

THE PACK TRAIN

**BAR
and
LIQUOR
STORE**



VISIT the first and original bar of Skagway's GOLD RUSH DAYS, made famous by the early pioneers of the "Trail of '98."

Your Host:
C. "McGEE" BRENA

SKAGWAY, ALASKA

From Lou Jacobin's *Guide to Alaska* – 1953

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"MEET McGEE"

Patrons of the past: Jack London, Rex Beach, Robert Service, Tex Rickard, Frank Slavin, Peter Jackson.

C. (McGee) BRENA, Owner

SKAGWAY, ALASKA



From Lou Jacobin's *Guide to Alaska* – 1961

The Pack Train

By Jeff Brady

SKAGWAY — The Brena family of Skagway has always had a deep emotional involvement with the Pack Train Inn.

They have owned the historic landmark since 1939 — longer than any other previous owner. They have watched it thrive as the oldest bar business in the state, and they have watched the old building deteriorate to the point where the place had to close.

Now, emotions are high again. With a lot of help from many people, restoration work began on the building in late April. The dream of returning the Pack Train to the glory years of the famous bar, hotel and restaurant is slowly, but surely, becoming a reality.

Restoring the building in the Skagway historic district is quite a chore if you are not the National Park Service. Obtaining funds for restoration work can involve a lot of time and paper work before the first jack is shoved under the foundation. Many people in Skagway gave up on the idea of restoring their buildings and either tore them down or sold them to the park service.

The Brenas could have gone either of those routes when they were forced to close the bar in the mid-1970s. The building had become almost impossible to heat, and extensive remodeling had to occur before it could be opened again. They decided to take a more difficult route and seek funds to restore the building.

The whole family has been involved in the project in some way, just as they were involved in the bar business when it was open. McGee and Sheila Brena arrived in Skagway in 1947. McGee worked in the bar and then bought it from Pat Carroll in 1950. They raised three children: David, Robin and Maureen.

During those days, there was a law against having a woman tend bar in Alaska unless her name was on the liquor license. Sheila did not tend bar then, but the young boys were well-schooled before they were teenagers. McGee worked long hours and sometimes he would take a quick afternoon nap and let the boys get the beers for the customers.

After McGee passed away in 1968, Sheila ran the bar. "I was the first woman in Southeast Alaska to join the bartender's union," she says.

As the building sank under a rotting

foundation, and as freeze-ups became intolerable, the Brenas decided to close the building until work could be done on it. "Its decay has been depressing, so it's nice to see the momentum with us," Robin says.

That momentum took a few years to develop. The first letters inquiring about restoration funds date back five years ago. In 1978, in the middle of a summer of running a photo parlor in the old bar with his sister Maureen, David went to Ketchikan to present the Pack Train restoration proposal to the Division of Parks' historic preservation office. The result was the largest matching grant the state has ever given for a restoration project.

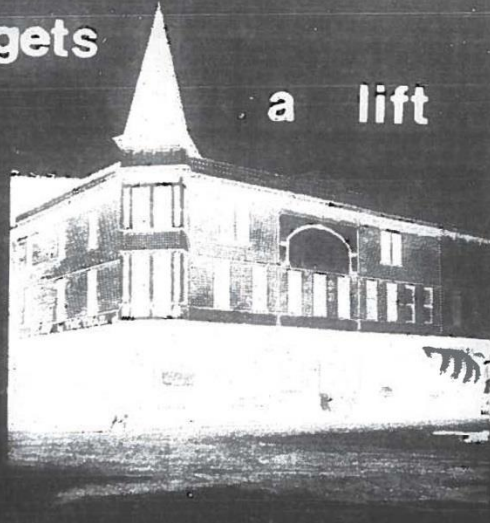
The matching funds have been available since then, but getting the interim and long term financing and translating the money into work has taken four years. Robin has taken a year break from law school to put the financing together and oversee the first phase of the construction.

"A lot of my motivation for developing it rather than selling it, has to do with the family history," Robin says.

One can spend the better part of an afternoon over coffee listening to him talk about the project and describe where the money is coming from. The total project cost is roughly \$240,000 with matching funds covering about one-third of that. About \$195,000 will go into construction. Interim financing was obtained through a construction loan from Mike Hogen at Alaska Federal Savings and Loan in Juneau, and the Division of Business Loans will pick up the long term financing with a take-out mortgage that was provided with the help of Gregg Winger, Wayne Jensen of Akeley, Jensen Architects in Juneau and National Park Service architect Dave Smog helped Robin with the plans for the restoration. Long Bay Construction Co., headed up by John Poljacik and Ole Slettevold, is the contractor. Robin is proud of the fact that all local labor is being used. The full seven-man crew went to work on April 22, a day after the project officially began.

First phase of the project includes foundation and roof repairs, exterior work and painting. The first floor will be sheetrocked, and the mechanical systems (heating, plumbing, electrical) and a fire

gets a lift



'U-AN-TO--NO' what's going on under 'The Trail' Photo by Scruff

alarm system will be installed. Much of the difficult work is behind them with the building now raised and sitting on new concrete footings. The joists were in good shape, but some were actually sitting on the ground when the crew first began digging under the building.

Digging in Skagway always produces an array of artifacts and the crew has found between 200 and 300 old bottles. Sheila's favorite is one labeled, "William Pitt, druggist, Skagway, Alaska."

The contractors are very thankful for the use of the park's jacks and conveyor to get the dirt out and the building up. The northeast corner had sunk the worst, and it had to be raised 10 inches. Now all the joists have a three-foot clearance. The family is pleased with the pace and the quality of work done so far. "I didn't know

it would straighten up like that," Robin says.

The main impetus of the work is to return the building to its original use as the finest bar, cafe, and hotel in the North. Sheila pulls out a Dyer's Trail, dated Feb. 18, 1886. An advertisement calls the Pack Train "The Oldest Established Place in Skagway — a First Class Cafe — Games and Entertainment of All Kinds — None but the Best Goods served over the Bar — Open Day and Night." Sheila says the new sign will look like that ad.

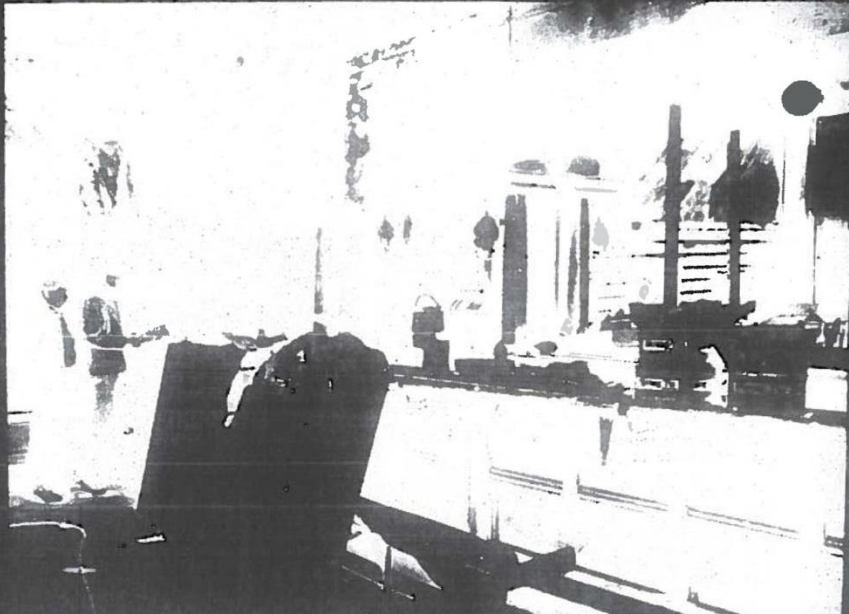
Phase two of the project will include finishing work in the upstairs hotel, which will contain 11 rooms, and construction of the kitchen facilities in the utility building in the rear. This work may take a little longer, and some of the space may be leased in the meantime.

The history of the business is more definite than the history of the present structure. The first picture of the business that Robin has seen was taken in 1897 and shows a shack with large cracks in the walls between the boards. The next photos were taken in 1898 on Holly Street, 60th near Broadway. There the cafe and bar stayed until the business moved into the new Pack Train after the present buildings were moved to the present location some time before 1906.

Upstairs was "The Trail," a hotel with those little rooms that made Skagway a pleasure for those who could afford it. Sheila says that when they first bought the building, it had wires running everywhere. "I don't know if they were for signalling girls or gamblers."

All of the valuable Pack Train artifacts are in storage and will be brought out for the grand re-opening of the oldest operating bar in the state. The old back bar still stands out, even under a coat of dust. It came from Belgium to Skagway via the Barbary Coast, the Cape and San Francisco.

Hopefully it won't be too long before one sees his reflection clearly in that mirror with a group of people toasting the work that is being done today.



Contractors Ole Slettevold and John Poljacik discuss construction plans in front of the old bar Photo by Scruff

Gold Pan
Drive-In

Good Food & Fast Service

Pinball — Games
Tacos — Burgers
Milk Shakes
City & State