A Pub is a Place of Healing: An Interview with Mike McMenamin

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BY J. M. CURN

One metropolitan venue seems to have found an unsurpassed formula for hosting local culture—McMenamin's. The restaurant now has over 50 locations in Oregon and Washington, including six historic hotels. The company has embarked on some notable historical renovations, including Portland's Crystal Ballroom, the Kennedy School (an elementary school that the City of Portland abandoned in 1980 as beyond repair), and Edgefield (a 38-acre estate, formerly the Multnomah County Poor Farm). These sites all figure on the National Register of Historic Places, and in their present McMenifestation, they all serve McMenamin's beer and wine. Mike McMenamin, co-owner of the eponymous chain with his brother Brian, agreed to an interview at their Mission Theater headquarters. He is a lifelong resident of Portland, having attended Jesuit High School and OSU. He now lives in the Southwest hills.

Metroscape: Your restaurants have become so successful, and there are so many of them, that the name McMenamin's is a household word in Portland. Did you ever expect to do so well and become so big?

Mike McMenamin: I get so completely wrapped up in the daily mechanics of running the business, and so consumed by the scope of it all, that I don't think too much about the bigness. I just keep my eyes on what we're trying to accomplish day to day. In the restaurant industry, there's usually a lot of turnover, but if you can learn to adapt, you can achieve longevity. And if you can manage to stick around, eventually you get to do what you'd like to be doing.

Q: What is it that you'd like to be doing?

A: I'm already doing what I love—run pubs. But "pub" is a word that keeps expanding for us over the years. It used to mean "a sandwich shop with beer." Then it came to mean "a sandwich shop with beer and wine." Then we added meeting rooms for business, and banquet rooms for weddings, mostly because our customers came to us and asked us for it, or we saw that it would be useful to them. The meaning of "pub" took us in the direction of theater and entertainment—we have films here at the Mission Theater. But the Mission Theater is nonetheless a "pub." Then we offered live music—that's also a "pub." And then we added lodging—that's also a "pub," because it still fits into the original idea of a place where people in the community can get together. All these services combine because we are looking for ways to make ourselves useful to the community. You can't run a business if you're not useful. People come to a restaurant because they want to have a good time. Our job is easy—we make having a good time possible for them by providing good food, good beer, good wine. That's what my job is all about—people having a good time.

Q: How did you get started in historical renovation?

A: By mistake. We didn't have any money, and the cheapest way to go was to get an old building nobody wanted anymore. At least, it looked like the cheapest way at the time, but as it turns out, it is very expensive to renovate. These old buildings opened up a whole new ballgame for us. We didn't realize at first the importance of history and what it can mean to people, but having that historical tie to a building—human occupation over a long time—significantly changes the atmosphere for the clientele. We try to make our places as human as possible. By human, I mean simple, and by simple, I mean un-fussed with. A place where you can relax and chit-chat, like home. Ideally our pubs would be places like home, but that also have a history, like home.

Q: Was the Edgefield project the turning point when you began thinking on a larger scale about pubs?

A: No, I'd say that the Kennedy School was the turning point where we really learned what we could do with a property. The Kennedy School took the community-center aspect of our business much further.
than Edgefield did. There were a number of ideas out there in the community about what to do with the old school, including turning it into a community center. If the city wants to build a community center, though, it costs the public money, and it has to be continually supported by public money. If your community center can also be a business and run itself, then that’s different – that’s a success of a different kind.

We looked at the Kennedy School building and knew – and the city knew – that it would cost several million dollars to renovate. As a business, we had to make that expense work by providing food and lodging. When it finally came down to a matter of the purchase price, someone came up with the figure of $600,000. We told the city, "We can't pay for it. Not if we are also going to renovate it." But the city wasn’t going to give it away, either. Now, we had a wonderful lawyer who talked with the people from the city and worked out a creative deal. The price of the property wouldn't be paid in cash but in free rent for community events. So we built a 20,000 square foot community garden. We gave a 750 square foot permanent classroom to the community association to do with as they please. Two or three nights a week, we have an open gym – no charge for using it. There's a really fabulous soaking pool. It's ten feet by thirty feet, and we keep it at one hundred degrees, benches all around, just a great place to hang out. We made all this free space available for the community.

There does come a point where, as a business, we have to wonder if we're giving away too much. It's valuable space we're giving up, and we're not charging for it. But anything we do to enhance that community center is valid for the business. If you get the members of the community to come there, it will work as a business. They do come, and it has worked. Besides, it's lots of fun to get these places to work, and see people use them and have a good time.

Q: You must be the only restaurant chain in the country that keeps a historian on staff.

A: The historian [Tim Hills] became necessary to us because we had to dig around and find out what things were while we were renovating them. When we were working on the Crystal Ballroom, we had the photographers and artists, for example, looking into the history of the sites they were
working on. But when we hired a professional, and saw what he could do, then we realized that we had to have a historian in order to do it right. These places are so rich and fabulous that it would be criminal not to integrate the history into the renovation.

Q: Don't you think it's a paradox that you would like to think of these pubs as cozy homey places, when in fact you are running a major business? You have more than 1,500 employees, don't you?

A: The size of the operation definitely changes the deal. You have to fight it. When you get big, change becomes incredibly hard. We built this company saying, "There are no rules," and now we need a committee just to remember all the rules. I used to know the name of every employee, and I don't any more. It's sad, but I still do my best. If employees in the company are still buying into our ideals and are treated fairly, there's hope we can maintain the spirit, even when we're large. Keeping all those people happy is difficult since financial performance goes up and down. Dealing with the size is also intimidating. Getting everyone to move in one direction gets harder and harder. There's also the paperwork. Keeping a paper trail is the kind of work that disgusts me - and yet you're required to do it. An advantage of being big is that I can hire someone else to do that job. That's also an advantage of being boss. Besides, being big allows us to create all these wonderful projects that we could never do if we were small.

Q: Is your job now to keep that small company spirit alive?

A: All I do now is what I always did - go into a new place and have a ball. I love getting people pumped up about a project. The Centralia Washington hotel we just opened last week is one of the most electrifying projects I have ever been involved with. The work sucks you dry because it is all-consuming for two months in a row, and afterwards you feel like a mush-cake, a potato-head, because you put so much energy into it. But I also love the day-to-day routine. I still love going to the pubs, to all of them. I say to myself, "I'm in the pub business, why haven't I been to this one in four months?" Remember, it's the day to day routine that makes it possible for people to have jobs, to raise their families, to put their kids through college, all that good stuff. The whole business is a love affair. I love it when people spin off from us and make their own restaurants, because it means that they have learned to love it, too.

Q: We've talked about your success, what about failures? Have there been any memorable flops?

A: From 1974 to 1979 or 1980 we did pubs. Then I went into the distribution of beer and wine. The distributing business was a big flop, and I didn't like the work. The business aspect of distribution was brutal, which was a lesson I had to learn. But it sparked my interest in beer and wine. I traveled to producers in California, in Washington, even in Europe. Seeing how the product was made got me much more interested in it. Distributing to all the restaurants in town also gave me an internal perspective into the restaurant business. I would go in and try to sell an owner a product and he would say, "No, that won't work for us because of X, Y, and Z." And I listened, making mental notes. Every place was different, but you need to know what kinds of products will work at a given place, and why. And so I learned about all the elements - what wine, what beer, what food, what location, what décor, everything.

Q: And so now you've started making the products for yourself?

A: Now we make beer, wine, even distilled products - whiskey and brandy. We grow some of our own vegetables and herbs at Edgefield - it's great fun. We've even started roasting our own coffee. The more parts of the service we can do for ourselves, the more fun it is for me. And the more connected we are for the people who come in. Add all those breweries and theaters into the package - each one is a hard business to figure out, but each one enriches the total experience. For example, if you make your own beer, and the brew master is in the house, his presence adds a whole new level of energy to the atmosphere.

Above all, the energy comes from our people. Staff has to be knowledgeable, and they have to love what they are doing. If you come into a place, it doesn't matter what the décor is, or what the history is, if the staff doesn't make you feel welcome. If the staff loves their work, the beverages taste better and the place is cleaner and you get better service. A pub is a community center, and that means people.

Q: How did you come to this idea of a pub as a community center?

A: After college my wife and I got a Volkswagen bus and cruised around Europe - and when we saw the pubs, we had the reaction that a lot of people have, which is: "Hey, bars are different here."
British pubs, French cafés, beer halls in Germany, coffee houses in Greece—these were places the whole family went to. Not just once a week or once a month, but as part of the daily routine of life. They were centers of community. Seeing that blew us away. We asked ourselves why we didn't have anything like them at home. At that time in the seventies here in Portland, there was nothing even remotely like them. Bars were not for families—they were more of the "not in my neighborhood" sort of places, and it's true that they were often seedy, unpleasant, dark places where guys went and drank. What we had instead of pubs were pizza parlors—that was about the only kind of restaurant that families went to and could feel at home in.

Q: Isn't the big difference between European and American cafés that the liquor laws here keep minors out of establishments that serve alcohol?

A: There is a difficulty with minors. The law here says you can't have minors in a "drinking environment." Now, it is a matter of some interpretation what a "drinking environment" means, but I don't have any problem with the law or with keeping minors out of a "drinking environment." We can easily work within the law—it's mostly a matter of providing separate sections. Besides, if you only serve beer and wine, you don't have the same legal problem with minors as you do if you serve liquor.

Q: Do you get any of the Starbucks phenomenon backlash—in other words, do you reach a point where you've gotten so popular and successful that people start reacting against you?

A: It happens occasionally, and I love it. I love the idea that we get taken for granted. It means that we have become a standard, that people measure a pub by us. Besides, longevity overcomes all that criticism. New trends and flashy bars will be here for a couple of years and be gone. Our thinking in this company is longevity. We want new people to come and work for us for the long term. We don't worry too much about the competition from this or that new restaurant. We're going to be here forever.

J. M. Cohn is a Portland area writer.  

Top and bottom. Pipe Art from McMenamins.