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Jimmy Oreck's Flame Restaurant

From BBQ Shack to Nightclub

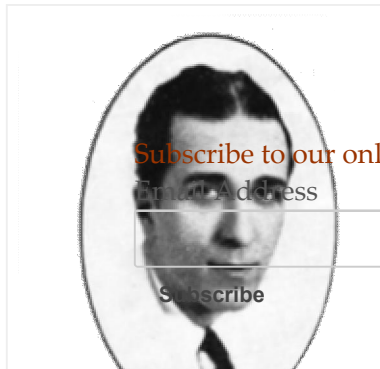
By Tony Dierckins • Published March 28, 2016



A lithographic postcard shows interior and exterior views of the Flame after its 1937 renovation. (Image: Zenith City Press)

In 1946, as Jimmy Oreck was about to reopen his popular Flame restaurant at the foot of Fifth Avenue West on the harbor, the Duluth Herald ran a series of articles on the business, announcing that what began as a humble barbecue stand had evolved into the “Northwest’s most spectacular night club.”

Not bad for a kid who left school after the eighth grade to sell newspapers and shine shoes. The Flame’s history goes back to the Great Depression, when in 1931 Jimmy Oreck and Alex Zurovsky opened a barbecue



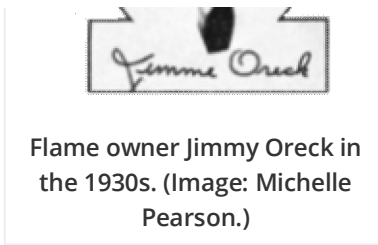
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stand on the southeast corner of Fourteenth Avenue East and London Road. A year later Zurovsky dropped his end of the bargain, leaving Oreck and his wife Ruth to run the stand.



Flame owner Jimmy Oreck in the 1930s. (Image: Michelle Pearson.)

The building could hold only thirty patrons, who were lured in by the glassed-in rotisserie Oreck installed next to the entrance, showing long, revolving strips of ribs and, according to the Herald, “whole chickens toasting to a golden brown over charcoal flames.” Mouthwatering.

The restaurant’s logo, the newspaper explained, was “a flame red cockerel, poised with his head up, crowing to the world that he was about to start something.”



The Flame after its 1937 remodel. (Image: Michelle Pearson.)

As the spinning meat attracted more and more customers, Oreck added wings to the original shack, including a bar in when Prohibition was repealed. By 1936 they had outgrown all the expansions, and the next year Oreck added on again (including a cocktail lounge called the Rooster Room) and at the same time modernized the older buildings and tied them together visually with an Art-Deco façade.

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The Art-Deco inspired Flame at night. (Image: Michelle Pearson.)

At the same time Oreck and manager Charlie Kassmit pulled out all the stops to add experience-enhancing gimmicks.

The remodeled Flame building boasted large picture windows that looked out over a garden of “trees and shrubs, a waterfall, trout pool, and stuffed wild animals.” It also held the town’s first custom-made semi-circular booths, strolling musicians, a cigarette girl, and a dwarf doorman decked out in a red uniform. Coffee was served by “The Sultan of the Second Cup,” a man wearing a turban and curl-toed shoes.



The “Sultan of the Second Cup” pours coffee refills for diners at the Flame in the late 1930s. (Image: Michelle Pearson.)

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They put in a much larger glassed-in rotisserie, and it wasn't just the meat and the drinks the patrons came for—the Flame became famous for its pop-overs, made fresh daily by Ruth herself. In fact, the food was especially good. Duncan Hines stopped by the Flame in 1940, and the next edition of his *Adventures in Good Eating* contained a review of the restaurant, and the food writer spent much of his review praising the Lake Superior whitefish, chicken, steak, lobster, and “piquant” ribs.



The Flame's "Rooster Room" lounge at the building on London Road; the restaurant also had a "Chick Room." (Image: Michelle Pearson.)

When fire claimed the Flame in 1942, Oreck temporarily moved the restaurant to 110 West Superior Street. Meanwhile he purchased a grocery warehouse along the harbor. The three-story fire proof building—designed in 1912 by renown Duluth architect Frederick German—originally housed the Duluth Marine Supply Company, a grocery retail firm specializing in selling foods to Lake Superior vessels. By 1936 Duluth Marine Supply had moved; the building remained a grocery warehouse until Oreck bought it and hired architect Harold St. Clair Starin to convert it into The Flame.

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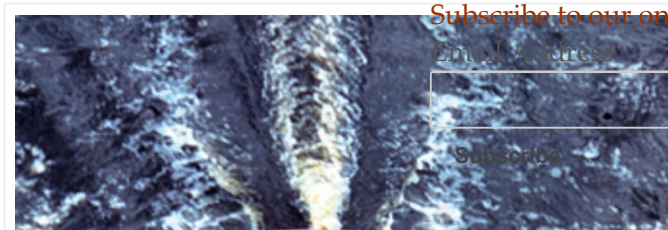


The dining room, adjacent to the Rooster Terrace, in the Flame at the base at 5th Avenue West. (Image: Michelle Pearson.)

The *Duluth Herald* called the new Flame “elaborate... dazzling...sensational...[and] out of this world.” It sat four hundred diners with room for another 100 patrons in the lounge. Its semicircular black terrazzo dance floor was framed with “inverted Roman-like columns flooded with multicolored lights.” The restaurant and nightclub included a glass stair tower and many windows that looked out over the harbor, including five twelve-foot windows in the dining room that created a “wall of glass.” Patrons could watch ore boats and freighters come and go; the vessels’ names were announced over the building’s p.a. system as they passed the restaurant.

But Oreck wasn’t happy with the building because of compromises made during construction due to war-related shortages. In 1955 he moved the business to Superior Street, reworked the old Flame, and by 1956 was back at the Fifth Avenue building along the “seaway,” as the restaurateur called the waterfront. The building was tweaked inside and out, with the addition of a piano bar, more windows, and a flame-red paint job on the exterior.

In the
1960s and
70s the
restaurant



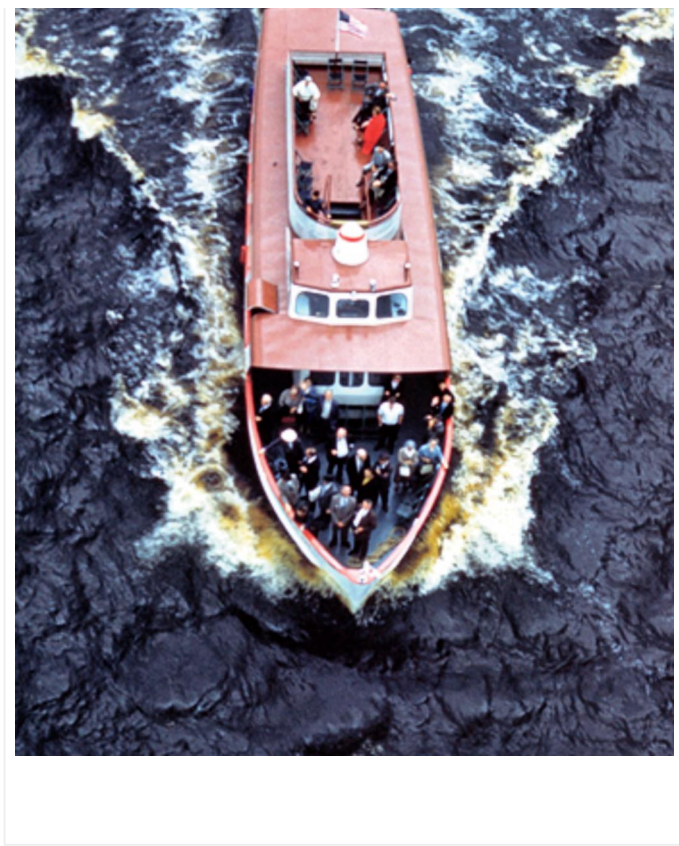
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operated an excursion boat, the *S. S. Flame*, which offered harbor cruises. In 1970 the *Flame* and its counterpart, the *Flamingo*, accounted for 35 percent of all the time



Duluth's aerial lift bridge had to lift to allow traffic through the ship canal.

This prompted complaints from Park Point residents, and they made the first of many attempts to establish lifting restrictions. Bridge operators didn't fight the restriction attempts; according to lift bridge supervisor Bob Brown, all those lifts for pleasure craft were prematurely wearing out the bridge's batteries.

As Duluth attracted more family visitors, expensive restaurants like the Flame struggled, and the eatery closed periodically. When it reopened in 1967, it had a less-expensive menu and a new name: Harbor Lights. Oreck sold the business to a Memphis developer in 1971 and retired; the restaurant closed in 1973. The Anchor Inn rented the building until 1982; Oreck died that same year at age 82.

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In 1983 Micky Paulucci of Grandma's Restaurants reopened the Flame in its Fifth Avenue location, but it closed just eighteen months later. The building was home to the Lake Superior Center from 1990 until 1996. It was demolished in 1998 to make room for the Great Lakes Aquarium. Mayor Gary Doty, a supporter of the aquarium, proudly took the first swing with the wrecking ball.

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12 Responses to *Jimmy Oreck's Flame Restaurant*



Michele Pearson says:
April 26, 2016 at 12:25 am

Gary, you made a good point. my grandfather never changed the name from the Flame to Harbor Lights. I do remember vaguely someone else did try running another restaurant in the same building and might have been Harbor something but Johnny did not open it. If I remember right, he never owned the building either. I think the Marshall sisters owned it and refused to sell it to Jimmy.



John M Glendenning, Jr. says:
April 13, 2016 at 1:01 pm

What a marvelous place the Flame(s) restaurants were. All 4 of them. There was one in Phoenix. I remember the one on London Road, where Valentini's is now. I remember the chicken being delivered on the sword. Instead of football signaling Winter, Jimmy's Flame(s) were closed during the Winter. Especially by the lake. Too cold for the tourist trade. The one on West Superior St Next to NWB of C., was okay, but not really too memorable. The one at the waterfront was real classy. Hub Gonya(Sp?)reporting ships passing, the bell ringing to call attention to that; Billy Sam... piano. Ah yes, "The Mortgage Man." Frog legs, lobster, steak. And do not forget there was an unwritten dress code. Yah, yes! Nostalgia time.

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Bill says:
March 31, 2016 at 10:32 pm

Is there any relationship between Jimmy and Ruth Oreck, and David Oreck of Oreck vacuums, who also is from Duluth?



bonnie paull says:
October 13, 2015 at 5:57 pm

I remember going to the Flame as a child for special dinners. I would love to have the recipe for their marvelous sauce that went with chicken and ribs. Is it obtainable?

Bonnie Paull



JoAnn says:
January 15, 2015 at 5:42 pm

My dad Ed Cismoski used to park his boat at the dock there and have appetizers delivered to the boat. He also took the cruise on the South American.



Terese says:
September 11, 2014 at 9:01 pm

My grandmother, Erma DelZotto O'Brien, was a waitress at The Flame for many years.



Tony Dierckins says:
July 24, 2014 at 9:41 am

Great memory, John! Thanks for sharing it with us.



John Jacobi says:
July 23, 2014 at 7:55 pm

When I was growing up in the 1940's and '50's my father would book passage on the S.S. South American for a weekly cruise from Detroit to Lake Superior and Duluth and back. When the South American docked in Duluth for the day, my dad would take me to the Flame restaurant for a delicious filet mignon dinner. I enjoyed the meals at the Flame

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restaurant every time. We'd sit in a raised area overlooking the water. One of the things as a youngster I never forgot.



Valerie K sweeney says:
December 21, 2013 at 7:55 pm

Would love to see old pictures! Was a very classy place!



Gary Jader says:
August 14, 2013 at 12:42 pm

I worked at the flame in the late 60s and it was not called harbor lights. It was called the flame.



Sarah Oreck Evans says:
June 21, 2013 at 7:13 pm

Hi jeanniejo,
I am happy to hear that you enjoyed your meal at The Pines!
I do operate the dining service for Pines I, Pines III Assisted Living and Cater events as well! Jimmy and Ruth Oreck were my grandparents. I do incorporate some of The Flame recipes, including the BBQ sauce!
I hope you can visit us again,
Sarah Oreck Evans



jeanniejo says:
July 23, 2012 at 6:38 am

If I am not mistaken the former chef of the Flame was cooking/catering at The Pines for residents, and using some of the same recipes. The food was awesome when I ate there while visiting.

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