

# There goes a piece of history

## Lumber moguls, cigar makers and rock bands all played a part in the history of the recently demolished Assante's Hotel

By Matt Connor

By the time the old Sal Assante's Hotel (formerly at 216-218 Bellefonte Ave.) was demolished to make way for additional parking for an adjoining area business in July 2004, the building had already been vacant for some time, a victim of changing times and declining business. It no longer played host to raucous Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania (LHU) students and noisy rock bands, though that's what many former regulars remember most fondly about the place. "Who could forget my 21st birthday?!", Shelly Callahan, an LHU alumnus who graduated in the early 1990s, wrote via email after hearing that the building had been torn down. "Come to think of it, I don't remember much about it. I had 10 double shots! A Prairie Fire, a Mind Eraser, a 'Flaming Liberty' (I think that's what it was called), a 'Brain,' and many others. A friend took me for a walk outside to try and sober me up, but it was way too late for that. "Is it bad when your hands and feet are all tingly?" I wondered." What Callahan – and few others – realized when they were knocking back cheap beer and shots of Flaming Liberties at Sal Assante's bar was that the building itself had a truly intriguing past, though one that is now largely lost to history.

The property, located on the corner of Bellefonte Ave. and West Park Street in Lock Haven, was once owned by one of the town's most influential business and civic leaders, for example. In 1874 lumberman Samuel Christ purchased the building in a Sheriff's sale. "Samuel was one of the most extensive lumber operators in the county," said Katharine A. Paulhamus, Curator of the Clinton County Historical Society. "He owned a lumber processing plant on the corner of Race and Lamb streets in Lock Haven. He also held some fairly significant positions in the community." He was, for example, the owner and president of the Lock Haven Gas Works, was on the Committee for the West Branch Bucket and Hose Co. No. 1 of Lock Haven, a member of the city council and was mayor of Lock Haven in 1881. Also in the early-1880s, Christ was on the Board of Trustees for the Central Normal School, which later became Lock Haven University.

Christ's grand house stood at 320 West Main Street, next door to the former Lock Haven High School building (now Lock Haven University's "East Campus"), until it was torn down by LHU several years ago to make way for additional parking.

In 1900 Edward Young purchased the Assante Hotel building, and it remained in the Young family for the next 46 years. It was during this period, according to Paul Mahoney, a later owner of the property, that the building was home to a different sort of business enterprise. "A long time ago it was a cigar factory, probably in the early 1900s," he said. According to Tony Hyman, the curator of the National Cigar Museum and a nationally known expert on cigars and their manufacture, there were ten cigar factories in Lock Haven during that period of time. "A nice three story brick or wood frame building [like the former Assante Hotel] is likely to have been a factory employing 75 to 100 or so people," he said. Evidence of the building's cigar making days is confirmed in old city directories, which list the E.H. Young Cigar Factory as being located at 216 Bellefonte Ave., site of the future Sal Assante's Café. Paulhamus also said the Heisey Museum is in possession of a cigar box with the label "E.H. Young" on it, but this appears to be from a cigar factory located in Farrandville, rather than the Bellefonte Ave. location.

The building came under the name Assante in 1946, when Salvatore Assante purchased the property and opened an Italian restaurant and bar at the location. Longtime locals remember Sal's as the place to go for the best plate of spaghetti in the area. "Sal was a good guy. I knew Sal for a lot of years," Mahoney said. "He passed away about six years after I bought it. He was very old school. He liked Italian food and he liked to talk. But I'm not positive how many years he had the place. He used to live upstairs. He lived up there the whole time he had it. There were four big apartments then. His business was mainly a restaurant."

There are even stories that Sal stuck around the location even *after* he passed away. On the website [www.leftfield-psi.net](http://www.leftfield-psi.net), the following listing for haunted Pennsylvania locations can be found: “Lock Haven: Assante’s Hotel (Condemned) - Believed to be haunted by first owner of the hotel, Sal Assante. Apparitions sighted on several occasions.” According to Bonny Mardis, who worked at Sal’s for 18 years, Assante, who died of a heart attack at age 70 in 1977, frequently visited the popular drinking establishment after his demise. “The biggest time that he was upset, I think, was when they were remodeling the dining room,” Mardis said of the Assante ghost. “There would be two of us working Rotary and Kiwanis meetings that were held there, and dishes would fly off shelves. One time I was over in the banquet room, clearing off dishes, and one of those big bus bins — a big cart with rollers — just fell over on its side, which is impossible because they’re pretty heavy.” Several Sal’s employees told Mardis they saw apparitions of Sal himself on occasion. “Helen James, who is dead now, worked with Sal when he was alive,” Mardis said. “She told me his ghost was always seen in outline, in a trench coat and some kind of a hat he always wore.” She added that the Assante ghost never gave off negative impressions. “It was never anything bad. It was just kind of different,” she said. “Some of the bartenders saw him late at night when they were closing up. One bartender didn’t want to stay by himself till closing time because of that.” Interestingly enough, Sal’s ghostly appearances often coincided with the departure of one of the employees, as if he was saying goodbye to them. “It seemed like most of the people who saw him were leaving,” Mardis said. “They’d see him on the day they were leaving or the day before. Me, I never saw him personally, because I never really left. I was there till they closed the place. But I saw his antics and things.”

In 1973, the then 23-year-old Mahoney, a former LHU student, purchased the property from Assante and began courting the college crowd. He was one of the first in the area to purchase a large-screen TV for use at the bar, where regulars watched Saturday Night Live every weekend. He converted some of Sal Assante’s old apartments into hotel accommodations. He bought an adjoining automotive repair shop and converted it into a dance floor. He hired live bands to entertain on weekends and opened a packaged goods and sandwich shop next door, the Avenue Six Pack. “I made it the peak time,” Mahoney said. “I worked 75-80 hours a week. I was there all of the time. I was young then, so I made it work. If you own a bar, ya gotta put the time in to make it work, and I put the time in. And I loved it.”

Not surprisingly, Mahoney was often witness to colorful escapades in the bar. Occasionally people would get a little overly romantic in the back rooms, for example, and Paul would have to close those rooms off, but it didn’t happen often: “People would go out to their cars to do that. That’s what they did,” he said. “But I’ll tell ya, more grass went through that place than anywhere else in the world. The guy, a college kid, who lived across the street, got arrested for growing it up on his roof!”

Bands like the Poptart Monkeys, Strawberry Jam and the Trogs all performed at Sal’s, but Mahoney’s personal favorite was a hard-rocking little bar band from Danville.

“The band that did the best for me was Hybrid Ice. They played for me for twelve or fourteen years straight, every six weeks.” Jeff Willoughby, one of the founding members of Hybrid Ice, remembers Sal’s bar fondly, too. The band, which was launched in 1969, still occasionally performs reunion shows. “We started there in the mid-70s,” Willoughby said of Sal’s. “It was not a very big place, but nobody seemed to care. It was a sea of heads from the stage all the way to the back wall. It was always a nice feeling to know that when you went there you were going to have that kind of a crowd.” Rusty Foulke, another member of the band, became sadly sentimental when he heard the news that Sal’s had been torn down. “I can’t imagine there being no Sal’s, truly the end of an era,” he wrote via email. “There should be one of those historical plaques erected that says, ‘Here was a place where people came together to celebrate, through music, the times of their lives.’ And what a time it was. I feel fortunate to have so many great memories and to have made so many friends there.”

Interestingly, Mahoney himself was less-than-sentimental about the demolition of the old landmark he once owned. “It’s been a lot of years,” he said “I put eighteen years in there, and six more at the Six Pack. I had enough. I worked all the time when I was there, day and night. I did pretty good there. When I left there, though, I had enough of the bar. Eighteen years was enough... I had a great time, but I never drank when I was

there.” That’s more than can be said for the hundreds of LHU students and alumni who made Sal’s their drinking place of choice.

Upon hearing the news about the Sal’s demolition, one former LHU exchange student, now living back in Europe, wrote via email: “What a tragic end to one area of Lock Haven that brought sanity to innumerable foreign exchange students. Many a homesick college kid was consoled by a Mind-Eraser closely followed by a Sambuca. The grounding in American culture that was provided by this establishment was unparalleled... It’s all part of the lasting memories of my education at Lock Haven.”

Added “Brad” a stateside LHU alum who opted to remain anonymous, “I remember every Thursday Night was Dance Night at Sal’s. The thing that sticks in my mind is that, around midnight, the DJ would announce they were going to play ‘Songs You Only Dance to When You’re All [Expletive Deleted]-Up!’ and then ‘Movin’ On Up,” the theme song from ‘The Jeffersons’ TV show would play...twice.” And, wrote another alum, this one who graduated in the 1980s: “Sal’s was the place for a case of Rolling Rock (pony bottles) on Mondays... I have vivid memories of watching Billy Idol’s ‘White Wedding’ video while drinking there -- if that doesn’t date me, I’m not sure what else would!”

During its peak period of popularity, Sal’s was also, occasionally, host to the odd show business celebrity. When the band Cheap Trick performed at LHU in the late 1980s or early ‘90s, the entire band and its roadies stopped by at Sal’s for a drink after the show, according to several LHU alums who were present at the bar at the time. When professional wrestler George “The Animal” Steele finished his match at a firehouse fundraiser down the street from the bar, he stopped in at the Six Pack for a sandwich, according to Mahoney.

But sooner or later the party had to end. Mahoney was growing increasingly weary of running the bar, and in 1991 he sold the place. Each subsequent owner, it seems, had less and less success with the property. “I really loved the place for a lot of years,” Mahoney said. “Then Wes Settle bought the place from me after I sold it. Wes played football at Penn State. He sold it after five or six years to a guy named John Knoll. He held onto it for about three years and then he sold it. Then it was an ice cream parlor for a while, but they didn’t do too well with that. They had a buffet on one side and ice cream on the other.”

During its final months, the building was vacant and condemned. Finally razed by Steinbacher Enterprises to make way for a parking lot for the adjacent Hangar Nine restaurant on Bellefonte Ave., the old Assante’s Hotel building is now no more than a memory. And like the building itself, memories eventually fade away.