

Historic taverns are a West Side tradition
By Sara Anne Corrigan

Author's Note: Sadly, the **Dogtown Tavern** closed in 2010.

You can always tell when you are at one of our locally owned historic taverns: The buildings may not give them away but the menus will.

Tavern menus, while certainly not clones of one another, still bear striking similarities: Look for brains, burgoo, (German) bologna and barbecue.

If whole fried catfish are on the menu – and they often are – they will be called fiddlers.

The list of menu items beginning with the word “fried” will be legion. Ditto for the words “German” and “homemade.”

Fried chicken will include offers of livers and gizzards in addition to dark and white meat selections.

Often there will be a fixed price “plate lunch” and it will be different every day of the week. And dinners may be offered “family style” with platters of meat and bowls of vegetables and mashed potatoes set out for everyone at the table to share.

These taverns sell beer and liquor but rarely have what you’d call a “wine list.”

And anymore, most all of them have addresses west of Pigeon Creek.

The oldest tavern in Vanderburgh County is the **St. Joe Inn**, 9515 St. Wendel Road, says owner Darlene Young, who has had the business for the past 20 years. “It was built in 1820... it has been a saloon, a post office, a hotel and a stagecoach stop,” she says.

Predictably, the tavern sells a lot of fried chicken and fiddlers but its reputation extends to include fried mushrooms that are made fresh, homemade pies, and a good number of sandwiches that are elevated by the homemade bread on which they all are served.

Another truly vintage tavern, the **Hilltop Inn**, 1100 Harmony Way, has been in operation since 1839, says owner Lanette Snyder who, with husband, Don, has owned the business since 1999.

“It was a stagecoach stop, a saloon, a general store and a feed store with sleeping rooms on the second floor, Lanette Snyder says.

The menu includes homemade brain sandwiches and burgoo, barbecue, fried German bologna and, Snyder says, “Award winning fried chicken which is our Wednesday special.”

A classic array of tavern side dishes and a somewhat atypical (for taverns) salad bar also are offered.

The **Dogtown Tavern**, 6201 Old Henderson Road is one of the Tri-State’s legendary fried chicken and fiddler joints that draws capacity crowds even when the river is so high that alternate routes must be sought out to get to the place.

A map inside the bar room is crowded with push-pins set in place by patrons who have visited there from distant climes with Australia being the farthest away.

Mike and Dawn Nunning took over the family business about five years ago. Mike’s grandparents, Hillary and Kate Carr had purchased it in the mid-1940s, Dawn Nunning says.

The building dates to 1889 and opened the Cypress Post Office and saloon.

The post office was closed in 1915. The Dogtown moniker came into existence sometime shortly after that, as the tavern stayed in business, catering to boatmen and hunters, the latter in the habit of leaving their hounds outside the front door.

Newsflash: The Nunnings recently bought another vintage West Side tavern, **Hagadorn’s**, at 2037 West Franklin Ave. Of an evening, patrons can now get, in addition to all the traditional Hagadorn’s fare (including breakfasts and plate lunches), the “fiddlers, filets, shrimp, pork chops and steaks” from Dogtown, says Dawn Nunning.

Lydia and Jim Hagadorn still own the real estate there and Lydia details its history: Originally the tavern was owned by Sterling Brewery and was known as Englert’s; when Prohibition came, it was converted into an ice cream parlor.

Henry Hagadorn bought the place after prohibition, re-opened it as a tavern, and it has carried that family name ever since. During World War II it was a popular destination for the shipyard workers, Lydia says.

West Side tavern cuisine extends into Posey County at the **St. Philip Inn**, 11200 Upper Mount Vernon Road; Larry Riney, who has owned the business for the past 10 years, notes the building is at least 100 years old and originally was a grocery and feed store.

Riney is not sure when it became a tavern, known originally as the Yukon Inn, but it has been St. Philip Inn for the past 23 years, he says. His most popular menu items include fried chicken, fiddlers, breaded tenderloins, barbecue, pizza.

Just up the road a piece from the St. Joe Inn, along the Vanderburgh and Posey County line are the **Silver Bell Restaurant**, 4424 St. Wendel Road and, a block away, **Dutch Corner**, 13935 St. Wendel Road.

Dutch Corner has been a tavern since the building went up in 1859, says owner, Keith Schile, who has had the place for the past 20 years. It changed names as it changed owners over the years, beginning as Coudret's then Feldman's and later Reitman's before gaining the Dutch Corner name in the 1960s, Schile says.

Dutch Corner continues to serve legendary fried chicken and fiddler dinners, homemade chili and vegetable soup, "Awesome steaks and the best German fries around," Schile says, adding that the pork tenderloins are fresh and hand-breaded and his wife, Darlene makes the cherry cheesecake from scratch.

The Silver Bell Restaurant, 4424 St. Wendel Road, may be a relative newcomer, dating only to 1972, but its fame has spread far and wide owner, Sean Powers says, explaining that the fried chicken served family style is probably the single biggest attraction, but they also are known for their fiddlers and "award winning" onion rings.

Last but not least on this list is the **Nisbett Station Inn**, at 6701 Nisbett Station Road.

Owner, Becky Harl notes the business began its life in 1912 as a whistle stop for the railroad bringing both passengers and produce through the area. It has always been a tavern, she says.

The featured cuisine at Nisbett Station is the barbecue – pork and lamb including an occasional special of barbecued baby back lamb ribs.

"But we do smoked tilapia, bean soup, beer cheese, German potato salad, German fries ... and we make a "Rib Gumbo" with our smoked meats," she says.

Most of our area's historic taverns take reservations and it is wise to call and inquire about that amenity, especially on weekend evenings. Some have smoking and non-smoking areas; most take credit cards and checks.

Some have Sunday hours and a few open as early as 7:30 a.m.
offering breakfasts

Let your fingers do some walking before you get in your car.

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