



Bringing the Walper Hotel INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

123 years have been hard on the historic Kitchener hotel but, after a year and a half of renovations, its best years may still be ahead

BY ED BUTTS

T rue classics have a tendency to endure. Whatever their artistic or cultural form, they survive changing times. They might temporarily slip into neglect or obscurity, but deep roots keep their relevance alive. Kitchener's newly renovated Walper Hotel is a classic by any definition. Documents in the archives of the Kitchener

Public Library show that the roots of this iconic, stately building at the corner of King and Queen streets go back to the community's earliest days.

The site has been occupied by commercial establishments since 1820, when the pioneer settlement was called Sand Hills. Joseph Schneider, one of the city's founding fathers, leased the property to Phineas Varnum, who built an inn and

a blacksmith shop. Frederick Gaukel established the first real hotel there in 1835. Like the community that grew around it, the hotel underwent name changes. Sand Hills became Berlin and then Kitchener during the First World War. Under a succession of owners, Gaukel's Inn became the Great Western Hotel, and then the Commercial Hotel, which burned down in 1892. The following year, at a cost of \$75,000, Abel Walper built the structure that bears his name. It was sold in 1908 to Joseph A. Zuber, whose family would retain

ownership until 1975, but kept the familiar name. Kitchener's very first neon sign, erected in 1929, glowed with the name Walper Hotel.

That was a technological far cry from the early days, when the hotel was lit by gas lamps, only two rooms had baths and the single telephone was in the lobby. But \$4.50 got you a room for a week, with meals, and a maid refilled your water pitcher daily. In the hotel's bar, a glass of beer or a shot of whiskey cost five cents.

In 1909, provincial commissioner W.K.

LEFT: A completed room at the Walper Hotel.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WALPER HOTEL

RIGHT, TOP AND BOTTOM: Domini Baldasaro, general manager of the Walper Hotel, and Craig Beattie, founding partner of Perimeter Development, gave a tour of the 123-year-old hotel during renovations in January.

PHOTOGRAPHY • PETER LEE



Joseph Zuber poses with his grandson, Joe, in the Walper Hotel's dining room in 1971. Zuber's family owned the hotel from 1908 to 1975.

Snider told the proprietors of the Walper and more than a dozen other Ontario hotels to come up to standards or lose their licences. Zuber immediately complied, spending a hefty \$15,000 on improvements. However, it wasn't until 1925 that the Walper underwent the dramatic changes that would make it the pride of Kitchener and its name synonymous with first-class elegance and quality service.

Zuber built two additional floors of guest rooms. Only the best suites had baths and showers, but all had running water. The rooms were all carpeted and had telephones. The Star Theatre on the property adjacent to the Walper had gone out of business, allowing Zuber to expand. He replaced the hotel's old stable with a parking lot and added a men's beverage room, a formal dining room and the Walper's crown jewel, the Crystal Ballroom, named for its exquisite chandeliers. The hotel's menu still included the popular simple fare of such homey items as roast beef and apple pie, but now also boasted gourmet delights such as capons, lobster and champagne sherbet. Zuber switched from the American Plan, in which meals were included with the price of a room, to the European Plan, which charged separately for rooms and food.

This was the beginning of the Walper's golden age. The state-of-the-art hotel was "the place" to stay for visiting dignitaries and stars. It has been claimed — though not confirmed — that every Canadian

prime minister from Sir Robert Borden to Pierre Elliott Trudeau visited the Walper. William Lyon Mackenzie King, who grew up in Kitchener, certainly knew the place, and Lester Pearson was guest of honour at a Walper luncheon. Eleanor Roosevelt liked to have her breakfast in the Walper's inner courtyard. She was so charmed by its character that the courtyard was named after her.

A who's who of the musical superstars of their day graced the stage of the Crystal Ballroom, which could easily have fit the bill for a scene from F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby." Jazz legend Louis Armstrong went a step farther than his colleagues when he stood on a balcony overlooking King Street and played for the crowd below. Over five decades, among the musical greats who either played the Crystal Ballroom or stayed at the Walper because they were doing concerts at the Kitchener Auditorium were Duke Ellington, Vaughan Monroe, David Rubinoff, Guy Lombardo, Les Brown, Liberace, Tony Bennett and James Brown.

In the glamour days of Hollywood, even the biggest stars toured to promote their films, and would make personal appearances in movie theatres not only in the major cities, but also in smaller urban

centres. The stars who stayed at the Walper included Bob Hope, Nelson Eddy, Jeanette Macdonald and Will Rogers. With the coming of the annual Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, just 45 kilometres from Kitchener, the Walper became a home away from home for such famous actors as Art Carney and Canadians Lorne Greene and William Shatner. Among other Canadian celebrities known to have stayed at the Walper were Pierre Berton, Gordon Sinclair and Rita MacNeil. If the Walper had a Wall of Fame with photographs of all the notable people who had passed through its doors, the gallery would include individuals as diverse as the Queen Mother, Rudolph Nureyev, Jane Goodall, Bob Newhart and governor general of Canada Georges Vanier.

From 1936 until about 1960, VIPs travelled between the Kitchener train station and the Walper in a chauffeur-driven 1936 Packard limousine. The seven-passenger car with a 12-cylinder motor was one of only 682 that were made. It was an added touch to the prestige with which the Walper had come to be associated.

A principal component of the Walper's appeal was the excellent food served in its Baroque dining room. The person chiefly responsible for the hotel's internationally famous cuisine was Edward Ruppe, a Yugoslavian-born chef who specialized in German, Swiss and Austrian-style cooking. Walper guests and local residents out for an evening of fine dining praised Ruppe for such mouth-watering dishes as *hasenpfeffer*, stuffed kidneys in Armagnac, liver dumplings, paprika cream schnitzel, smoked pork in raisin sauce, roast duckling with ripe olives, spinach salad with sour cream and bacon and brandy cream pie. In spite of lucrative offers from other hotel owners and millionaires across Canada and the United States, Ruppe presided over the Walper's kitchen for 48 years. "The Zubers treat you like a member of the family," he once told a reporter from the Kitchener-Waterloo Record.

Globe and Mail columnist Mary Walpole, for many years author of the newspaper's "Around the Town" feature, dined at the

Walper frequently and always gave the food and service top marks. In one article, she informed her readers that the Walper would refrigerate purchases guests made at the Kitchener Farmers' Market. Even after the Walper's star began to fade, and its exterior succumbed to creeping drabness, the food remained an attraction. But in time, even that failed to live up to a once-sterling reputation.

In its long history, the Walper had a few unfortunate episodes. In 1909, during a sensational election fraud trial, witnesses testified that the Walper had been the conspirators' meeting place. When prohibition laws were in effect during the 1920s, rumours circulated that the Walper not only sold liquor illegally, but that the cheap booze peddled by bootleggers was brewed in the hotel's basement and smuggled out through secret tunnels. In March 1972, a wedding reception was interrupted when police had the hotel evacuated because of a bomb threat and an extortionist's demand for \$20,000. There was no bomb. The perpetrator was arrested and the groom quipped that he could have made his objection to the marriage known in church.

But those were passing moments, soon forgotten. The hotel ran into much more profound difficulties after Joseph Zuber's daughters sold it in 1975. Subsequent owners met with financial difficulties as the monied clientele melted away. Business was so bad that a longtime employee who had worked as a bellhop and doorman said he couldn't make enough from tips to buy his pipe tobacco. Other staff complained that they weren't being paid regularly. During Oktoberfest of 1979, Ontario government tax officials raided the Walper to collect on \$41,000 owed in sales tax. They emptied the cash registers and allegedly forced employees to turn over the money in their pockets. Two days later, the Walper closed its doors.

Most of the Walper's furniture and fixtures, including the chandeliers from the Crystal Ballroom, were sold. There was considerable speculation over what to do with the vacant building. One developer



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proposed turning it into a seniors' home. A wealthy Kitchener entrepreneur who had been a loyal Walper patron for 50 years made the startling suggestion that it be torn down in order to widen Queen Street and create a small park. A nonprofit organization called the Voice of Concerned Canadians launched a campaign to save the Walper as a historic building.

Meanwhile, the once-dignified Walper became known as the Pigeon Hotel. The hordes of pigeons that were the scourge of downtown Kitchener found their way in through holes in the roof. They nested in rooms once occupied by prime ministers and movie stars and buried the carpets under layers of droppings.

That was certainly the lowest point in the Walper's history, but in the 1980s, the hotel reopened under new ownership and with award-winning restorations. It was also designated an Ontario Heritage

building. But as attractive as the makeover was, the work was more or less cosmetic, and the problems that are endemic to old buildings persisted.

In 2013, a group of investors led by Perimeter Development purchased the Walper from Michael von Teichman. They had a vision of the grand old hotel restored to a place of prominence in Waterloo Region. For that to be realized, it would be necessary to close the Walper in January 2015 with the goal of reopening in May 2016. During that period, more than \$10 million would be spent on bringing the Walper into the 21st century, while retaining its Victorian/Edwardian charm.

Anybody with a feel for history and community appreciates the importance of a venerable building being restored. But it is especially gratifying to have an opportunity to see the architectural rebirth in progress.

In late April, Walper general manager

Domini Baldasaro and Perimeter consultant Laura Meikle provided a tour. Both women have backgrounds in the community and an affection for the hotel, with Baldasaro even working at the front desk in her University of Waterloo student days.

The Walper's interior — much larger than the view from outside suggests — bustled with workers facing a deadline. Although the guest rooms wouldn't be ready for occupancy until August, a wedding reception in the Crystal Ballroom was scheduled for May 7. Making our way down from the top, floor by floor, we saw the bare bones of the old Walper and the shaping of the body of the new.

Bricks and timbers from long ago had been exposed, and Baldasaro and Meikle explained that in appropriate locations they were being incorporated into the interior design to preserve historic ambience. Such is also the case with elaborate woodwork

in the lobbies and old-fashioned windows in some of the suites. The Crystal Ballroom still has the original maple hardwood flooring that Louis Armstrong walked across. Most of the historic crown moulding of the ceiling has also been preserved. The chandeliers were installed in the 1980s, but nonetheless add to a nostalgic atmosphere. Even in the unfinished ballroom, they captured the flair of the Roaring Twenties.

The renovation includes fully upgraded plumbing, insulation and HVAC and electrical systems. Old tiled flooring has been torn out, replaced by 6,000 square feet of oak hardwood floor. The antiquated transoms over guest-room doors — no longer required for air circulation — are gone. The front lobby has been completely remodelled to provide newly arrived guests with a boutique experience representative of the hotel.

Like the Crystal Ballroom, the other

spaces for events and meetings, such as the Oak Room, Barristers' Lounge and King Conference Room, are being fully restored. TWH (The Walper Hotel) Social, a restaurant and bar below street level, has been in operation for a year and a half and is already a popular downtown spot. It has both indoor and outdoor access.

The byword of the new Walper is hospitality. There are no efficiency rooms with kitchenettes, but every service will be at guests' fingertips. As much as has been possible, each of the 92 guest rooms has been designed to be unique. A few premium suites, called the Historic Collection, are located at the corner of King and Queen streets, with a view of downtown. For guests who prefer a more intimate, European-style view, there are rooms facing an inner court. There are also two guest rooms that are fully accessible. All suites have LED lighting and new bathrooms

with large showers and environmentally friendly toilets.

The Walper's new owners believe in supporting local businesses. The guest rooms' headboards and side tables were made by Artco of St. Jacobs. Locally roasted coffee will be provided by Smile Tiger. All natural, handmade artisan soap comes from Buck Naked. Management is especially pleased that many former Walper staff, including cook teams and servers, will be returning.

There is a legend that the Walper Hotel is haunted, not by some malevolent ghost, but by a benevolent presence that watches over the building and the people in it. Perhaps Joseph Zuber left something of his essence behind. He did, at least, leave some words of wisdom that could almost be a motto for the classic at King and Queen. Quoting a famous Austrian hotelier named Ralph Hitz, Zuber once told a journalist, "Give 'em value and you're sure to maintain volume." 



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