

SHANTY TOWNE

A RESTAURANT STORY

Written by Charles Selle

INTRODUCTION

Food is a necessity for all of us. It's a universal and specific activity we all partake, communally and automatically. Who doesn't like to sit down to the experience of a good meal? This is what the Kallianis family and their staff plan and execute daily.

Listen to family members long enough and you will understand the passion which drive them, whether it be running successful restaurants; producing their organic olive oil; tending to their local farm; enjoying family and their local community; planning for a future full of promise. They believe in destiny, especially the predetermined course of Shanty Towne, a vision for a culinary village.

At the same time, the Kallianis family is quick to point out that many individuals have helped pave the way for the future creation of this vision, including past owners, staff members, local residents and loyal patrons. It truly is a Wadsworth gathering place built by the people.

The past, present, and future of this restaurant story is defined by an unbreakable set of events and people of which no single link in the chain can be forgotten. Shanty Towne is a journey of destiny, mixed with hard work, a head full of dreams and determination. The table is set, the path is written, destiny awaits. Enjoy.

CHAPTER ONE - PART A

THE START

If this were a fairy tale, it would start out, "once upon a time".

But, this is a modern-day story and it begins in a dorm room --- where for collegians, dreams take flight --- at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. That's where young Dimitri Kallianis received the phone call that would alter his life and that of others.

Dimitri transferred to UWM from Southern Illinois University in downstate Carbondale where he majored in art and business. It was his business career he was readying for his final year at UWM in 2006 by working part-time at a Milwaukee bank. He was doing quite well at it, matter of fact. Wearing a suit and tie during the day, working at night at restaurants on Milwaukee's east side.

The call was from his father, Dino Kallianis, owner of the popular Captain Porky's fish market and eatery. "You know The Shanty in Wadsworth on Route 41? It's for sale. What do you think?" he said to his son.

The younger Kallianis, indeed, was familiar with The Shanty. He drove by it with his mother and siblings most days while they worked for their father at Captain Porky's which at the time was on the east end of Wadsworth Road.

It was hard not to know about The Shanty, run by a succession of owners since 1971, when it debuted as The Shanty. Prior to that it was a lonely outpost at Wadsworth Road and 41. It served Wadsworth residents, area farmers and travelers heading north and south. It had provenance.

Dimitri was urged to investigate the possibility of running a restaurant and he did what any business major who paid attention in class would have. He began to probe the restaurant, its loyal customers and its offerings. He drove down to Wadsworth after his classes in Milwaukee and sat in the parking lot counting cars and diners for months.

Early one morning in 2005, he knocked on the front door of the restaurant. A gentleman opened the door and said, "Good morning, my name is Bob Stahl, welcome to The Shanty." Stahl owned The Shanty since 1982 after purchasing the Wadsworth restaurant from the Shelley family with fellow electrician Gary Schulz.

After Dimitri was given a tour of the wooden eatery, the two sat at a table in the north dining room and the two spoke for hours about The Shanty's historic past, rustic charm and future possibilities.

They agreed to have Dimitri manage the restaurant for a year before purchasing the business with his family. The first day on the job Dimitri asked "What do I wear?" Bob walked in the back room, reached into a box and pulled out a black T-shirt with a white Shanty logo printed on the front and back. "Wear this, it's a classic" Stahl said.

Over the next year, Bob would help guide Dimitri and the two would become good friends. Dimitri recalls meeting future friends --- Ed Urban, Joyce Shelley, Tim O'Neal, Gary Penrith, Pat Page, Ron Sheptak, Ray Petersen, Gary Schulz, Dan Turkowski, Jack Collins and Frank Gibbs to name a few --- in the very first week of management who would become influential in the Shanty's success.

As the years would progress, many more local residents and friends would help advise Dimitri and enhance The Shanty's appeal and culture.

Yet to understand The Shanty, one must understand its surroundings.

CHAPTER ONE – PART B THE BEGINNING

"Regardez la-bas, vite. De l'autre cote le fleuve."

Look down there, quickly. On the other side of the river.

The French hunting party was tracking the doe's blood trail. After three days west from the trading post along Lake Michigan, the four trappers needed to eat more than pemmican, the dried meat and fat mix the nearby Pottowatomies had introduced into their once-refined European diet. They needed more to keep them going along the cold-running river as they checked their trap lines. It was then they spotted the deer.

Two had shot at the grazing doe in the midst of the heavy woods. After shouldering their heavy Charleville muskets, one fired, hitting the animal in the shoulder, causing it to leap and run, its white tail a fading flag across the river the French called Aux Plains since their early explorers ventured into the upper reaches of their territories.

The other trapper missed the deer. After reloading he waded into the river, goosebumps rising as the water rose toward his thighs. Scrambling from the western bank, he tracked the deer a few meters and found the animal near death.

He unsheathed his long knife, delivered the death blow and began field dressing as the others approached the kill site. They would eat well that day and the next. They even would share some of their good hunting with their Native American neighbors.

The leaden musket ball from the trapper who missed the deer wouldn't be found until 1840, according to historians, embedded in a red oak tree by the Des Plaines River. It was dated to 1770.

First, there was the river. About three million years ago, the Ice Age began, heading south from the North Pole and invading northeastern Illinois, the huge sheets glaciers pushing soil and gravel and boulders in their paths, forming rivers, lakes, kettles, moraines, swamps and the alluvial plain. When the glaciers retreated, the river was formed by roaring water. Hundreds of years of erosion tamed the Des Plaines from a churning wraith to a twisting, lazy river running from Wisconsin south into Illinois.

It was the river which begat the alluvial plain, which allowed the small prairies, interspersed with woodlands and groves of oak, which drew Native Americans to the nestled valley full of game, food and materials for shelter. It has been documented that Lake County was a favored spot of Native Americans. The so-called mound builders were the first to inhabit the river banks of Newport and Warren townships.

A "chain of ancient mounds" were discovered on the west side of the river built by a people --- precursors to the Pottowatomie settlements --- who dined on turtles and other plentiful animals. Turtle shells and animal bones have been found inside the mounds. Along with the Pottowatomie, bands of Iroquois, Illinois and Miami, roamed Lake County before French explorers Father Marquette and Louis Jolliet stopped along the Lake Michigan shoreline in 1673. The Indian Treaty of 1833 ceded Lake County to the United States.

CHAPTER ONE – PART C THE SETTLERS

With such a welcoming environment, the region invited settlers to join turning miles of open lands into rural communities. The land was cheap and sometimes free to homesteaders as the northeastern portion of the Prairie State began to be populated. Homesteaders to this then-frontier floodplain quickly dropped the French name of the river, now calling it the Des Plains. From the Wisconsin border to the Cook County line settlements began in Half Day and Vardin's Grove, which grew up to be Libertyville.

In 1835, the first Newport Township settlement, Millcreek (sic) was founded that summer with Jacob Miller erecting the first saw and gristmill for flour in Lake County watered by the Des Plains, according to early historian Elijah M. Haines. At that time, flour was \$20 per barrel; oats were \$2 a bushel.

Miller, a native Virginian who served with an Illinois regiment in the Blackhawk War, was described by Haines as "one of those noble-hearted Virginians when the later settlers of Illinois cannot but remember with the warmest feelings of gratitude and respect for their kindness and hospitality in the early settlement of the state." While Miller initially savored his Newport Township homestead, he left Lake County in 1849, heading to the California gold fields to seek his fortune.

Besides Miller, early Newport Township settlers, called "thriving and industrious farmers" by Haines, included Merrill Pearsons, Alvin Ames, James Melinda, John Reid, Asa Winter, Peter Cassidy, James Emery and Elijah Alvord. Some of the residents wanted to call the growing community Sterling and Mortimer. But Millcreek it remained. By 1850, settler assets totaled \$94,644. The township's first supervisor was John Reid. The area's first bridge over the Des Plaines River was built in 1850.

In nearby Warren Township, a settlement close to the river was being formed, with Amos Bennett, becoming the township's first settler. Other early settlers included Thomas McClure, Thomas Lovejoy and Orange Smith. Ancient Native Americans mounds, similar to Newport, were found in Warren Township, according to Haines. In wealth, Warren, named for Gen. Joseph Warren of Revolutionary War fame -- he died at the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775 --- ranked second in Lake County with settler assets of \$114,989. The township's first schoolhouse was dedicated in 1848. The township's first supervisor was H. Whitney.

CHAPTER ONE – PART D PROGRESS

The roadmaps of history mirror that of Lake County. First, waterways were the roads of commerce, then the railways and finally the highways. It was the railroad --- the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific, The Milwaukee Road --- which led to the naming of Wadsworth. The town's folks lured the railroad by choosing the name Wadsworth for Elisha Wadsworth, a Milwaukee Road official.

It was common practice during the Age of Rail that community leaders would name their towns after railroad officials to curry favor with the railways. Gurnee did the same, naming the town after Walter S. Gurnee, a Milwaukee Road director. Mundelein once dubbed itself Rockefeller for another rail official.

Prior to taking Wadsworth's name for their community, the area progressed with no name during the 1850s and 1860s. If anything, it was known informally as Luxville, because of the platted Lux subdivision with 10 to 12 members of a family named Lux living there.

With the railroad stretched into Newport Township, the area got a post office in 1873 and the village of Wadsworth was platted in 1874. The Wadsworth stop was one of two in Newport Township as the railroad, a milk train run, began operation. A goodly number of Wadsworth residents became employed by the railroad, building and maintaining the tracks for the steam-engine trains.

Rail progress was good for Wadsworth. It was becoming a burgeoning village. It had a meat market, barber shop, three general stores, a feed store and warehouse, blacksmith shop, and dance hall. Ice was culled from the Des Plaines in winter and shipped across the region. Two tile and two brick factories, which supplied most of the brick for the buildings in the nearby Utopian community of Zion, flourished, as did a creamery.

The Milwaukee Road was good for Wadsworth until the 1920s when the railway eliminated the village as a train stop when locomotives switched to diesel fuel instead of coal. Diesel no longer required the water for steam. With the milk run ended, Newport Township farmers instead sold their milk directly to dairies --- Meadow Gold in Waukegan, Spinney Run in rural Warren Township --- requiring the need for paved roads to get product to market.

The milk stop gone, less people came to Wadsworth; stores closed. The companies that made brick and tile closed, as did a small butter factory. The automobile meant farmers and residents were more mobile, giving them more choices.

CHAPTER ONE – PART E GOOD OLD DAYS

Decades later, Gary Penrith still recalls riding horses in idyllic afternoon summers of his youth from the 180-acre farm his uncles' owned, the Jac-n-Ot, to Gracie's Candy and Ice Cream store on Wadsworth Road. The trek to the Shields store was a treat for him and his Chicago buddies for working the farm.

“One summer we painted all the fences on one side and the next summer, the other side,” he remembers. While Gary worked the farm in what would become Old Mill Creek, his future wife, Lynn, spent her six-week summer vacations away from the city of Chicago with relatives on Wadsworth’s Chicago Avenue.

The Penriths didn’t know it at the time, but their early Wadsworth days would lead them back to the area after careers with the FBI and 14 moves in 25 years. After retiring from the Bureau, the two built a home on Leahy’s Hill, a one-time sheep meadow and winter sledding mecca for area youngsters, off Cashmore Road.

Lynn was born in Wadsworth in a house on Chicago Avenue and when two years old, her family moved to the South Side of Chicago. “There were more horses than people,” when she was born she said. Gary grew up in the Sauganash neighborhood on the Far North Side of Chicago. While the two never got together in their early Wadsworth years, the lure of a quieter country life and their summer memories in Newport Township stayed with them over the decades as they would return to the area for holiday and summer visits.

The time of their youths was an era, Lynn said, when penny candy drew kids to Gracie’s or Fritz’s Grocery or Rice’s Grocery, the competing “supermarkets” in downtown Wadsworth. It was when gandy dancers laying railroad tracks for the Milwaukee Road would stop at the stores, when area baseball teams used cow pies for bases. Farms dotted the area and back then a three-holer outhouse was something to be envied by the neighbors. When kids fished the lazy Des Plaines River for tiny bluegills.

It was when two taverns --- Oak's Duck Inn on Wadsworth Road and Sandy Slusser's on Chicago Avenue --- competed for post-Prohibition business, especially on Friday nights, Lynn said.

"Sandy's was the first outdoor movie theater in Wadsworth," she noted. With fish fry Fridays, Slusser would have an old movie projector set up, projecting a film on the side of his nearby barn. "The kids ate outside --- that was our entertainment," Lynn said.

But not the only entertainment for townsfolk.

Picnics were held regularly at St. Patrick's Church. "Everybody in Wadsworth would go to the old church's picnic," Lynn said. Water fights would be held across the "iron bridge" over the Des Plaines River on York House Road, west of Delany. Rodeos were held in the summer, she recalls. Those were summers of happy childhood memories for both Lynn and Gary.

For two long-time Wadsworth residents, those were the good old days.

NEXT RELEASE

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Part K: Food Culture – Relocating Captain Porky's to Wadsworth