

How the Kent Historical Society Saved the Depot by Jim Myers

On November 4, 1971, Sam Apicello invited Bill Birkner, Titus Jackman, Leland Keller, Reed Strimple and me to meet at the Kent Motor Inn on E. Main Street, to consider the founding of a Kent Historical Society. Sam was elected our first President. The looming destruction of the Erie Railroad Depot prompted our purpose -- to save it from demolition.

In 1973, Sam resigned and Bill Birkner was chosen as President. Sandy Halem replaced John Carson. John Flynn replaced Titus Jackman and was directed to meet with the Erie Railroad representative about purchasing the Depot from them. A court-ordered estimate price of \$32,100 was established for the Depot's purchase.

At the Society public meeting on January 16, 1974, the Society's membership unanimously ratified the proposal to go ahead with the purchase. A model of the Depot was made and the Society started "The Erie Railroad Station - a Project of The Kent Historical Society."

On December 30, 1974, the Depot, as part of the "Industrial District" application, was approved for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places submitted by Sandy Halem for KHS.

By February 1975, the reappraisal of the depot resulted in a sale price of \$28,000. The Portage County Commissioners provided a \$10,000 grant. By January 1976, the Kent Historical Society owned the Depot. Christiansen Construction boarded up all the windows and signs were posted to keep people out. Despite the low purchase price, estimates for restoration were around \$375,000. (\$2,000,000 in 2025)

After interviews and discussions, the Society chose Robert Gaede, a respected historical architect and teacher (Kent State) to be the project director. He had been involved with the historic Roscoe village and Medina County Courthouse restorations among others.

Plans for the Depot included a museum and offices on the central and north towers with the entire first floor and south tower for a restaurant. Two-thirds of the station would be for public use. Hopefully the leasing of a restaurant would provide continuing revenue for its preservation as well as space and income for the Society.

In 1977, KHS founder, Sam Apicello resigned. Howard Boyle, already an active volunteer, was appointed to take his place. George Lewis, an architect in Gaede's office, began plans for the interior design to accommodate both the restaurant and the upstairs offices and museum. The city applied for and received a grant to update the dark and dreary Franklin Avenue area. This Urban Development and Action Grant (UDAG) funding was to be used to provide updates to the dark Franklin Avenue, including buried utility lines, updated street lighting and stripping the street back to its original brick.

The Society's annual meeting in 1978 was at Roosevelt High School. Architect Gaede explained the Depot projected plan in a slide presentation. An \$18,500 National Park Service award was given for roof repairs. New trustees included Hinda Golding, Peter Opperman, M. L. Davey and Ted Sapp.

Fundraising events included spring and summer performances by the Kent Acting and Touring Co. which brought new life to this still empty building. The Society's official fundraising campaign was marked by a ribbon cutting by State Representative John Begala of Kent, and Harry Gilcrest's Dixieland Band playing tunes for the crowd that came to see or board the old steam train brought in to the Depot.

Membership had increased 100 members over the past year to 143. More than \$15,000 was raised from the Kent Rotary auction, Justin Mendel and Getz Funds, as well as money raised from Kent Roosevelt students and

new patrons. As depot restoration began to take shape, interest from the perspective of investors in a new restaurant came and went. By May of 1980, things were looking very bleak.

In October of 1980, George Lewis, who had worked with architect Gaede, expressed an interest in developing a restaurant to become the main occupant of the Depot. A motion was passed giving Lewis exclusive rights for development until January 1981. He said his partner would be Tom Roehl who already operated several other railway themed restaurants. They would need twenty-five investors at \$10,000 each to get the project off the ground and restore the interior space into a modern restaurant interior.

It was to be known as *The Pufferbelly*.

They would also be responsible for the care of the interior. The north tower on the second floor was reserved for a KHS museum along with one of the office spaces in the central tower. The other office and open space in the reception area would house the Kent Chamber of Commerce. The restaurant has use of both the south tower and the entire first floor and basement.

Restoration of the Museum space would be funded by \$10,000 from a donation from Dorothy Parsons with other significant pledges from Ted and Cal Rowe, the Davey Foundation and an \$18,000 grant from the Ohio Historical Society. Volunteers from all over Kent joined in making this dream come alive including Bruce and David Hansford who repaired the canopy.

President Bill Birkner and Loris Troyer drafted a short history of the station for the restaurant menus. Sandy Halem and Loris were selected to chair the Dedication Ceremony. Howard Boyle would chair the Plaque committee for those donors. Jim Myers and Ted Sapp began to organize the opening night celebration.

On December 6, 1981, it finally happened. Hundreds of people would attend that opening.

The ten-year dream of preserving the historic Depot became a reality.

Bill Birkner, who had continued to serve as President, was also taking on the role of Museum Director with the help of local volunteer, John Cheges. The KHS Board named the central tower in Bill Birkner's honor. He would continue running the Museum for the rest of the decade.

The Pufferbelly's thirty-year lease expired in 2011. Owners Lewis and Roehl had sold the restaurant to Kevin Long. When the lease ended, Kevin chose not to renew the lease and the Pufferbelly closed. Ron Burbick, benefactor of much of Kent's downtown revival, took over the space and invested several hundred thousand dollars in updating the kitchen, infrastructure, dining room and basement area for his new restaurant *Treno*. During Covid and following the death of Mr. Burbick, *Treno* closed. In 2023, Owners Shannon and Chad Zemba chose to take over the Depot lease and expand their highly successful breakfast and lunch restaurant into *Over Easy at the Depot*. It has been voted the Number #1 winner in Kent for breakfast in *The Kent Stater* contest. We are proud.

The Kent Historical Society continues to raise money for the maintenance of the Depot and continue its ownership. KHS wishes to thank the community, organizations, government and Board for helping to save and find a future for this iconic building for our town.

Preservation is not just about saving a building -- but finding an ongoing purpose.