



WEBFOOTER EXTRA

March-April 2021

Fred Merrill's Twelve-Mile House Rowdiest Roadhouse in the West



Twelve-Mile House when it was known as the Barnes Inn, circa 1914. Real photo postcard views from Franklyn Sowell. Photo courtesy of Steve Kenney.

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WEBFOOTERS POST CARD CLUB

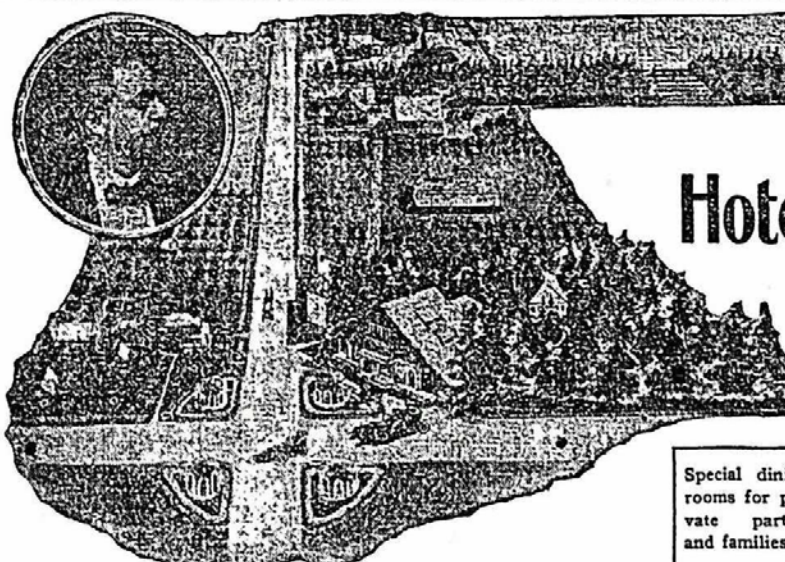
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Fred Merrill's Twelve-Mile House Rowdiest Roadhouse in the West



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(12 Mile House)

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PORTLAND OFFICE 108 SEVENTH ST. Main 525

Advertisement for Fred Merrill's Hotel Castle Edel Brau dining room at the Twelve-Mile House from The Oregon Journal on April 23, 1908.

After the Lewis and Clark Exposition closed in October of 1905, Bicycle King Fred Merrill bought the Telephone Building for a few hundred dollars and moved it to the southeast corner of his property at Base Line and Fairview roads (now Stark Street and 223rd Avenue). It was one of the show houses at the Fair and it had been built in the east in 1904 for the World's Fair in St. Louis. The 28-room building was taken down, piece-by-piece, and sent to Portland for the Exposition.

On July 15, 1906, the Oregonian published the following, "The Hotel Castle Edel Brau" dining room at the Twelve-Mile House is now open. French chef. Everything fresh from the Merrill farm. Dining rooms in the cool grove. Train to Gresham every two hours. Telephone for bus to meet train, or automobile from Portland day or night."

Merrill's goal was to establish the first and best roadhouse of the gasoline era. He installed a bar, a maple wooden dance floor, a "ragtime" orchestra, gambling tables, and private as well as public dining rooms. There were facilities for cock fighting and a dirt race track for both horse racing and harness racing.

There was a barn and a stable behind the house where the local townspeople kept and trained their horses. After his extensive preparation, Fred T. Merrill waited for the sporting crowd to drive out in their cars.

And they showed up in droves! Merrill is recorded as saying that the Twelve-Mile House paid for itself in less than eighteen months. For ten years liquor sales were legal and Merrill's was a booming and roaring roadhouse. Rumors claimed that some of the success could be attributed to the fact that the local bootlegger lived less than a block away.

The huge stone fireplace was a massive structure with recessed niches holding bottles of champagne. There were booths along the walls with heavy red velvet covering the doorways for patrons who wished privacy in dining and gambling. The furnishings were lavish and sometimes gaudy. In the center of each table was a handsome walnut "fluted bowl" with a lid. It was eight inches in diameter and about six inches high without the lid. Inside was a small roulette wheel and chips.

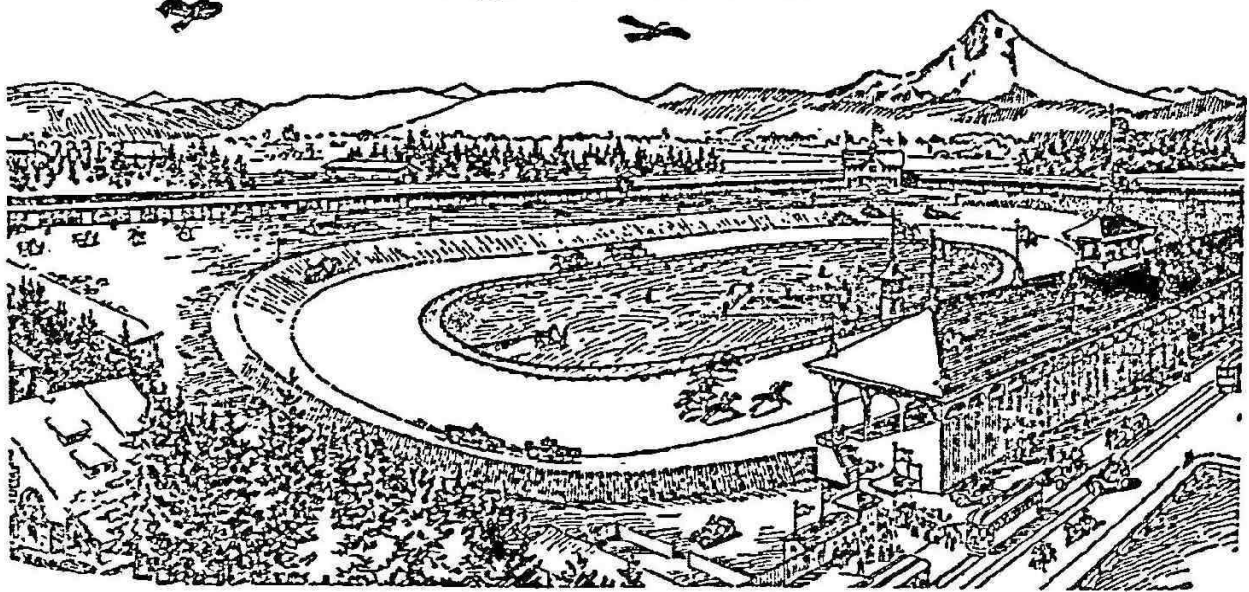
Later that year, the Oregonian published the following on December 23, 1906, "The latest sensation in the Portland sporting world was a genuine old-fashioned cocking main which took place at the Twelve-Mile House last night. About midnight, automobiles carrying large loads of men headed to the Twelve-Mile House. Fully 150 spectators had assembled at the designated spot and 100 game cocks were taken from different cars. A pit was formed and the birds were equipped with silver gaffs and the fight was on. The spectators, among them were many Portland professional men, gathered to witness the birds and the blood. Every precaution was taken to hoodwink the police, and the event went off exactly as planned. At the approach of daylight, the crown began to disburse and in the gray light of dawn, the automobiles crept back to town."

Many automobile accidents were attributed to guests of the Twelve-Mile House. "Fred Merrill's license to sell liquor at the Hotel Edel Brau, more familiarly known as the Twelve-Mile House, has expired, and the prospects are that the County Court will not renew it in the face of a remonstrance from the citizens of Gresham and vicinity. Merrill announced that his Twelve-Mile House will stop selling liquor and will hereinafter serve only soft drinks," according to the Oregonian on September 28, 1909.

On March 29, 1910, an article in the Oregonian announced "An aeroplane fashioned after the Curtiss biplane, constructed here, will be given a try-out near the Twelve-Mile House on the Base Line Road tomorrow."

Plans for a Country Club at the Twelve-Mile House were announced in the Oregonian on February 5, 1911. "The plans provide for a motordrome, racetrack, aviation field, and athletic field, as well as other sport accommodations.

NOVEL RACETRACK AND MOTORDROME NEAR TWELVE-MILE HOUSE WILL NOT BE COMPLETED UNTIL FALL OF 1912.



The unique racetrack planned by Portland capitalists on the Fred T. Merrill property at Twelve-Mile will not be completed and ready for service for another year at least, according to an announcement by the backers yesterday. The dirt track in the center is practically finished, but owing to the inability of Jack Prince, veteran motordrome builder, to come to Portland this Summer, the automobile and motorcycle wooden saucer rim will not be added until 1912. "The horse track is a half-mile affair and the motordrome track five-eighths of a mile, both built and banked for extreme speed," says Merrill.

An illustration of Fred Merrill's Novel Racetrack and Motordrome at the Twelve-Mile House as it appeared in the The Oregonian on July 23, 1911.

Work has already been commenced on the racetrack as well as on the site where the motordrome is to be built. The promoters expect to have the grandstands, fair buildings, and other structures under way as soon as the rainy season is over. The park and grounds surrounding the Twelve-Mile House and the Rose Vista Farm will be combined, and a country club with all modern conveniences will be built."

The next big announcement appeared in the Oregonian on April 23, 1914, "What will be known as Barnes Inn, formerly the Twelve-Mile House, will open Sunday, April 26, 1914 under the management of J.W. Barnes, well known Portland caterer. A specialty will be made of chicken dinners. No liquors will be served and only a high-class patronage is desired."

As the revelry continued and the money rolled in at the Twelve-Mile House, there were forces gearing up to pass the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, known as the Prohibition Amendment or Volstedt Act, which prohibited the "manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors."

Another name change was announced in the Oregon Journal on May 4, 1919, "The Cross Roads Inn, at the junction of the Base Line, Gresham and Fairview roads will be opened on Wednesday, under the management of Frank Coffinberry, formerly manager of the Orpheum Theater in Portland."

An article in the May 15, 1922 edition of the Oregonian stated that "Another raid was made on the Twelve-Mile House early yesterday by deputy sheriffs and resulted in the arrest of Ray Herring, proprietor on a charge of violating the prohibition laws."

Later in 1922, the Oregonian reported on September 1, "The old Twelve-Mile House on the Base Line Road, more recently known as the Cross Roads Inn, has been leased by a party of Texas men, according to an announcement made yesterday, and will be completely renovated before being reopened under the name of the Plantation Inn. The new owners plan to erect a new grandstand, stables and other equipment necessary to maintain a first-class racing track and facilities."

Three weeks later, an article appeared in the Oregonian on September 24, 1922 announcing, "Fred T. Merrill, ex-boxing promoter, manager, and veteran conditioner of athletes and race horses will give the boxers an opportunity to do their training in the fresh air of the country at the Plantation Inn. The grounds cover several acres and include a half-mile horse-racing track, a swimming pool, plenty of indoor and outdoor platforms for boxing and exercise, and the Inn itself."

Instead of roaring through the Twenties, the Twelve-Mile House began to suffer from deterioration and neglect. The police visited regularly -- and there were several fires. The repeal of the Prohibition Amendment in 1933 came too late to restore the Twelve-Mile House to its gala affairs, crowded dances and lavish entertainment. In the early thirties, car races replaced all the earlier attractions and an eight-foot high wooden fence surrounded the race track.

Auto racing at the Speed Bowl was heralded in the Oregonian on July 13, 1927 with the following article, "The second racing meet of the Speed Bowl, located at the Twelve-Mile corner of the Base Line Road, will be run off Sunday with 10 events. Both automobile and motorcycle racing will be on the bill, in addition to special features such as Roman chariot racing and a motorcycle polo game. Several of the best drivers in the northwest have entered the competition. The Speed Bowl is laid out on the site of the old Twelve-Mile track, but it has been entirely remodeled and rejuvenated until it is one of the speediest dirt tracks in the northwest. It was formerly used for harness racing."

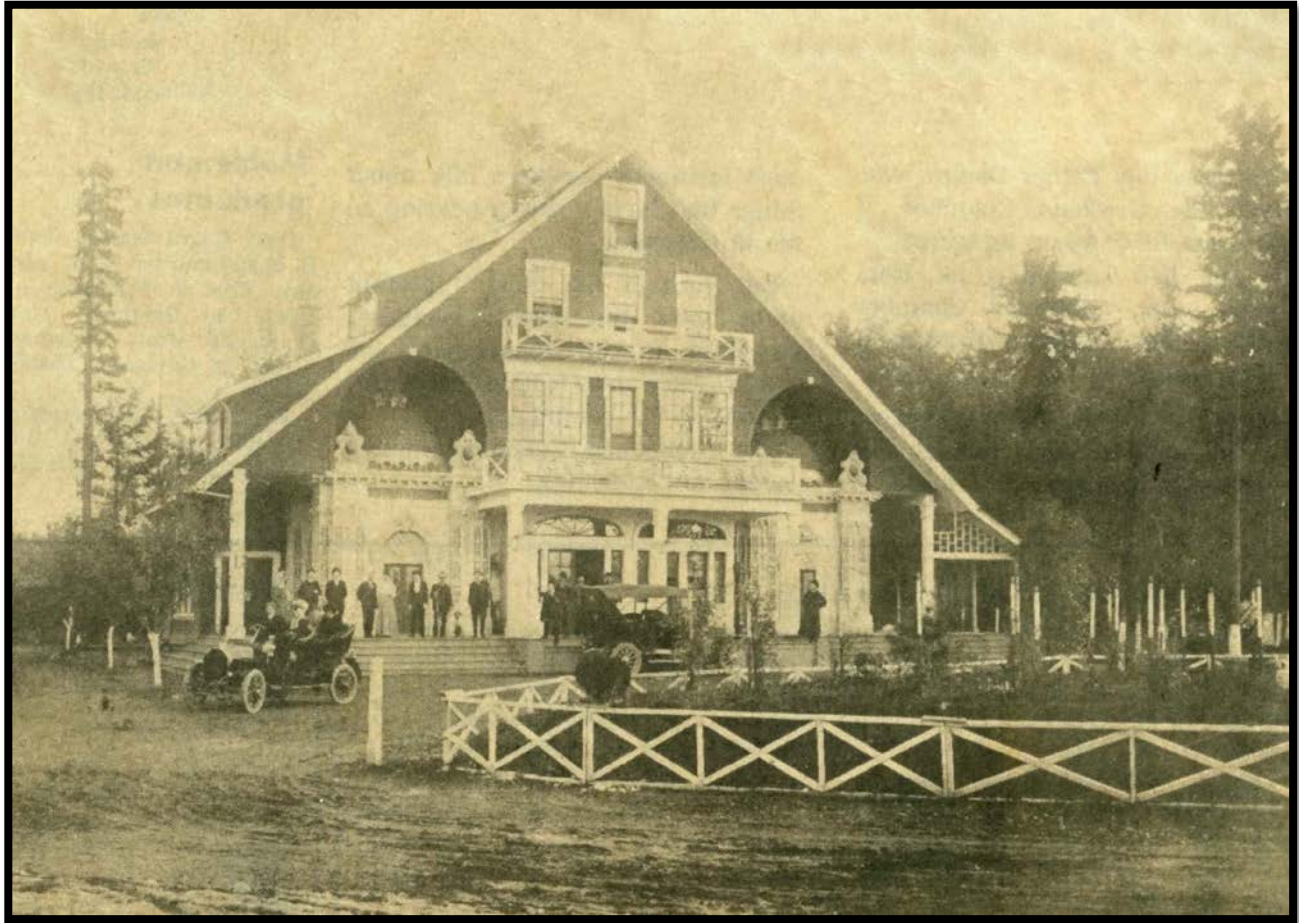


Photo of Fred Merrill's Hotel Castle Edel Brau dining room at the Twelve-Mile House about the time of its opening in 1906.

By 1935 the Twelve-Mile House was a monument to deterioration, destruction and desolation. Debris was everywhere. The enormous stone fireplace with the niches for holding champagne bottles was a broken skeleton with empty sockets without eyes; pieces of glass remained on the floor and in the fireplace.

As reported in the Oregonian on May 19, 1939, "The Twelve-Mile House, renowned and notorious roadside tavern built by Fred T. Merrill in 1906, went up in flames early Thursday. Beyond police jurisdiction and outside the pale of responsibility, the resort boasted a well-stocked bar-room with drinks by the glass, musical slot machines, a famous cuisine, and there was no limit on the betting.

At the time of the fire, the building was owned by F.G. Nealand who acquired it on a mortgage some time ago. Art objects and other furnishings of value were sold at auction in November 1938. The building had been vacant for some time and frequented by tramps. It never survived enforcement of the prohibition law."



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