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 satisfactory profit so he hired another contractor to build an addition on the end closest to Broad Street, which doubled the size of the structure. He also erected a stable for guests to board their horses.

All of this was very expensive. Freed initially paid Heebner about $17,000 for the property but he spent at least $25,000 more for the stable, the addition and furnishings. In 1892, that was big money.

The finished product became Lansdale's finest hotel, the first place travelers headed when they came to Lansdale. But as brisk as

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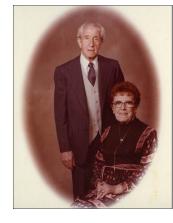
They agreed to give him two more years to get out of the red but he couldn't do it, thus the Tremont began a long journey through multiple owners. Yet even after Freed was out of the picture, he left behind problems that dogged the hotel for the rest of its life.

That big addition he added looked great and blended right in with the original house but it was built with a substandard foundation 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 remember – 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 kissing his female diners, he was no slouch in the kitchen, and his customers appreciated the consistent high quality of his food.

As his business boomed, Winniger, seen above with his wife Catharine, carved out a new dining 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 investors and proprietors but none could restore the charm and ambiance 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 remained. 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.