

Pittsburgh

By Jeff Vavro

Talk of the Triangle

Going 'Round in Pittsburgh History – The one unique feature about Pittsburgh history is how it lends itself to much of the city's architecture. Derek Burnell admits he knew very little about that before he met the woman of his future. That was in San Diego, where his now-wife Jesse, a Pittsburgh-area native, moved to five years ago.

After they began to date, Derek made a few subsequent trips to the "Burgh, and became an instant fan of the unique look of the buildings. In comparison to the stucco sameness of San Diego, Pittsburgh had a lot of local charm, he says, and that's what brought him to owning the Round Corner Cantina.

Derek, 28, had gone to UCLA for recording engineering and business, but when the record industry changed dramatically, he went into the mortgage industry. After he and wife moved here two years ago, Derek decided Pittsburgh was the place to pursue a different sort of dream: owning a bar and restaurant.

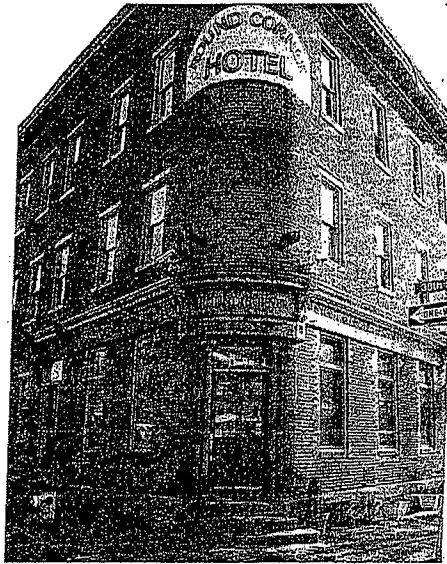
On a chance, he stopped in Sufak's Round Corner Bar, an old hotel and bar in the city's Lawrenceville area. The place was history itself, Derek says. Said to be one of oldest operating hotels and bars, Sufak's even has a tunnel in its basement that dates back to the Civil War era, he notes.

After a few beers, Derek asked the bartender about talking to the owner, and a few months later (with the help of Specialty Group) he was the new owner of the now-Round Corner Cantina.

One would expect a young guy to see modern and shiny in such an establishment, but Derek says he never planned to change the ambience. "Design-wise, this had a great old feel to it. The soul of an older city like Pittsburgh is in its architecture. If you live here, it maybe easy to take for granted such history. But in San Diego, everything has a boring cookie-cutter feel to it."

When he and his wife purchased the place, they wanted to maintain the integrity and history of the more than 150-year-old building, but give it a new shine. The old items still hang on the wall, but with a new, cleaner look. He also is excited about the bar's patio, which his says is a standard in the majority of bars in San Diego. Weather-wise, Pittsburgh doesn't lend itself to patios like the West Coast, but Derek hopes to use it (with the help of heaters and a tent) through the fall.

The bar has been open for about four months, and he recently added kitchen service, with a menu of South American and Mexico-influenced dishes. That comes from his growing up so close to the border, and his own love of cooking. He recently hired a chef, Alan Kaplan, who hails from a restaurant in Portland, Oregon, and a



partner and bar manager, Sarah Fitzgerald, who helps in the daily operations. His wife also has many years of experience in working at bars and restaurants.

Thus far, reaction has been positive, and Derek says he's had many surprised reactions from people about his love of the city's architecture. He also plans in the future to renovate some of the 16 hotels rooms that are still in operation in the building.

G-20 Redux – The world did, indeed, get to see Pittsburgh in all its glory in September during the two days of the G-20 Summit. Certainly the free publicity we received around the globe was a huge plus, but it certainly was a surreal experience for those of us who lived in the city – or even in the suburbs.

Security measures were rumored to be tight, but not even residents could have expected the site of hundred of police officers and armed force members locking down the nation's most livable city. Ramps were blocked coming into the 'Burgh during the two days; rivers were patrolled with armed boats; even rooftops had lookouts for any kind of activity. With this many dignitaries in one place, such a reaction may have been understandable, but one also wonders if it wasn't a bit of an overreaction.

If you were a restaurant owner, it also wasn't a week to expect much in the way of customers, since many businesses simply closed during the period. When I talked to a few owners in August, most weren't predicting much in terms of sales that week. For the most part, their predictions came true.

Kevin Joyce, owner of The Carlton, said "It was much, much worse than anyone could have imagined," he said. "We were led to believe that we should try to stay open, but five days before the event, they said that whole corridors into the city were

going to close. It was impossible to get across the street (to my restaurant) without having to walk 20 blocks to get here."

As a result, The Carlton closed on Friday, and Joyce said he essentially lost an entire week's worth of business from it. "We had a golden opportunity to host the event, and I'm glad the city got the opportunity, but we may have panicked over this too much."

Casino Makes Good Will Payment – Less than two months open, Rivers-Casino already faced potential legal action from the state Gaming Control Board. The board had recommended filing a suit against owners for failure to make good on their leasing agreement to make an annual \$7.5 million payment towards building a new arena for the Pens' hockey team. Rivers owners argued the agreement stated they didn't have to make it until 2010.

After much publicity, the Casino made a "good will" payment of \$2.35 million, and assured the board that it intended to live up to its part of the bargain, according to reports. The agreement requires the payment (made in two annual installments) for the next 30 years.

SouthSide Works Under Study – Hmm. Maybe too many restaurants can spoil the soup. That's the contention of a \$15,000 Urban Redevelopment Authority study aimed at figuring out if the explosion of new restaurants at the SouthSide Works development area is hurting smaller restaurants along Carson Street in nearby South Side. Three new restaurants already are coming to the Works (including Toby Keith's I Love This Bar franchise). Defenders of the Works say such a study is unnecessary, and, if anything, more restaurants and choices are good for the area. URA, according to reports, says it's just trying to make sure it gives everyone the chance for success and opportunities along the South Side corridor.

Court Strikes Down Referendums – The State Supreme Court ended up siding with neither the county nor a local group of restaurant owners on their bid to place a referendum on the county ballot concerning the infamous drink tax. Justices said County Council could not set tax rates via ballot questions, and ruled the group FACT (Friends Against Counterproductive Taxation) does not have the authority to change a tax rate via a referendum question. Last year, both groups had floated questions concerning the then-10-percent drink tax (which has been reduced since that time to 7 percent). Kevin Joyce, a member of FACT, said with that avenue closed, members plan to pursue the points of their original lawsuit against the council.