

Our Family Tremont History

By Richard S. Dembowski

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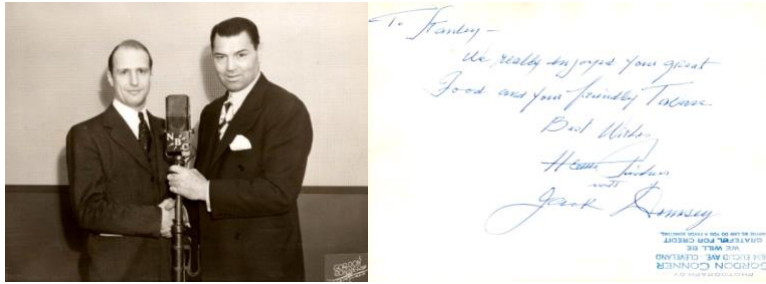
The Great Depression, with all of its devastating effects, started in the late 1920's. Sometime in the early 1930's my father, a World War 1 veteran, owned and operated a delicatessen at 1301 Starkweather Avenue, where Saint George's school is located today, selling ice cream, bread, penny grab bags and lunchmeat. My mother, Bernice, helped run the deli. It was difficult to make ends meet, especially so since I had 9 siblings. Prohibition (a nationwide constitutional ban on the sale, production, importation, and transportation of [alcoholic beverages](#)) started in 1920. My dad was known to bootleg and make bathtub gin. As word of mouth spread, his "business" picked up. Dad began selling beer, and on occasion you would see people leaving the back door literally with buckets of beer. Prohibition raids were commonplace, houses were close together and neighbors would warn each other by knocking on windows from the back bedrooms. They would even attempt to salvage the days' work by passing filled buckets to the neighbor. And yes it's true, Dad was known to have spent a night or two in jail! It's an interesting fact to know why the neighborhoods were constructed/designed with houses behind houses. There was as little curb frontage as possible. This is because property taxation was based on curb space!



Dempsey's in the 1930's and 1940's

The building known today as Prosperity Social Club, at the time was home to "Hot Dog Bill" at 1109 Starkweather, selling hot dogs and coffee from the front store window. At the time my father, Stanley Dembowski, was inspired by Herman Pirchner's Alpine Village, a celebrity filled night club on Playhouse Square, circa 1934. Following his dream, he bought Hot Dog Bill, the house next door at 1107 Starkweather, the house and barn behind, hired an architect to design his business and opened Dempsey's at 1109 Starkweather. Prohibition ended in 1933 and Dempsey's Night Club opened for business in 1938. Leisy's beer kept the tap flowing. The "Night Club" name was appealing at the time because it was not socially acceptable for women to be seen in a "bar".

Herman Pirchner with Jack Dempsey, early 1940's



The words “Night Club” gave the impression to dress up in Sunday go-to-church clothes, so he later changed the name to Dempsey’s Oasis Tavern to appeal to a wider audience. After all the south side, Tremont, was a working man’s neighborhood for those who toiled in the nearby steel mills. My dad built his business by cashing payroll checks and serving 16 oz. fishbowls of beer, with various liquors and wine at a very good price. Some afterward he placed salty pretzels and cheese corn on the bar and tables so the guys would stick around and have another boilermaker (shot and beer). Many a man would crack a raw egg in their fishbowl for 5 cents more, supposedly to put a little more “lead in their pencil”. After the Second World War, dad added fish fries and homemade pierogis on Fridays only. He also provided live entertainment (polka bands, musical shows and comedians) on weekends where they played in the back room on a small stage. He was even known to “open” on Sundays hosting many church-goers.

Dempsey's was truly an oasis. The walls are finished with a wormy chestnut wood, the bar made of walnut, and tables and chairs imported from Poland. The back bar was colorfully lit with a multi-tier-level collection of commemorative limited-edition Jim Beam Bourbon bottles. Next to the cash register was a Pope John Paul II shaped flask, filled with virgin amaretto, of course. Lit neon palm trees alongside Welcome, Thank You and Call Again signs made customers feel appreciated and they are still there to this day. Tiffany ceiling lights from Mexico were add later. People loved to come in to relax and enjoy the atmosphere.



1950's

Many have asked how a Polish immigrant came up with an Irish name. As the story goes, my dad liked to bet on sports. He was particularly fond of Jack Dempsey, at the time a cultural icon and world heavyweight champion boxer. It seemed a sure bet to wager a day's pay on Dempsey, but when he lost to Gene Tunney in 1927, dad quickly got the nickname Dempsey . . . and it has stuck ever since.



Stanley and Richard Dembowski, 1950's



Richard in the 1970's

Growing up and living next door to the family business had its benefits and challenges. Everyone was expected to help. After graduating from Staunton Military Academy in 1950, I returned home and met my sweetheart, Theresa Pesto, who lived not far away on West 11th Street across from Lincoln Park. Theresa was a graduate of St. John Cantius High School, class of 1951. She played basketball at the Bath House, next door to Dempsey's, and to this day tells the story of beating the boys at the game. She is still proud of her outside set shot. It was from the backyard I would watch her play at the Bath House. I was drafted into the Army in 1952. As they say, the rest is history. We married in 1954 where we lived on Branch Avenue and moved to Dellwood Drive in Parma in 1957. We have 3 children, Gregory, Jacqueline and Pamela.

When dad turned 75 years old in 1967 he decided it was time to retire. He asked if I would buy the business and property. My only hesitation was moving the family again, but we made the decision to move and buy the business.



Richard and future wife Theresa Pesto, early 1950's

At the time families were moving out of the Tremont area because of the I-71 project. But I knew the potential for the area to grow and prosper was good, in part because of the I-71 exits to and from downtown to West 14th Street. I know to grow the business changes needed to be made so started adding sandwiches, burgers and homemade soup to the menu; then eventually added Theresa's homemade Polish dishes, which she prepared in the kitchen. The word got around and we started to get customers from downtown. From there we added a full menu, which became popular, of course shopping at West Side Market for fresh produce. We were expanding and needed help in the kitchen so hired Theresa's sisters, Mary and Anna and her mother Barbara, to cook. Homemade polish food was our specialty. We became ultra-trendy and a destination for some of the best fish fries and pierogis in town on Fridays, "belly busting burgers" and much more.



Keeping the business in the family meant we all chipped in. Greg filled the coolers and tapped beer kegs after coming home from Benedictine High School (class of '72), and Jacquie and Pam (Erievew High School, classed of '74 and '77) helped in the kitchen and bussed tables and flipped burgers on Saturdays. Sunday was not a day off that is when we would wax the floor and clean everything in sight. We took a lot of pride in having an impeccably clean restaurant, outstanding homemade food and keeping our customers happy.

Our lunch business was always steady and at time we packed them in! But business was not always good; somehow we survived 2 recessions and some politically tumultuous times, like the Hough Riots in 1966. I was always looking for ways to attract new customers, those that would complement the atmosphere and ethnic identity we created. We hosted many special events, like bowling machine leagues (with 26 teams!) and banquets, dart teams, and sponsored many local sports teams. In the 1980's we had karaoke, blues, bluegrass music, polka bands and even a player piano. The Solidarity movement in the 1980's also attracted many supporters and patrons. Filming of *The Deer Hunter* (1978) at the Eagle Supermarket on Starkweather and Lemko Hall, West 11th Street, also supported many local businesses that summer. And of course who could forget the wonderful theme parties, such as the Hawaiian Luau.



Solidarity, 1980's

Maybe more memorable than operating during business hours was when the business closed on a Sunday or holiday. That was when Theresa (one of 9 children) and I would open Dempsey's for family gatherings. Albeit a holiday, christening, baptism, birthday, or graduation party, cousins visiting from California – Dempsey's was a popular family gathering place. Family was and always will be most important to us.



Theresa and I sold Dempsey's in 2000 and are now retired and living in North Royalton. To this day we have memories of working hard to build a business that we are proud of, and are thankful to all our employees, customers and friends who helped achieve this success. Special thank you to our bar-maids Betty and Rita, and cooks Ron and beloved Kathy. On the day Kathy passed, waitresses would come into the kitchen crying then return to wait on tables as saying "the show must go on".

Cleveland has always been and will be our home.



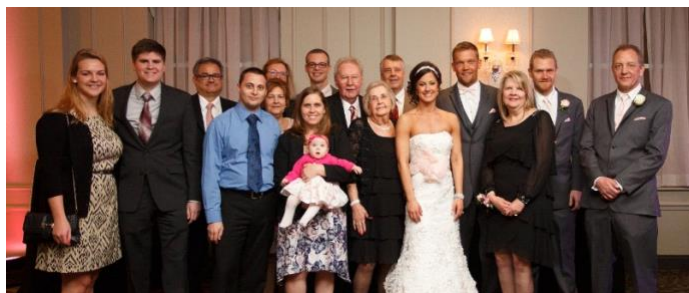
Dembowski Clan

We still love to go back and visit "Dempsey's". We are so proud of the new owner, Bonnie Flinner, and all she has done to maintain our rich history of the business that was in our family for 2 generations.



Bonnie Flinner, Prosperity Social Club, 2015

Thank You for honoring the past!



Na Zdrowia!! Here's to the future!