

April 13, 2008----

PORT WASHINGTON, Wis.---Every good story has a tail, and this one is no exception.

Shaw's Crab House told me about the 57th Annual American Legion Smelt Fry in Port Washington, which sounded like it would be cast in the shadow of Green Bay but is only 30 minutes north of Milwaukee. Smelt are sardine-sized fish that begin spawning in Lake Michigan around early March or as late as April 28.

Growing up around Chicago, I knew about smelt fishing in Lake Michigan, but I certainly never ate 50 smelt in one seating like I did at American Legion Post No. 82 in Port Washington. Shaw's annually takes busloads of smelt fans to Port Washington because the legion's "secret" recipe is used at Shaw's, 21 E. Hubbard in Chicago, and 1900 E. Higgins Rd. in Schaumburg. Here's a hint to unlocking the mystery: the secret is in the cornmeal batter. Shaw's in Chicago goes through about 90 pounds of smelt a week, where it's on the menu through April 30.

I went up a day early to learn as much as I could about Port Washington (pop. 24,000) as a weekend getaway. There was fine thrifting at the Second Chances Donation Center, 211 N. Franklin St., where I scored an oil painting of an Inland Steel cargo ship on Lake Michigan. Paid \$20. Each time I look at it I feel like I'm going somewhere. Without smelt.

I also learned how Ma Rainey, Charley Patton and Blind Lemon Jefferson lived around Port Washington in the 1920s and '30s while recording for Paramount Records. Paramount was a subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Co. of Port Washington.

And everywhere I went in Port Washington, people smiled and yelled, "EAT THE TAIL."

In Chicago, that sounds like something someone might scream while cutting you off on the Dan Ryan Expy.

But I heard "EAT THE TAIL" in the kitchen of the Legion Hall and even during breakfast at Harry's Restaurant, 128 N. Franklin St. I might retire to Port Washington and open a dance club called EAT THE TAIL.

"There's calcium in the smelt tail," said Legion member John Mayer (no relation to the rock guitarist). "You just pop all of 'em in your mouth like popcorn."

More than 1,200 people attended the Friday/Saturday smelt fry in the Legion

Hall, which originally was the Old Port Brewery. Diners brought their own condiments. The 1,500 pounds of smelt were trawled in Lake Michigan by the Susie-Q Fish Market in Two Rivers, an hour north of Port Washington. The smelt population has dropped around Port Washington.

Keep that in mind when you visit Port Washington in July 19 for The World's Largest One Day Outdoor Fish Fry. "We used to be involved with the fish fry but they said smelt wasn't fish," said Legion member Paul "Butch" Tutas. "So we started serving bratwurst and they didn't like that, either." In 1965 the U.S. Dept. of Fisheries & Wildlife gave Port Washington the honor of "The World's Largest One Day Outdoor Fish Fry" based on how many fish were sold in one day. Last year 10,000 pounds of fish were sold in 12 hours flat, according to Mary Monday, president of Port Fish Day, Inc.

And none of the fish was smelt.

While trawling around Port Washington I wanted to get a better line on the obscure blues and jazz history of the region.

The west slip of the lakefront marina used to be the site of the Wisconsin Chair Co. (1888-1954). Paramount Records was born in 1917 as a subsidiary of the chair company. Wisconsin Chair also made wooden cabinets for Edison phonographs. A corner of the quaint Light Station Museum, up 104 steps from the marina, is devoted to Paramount. The 1860 lighthouse is still active and worth a look see.

"Paramount started out doing regional German and Norwegian music," said museum co-director and historian Linda Nenn. "In 1924 they bought the rights to Black Swan Records, the first black-owned record company in the United States. It was quite a coup for this little chair company. They opened a pressing plant in Grafton along the Milwaukee River, 10 miles southwest of Port Washington."

Fletcher Henderson played piano on all Black Swan releases and the label recorded Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters. All the talent was African American. Meanwhile Louis Armstrong and King Oliver recorded for Paramount. "There was no place whiter than the small towns of the Midwest," Nenn said. "These people would come up from Chicago, do their recording and they'd have to leave because there was no place to stay. A few of them who had a reputation like Ma Rainey and Eubie Blake were allowed to stay in private, upper-class homes. It's not a part of the past I'm proud of, but it was reality."

The history of Paramount Records has been reconfigured in the new Paramount Restaurant, 1304 12th Ave. in downtown Grafton. What a find.

This wasn't even on my agenda, which is the beauty of detouring on travel.

The \$1.5 million rehabbed restaurant is in the original Washington County

Courthouse, circa 1846. In 1870 the limestone and brick building became Bienlein's Central Hotel. "Blues artists stayed here, which was confirmed by Henry Townsend, the last living blues artist from Paramount," said restaurant owner Joe Krupski. "They would come to Grafton from Chicago on the electric Inter Urban Railway. Charley Patton, Skip James, Willie Brown and Louise Johnson stayed here. The innkeeper gave Louise Johnson the wrong key. She ended up in Skip James' room. She had come up with Charley Patton. In the end she walked away with Skip James."

Krupski is former chef at the now-defunct Playboy Club in Lake Geneva and the Corner Pub in downtown Burlington, Wis. The red leather booths pay homage to the Pump Room in Chicago. Paintings of Paramount artists hang on the walls. For dinner try the Chilean Sea Bass (or the Ahi Tuna (on spicy potato hash,) both flown in fresh daily from Hawaii.

There was no smelt on the menu.

Before the Paramount, the historic space was a dance club called Club Bananas. "This building was a tough one to save," Krupski said. "We took out floor joists and started over. We removed 330 tons of material." The sparkling 15-month-old Paramount seats 118 in the main dining room and another 40 in a private dining area. The corner building overlooks the Paramount Plaza and walk of fame, which pays tribute to the city's blues heritage.

The walk consists of 44 keys of a piano, each one representing a noted Paramount recording star. In the fall of 2006 Townsend died just hours after being the first person presented with a key in the walk of fame. He was 96. In 1930 Townsend recorded "Jack of Diamonds Georgia Rub" for Paramount.

If you want to go trawling for more blues history, local rumor has it that when Paramount Records closed its Grafton plant in 1932, many of the 78s were tossed in the Milwaukee River near Falls and Green Bay Roads. "And then metal masters were stored at Simplicity Manufacturing in Port Washington," said Krupski, who has researched blues in the Grafton area. "They recycled the metal for the war. Some of these masters that would be priceless today are lost forever."

And that's no fish tale.