

The Windmill



gas from many different companies and added a purple dye so that all the gas he sold would be of the same color. His gas initially sold for 10 to 12 cents a gallon. The windmill was heated by a woodburning stove, which had a chimney that went through the roof.

The back half of the windmill was divided into men's and women's rest rooms, with showers and toilets for the guests in the cabins. Cabin guests paid \$1 a night for lodging. To provide the water for the showers and toilets, Kean rigged up a ring gear from a Model T Ford and pumped water from the river to a cistern on the second floor of the windmill.

Demonstrating still more of his innovation, Kean built a pottery and souvenir shop east of the windmill. There he sold souvenirs he made out of old wooden crates acquired from the nearby grocery stores. In the winter months when tourism was slow, he used the wood from the crates to make ducks and knickknacks which he then painted and hung by strings. In the Depression year of 1929, he reportedly earned \$20,000 from the business.

Since 1928, "The Windmill" has been a landmark on Routes 5 and 20 just west of Seneca Falls. Roscoe Kean, who had bought the windmill property in 1926 and had built fifteen cottages along the Cayuga-Seneca Canal, wanted to add a restaurant and other facilities. Not just any simple basic facility would be satisfactory. Kean "was a real dreamer, an innovator," according to Dick Compo, former executive vice president of the Seneca County Chamber of Commerce. Kean conceived of a windmill that could welcome visitors to "The Windmill Tourist Camp." It was built to authentic 1/3 scale with the windmill painted green and the blades cream.

The front part of the windmill was a gasoline station with at least eight pumps. Keene sold a mixture called "Kean's Purple Flash." It was the color purple largely because he bought the cheapest



In 1942, Kean sold the windmill and cabins to Helen Antoniak and Robert and Mary Ireland. Kean went to work as a civil engineer for Evans Chemetics, making chemicals and pesticides used by the Army in Africa. Helen Antoniak and the Irelands sold the property to Lee and Hazel Park. The Parks sold the property to Mario and Mary Riani and November 1955. They moved the motel offices from the windmill to their home adjacent to the new motel. The cabins were sold and moved to various locations.

The windmill was closed until the Western Regional OTB leased the property from 1973-1979. The OTB used the windmill for storage and used a drawing of the structure as the logo for their Seneca County betting parlor.

On June 13, 1980, the Seneca County Chamber of Commerce purchased the windmill and 120 feet of road frontage. Raising about \$39,000 through a community campaign with major contributions from Goulds Pumps and GTE Sylvania, the Chamber renovated the windmill structure as an office. A crossbeam was installed to support the second floor, as well as a new circular interior stairs and an external stairway. The Chamber opened its new offices in October 1980. Chamber Executive Director Dick Compo told reporters at the time that the Chamber bought the windmill for its offices "because it is a reference point for people within the area. This will give the Chamber a new image. We are preserving a landmark."

Originally the twenty foot blades of the windmill rotated on a steel shaft turned by an electric motor with a freewheeling clutch. The clutch allowed the blades to turn clockwise normally, but if the wind got too strong, the clutch would switch and the blades would turn counter-clockwise. When the Chamber purchased the windmill, the engine was disconnected and the blades only turned when the wind blew. Later, because of liability concerns, the blades were stabilized so they wouldn't turn. In April 1991, at a cost of \$3,500, a new set of sixteen foot blades was installed.

When the Chamber began planning for its current new headquarters (which it moved into in December 1999) adjacent to the windmill structure, questions about the future existence of the windmill loomed larger. Some felt that the windmill had outlived its usefulness and demolishing it would add to parking space for the new headquarters. People with strong former ties to the windmill came forward to ensure its preservation. The most notable efforts and financial support came from the Sessler family, in that Jane Shaffer, and Craig and LaVerne, Jr. Sessler are the children of Barbara Park Sessler, daughter of the former owners Lee and Hazel Park. The windmill itself today is the Barbara Park Sessler Visitor Center. This use continues the vision of the original builder who wanted to welcome tourists.

[This story was written by Walter Gable, the Seneca County Historian. He acknowledges the Seneca County Chamber of Commerce for much of the information contained in this article.]