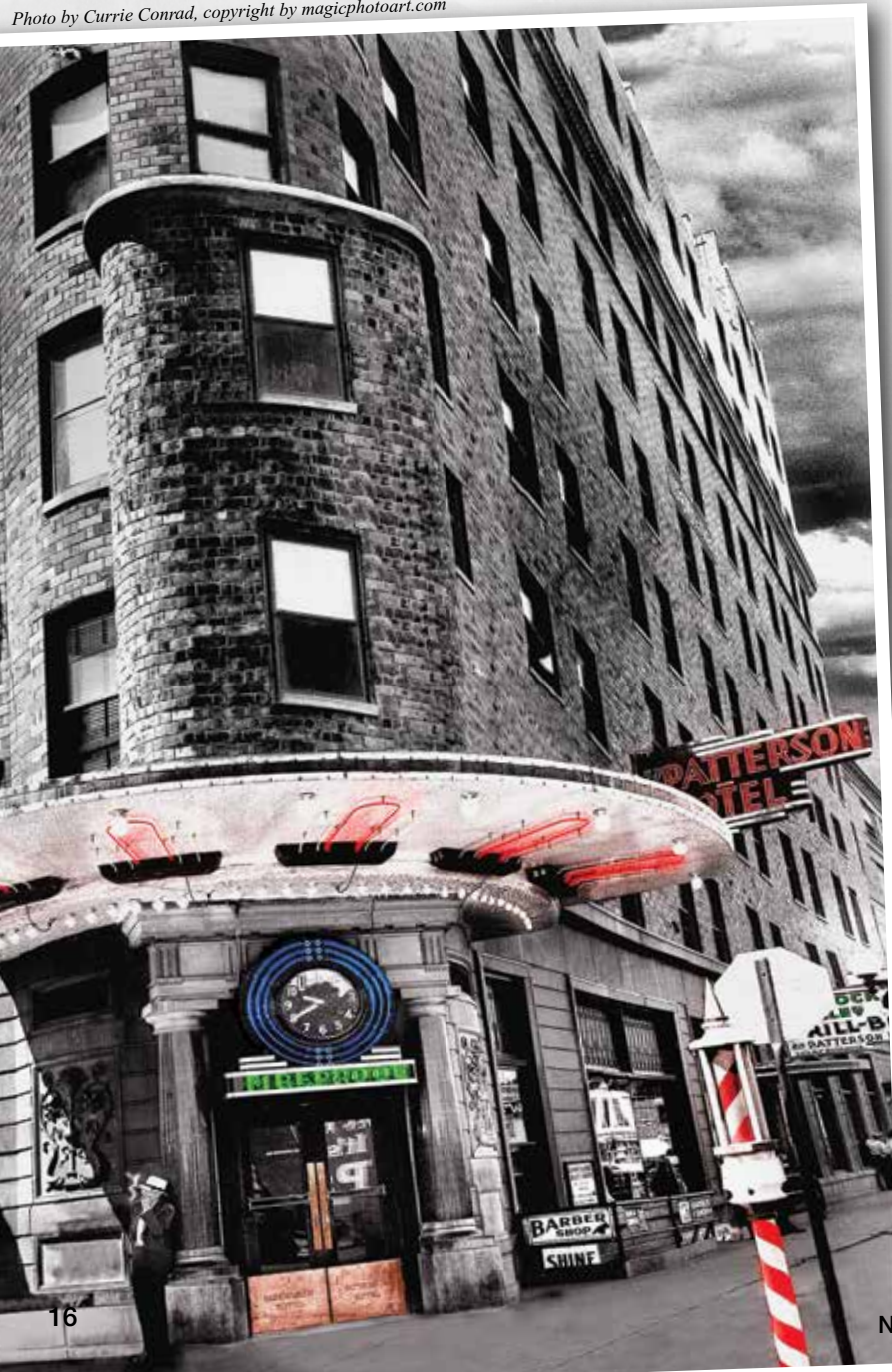


Vittles in the VAST LANE

80 years and going strong Peacock Alley still a hub for legislators, lobbyists

Photo by Currie Conrad, copyright by magicphotoart.com



By Andrea Winkjer Collin, Editor

If this is an odd-numbered year, it means the North Dakota Legislature is in session. For the past 80 years – and 40 legislative sessions – a downtown Bismarck restaurant and bar has been the unofficial headquarters for after-hours gatherings of legislators and lobbyists. The past few months have been no exception for the Peacock Alley American Grill and Bar.

“This building was the temporary North Dakota State Capitol,” says restaurant owner Dale Zimmerman of the Patterson Hotel building, which houses the Peacock Alley and has been standing on the corner of Fifth Street and Main since 1911. “When the state capitol building burned down in December 1930, many state offices were relocated here, including Governor William Langer’s.”

The current Capitol building was occupied in January 1935, and while state officials worked out of the Patterson, the legislature convened for two sessions at the World War Memorial Building, one block to the east.

Opens after Prohibition ends

The original Peacock Alley opened one door west of its present location in 1933, right after Prohibition was repealed. In his lifetime, Ed Patterson was a boxer, Bismarck mayor, as well as a city and county commissioner. “Patterson wanted this to be the finest establishment between Minneapolis and Seattle, so he named it after the famous



At left is an early view of the original Peacock Alley, which was one door to the west of the Patterson Hotel. Pictured below center is the Patterson Hotel, which until the North Dakota Capitol was completed in 1935, was the tallest structure in Bismarck. Below, this photograph of John F. Kennedy was taken at the Patterson Hotel when he was campaigning for President in 1960.

glass walkway between the Waldorf and Astoria hotels in New York City that opened in 1929,” says Zimmerman. “The walkway got the nickname Peacock Alley because the well-dressed elite paraded through it like peacocks.”

The Patterson Hotel closed in the late 1970s and the property came close to demolition before it was reopened in 1984 with senior housing on the top floors and the Peacock Alley on the main floors. The original bar, which remains today, was moved from next door into what had been the hotel’s lobby.

Zimmerman and his wife, Melodie, became owners of Peacock Alley in April 2010. Since then, he has become the resident expert on the history of early Bismarck, as it relates to the Patterson Hotel property, which is listed in the National Registry of Historic Places.

Legislative issues still fill the air

For being more than 100 years old, he says the building, which was Bismarck’s tallest until the present-day Capitol was built, is in very good shape. “In the early 1900s, most hotels were no taller than two stories because of fire concerns. Originally with seven floors, Patterson eventually expanded it to 10 floors, constructing it exclusively out of concrete. This included all beams and columns and nine inches of concrete between each floor,” Zimmerman says. “He aggressively advertised the hotel as being fireproof. It remains so sturdy today we don’t even hear the train pass through town a block away.”

The interior remodeling the Zimmermans have completed



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includes the placement of many historic photographs throughout both the restaurant and bar, many of them politicians. They include portraits of four men who were U.S. presidents who have visited – Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

“This photo of Kennedy was taken here in the



building,” says Zimmerman, pointing to one of the portraits on the restaurant wall.

Recent renovations have redone the kitchen and remodeled the Langer Room, which seats up to 40 for private dinners and meetings. Photographs and other documents in the room recognize the career and era of Langer, who was an Attorney General, Governor and U.S. Senator, and is generally considered to be North Dakota’s most colorful politician.

Zimmerman says business picks up a bit when the legislature is in session, but it is steady throughout the year. “People stop by all the time to share stories of early Bismarck and their personal Peacock Alley memories. Bismarck has had such an influx of new residents recently we have guests from all over the world.”

Since January, a live two-hour legislative radio show has been broadcast from the upper level of the bar four nights a week. It

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Peacock Alley owner Dale Zimmerman, pictured above left, talks about a photograph of former Attorney General, Governor and U.S. Senator William Langer that is on display in the restaurant’s Langer Room. Visitors to the Peacock Alley quickly sense the atmosphere of history and nostalgia through the decor of the restaurant.





Left, this early photograph of the Peacock Alley shows the sign above the entrance at the left.

Below, this early photograph shows the dining room of the Patterson Hotel, the same location of the present-day Peacock Alley dining room.



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further enriches the status of this political gathering place, which was home to the Nonpartisan League, the influential progressive branch of the North Dakota Republican Party from 1915 until 1956, when it became aligned with the North Dakota Democratic Party.

Focus on beef brings national award

A Hettinger, North Dakota, native who calls himself a “Class B kid,” Zimmerman says that in addition to preserving the restaurant’s heritage, he wants the restaurant’s menu to recognize the food culture of the region. “We are located smack dab in Middle America and it’s hard to get fresh seafood. This is not the case for beef,” says this former leather furniture salesman whose uncle is a cattle rancher. “We decided to serve certified Angus beef, which is raised by many North Dakota ranchers.”

Zimmerman also decided that he would offer beef dishes that would go beyond the offerings of the traditional steakhouse. With the help of M&W Beef Packers of Mandan, which cuts all the meat, the restaurant offers new beef dishes every month. One favorite is the Hanger Steak, of which there is only one steak per animal. “This is sometimes called a ‘butcher’s steak,’ because butchers often kept it for themselves instead of selling it,” he says.

Another best seller is the Cowboy Ribeye Steak, which is cut with the bone inside. A popular appetizer innovation is Prime Time Eggrolls, which sautees together chopped prime rib beef with oriental vegetables and is deep-fried in an egg roll.

The Peacock Alley’s reputation for its beef dishes brought the restaurant a highly coveted national honor in February. The National Cattleman’s Association presented the Zimmermans with the “National Beef Innovator of the Year Award” for understanding the versatility of beef and introducing at least five new beef dishes a month. This is the first time a restaurant in the region has won the award, not to mention North Dakota. “High class restaurants on either the east or west coasts or in Chicago usually get this recognition,” Zimmerman says. “We got a standing ovation at the convention in Tampa when a North Dakota restaurant was announced as the winner.”

The restaurant plans to celebrate its 80th anniversary later this year. And, although it has been a busy two years at the Peacock Alley, Zimmerman says there are no plans to slow down. “We are always pushing, constantly trying to improve.”

Peacock Alley American Grill and Bar

422 East Main Avenue • Bismarck

701-255-7917 • www.peacock-alley.com

Hours: 11 a.m. to midnight, Monday through Thursday

11 a.m. to 1 a.m., Friday • 10 a.m. to 1 a.m., Saturday

Closed Sunday