

Curley Doesn't Live Here Anymore

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By Sue Mayfield Geiger

There's an old expression that goes: "The more things change, the more things stay the same." Sometimes there is a lot of credence to that quote, but in this instance, it couldn't be farther from the truth. Despite the handful of articles that have been written about the structure on the corner of Highway 146 and NASA Road One in Seabrook, no one seems to have been more captured by the essence of the energy and history of the building than current owner Michael Valentine. Unfortunately, the building was demolished in 2019 by TxDOT to make way for the the Highway 146 expansion project.



Familiarly known as "Curley's Corner" to the locals, Valentine says the name has stuck. "Most people still call it that," he states. So, when asked if he himself has a special name for his new landmark, he says he does. "I'm thinking of the name 'Delta,' which is the Greek letter for triangle (the property is in the shape of a triangle), but probably no one would figure that out."

The timeline of Curley's reads like the ancestry of the Romanovs, but here's a quick trip down memory lane:

- Originally an entire lot, the parcel of land was first on the books of Seabrook Town Lot & Improvement Company in 1898, owner Christian Insenee.
- The land was inherited by his widow who deeded it to the State of Texas in 1936.
- By 1939, what with road development already consuming all but a small corner of the lot, Dickinson Ice & Fuel was the first commercial vendor to occupy the premises. Dickinson Ice & Fuel was operated by Robert and Andy Hooker until the early '50s, and was the only place to get ice between Pasadena and Galveston.
- After Hooker's death, Frank Horlock (Pearl Beer distributor) bought the building and leased it out to someone only remembered as Doc who ran it for the next 15 years.
- In 1966, the corner had a brief stint as a U-Totem.
- Then a few more owners came and went until 1973 when William Foreman (known as "Curley") bought the pie-shaped piece of real estate and named it Curley's Corner.
- In 1975, John Stamper acquired the place, but kept the name, Curley's Corner. Stamper ran the place as a bait house from sunup to sundown, seven days a week. (FYI: Stomps Icehouse burger on the Tookie's menu is named in honor of Stamper.)

- A few more owners would stake claim to the triangle until 1985, when Alan Thayer became the new owner. Near and dear to his heart, Thayer had memories of riding his bicycle from Pasadena to Curley's when he was just eleven years old to get a root beer. Thayer, a psychologist by degree, but architect and contractor by trade, closed the retail part of the business and began using the facility for operating his Seabrook Construction Company.
- In the meantime, the City of Seabrook felt the structure was hazardous to traffic and wanted the building removed.
- With Thayer's passion for unique architecture, he applied for a permit to remodel the structure, and the rest, as they say, is history. Not only did he remodel it once; but twice.
- The building got a complete facelift from its multi-layered façade, and became a work of art for drivers to gaze at while waiting for the traffic light to turn green. Although the initial redo was wood, Thayer eventually brought in a team of Central Mexican artisans who turned the structure into a mini Spanish hacienda. No stranger to Seabrook residents, Thayer is well known for his building and remodeling talents in the area, and it is easy to spot his signature trademark around town.

Thayer would continue to add to his "canvas" as time went by, but when it was finally complete, like all artists, it was time to start a new project. So, the building went up for sale. It was bought and sold, and sold and bought, with Thayer finally buying it back. Then, about 1996, enter Seabrook resident Michael Valentine, someone with an equal amount of passion about the place.

"I drove by, saw the 'For Sale' sign, and thought, this would be great for something," remembers Valentine. He sent his wife over to look, and she said, "If you buy it, you can't change a thing." And, that's exactly what he did. He bought it and just enjoyed it for a few years.

So, what's a retired corporate lawyer going to MBA school to do? Come out of retirement, that's what! In 1999, in order to develop clients, Valentine decided to offer electronic filing of tax returns. The clientele started trickling in slowly, but then grew, and grew, and grew. Thus, the staff also grew, as did his other locations (two, to be exact, both in Houston.)

In May of this year, Valentine felt it was time for yet another facelift. With Thayer having complete artistic control (well, almost), Valentine sat back and waited for his "Delta" masterpiece to be completed. Whatever you call it, when the building was an ice house, it was a Mecca for those parched travelers sitting in non-air conditioned cars waiting on the old Kemah drawbridge to open or close, hour after hour, after hour. Many an ice-cold beer or soft drink was consumed from dawn till dusk. Tons of block ice, bait and fishing tackle was sold to early morning anglers.

Valentine smiles and relates how clients tell him that their fathers used to stop here and buy a beer, purchasing a Coke for their young sons, some of whom also bought their first fishing licenses at this location. He tells of a guy who says that his mother got married on the back steps of Curley's. Valentine feels all the energy and vibrations from owner's past. Now, many people come in who are just curious about the inside or want to reminisce about their by-gone visits to the place.

So, what's it like today? Most of the artifacts are Mexican or Central American in origin. The focal point of the interior is the three foot tall *Michael the Archangel*, hand carved out of wood, vividly painted, and hanging atop the ceiling in the predominate corner. Authentic Tequila bottles are embedded in one wall. Valentine points out various places, stating, "This is where the air conditioner was, this is where the roof was, the deck was here, the sign was here, these beams were the roof, a loft was here, a door was there." All changed now, even the addition of central air and heat. Valentine even plans to install an elevator

(will have to be circular to fit). About the only thing modern in sight are the tiny stainless steel track lights.

With a roof garden boasting cactus and palms, you can actually walk up there. The air conditioning unit drains onto the plants to keep them watered, but there is also a valve that can be turned on to sprinkle the foliage when needed.

The interior is a strong mixture of peach and teal. Copper cabinets, lots of mahogany, brick, driftwood, a handpainted sink, Mexican tiled floors, tin framed mirror, and on and on. There is only one regular window in the whole place, the rest are oval and round, framed in stone (stained glass will soon take the place of the regular glass). A Madonna and child painted on metal occupies one wall; doves, masks, a wooden cross, an old lantern take up space on another. A tile table and metal Salamander positioned on the ceiling jump out at you. Not only one, but two bathrooms adorn the 550 square foot canvas (one has a marbled shower). There is also a refrigerator and microwave.

Valentine points to where desks will go for his assistant and paralegal, then motions to a place for chairs. "Last year, so many people had to wait in line to get tax returns; this year will be better," he states. If the elevator is not installed by then, a spiral staircase will be, so some of the flow can venture to the second level. His practice primarily deals in mortgages and taxes.

Surprisingly quiet inside with concrete walls 12 to 14 inches thick, Valentine says he does not worry about a car or truck smashing into the place. He laughs: "Are you kidding? With 40 tons of concrete, I'm more worried about what would happen to the driver! Even if a truck hits the building, the engine may well fly back out over the Kemah bridge!"

As for the rest of the exterior: That orange color is technically called African Tulip. The dolphins were created by Dodie Miller (sheet metal artist across the street) and the sharks by John Wilson. Then there are the bells, more cactus, oodles of Mexican plates, angels, 256 windowpanes, a vertical tile display, and an impressive wooden angel to greet you when you enter the front door.

The bells are by far the most ancient of the artifacts with the majority of them originating from San Miguel de Allende and one in particular from Spain.

Valentine plans to stay here. "Yeah, I'm set," he says. Sadly, he cannot get historical status because the building has been remodeled so much. If his business expands, he will open another office, but will keep the "Delta" building as is. He already has plans for a second expansion, but that's down the road.

Having begun the project in May, and finishing up in September, Valentine feels a grand opening is in order. Maybe late October.

And will there be a mariachi band and margaritas? "We'll see," he says. "It all depends on if the City of Seabrook will let me close a street or two." This is not only a "must see" for the curious, but an incredible, truly magnificent work of art. Rumor has it that even Curley might come around and say hello.

The drawbridge is gone, Curley has left the building, and Seabrook is no longer the fishing village of yesterday. But if you walk inside and close your eyes, or gaze at the old photo of the place hanging on the wall, you might, just might, transform yourself back in time for one fleeting, whimsical moment, while waiting for the drawbridge to close.