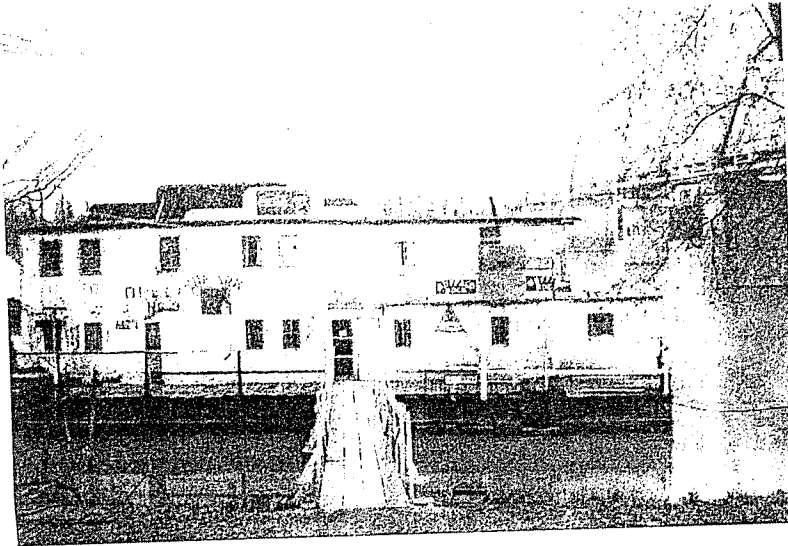


The Ark

Just west of the US78 Coosa River highway bridge near Riverside, AL sits a quiet, nondescript little café called The Ark. Other than a picture of the original Ark, and their talent for serving the world's best fried catfish, there's little to indicate this humble eatery had such a colorful history. But appearances can be deceiving; The Ark's story was almost made for Hollywood.

Back in the early days of Prohibition, the only places where folks could legally imbibe of spirits in our part of the state was Jefferson County, and The Ark Restaurant & Lounge.



Made from an old river dredging barge, The Ark had all the accoutrements of any good Roaring Twenties country road house, including kerosene lanterns for light. Its owner evaded dry laws by anchoring The Ark about thirty feet out in the river, just upstream of US78. The Coosa was a free-flowing, navigable waterway at the time, so anything floating on it was exempt from certain laws, much as today's casinos on the Gulf coast.

Further, it's the borderline between St Clair and Talladega Counties, and The Ark was technically not resting in either county, so neither county's law could touch them. Festooned with Coca Cola and Buffalo Rock signs, it would have been equally at home on dry land were it not for Prohibition. Thirsty customers arrived by boat or a narrow catwalk, and often made wet exits after a night of carousing aboard this Alabama version of Porky's.

There was no US78 bridge at that time, just a river ferry. When the new highway bridge was finished in 1938, The Ark was re-moored almost within its shadow.



Prohibition was over, and business was booming. But alas; the Ark caught fire and sank. It was time to move to dry land.

The owner, Mr. Thompson, built a crude log structure near the Ark's moorage, and served beer, catfish & hushpuppies at cut-rate prices. There was a dock in back for float-in customers. The place was too busy for menus; customers just told waitresses what they wanted and they wasted no time getting it to their tables. Thompson was especially rough on deadbeats and troublemakers, no doubt a business trait held over from Prohibition days.

In the mid-Fifties this newer structure also caught fire and burned, so Thompson rebuilt across the highway at The Ark's present site. It was called Red's Place, and stayed in the family for a number of years until the Cornetts bought them out. Bob Cornett changed its name back to The Ark to connect with its colorful past.

Today's Ark is like a time machine locked in the mid-twentieth century, drawing business from several generations who recall better and worse times. One vintage couple of this writer's acquaintance became engaged at The Ark more than forty-five years ago.

Its walls are covered with autographed pictures of NASCAR drivers, movie stars, country music stars, sports figures, and other notables who have sought food and drink there because of its

reputation for fine catfish.

The Cornetts have wisely kept everything almost exactly like it was, including rustic wooden booths, knotty-pine paneling, and a menu of original recipes that have been pleasing local folks for more than eighty years. For sheer atmosphere, it's hard to beat The Ark. \

from
Uniquely St. Clair
by Jerry Smith

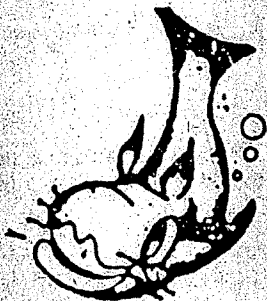




GERTRUDE COMER HOSPITAL—The first hospital in Pell City was Gertrude Comer Hospital. It was supported by Avondale Mills. Dr. Martin was head of the medical staff and Miss Elsie Dunn was head of the nursing staff.

The Ark

A Family Restaurant



SERVING THIS AREA'S

BEST CATFISH

For More Than 60 Years

- ★ Gulf fresh shrimp and oysters
- ★ Choice charbroiled steaks
- ★ Mouth watering fried chicken
- ★ Grilled, skinless chicken breasts

Bob and Sylvia Cornett, Your Hosts

Highway 78 East, Riverside, Al. **338-7420**

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