



The Express

Today's News Today

A Peek At The Past:

The legend of the madam of McElhattan

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There's nothing particularly memorable about the house today. If you were to drive by it you probably wouldn't give it a second look. But to longtime locals it is one of the most notorious houses in Clinton County, with a legend surrounding it that has persisted for over 80 years.

Today the home, located at 2122 Youngdale Rd. in McElhattan, is owned by Ross Library employee Joe Bitner. He and his wife and 14-year-old son have lived there since 2001 and have occasionally heard tales about the property's scandalous past.

"I heard that because of the house, Wayne Township is a dry township," said Joe. "I heard it was once a speakeasy and that the woman who lived here Mrs. Mitcheltree brought in some 'ladies,' and the women of the neighborhood would stand it no more."

Bitner says longtime locals told him a backlash to the alleged conduct going on at 2122 Youngdale Road fired up local reformers and caused them to rescind liquor permits throughout the township. Still, says Bitner, an old liquor license is alleged to remain in existence for his historic old house, though where it is today he cannot say.

During its most infamous period, 2122 Youngdale was known as the Wayne Hotel, and it was owned by Florence "Flossie" Mitcheltree, who purchased it from other Mitcheltree relatives in 1929. She resided there until her death in 1973. By then she had put her naughty past behind her, become respectable and married Jerome Sunderland, a retired farmer.

But during the earliest years of the Great Depression, when Prohibition was still the law of the land, Flossie is said to have operated a "speakeasy" and house of ill repute out of her Youngdale Road home.

Intensely curious about the legend of Flossie Mitcheltree, I took the opportunity of Wayne Township's Hometown Heroes banner program unveiling in September to ask a few local seniors what they remembered about the alleged "Madam of McElhattan."

"A lot of the men liked to go there," said one woman. "I can remember going in that side door and she served food and liquor in the 1930s and 40s."

Said another, "At one time Flossie had an eye for the men, but not in her older years. In the early days, yes, I used to hear things about her My dad used to talk about it. We all heard the rumors."

Rod Stabley, 73, was born in 1937, and by that time Mitcheltree seems to have curbed her activities. Just the same, Stabley grew up hearing occasional tales about the notorious Flossie.

"Really, there's not too much to tell," says Stabley. "Most of it was before my time. The story was that that house was a speakeasy. She sold home brew and had a couple of girls there. That was back in the 1920s and early 1930s, during the time when liquor was banned."

He said that contrary to what Bitner might have heard, there was little community opposition to Flossie's career choice.

"No, not really," he said. "Back then they just kind of looked the other way."

Still he says, it's difficult to know with certainty what went on at Mitcheltree house in years gone by, due to the passage of time.

"The deal is, so much of that has been lost because it's so far back," he said. "But there were never any problems with it that I ever remember anybody talking about. I was just a kid back then and mother and dad didn't like us walking by there, but there were never any problems. Everybody knew it was there and knew what was going on. And I imagine some of the men in the community went there but it was pretty much ignored."

Flossie herself, said Stabley, "was kind of a short, stocky woman. She wore glasses. Her hair was brown-going-grey when I was a youngster. She wasn't in business anymore then. Her business was all gone. She just lived there as an elderly lady. But she was a pleasant woman. If you walked by she'd say hello. She always had a great big garden out back. She was a worker."

The late Jack Stabley was a second cousin of Rod Stabley, and years ago he was a neighborhood regular who frequently talked with former McElhattan resident Corrine King, who lived in the house from 1987 through 2001.

"It started as a bar room and then it went to a cathouse," King said during a telephone interview Thursday night. "Then it went to a nursing home. The lady who owned it when it was a cathouse was named Florence Mitcheltree, and she married a man named Sunderland I still own the sign for when it was the Wayne Hotel."

She says she purchased the home from one Bill Hastings, who had done substantial remodeling on the house during the time he lived there.

"When it was a nursing home, there was a big porch that wrapped around the front," King said. "There were 11 rooms in it, and when I was a child I can just barely remember people in wheel chairs on the front porch."

King, who now resides in Lock Haven, says she was told that Flossie and her husband, Jerome, continued to reside in the house into their sunset years. She says Jack Stabley told her that there was a large, old-fashioned wood- or coal-fired cooking stove in the kitchen, and that one day Jerome was poking at the fire when he suddenly fell down dead behind the stove. Flossie, coming to his aid, is said to have dropped dead herself, falling on top of Jerome's body.

And indeed there may be some truth to that story, though both Jerome and Flossie actually passed away at Lock Haven hospital.

According to their obituaries, published in the Express in September of 1973, both Flossie and Jerome were "found ill in the kitchen of their home by a neighbor. Mrs. Sunderland had suffered a stroke Mr. Sunderland had suffered a heart seizure."

They were still alive at the time, but in extremely precarious health. They died within days of each other, Jerome at age 89 on Sept. 20, Flossie at age 74 on Sept. 22. They were childless, though some nieces and nephews survived them.

Flossie's Express obit described her as a "Justice of the Peace," and a member of the Clinton County Police Auxiliary, the State Council of Civil Defense, the McElhattan United Methodist Church and the Golden Age Club of Lock Haven.

No reference, of course, was made to her alleged tenure as the notorious "Madam of McElhattan."

Matt Connor can be reached at . Two of the original Peek at the Past books are available for purchase at Ross Library.