

Presque Isle Inn & Convention Center Celebrates 10th Anniversary

by Kathy McCarthy

A Star City landmark is celebrating its 10th anniversary this July, complete with a number of upgrades - in keeping with its record of exemplary service, be it dinner in Gram Russo's newly-constructed solarium or a night in one of its completely redecorated rooms.

The Presque Isle Inn & Convention Center has now been owned and operated by Kevin B. Simmons, owner and president of KBS Enterprises, Inc., for a decade. The structure itself dates back nearly 40 years. Simmons said over the years, the facility has undergone a number of changes to better serve the needs of the community, business travelers and vacationers. The Presque Isle Inn & Convention Center is Aroostook County's largest full-service hotel and convention center.

Construction first began at the Houlton Road location in the summer of 1972. The Swamp Fox Motor Inn was completed in June of 1973, under the ownership of Carroll Hardy, of Brewer, and Peter Benson, of Washburn, who served as contractor.

At that time, The Swamp Fox - as it was more commonly referred to - included over 70 guest rooms; a dining room that served breakfast, lunch and dinner; a lounge; lobby; meeting rooms and banquet facilities. The new hotel also included a pool, saunas, fitness area and a beauty salon. The project carried a considerable price tag for that time, exceeding its budget by over half of the original estimated cost. At time of completion, the total cost of construction





was close to \$1 million.

The facility gained a reputation early on as one of the lively night spots, with Swamp Fox performances by the likes of Rock Maple, Night Life and Hokum entertaining audiences at the Cock and Feather Lounge. Visitors could make a night of it, starting with a meal at the Coach & Eight Restaurant, before heading to enjoy music and dancing. The restaurant was known for its daily luncheon specials and famous Saturday night buffet, with catering available for luncheon parties. The facility was recognized at that time as “Maine’s newest and most luxurious nite spot.”

The Swamp Fox was only around about five years, before it changed names and ownership.

By March of 1978, the Swamp Fox was no more, having undergone a change to Keddy’s Swamp Fox Motor Inn, then shortened to Keddy’s Motor Inn, the only U.S. property owned and operated by Donald Teddy - a Canadian owned hotel company. Night life remained a popular attraction, with performances by Northern Comfort, playing rock and roll, in the Cock & Feather Lounge and Joshua Sunshine appearing in the Olde Gaol Tavern, with a selection of easy listening music. By the 1980s, the lounge had been redesigned and its name changed to the Connection, featuring music by popular bands like Mirage and performers such as Mel and Ira.



Today, the Connection is still the leader in Presque Isle for entertainment, live bands and socializing. The night club has gone through many renovations by previous owners. Moving of the Horseshoe bar from one end to the other is just one example. Simmons has continued to update the venue, enlarging and changing the façade of the bar, installing new bathrooms and adding 52-inch flat-panel TVs. Beer on draft was also added.

“Our clientele asked for it and we made it happen,” said the owner.

In 1986, the City of Presque Isle’s records indicate Keddy’s underwent substantial upgrades. In February 1986, Scovil Building Supply acquired a permit for an addition to the hotel, adding additional guest rooms, conference and meeting space, as well as adding an additional kitchen for banquets, valued at an estimated \$1.5 million. A second permit was issued to Scovil in November of 1986, for construction of a new restaurant, renovation work and the addition of the solarium, with



the value of the project estimated at \$88,000. The hotel remained Keddy's for nearly 20 years, though few records remain as to the owner of record at that time.

City records indicate Dalton Scovil purchased the property, which had fallen into receivership, in November 1998 and shortly thereafter it became the County View Hotel. Less than a year and a half later, Simmons purchased the hotel and began the process of updating the facility, adding a touch of elegance and family atmosphere throughout, as well as a new name: Presque Isle Inn & Convention Center – taking on a similar name to Simmons' first hotel in Aroostook County, the Caribou Inn & Convention Center.

Simmons first came to Aroostook County in the fall of 1990 looking at potential hospitality properties. He returned several times until his purchase of the Caribou Inn & Convention Center – formerly Caribou Motor Inn - on March 23, 1994, becoming a member of the Aroostook County community at the age of 28. The new owner, originally from Portland, was excited to bring his knowledge of the industry and his own ideas to Aroostook County.

“We've completed significant renovations to our guest rooms; we have added extended-stay suites, with full kitchen and living areas. In 2009, all rooms received new furnishing and additional amenities. Additional upgrades are being phased in in some suites and a few guest room bathrooms at present,” he said.

The facility offers the latest amenities, making any stay – be it a family on vacation or a business trip – a pleasant one.

“The interior private areas and public areas have been upgraded. We have made substantial energy-efficient upgrades to our operational and mechanical systems, as well as installing advanced technological systems. We offer wireless Internet access. New state-of-the-art computer systems have been installed in the restaurant and at the front desk, allowing us to be more competitive in today's marketplace,” Simmons noted.

Simmons remembers shortly after his purchase, he had to replace the over 30-year-old boiler system that was manually run by turning and shutting off valves.

“It was pretty scary,” he said.

Simmons has much more on the





drawing board, though it has been slowed due to the downturn in the economy.

“I have wanted to do a complete exterior modernization of the building facade, as well as improvements of the exterior grounds. We are still working on the structural design of the building, as well as material and color coordination. With the completion of the new solarium, I look forward to moving on to the exterior,” Simmons commented.

The facility took on a family feel, following his purchase of the business ten years ago. Gram Russo’s Italian Restaurant is named for Simmons’ late grandmother, Marjorie Russo, and features many of her Italian recipes that Simmons grew to love as a child.

“Gram was my inspiration for the dining area. I chose an Italian theme not just to honor my grandmother but to offer the community something different and previously unavailable in Aroostook County,” he said.

“We realized what we needed was a truly Italian restaurant. I had a definite picture of what I wanted and I think it turned out great,” Simmons continued.

“A lot of hard work went into the dining room’s design – attention was paid to every detail. We even have an Italian fountain, straight from Italy,” Simmons said.

A kitchen remodel was completed to keep up with the increase in business.

“We went right from the roof rafters to the floor joists. It was remarkable to see almost 40 years of history transformed into something more efficient and modern.

All new energy-efficient equipment was purchased and the new design made for a more effective operation,” he said.

“The food has a distinctive Italian flavor, with authentic dishes based on those made by my late grandmother. It has taken us a while to get it right and with the many influences of a number of talented chefs, we have a wonderful menu; Gram Russo’s has become the talk of the town,” said Simmons.

Menu items include Gram Russo’s family recipes for marinara sauce and meatballs, lasagna and many other popular Italian dishes. With the completion of the solarium in February of this year, diners now can enjoy their meals in a more comfortable and energy-efficient area while still maintaining its grand



view of the Star City scenery, including a remarkable view of Presque Isle's skyline.

The health club is another feature Simmons takes pride in. It's located in the lower level of the hotel which was formally meeting space and, more recently, Presque Isle off-track betting (OTB) parlor. The approximately 6,000 square-foot fitness and wellness center has state-of-the-art equipment, many specialty classes and a trained staff available to design a program to fit any individual.

"Membership is all-inclusive," said Simmons. "It includes the use of the swimming pool as well as access to the Caribou Center as well. The fitness facility was a perfect amenity to add for our hotel guests and a great addition to offer the community of Presque Isle."

The Presque Isle Inn & Convention Center also offers spacious banquet rooms suitable for business meetings, bridal and baby showers, receptions, special dinners and the like.

"The Center's decor has been completely updated. We continue to make changes to better serve our customers. Our facilities are some of the most spacious and elegant around. We have the ability to cater for any occasion," said Simmons.

The business continues to look for new and exciting ways to better serve its patrons.

"We are presently constructing a new board room that will be located on the upper level of the hotel close to the lobby, to accommodate smaller business meetings," said Simmons. "Frankie's Lounge is being redesigned and we are hoping to have a complete new look by fall."

The Inn also has ample parking and is well-located for recreational activities like snowmobiling and ATV use.

"We're located right on the trail system, whether you're here in the winter to experience Aroostook County's spectacular trails or coming up for a summer ATV ride," said Simmons.

Simmons said the secret to any business's success is its ability to adapt to the needs of its customers.

"It's important to seek input –



listen to their ideas and suggestions. It's about meeting needs and providing desired services. You want to make them feel welcome, create an inviting place – a place they'll tell others about and want to return to," said Simmons.

And return they have, with businesses and organizations using the facility for meetings, banquets and other gatherings year after year. One example is the Presque Isle Kiwanis Club, which celebrated its 60th anniversary in May, holding the celebration in one of the inn's banquet rooms. The club has **been** using the facility for many years for their weekly lunchtime meetings.

The business continually looks for ways to improve services and appreciates guests' input.

"This is an ever-evolving process. We'll continue to look for ways to better serve our guests and look forward to their feedback," said Simmons. "Before I renovate - take on a new project - I consider the value to the community and my customers. All our upgrades are done to protect the historic nature of the facility; the Presque Isle Inn is truly a city landmark, a 'County Gem.'"

During the 10th anniversary celebration, Simmons said he and his staff will be running specials and celebrations throughout the facility.

"Please watch local listings for updates," said Simmons.

For more information, contact 764-3321 or go online at www.presqueisleinn.com.

Information obtained:

City of Presque Isle, Presque Isle Library-Archives, Robb Miller, Frankie Robinson, Maryann Raymond, Kevin B Simmons