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Courtesy of Wendy Kershner | Wendy Kershner's family once owned the American House and operated it as a hotel.

A look at the history of the American House

By Courtney H. Diener-Stokes - Reading Eagle correspondent

Friday March 18, 2016 12:01 AM

READING, PA — Wendy Kershner has always had a passion for her family's history.

When her grandmother Ina Kershner died, she came across something among her belongings that intrigued her.

"I found her jewelry box and a D.A.R. (Daughters of the American Revolution) pin, and I did not know that my grandmother's mother was a member of the D.A.R.," Kershner said. "I was able to join the D.A.R. and track this history down on my father's mother's family."

Her involvement in a local woman's group, Minerva, aided in her motivation to learn even more about her father's family, particularly its connection to the American House hotel in Reading.

Did you know?

In the 1920s, there were more than 15 hotels in downtown Reading. All the rooms in the Mansion House at Fifth and Penn streets had private baths or hot and cold running water. A tea room was attached to the American House at Fourth and Penn streets. The New Reading Hotel at 36 S. Sixth St. had a

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"It came from my interest in our family history and understanding our roots," she said. "I have always been the informal family historian, and I had always heard stories about this American House hotel. It was part of stories I was told by my family. I wanted to learn more about it."

After doing extensive research and digging up photos, Kershner, who lives in West Reading, was prepared to share the information she found with her fellow Minerva club members.

"Minerva was a Greek goddess of knowledge, and so it's a women's group that meets monthly and does presentations on various topics to one another," she said. "There are no parameters; you can present on anything that interests you."

Kershner shared that two generations of her family lived at the hotel, and two subsequent generations spent a period of time living there.

"My father's great-grandfather, George M. Ammon, ran it from 1901 to 1905," she said. "And then one of his sons and his son-in-law, David S. Ammon and Edwin Kershner, ran it jointly from 1906 to 1932. Edwin Kershner was my father's grandfather."

Wendy said Edwin Kershner became the sole proprietor from 1933 to 1937, and his family lived at the hotel.

"Then he got out of the hotel business and went into politics" she said. "My father's father was born there and raised there, but never got in the hotel business, taking the path of law instead."

Wendy's father, Edwin H. Kershner, who lives in Wyomissing and was named after his grandfather, was also born in the hotel.

She has an array of photos from the time period the hotel at Fourth and Penn streets, spanning a city block from Penn Street to Cherry, was under her family's ownership.

"I have photos of the building and the interior," she said, "the family's living quarters, the bedrooms, the hotel lobby and the dining room.

"It was considered a fancy hotel. During Reading's heyday, there were tons of hotels on Penn Street alone. In 1842, there were 17 hotels on Penn Street. It was a booming city, so there were many hotels."

Wendy also tracked down some stories done on the hotel, which is

50-cent lunch.

Source:
www.downtownreading.com

American House timeline

Wendy Kershner's family history at the American House hotel:

1901: George M. Ammon ran the American House hotel.

1906: David S. Ammon and Edwin Kershner ran the hotel.

1910: An addition was put onto the hotel.

1923: Portrait of George M. Ammon was done by artist Vincenzo Miserendino, a guest at the hotel.

1933: Edwin Kershner became the hotel's sole proprietor.

1937: Edwin Kershner got out of the hotel business and got into politics.



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now used as commercial office space.

"A New York Times columnist quoted it was one of the best eating places in Reading," she said.

She found out that under her great-grandfather's tenure, an addition to the hotel was added in 1910. She also found out that at the time her family owned the hotel, they also owned a dairy farm that supplied the hotel with fresh milk and other products.

"It was definitely a very successful and well-regarded, nice hotel," she said. "They had an extension put on, and there were and retail shops, and even their own dairy farm."

Guests of the hotel included a notable artist.

"I didn't find any documentation (of guests who stayed at the hotel), but the one thing that was interesting was there was a well-regarded Italian artist, Vincenzo Miserendino, who stayed there," she said. "He was the artist who was commissioned to do the Christopher Columbus statue in City Park, which is still there. It was tied to the 175th anniversary of Reading. The dedication was in 1925."

Wendy came across a charcoal on paper portrait done by Miserendino, which is what originally got her on her path to researching more about the artist.

"There is a portrait of my great-great-grandfather, George M. Ammon, that was done in 1923, and so I have that portrait, and I wanted to know about the artist," she said. "He lived in New York and came to Reading to meet the Italian-American community to do this commissioned piece (statue)."

Wendy's family still has paintings in its possession that once hung on the walls of the hotel, in the public rooms and in the dining rooms.

"Some of those are still in our family, and they are very beautiful pieces with very large frames, so it is very neat to see something that was in the hotel environment," she said.

When Wendy looks at the building's exterior and observes it from an architectural standpoint, there is one thing that stands out.

"There is a cupola at the top of the building that still stands there," she said. "The fact that it still says American House on it and knowing that is a part of my family history is really great."

Contact **Courtney H. Diener-Stokes**: life@readingeagle.com.



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