

## The Jungle Club

### By Karen Ferguson, Town Historian

In the last two years, I have noticed quite a few inquires on various Facebook pages asking for more information about the Jungle Club. The information I have been able to put together is from the comments on those posts as well as from two editions of a book entitled "Roast Beef in April" written by Robert J. Higgins. This book is an autobiography and in it is a chapter talking about his years living and working at the Jungle Club as a teenager.

Robert J. Higgins, a/k/a/ Bob, was the son of Margaret and Matthew Higgins II. His parents co-owned the Jungle Club with good friends Charlie & Sally Marmas starting in 1946 until they had a dispute and parted ways a couple years later. The Higgins continued operating it until 1950.

The property was elliptical in shape and consisted of about 3 acres. On it stood the existing bar, attached two-story residence and a barn. When the Higgins & Marmas took over the business, they named the bar the Jungle Club. They had visions of grandeur for the décor to be jungle-like; however, they didn't have the funds to decorate it accordingly and could only afford the neon sign. The business faced Route 17, with the rear entrance facing Old Windsor Road (now known as Haskins Road). There was access to the parking lot from the two-lane highway and its location was ideal for drawing traffic to the business.

The Higgins family lived in the two-story residence that was attached to the bar. The house faced Old Windsor Road and the entrance was from a porch door that led directly into the kitchen. The Activity Room was to the left of the kitchen and the main area that the family utilized, especially in the winter, because it contained the heater. Additionally, this room had an approximately 8-inch square passthrough directly into the bar. It was there that his father Matt would yell to the family when he needed help in the bar. Another special feature of this house is that it had 3 bedrooms upstairs. This was the first time that Bob and his brother Matt III (Junior) wouldn't have to share a bedroom or a bed. (Bob was 14 at the time and his brother was 16). There were no bathrooms in the house itself, only in the bar. During the night they had to use a 2-gallon porcelain pot and Bob was responsible for dumping it every morning before school. Since there was no bathtub, they had to "bathe" in a sink. The boys looked forward to using the showers at school.

The large barn on the property wasn't in good condition so the family didn't use it. Bob, however, made an indoor basketball court of sorts inside it and used it as a place to hang out with his friends. The barn eventually rotted and crumbled to the ground years later.

Inside the Jungle Club, the bar was the focal point and was constructed out of glass bricks in a semi-circle pattern. Bringing more attention to the bar was the way colored lights cascaded through the glass bricks reflecting even more light. At the time, this style of brick was unusual making it even more special.

Besides the bar, the Club had a fully equipped kitchen and a full menu only because State Law required that food sales be a certain percentage of all sales. Food was always stocked in case an inspector would drop in unannounced. Even so, they sold a lot of hamburgers, French fries and chips during peak hours.

The busiest nights were Friday and Saturday. All the booths and tables would be full and the bar would be packed 3-people deep. The Jungle Club hosted "square and round" dances on those evenings and featured a live band. "Square and Round" dances involved a mix of square dancing followed by 3 or 4 foxtrots or other ballroom dances. This was a win-win situation. Those who loved square dancing would take a break to cool off and drink while the ballroom dances took place and vice-versa.

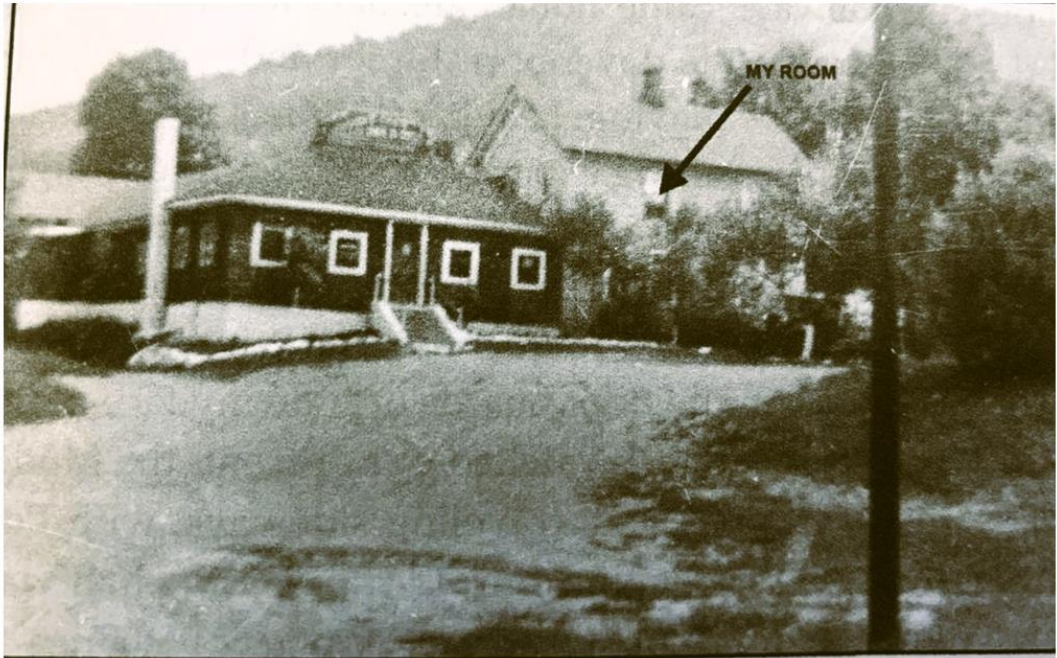
Bar fights are not unusual when people get drunk. Bob's father solved this problem by hiring an off-duty sheriff to watch the parking lot and make an occasional entrance into the bar itself. Additionally, some of his dad's friends who also worked for the Sheriff's Dept. would show up to the bar while on duty. Having a regular police presence minimized the fights tremendously.

In 1948, another attempt to create the Jungle Club atmosphere came about with the purchase of a Spider Monkey named Po Po (Poo Poo). He was small and weighed about 5 pounds. Po Po's name originated from a customer who would always say "Poo Poo" as a warning whenever dirty jokes or cuss words were being spoken in the presence of a woman. Po Po would hang out in the bar in the afternoon hours entertaining customers. They loved watching him eat his chips and nuts and make his chirping noise. Po Po also enjoyed drinking out of his little mug that held only about 1 teaspoon worth of beer. On occasions where Po Po would have too much to drink and stagger, he would immediately be taken back to the house to rest in his cage.

When the partnership between the Higgins and Marmas ended, Matt Higgins tried to run the business on his own. However, the long hours and pressure became too great. He was drinking heavily and his attitude sounded abrasive. Even his long-time customers started becoming more infrequent. By 1950, the bar's business had dropped off and Matt struggled to pay the bills. He finally sold the business in the summer but at a great loss. The family was then forced to move to a small apartment in Binghamton.

Other than knowing the Jungle Club continued operating, there is very little information about it. Eventually it was destroyed in a fire in the early part of 1980. I couldn't pinpoint the exact date, but I did find a demolition permit to clean up the fire debris dated March 7, 1980.

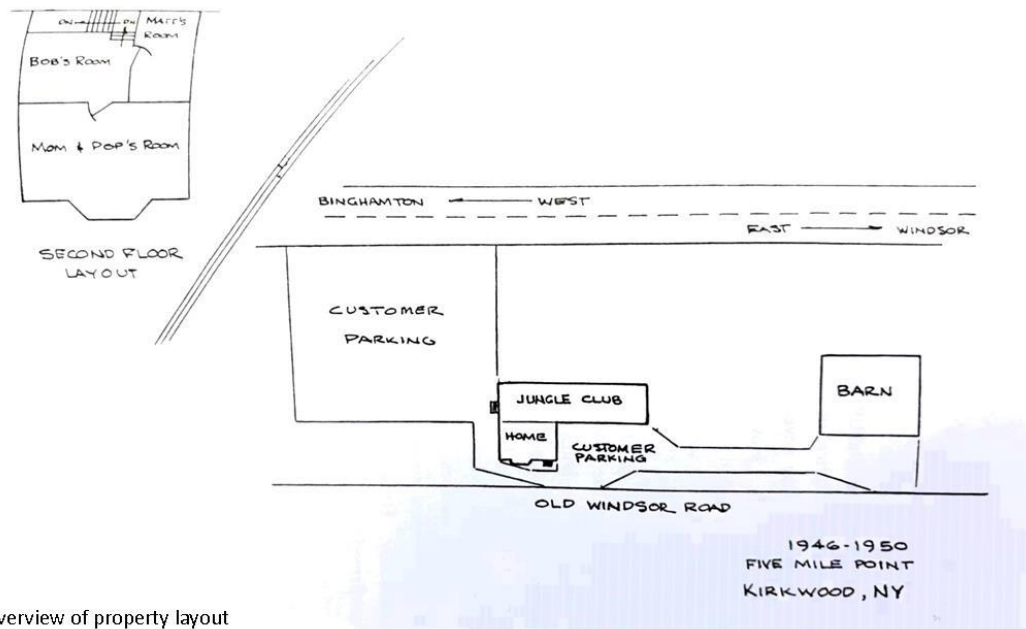
See pictures attached below.



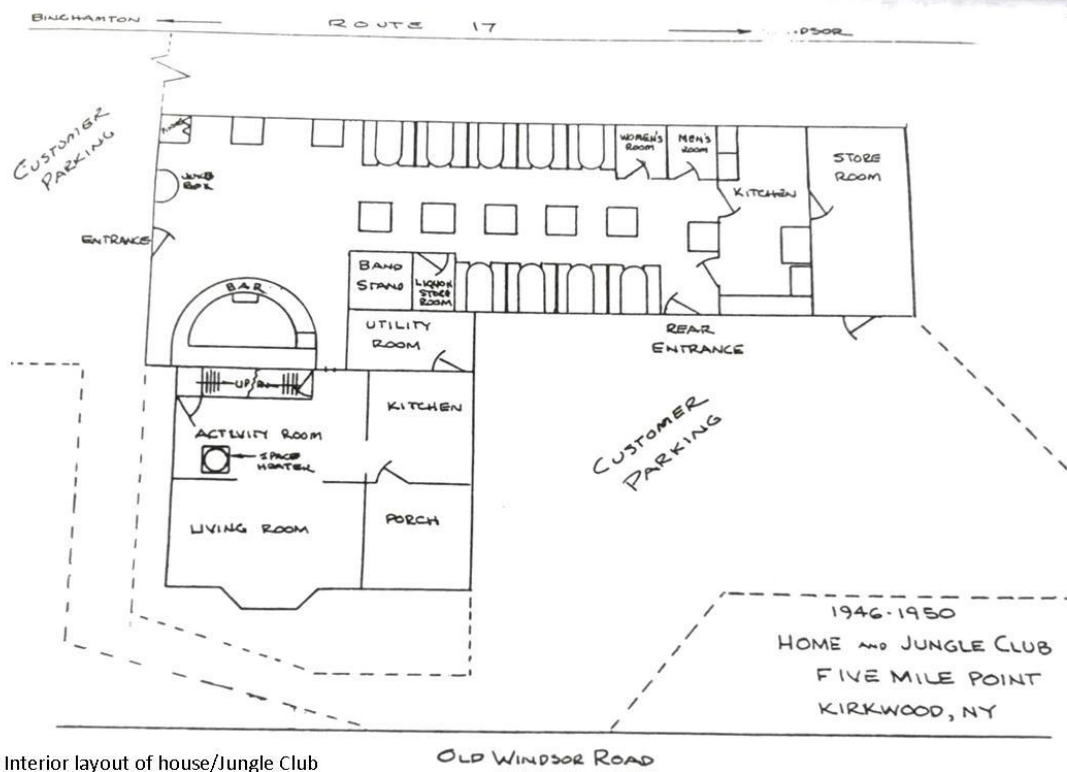
Front entrance to Jungle Club facing Hwy 17



Front entrance to house facing Old Windsor Road (Haskins Rd)



Overview of property layout



Interior layout of house/Jungle Club



Spider Monkey named Po Po (pronounced Poo Poo)