The Tremont’s troubled past

By DICK SHEARER

Many North Penn area residents still lament the demise of the Hotel Tremont 15 years ago. Yes, it’s been that long.

Beloved in its later life as a community meeting place, a spot to conduct a power business lunch or a safe venue to take mom and dad for their anniversary dinner, the Tremont was Lansdale’s go-to restaurant during the many years it was owned by Marcel Winniger.

But going way back in time we discover that this local landmark had a troubled past that haunted it until the very end. Built in 1890 by Isaac Heebner, son of the patriarch of the Heebner Agricultural Works, the Tremont was Lansdale’s architectural gem of that era.

Citizens of the bustling railroad town beamed with pride as the fine home was being constructed on a lot at Main and Broad streets adjacent to the farm implement factory and right across the street from Dad David Heebner’s expansive house later known as the Eitherton.

Townspeople were so fascinated with the Tremont - designed by Lansdale architect Milton B. Bean - that they set up lawn chairs so they could watch the contractors at work. Evidently, conventional entertainment was hard to find at the time.

As it turned out, Isaac Heebner didn’t share the public’s enthusiasm. Within a year or so he tired of the house (for reasons unknown) and put it up for sale. He found a buyer in A.G. Freed, who wanted to turn it into a hotel.

Freed determined that the original Tremont wasn’t big enough to generate a satis-
Time wasn’t kind to the Tremont

business was, Freed wound up $40,000 in
debt within two years when his creditors
came calling for their money.

They agreed to give him two more years
to get out of the red but he couldn’t do it,
thus the Tremont began a long journey
through multiple owners. Yet even after
Freed was out of the picture, he left behind
problems that dogged the hotel for the rest
of its life.

That big addition he added looked great
and blended right in with the original house
but it was built with a substandard founda-
tion that began buckling during the 1920s.
The wing listed toward the old section and
had to be torn down. It was replaced by the
three-story utilitarian wing most of us re-
member – the part that included Cuthbert’s
Drug Store, a barber shop, beauty salon and
rooms upstairs.

The hotel always remained a popular spot
for locals and visitors through the years, but
it was not until Winniger came on the scene
in 1946 that it became a dining destination.

While the French-
born Marcel is fondly
remembered for kiss-
ing his female diners,
he was no slouch in
the kitchen, and his
customers appreci-
ated the consistent
high quality of his
food.

As his business
boomed, Winniger,
seen above with his
wife Catharine,
carved out a new din-
ing room and added a
kitchen to the rear of
the building, doing
the structure’s
physical integrity
no favors in the
process. After he
died in 1988 the
Tremont passed
through the family
to a number of in-
vestors and pro-
prietors but none
could restore the
charm and ambi-
ance of Marcel’s time.

The Tremont finally closed a little more
than 100 years after it opened as a hotel. By
then, only a part of the original house re-
mained. Its walls had been compromised by
the many renovations, and nearby parking –
something A.G. Freed never had to worry
about – was in short supply.

Ironically, on a sunny day in 1997, people
again gathered across Main Street to stare at
the Tremont. This time a wrecker’s ball was
knocking it down.