

Gabriel ('Gabe') Fiorella (1900-1977)

By Jerry Long



Gabe Fiorella, Sr.



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY
26 May 1922, p.8:

Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY
27 May 1922, p.2:

I have purchased Bondurant's Restaurant and Soft Drink Stand at 4th and Frederica and will take possession Monday morning with Gabriel Fiorella in charge of same. Old friends and customers are assured of the same courtesy and service as heretofore.
MIKE FIORELLA.

• • •
Mike Fiorella has bought the soft drink stand in Frederica street, adjacent to his fruit stand, from Ernest Bondurant. His son, Gabe Fiorella, will have charge of the stand.
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Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 16 August 1923, p.9:



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY,
Club & Development Edition, 29 May 1924, p.7H:

**"GABE'S PLACE" IS ONE OF POPULAR
LOCAL EATING ESTABLISHMENTS;
PROPRIETOR YOUNG BUSINESS MAN**

Was Purchased By the Present Owner in 1922



Gabriel Fiorella

"Gabe's Place" is one of the popular eating establishments of Owensboro. It is open most of the 24 hours of the day and night, and the occasions when it is not doing business are rare.

The proprietor of this establishment is Gabriel Fiorella, one of the city's youngest and most industrious business men. His patrons include many men who are active in business here. The place is one that carries an appeal, part of which is due to the personality and geniality of the owner.

Mr. Fiorella was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, but came to Owensboro with his parents when he was but three years of age. At that time his father, Mike Fiorella, who conducts the confectionary and fruit store next door, moved here at the solocation of his brother-in-law, Frank Velotta, and has since been a resident of the city.

After attending the public and parochial schools .Gabriel Fiorella entered his father's store at the age of 18 and when he became 21 ventured into business for himself. He owned and operated a motor restaurant-on-wheels, playing the fairs, carnivals and circuses in Indiana, Illinois and Kentucky.

Two years ago Mr. Fiorella purchased the business of E. A. Bondurant at 326 Frederica, which he has since operated. His patronage has increased consistently.

Gabe's Place offers a variety of viands and its service is the kind that the minute-man appreciates. The prices, too, fare most reasonable.



Owensboro Area Business Directory, 1931, p.36:



"GABE'S"

"JUST A REAL GOOD PLACE TO EAT," – this slogan is certainly a true one. At Gabe's one will find the very best of food served among surroundings which bespeaks sanitation. It is truly the outstanding eating establishment of Owensboro. Gabe's began business in 1921 at 326 Frederica Street and moved to 324 Frederica in 1925. They

employ sixteen courteous people and serve an average of five-hundred meals per day. The business is a partnership between Gabriel Fiorella and Joseph Velotta.

The active manager, Gabriel Fiorella, one of the city's youngest and most industrious business men, was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, but came to Owensboro with his parents when he was but three years of age. When he became 21 years of age he ventured into business for himself.

Mr. Velotta is considered the best chef in Western Kentucky and a part of the popularity of this firm is through his knowledge of preparing superb food.



Couieer-Journal, Louisville, KY, 14 May 1950, p.3C:
Article, Gabe Really Believes 'It's A Wonderful World' –
So He Is A Big Success, by Allan M. Trout



Cleanliness, cheerfulness and tasty food – those are the ingredients used by Gabriel Fiorella to whip up the highly successful Gabe’s in Owensboro.



Gabe Fiorella stands by the Anheuser-Busch clydesdales in front of his restaurant on Frederica Street in 1958



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 16 November 1963, pp.1D & 2D:

**Gabe Pinches Himself To Be Sure and Finds It
Indeed “A Wonderful Life,” Just As He Always Said:
Fabulous Life Story of Gabriel Fiorella, Pronounced Gabe**

By Margaret Morgan, Messenger and Inquirer

Young men from this area have not had to resort to the stories of Horatio Alger for inspiration for a long time. Owensboro has had the fabulous Gabriel Fiorella and the late James C. Ellis to encourage the ambitious. Dreams of these two, both of whom became legendary in their time, culminate in the great round tower of a motel at 20th and Triplett Streets which is holding the second day of its formal opening today for viewing by the public and will open for business today.

Engineers think of the tower as having its foundation near 20th Street. Those who know the story of its inception think of it as having roots in Italy, in Brazil, . and at Fourth and Frederica Streets in Owensboro.

The Fiorella story begins in Italy where Michael Fiorella, Gabe's father, was born. At 15 Mike left Naples to try his fortune in the United States. He found the going hard and soon returned to Italy. He married, and he and his bride went first to Spain, then to Portugal, and eventually to Brazil. There Mike served as interpreter for a group of Italian laborers.

Conditions were unsettled in that part of South America, and Mike was forced to return to Italy with his wife, Christina, and their three oldest children, Joe, Veronica and Gabriel. Life in early 20th century Italy was no better than Mike had remembered it, and so with his family he migrated once more to the United States. He chose Owensboro as a new home because Frank Velotta, his brother-in-law, had already settled here. (Three other children were born to the Fiorellas after they moved to Owensboro, William, Marguerite (deceased), and Lucille, now Mrs. John Thompson.)

The three older children enrolled in school, and young Gabriel attended St. Stephens. The word "attended" must be taken in its broadest sense, however. The youngster was far from scholarly. He transferred to the public system but changing schools did not alter his personality.

Allan Trout of *The Courier-Journal* told the story years ago of Gabe's formal education. Trout wrote that in 1917 Miss Edna Gates, principal of the public school, called on Mike Fiorella at his fruit stand at Fourth and Frederica.

"Mr. Fiorella, I've come to see you about Gabriel," she began. "Your son is 17 and still in the seventh grade. Now Gabriel's a good boy, but he simply will not study. He won't let others study either. He keeps the whole room in an uproar. I advise you to take Gabriel out of school and put him to work."

The advice bothered the extrovert Gabriel not at all. Work or school it made no difference to him as long as people were there.

He and Joe had actually tried a business venture earlier, a confectionery for which Gabe's duties included turning the hand freezer to produce homemade ice cream. But the business had not flourished. Gabe tried out as a tinner's helper, but high on a tin roof he found neither an audience nor even company. He might have become a florist, but delivering floral pieces to bereaved homes during the influenza epidemic of 1918 was at variance with his cheerful disposition.

Joe built Gabe a little hamburger wagon and the entrepreneur parked his new vehicle at the curb on the north side of Fourth and the west side of Frederica, near his father's fruit store. Street car passengers transferred at that point, and Gabe and his "Sanitary Hamburger Wagon" were there to serve them. The spot became a town gathering place. Gabe stood on the ground outside and reached into the wagon to fry hamburgers on a gasoline torch. On top of the meat he put a relish his mother made from ground cabbage, onion, celery, pickles, green peppers, and red peppers. In addition to the relish he featured cleanliness and a steady, cheerful line of conversation. He grossed \$5 to \$10 on weekdays and \$15 to \$20 on Saturdays.

Joe built Gabe a second and larger wagon, one in which Gabe could stand while he fried hamburgers and dispensed sandwiches and Cokes. Called the "Little Seal" after the famous dining room of Louisville's Seelbach Hotel, it too stood at Fourth and " Frederica most of the time. There was no noon business downtown. Everyone bicycled home for dinner. So Gabe began taking the wagon to the high school during the lunch hour.

"At first I used to pull it," Gabe recalls. "Between Fifth and Seventh Streets was just like a mountain! Then I got prosperous. The man who operated the express wagon used to come by and get two hamburgers and a Coke. That was 15 cents. I just gave him a dime more and he let me ride on the tail gate and pull my wagon. I was so afraid something would happen to it. One time he stopped so suddenly, even though he was just driving a horse, that he slid me all the way down his wagon!"

Gabe sold from \$8 to \$15 worth of hamburgers and pie in the 20-minute school lunch period. He continued to dispense cleanliness, cheerfulness, and tasty food. His two biggest days were the two days the most people were in Owensboro: Armistice Day, and the last day whiskey could be sold legally, both in 1918.

Joe built Gabe a motorized unit. The latter still went to the high school at noon during most of the year, but in the summer he took his food service to the river's edge to meet excursion boats, to ball games, and to county fairs. His mother had the concern for her son that mothers have felt since the beginning of time. She made him promise to call her collect every night he was away from Owensboro so she would know how he was getting along, how much sleep he was getting, and that he wasn't sick.

He can understand now her worries for a young man just coming of age. "The temptation was there," he says, "but I guess I wasn't very smart. There were the strip tease, the midway, the '49 Camp (an early Twenties version of the taxi dance), and the rackets. But the lord took care of me. I didn't take in a lot, but my expenses were not great, and I always came back with a few dollars."

Gabe's last county fair was at Owensboro in 1922. He left the fair at Princeton, Ind., in time to return home by Labor Day for the Daviess County Fair – by coincidence located across Triplett from where Gabe's Restaurant and Gabe's Inn now stand. The fairgrounds filled the area bounded by Triplett, 18th, and Breckinridge Streets and the Hartford Road.

Two factors entered into Gabe's next step. He says, "The city kept passing ordinances to eliminate food wagons for sanitary reasons. They were passing me out of business."

For some time Gabe had tried to talk his father into making a trade for him with Abe Baer, long the operator of "Honest Abe's" Saloon near Fourth on Frederica. "I don't know why I thought I couldn't make the deal for myself," Gabe muses how.

But while the Fiorellas deliberated Baer sold the business to a man "who lasted one year," as Gabe puts it. "At the end of that time I asked Abe's successor what he'd take for the business. He said something about \$2500 or \$3000. I told him that was a lot of money. He finally took what I had – \$1500 – for what I called 'the inventory,' and I leased the building."

That others had more confidence in Gabe as a businessman than he had in himself is evidenced by the fact that the owners of the building who had allowed the previous tenant to have it for one year, leased it to Gabe for three years with the privilege of a longer lease.

The ex-saloon had several problems. Before Prohibition Abe Baer had become famous for his free sandwich of cheese on rye served with a five-cent glass of beer. With passage of the 18th Amendment business more or less died. For the most part eating establishments of that day made their money not from food but from the backroom from pinball and slot machines and other gaming

devices. Gabe was determined his restaurant would succeed on the sale of food alone. But he was not willing to leave his first business until his second had proved itself. He left his hamburger wagon on the corner with his sister in charge. At noon he would put someone else behind the counter at the new restaurant and he would take the wagon once more to the high school. After all, he had been grossing \$125 a week on the wagon when he moved into Abe's bar. He recalls that if he sold five to ten of his first merchants' lunches at 35 cents during a noon hour he thought he was doing well. His merchants' special consisted of roast beef, beans, boiled potatoes, and perhaps soup.

At the bar Gabe served near-beer, buttermilk, "cherry blossoms," and other soft drinks. He put in a few little porcelain tables and "ice cream chairs" which had been well used in The Callas, and bought a small second-hand steam table "with two little pans."

"I took the screen out," Gabe recalls, despite the fact that kibitzers warned, "Folks won't come in here with people looking at 'em."

He tried using the name "Fiorella's," says that didn't go over at all.

The mirror back of the bar was emblazoned with "Honest Abe." It occurred to the owner of the new business that only the letter "G" separated "Abe" from "Gabe." So he added the letter and introduced the trade name which has become famous.

Eventually Gabe was able to concentrate on the restaurant to the exclusion of the wagon and then the depression came along. The friendly restaurateur learned that no matter how clean the food, how cheerfully it is served, or how tasty it is, the menu must fit the customer's pocketbook.

"People had a hard time," he says. "I tried to think what to do to earn their money." Half-broke himself, and serving a half-broke public he cheerfully dispensed 25-cent plate lunches, 55-cent steaks, and ten-cent deluxe sandwiches. "Everything's going to be all right," he kept reminding his customers, and it was.

The depression was still a vivid memory when World War II began. Gabe says, "The Lord put all of us here for a purpose. He plays the hand. He played it so I wasn't supposed to go to war. But I tried to do a good job of feeding those who did go."

Operating a food service in those days offered many difficulties. Gabe, like other restaurateurs, found the shortage of butter and sugar among his many problems, but these he overcame too. As soon as the war was over he moved to the building next door on Frederica and renovated both the first and second floors at a cost of more than \$100,000. Business flourished. In a typical year customers from every state and many foreign countries would sign the register at the front door.

Gabe often recalls the philosophy of an elderly patron of those days: "Son, there's always room at the top. They'll peck at you on the way up and when you get there they'll shoot at you."

It was at this point in Gabe's life that his fable becomes entwined with that of the late multi-millionaire, James C. Ellis, a man whose career began when he hired out as a laborer at 50 cents a day.

"Mr. Ellis had always wanted an interest in a restaurant and a motel," Gabe says. "The old Miller Field ball park was for sale, and Mr. Ellis persuaded me to buy half of it with him. We would go together and put up a restaurant and motel at the Triplett Street site between 18th and 20th. Mr. Ellis went to Florida but never came back to Owensboro. He suffered a fatal heart attack at Hot Springs, Ark. I bought his half of the property from the estate and proceeded to promote it.

"I wanted to put up a motel, but I didn't 'have any history.' I had no background as a hotel man. One day I was telling a representative of a chain supermarket about my problem. He said, 'Why don't you make a shopping center?' His company couldn't go along with me because it had

an outlet in Owensboro, but Wyndall Smith agreed to put in a food store. Other merchants came in, and I built the restaurant."

On March 19, 1959 the new restaurant opened. Gabe moved his 70 employees, his popular menu, and his philosophy of "It's a wonderful world," to the new location.

During opening ceremonies H. A. Woods of Evansville said to Gabe, "All you need to make everything perfect is a red jacket."

Gabe agreed. "I'll have to get me one, won't I?" Woods replied, "I just happen to have one in your size," reached to take a box from someone standing behind him, and helped Gabe don the first one of his two famous objects of dress. Owensboro police and firemen, whom Gabe entertains each year, see that his supply of red jackets does not run out. His other famous symbol is his Kentucky Colonel black string tie, adopted in the 1940s when Charlie Farnsley wore one as mayor of Louisville.

Being the promoter of a \$750,000 shopping center was not enough to put Gabe's busy mind at rest. "I always had an idea that connecting this restaurant with a motel would be a wonderful asset to the community," he says. "We have oil, gas, coal, electricity, water, a waterway, and an industry which employs 4,000 women who go home to husbands and fathers who work in many other industries. If our roads ever get to where we can connect we can consider Chicago, Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Nashville as our near neighbors."

The fact that hotel men felt he had "no history" was scarcely a deterrent to the eternally optimistic Gabe. "I just went to work," he says. He contacted leading motel chains. "I didn't get much encouragement on a circular idea. There are similar buildings, such as hexagons, in Oklahoma, Chicago and a few other places, but no one had tried what I had in mind. I couldn't find any motel people interested in what I wanted to put up. I've always said if anyone wants to follow me I lead 'em in the ditch. Ben Johnson, the architect, was the first person who thought my idea of a round tower might work. I designed the rooms too. I don't know anything about hotels, but I think I know a little about people. You've got to make people feel at home instead of wishing they were. I had to go out and get more than 35 Owensboro people to join me in raising \$340,000. I owe a lot on the shopping center. You see, I took that on myself. I had a million dollar idea with a ten-cent pocketbook."

When Gabriel Fiorella, erstwhile immigrant, steps out of his \$500,000 restaurant and starts across his \$750,000 shopping center toward his \$1,400,000 motel he pulls himself up with visible pride. "I pinch myself when I see it – all that color, all that light," he beams. "I guess you could say I'm the man who parlayed a hamburger into a silo."





Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY

28 October 1966, p.1B:

27 March 1989, p.1C:



On left: Artist At Work – Owensboroan Elmer Cecil does a novel type of art work by hand-molding cement into the shapes of cartoon characters, animals or real persons. Here he is putting the last speck of paint on his most ambitious project to date, “Gig Gabe”. On right: Gabe Fiorella Sr.’s statue waves from its new home on Burlew Boulevard.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 24 January 1977, p1A:



Gabriel "Gabe" Fiorella Sr., a Brazilian born restaurateur who put together a thriving restaurant and hotel business by starting out with a hamburger wagon in downtown Owensboro, died Sunday at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital. He was 76.

Fiorella suffered a stroke Thursday night at his home at 910 Cottage Drive. He died Sunday afternoon at 2:30 in the hospital.

Fiorella, who was known for his optimistic expression "it's a wonderful world," came to Owensboro in 1902 when his father, Michael Fiorella, became discouraged by conditions in Brazil, where he was living after emigrating from his native Italy. The business that young Fiorella would build into a hotel, restaurant and shopping center complex began in 1917 when his father agreed to let him leave the seventh grade at St. Stephen school to open a hamburger wagon at Fourth and Frederica streets.

The location at the crossroads of the city's trolley system proved to be a good one, allowing him to gross \$5 to \$10 on weekdays and as much as \$25 on Saturdays.

That first wagon, which he called the "Sanitary Hamburger Wagon," was soon replaced by a larger one, "The Little Seal."

Fiorella moved inside in 1922 when he opened a restaurant at 326 Frederica St., partly because, "the city kept passing ordinances to eliminate food wagons for sanitary reasons. They were passing me out of business," he said.

The location was expanded in 1947 to include 322 and 324 Frederica Street.

On March 10, 1959, Fiorella opened a restaurant and shopping center at 18th and Triplett streets that would still be in operation at the time of his death. There he adopted a red jacket and black string tie as symbols. And it was there in 1966 that he placed a 12-foot tall statue of himself, hand raised in a wave to passing motorists.

In 1963, with 35 other investors, Fiorella opened the 12-story motel, Gabe's Inn. The round building with its 120 rooms was at the time Kentucky's tallest structure outside of Louisville.

During his years of business, Fiorella learned how to please customers. "If I've learned anything," he said, "it's this: A man in the restaurant business can get along without anything except customers. When a customer sits down, he's the king. He's the one you've got to please, regardless of what it takes. If he doesn't come back, you're soon broke."

And he told the Messenger-Inquirer when the inn opened: "I pinch myself when I see it – all that color, all that light. I guess you could say I'm the man who parlayed a hamburger into a silo."

Fiorella was born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, on Nov. 9, 1900. He was a member of St. Stephen Cathedral.

Survivors include his wife, Agnes; a son, Gabriel Fiorella Jr. of Owensboro; four daughters, Betty Fiorella of Chicago, Ill., Peggy Wimsatt of Dayton, Ohio, Mary Michael Hayden of Owensboro and Margie A. Collignon of Littleton, Colo.; 21 grandchildren; two great-grandchildren and a sister, Mrs. John E. Thompson of Owensboro.

Funeral services will be at 9 a.m. Wednesday at St. Stephen Cathedral. Burial will be in Mater Dolorosa Cemetery. Visitation at Haley-McGinnis and Owensboro Funeral Home after 5 p.m. today. Prayers will be said at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday.

The family requests that expressions of sympathy take the form of contributions to the Wendell Foster Center and the Owensboro Council for Retarded Citizens.



**Owensboro: The City on the Yellow Banks, Lee A. Dew & Aloma W. Dew,
Rivendell Publications, Bowling Green, KY, 1988, p124:**



Gabe Fiorella began his restaurant business in Owensboro in 1919 with a lunch cart made by his father. Gabe earned \$5 to \$10 daily selling 'sanitary hamburgers' from the 'Little Seal,' which became a popular lunchtime gathering place. His business grew into one of Owensboro's finest restaurants, located downtown on Frederic Street. In 1959 the restaurant was moved to the corner of Triplett and Eighteenth Streets. [Painting by Calvin Maglinger, Owensboro Area Museum of Science and History Collection.]



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 26 December 1999, 3E:

Hi, Neighbor!

Fiorella took a simple hamburger wagon and became a legendary restaurateur

By Glenn Hodges, Messenger-Inquirer

In its rise from obscurity to wealth and fame, the life of Gabe Fiorella was truly a Horatio Alger story - an inspiration to all those brave souls who dare to be ambitious.

Son of an Italian immigrant, Fiorella took a simple hamburger wagon at a busy street corner in downtown Owensboro and became a legendary restaurateur. In the process, he became one of the city's most colorful, unforgettable figures.

Buoyed by an effervescent personality, fueled by imagination and ingenuity and overflowing with optimism, he transformed his hamburger wagon into one of the nation's finest restaurants, known across America as the "Steakhouse of the South."

Fiorella rode a wave of success that carried him over six decades from the opening of his first restaurant at Fourth and Frederica streets in 1922 to his death 55 years later.

Along the way Fiorella was an innovator who was always ready to take on new challenges. In the last 18 years of his life, he changed the location of his restaurant and constructed a suburban shopping center and one of Owensboro's most unique motor inns, all of which bore his name.

Fiorella loved Owensboro and saw it as a city of opportunity. To all who knew him and patronized his restaurant, his standard greeting - "Hi neighbor! It's a wonderful world" - became the keystone of his hopeful philosophy.

Gabriel Fiorella came to Owensboro by the way of Brazil and Italy. He was born Nov. 9, 1900, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, the third of the six children of Michael and Christina Fiorella. Gabe's father arrived in America from Italy at age 15. But he found conditions in the United States too difficult and quickly returned to Naples.

After he married Christina, they went first to Spain, then to Portugal and later to Brazil. There he worked as an interpreter for a contingent of Italian laborers building a railroad through Brazil. When revolution broke out in that country, Michael Fiorella returned to Italy with his wife and their three oldest children, Joe, Veronica and Gabriel.

Still unhappy in Italy, Michael Fiorella migrated once more to the United States. In 1902, he moved to Owensboro because his brother-in-law Frank Velotta had settled here.

Gabriel attended St. Stephen elementary school for five years and then transferred to a public school for two more years. Going to school and trying to be a scholar just didn't agree with Gabe.

In 1950, the great Courier-Journal columnist Allan Trout told the story of how Gabe Fiorella and formal education parted ways.

Trout wrote that in 1917 Miss Edna Gates, the principal of a grade school in Owensboro, went to the fruit store of Michael Fiorella at Fourth and Frederica streets.

"Mr. Fiorella, I've come to see you about Gabriel," she said. "Your son is 17 and still in the seventh grade. Now Gabriel's a good boy, but he simply will not study. He won't let others study either. He keeps the whole room in an uproar. I advise you to take Gabriel out of school and put him to work."

The advice to the extrovert Gabriel was a godsend. Working or going to school made no difference to him as long as people were there.

Gabe and his brother Joe had tried a business venture earlier - a confectionery - but that didn't flourish. Gabe worked awhile as a tinner's helper, but he got lonesome on rooftops with no one to talk to. In 1918 he worked for a local florist, but delivering funeral wreaths to homes of families who lost loved ones to the great influenza epidemic was just too sad for his cheerful nature.

Finally, with the help of Joe, Gabe built a small hamburger wagon and parked it at the northwest corner of Fourth and Frederica streets near his father's business. It was a busy corner where street car passengers transferred. The spot became a favorite gathering place for people downtown.

Gabe called the little restaurant on wheels, "The Sanitary Hamburger Wagon." He stood on the ground outside and reached into the wagon to cook hamburgers on a gas torch. On top of the burgers he would put his mother's favorite relish made from ground cabbage, onions, celery, pickles and green and red peppers. In addition to good food, he emphasized cleanliness and dished out a steady line of friendly conversation. He grossed \$5 to \$10 on weekdays and \$15 to \$20 on Saturdays.

Gabe put his profits back into his business, and Joe built a second and larger wagon, one in which Gabe could stand and fry hamburgers and dispense sandwiches and Cokes. The second wagon was called the "Little Seal," a name inspired by the famous dining room at the Seelbach Hotel in Louisville. When business downtown was slow at noon, Gabe began taking the wagon to the high school to sell lunch to students.

He started paying the express man with two hamburgers, a Coke and a nickel to let Gabe sit on the end gate of his horse-drawn delivery wagon as he pulled the hamburger wagon to the school.

"This forerunner of the hot lunch program in Owensboro schools went like a house afire," Allan Trout later observed.

As business got even better, brother Joe built a motorized version of the hamburger stand, and Gabe began selling food at baseball games, carnivals, fairs and outings. He even took his food service to excursion boats and floating dance pavilions at the riverfront. As he prospered Gabe outgrew the motorized wagon in 1922 and moved inside a building at Fourth and Frederica, which before Prohibition had been Abe Baer's Saloon. But Gabe continued taking the wagon to the high school.

He was making \$125 a week with the food wagon when he moved into the bar. He started out calling the food establishment, "Fiorella's." But the name didn't catch on. The mirror behind the bar was emblazoned with the name "Honest Abe." Fiorella noticed that only the letter G separated "Abe" from "Gabe." So he added the letter and introduced a trade name that became famous.

Cleanliness, cheerfulness, tasty food and good service were still the ingredients to his burgeoning business.

Gabe also learned that his menu had to have food his customers could afford. During the Depression, Gabe sold plate lunches for 25 cents, steaks for 55 cents and deluxe sandwiches for 10 cents. "Everything is going to be (all right)," Gabe kept reminding his half-broke customers.

Times did get better for both Gabe and Owensboro. He moved to bigger quarters next door. When World War II was over, he took the next building north on Frederica and renovated both its floors.

While Gabe's business was growing, so was his family. He had married Agnes Kurz and they had five children: Gabriel Jr., Betty, Mary, Peggy and Margie. Agnes Fiorella was the day-time cashier, and the children would all eventually work in the restaurant after school.

From the 1930s to the 1950s, Gabe's Restaurant at 324 Frederica St. enjoyed its golden years. When Trout wrote his article about the restaurant in May 1950, Gabe was grossing \$350,000 a year, and he had 65 employees with a payroll of \$90,000.

"Gabe's variety of food is extravagant, his prices are medium," Trout wrote. "His food is succulent, but Gabe himself is the top billing at Gabe's."

The restaurant was open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, serving around 1,400 meals a day. In the early morning hours it hosted breakfast for well-to-do businessmen. At midday, the restaurant overflowed with the lunch crowd. Around midnight it was a gathering place for lawyers working on briefs, policemen, office holders, politicians and newspaper reporters.

"Gabe's was the place to be in Owensboro and everybody went there," said J. Richard Gaw, 73, who was manager of the Owensboro Sportscenter from 1957 to 1977 and is now manager of Ben Hawes State Park. Gaw worked as a cashier at Gabe's in the mid- to late 1940s.

In 1949, customers from every state in the nation and 19 foreign countries signed the register at the front door of Gabe's. The restaurant attracted such celebrities as comedian Bob Hope, actor Burt Lancaster and Grand Ole Opry star Roy Acuff. Former heavyweight boxer Jack Dempsey, who ran his own restaurant in New York City, once ate at Gabe's during a visit to Owensboro. James C. Ellis, the equally legendary Owensboro multimillionaire, ate breakfast at Gabe's every morning.

"You could go anywhere in Kentucky and the U.S. in those days and people knew about Gabe's," Gaw said.

The restaurant featured T-bone steaks, but "you could get most anything on the menu any time of day or night," Gaw said.

To Gabe, the customer was always the king, Gaw said. "He was very interested in finding out what people wanted. If they ate there much, he would come over and pull up a chair and talk to customers about the food and their lives.

"He was a very devoted family man and extremely proud about being in America," Gaw said. "He was a very staunch patriot."

Gabe was also a very compassionate man, Gaw said. "Time and time again he would see someone outside who needed a meal and bring them in to eat."

Gaw added: "All the time he was in business, Gabe fed the policemen and firemen at Christmas for free."

In the mid-1950s, Gabe's life became intertwined with that of the millionaire Ellis.

"Mr. Ellis had always wanted an interest in a restaurant and a motel," Gabe told the Messenger-Inquirer in November 1963. "The old Miller Field ballpark was for sale, and Mr. Ellis persuaded me to buy half of it with him. We would go together and put up a restaurant and motel

at the Triplett Street site between 18th and 20th streets. Mr. Ellis went to Florida and never came back to Owensboro." Ellis suffered a fatal heart attack at Hot Springs, Ark.

"I bought his half of the property from the (Ellis) estate and proceeded to promote it," Fiorella said. "I wanted to put up a motel, but I didn't have any history (or background) as a hotel man. One day I was telling a representative of a chain supermarket about my problem. He said, 'Why don't you make a shopping center?' His company couldn't go along with me because it had an outlet in Owensboro, but (grocer) Wyndall Smith agreed to put in a food store. Other merchants came in, and I built the restaurant."

In March 1959, the new Gabe's Restaurant opened at 1816 Triplett St.

Gabe moved his 70 employees, his popular menu and his philosophy of "It's a wonderful world" to the new location. When the new restaurant opened, Gabe adopted a red jacket and black string tie as his two famous symbols of dress. In 1966, Gabe placed a 121/2 foot-tall statue of himself at 18th and Triplett, the hand raised in his famous wave to passing motorists.

Being the promoter of the shopping center was not enough to ease Gabe's busy mind. In November 1963, with 35 other investors, Fiorella opened the 12-story motel, Gabe's Inn. The round building with 120 rooms was at the time Kentucky's tallest structure outside of Louisville. "I always had an idea that connecting the restaurant with a motel would be a wonderful asset to the community," Fiorella said.

Gabe died on Jan. 23, 1977, at the age of 76.

In its final years, the restaurant at 18th and Triplett streets fell on hard times; profits declined, and it was forced into bankruptcy court in 1984. It was purchased by new investors in 1985, but the once great restaurant never recovered. The building was demolished in 1989 and a convenience store was built in its place. The shopping center and motel still remain, the latter under different ownership.

In an editorial after Gabe's death, the Messenger-Inquirer paid a final, glowing tribute to the famous restaurateur and mused about his legacy. "From his 'Little Seal' hamburger wagon, to 324 Frederica St., to the shopping center, Gabe left a trail of satisfied customers, charmed visitors and hundreds of friends he encouraged to look at their wonderful world. Gabe helped to make the world that way."



Left: Gabe Fiorella, left raises his hand in his famous wave while standing atop Gabe's Inn. Right: The round building with 120 rooms, above was at the time Kentucky's tallest structure outside of Louisville. "I always had an idea that connecting the restaurant with a motel would be a wonderful asset to the community," Fiorella said.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 21 June 2020, p.1A:

GABE'S GONE FOR GOOD

Former hotel was once city's finest

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

When Gabe's Tower Motor Inn opened on Nov. 16, 1963, it was the talk of Kentucky and southern Indiana.

Nobody had ever seen anything like the silo-shaped hotel at 20th and Triplett streets, which was then the tallest building in western Kentucky at 175 feet — if you counted the beacon on top.

That day, more than 10,000 people — one fourth of the city's population — stood in long lines outside, waiting to tour the 120-room, 13-story hotel.

It's 12th-floor restaurant — Gabe's Atop The Tower — was credited with being Kentucky's first high-rise restaurant.

And Gabe Fiorella Sr., the man who built it, was the toast of Owensboro.

The former hotel is again the talk of the town nearly 57 years later, as workers from Evansville-based Klenck Co. are in the final stages of demolishing it.

An iconic piece of Owensboro history is gone.

"I was 12 when it opened," Kirk Kirkpatrick said. "The pool at the top was a big hit."

He said, "There was a TV show, 'Breakfast At Gabe's,' that ran every morning. I was on there with a couple of people in a high school play. I think we sang one of the songs. It was a local show live from Gabe's."

Kirkpatrick said watching the hotel come down is "bittersweet."

But he said his memories are "more sweet than bitter."

"I have great memories," Kirkpatrick said. "But having it down will help that whole section of town."

Gary Adams, a local preservationist, said when he saw footage of several floors of the tower collapsing at once the other day, "It reminded me of 9/11. That was the first time that it hit me that it was going to be gone."

He said the tower "was the only thing that designated that part of town, and it's gone."

Adams said he decided not "to tilt at windmills" to try to save the building because it became obvious that the city wanted it gone.

Today, the iconic building has set empty for 15 years — since October 2005.

When people asked why the building was round, Gabe Fiorella Jr., whose father headed the company that built it, said, "I had gone to Chicago to a restaurant convention. They had a picture in the paper there of two round buildings (Chicago's 65-story Marina City, two round towers that were then under construction). I brought it back and said, 'Daddy, if you want to build something crazy, build something like this.' "Gabe Sr. and his 35 partners did just that.

The cost was \$1.4 million.

Construction began on Dec. 19, 1962, and took just under 11 months.

In 1959, Gabe Fiorella Sr., then Owensboro's most famous restaurateur, became one of the first downtown businessmen to migrate to what was then the suburbs.

He bought the old Miller Field baseball stadium at 18th and Triplett streets and built his "Steakhouse of the South" on the corner with a shopping center just west of it.

In 1963, he became "the man who parlayed a hamburger into a silo," as Fiorella joked when the steel-reinforced concrete hotel opened.

It was 80 feet in diameter.

Its 120 rooms included 10 executive suites.

No room was more than 17 steps from an elevator or stairway, and every room had an outside view.

The beacon on top was said to be visible five miles away.

The pool on the top floor was 19 feet by 40 feet, and ranged in depth from 3 feet to 8.5 feet.

The outside of the hotel was covered with red, white and blue baked-in transite wall panels to add to its distinctive look.

But once the Executive Inn Rivermont, which was razed in 2009, opened in 1977, Gabe's glory days were over after only 14 years.

Long, slow slide down.

Owensboro Business College bought the tower in 1978 and converted it to offices, classrooms and a few hotel rooms for special occasions.

But that didn't last long.

In 1983, the college sold the hotel to two Nashville men — Frank Davis and Bert Ferguson. They spent more than \$100,000 on renovations, got a Best Western franchise and reopened the tower as a hotel.

Then, in June 1986, Senior Adult Ministries Inc. of Asheville, N.C., announced plans to buy the property and convert it to an apartment complex for the elderly. The group, which was affiliated with the Presbyterian Church of America, sought \$5 million in tax-free industrial revenue bonds from the city.

In October 1987, the church group reactivated the project with plans to spend \$1.9 million converting the hotel into an apartment complex to be called Franklin Oaks. It was to have its own library, music room and arts and crafts area.

But the plans fell through, and the hotel closed in the fall of 1988.

It sat empty for three years.

Then, with a surge in local tourism, Davis and Ferguson reopened the Tower Motor Inn. But again it didn't last long.

A few years later, it was sold to the National Foundation for Retirement and Housing Preservation, which also had plans to convert the property to apartments for senior citizens.

In 1997, Cyprus Connection Inc., a local group headed by George Christodoulou, bought the tower for \$408,000, hoping to bring back its glory days.

Two years later, it became a Knights Inn.

And in 2001, the name was changed to Sun Hotel.

In 2005, Cyprus Connection sold it to Regency Tower LLC and its managing partner, David Mirani, who announced plans to convert the property into luxury condos.

But by November of that year, Cyprus Connection was suing Mirani, saying he had yet to make the first payment on the property.

In 2006, Sherajul Hoque of Madisonville bought the building at auction for \$263,000 and \$2,700 for the building's contents.

He was never able to reopen it as a hotel.

In 2008, Presidium Real Estate Developments of Chicago announced plans to convert the building into a senior citizens housing complex.

But that never happened.

Hoque finally sold the property in May 2013, to a group of Pennsylvania investors for \$185,000.

They said they would spend \$6 million to restore it as a Best Western Premium hotel.

That also never happened.

In 2017, they sold the building to Bob Zimmerman, an Owensboro businessman, for \$500,000.

Last year, after wrangling with the city over the property for two years, Zimmerman sold it to the city for \$360,000.

The city made one final effort to attract developers to the tower.

But it received no offers. And now what was at one time western Kentucky's premier hotel is just a memory.



Gabe's Restaurant, 324 Frederica Street



Gabe's Restaurant, 18th & Triplett Street



Gabe's Tower Motor Inn, 1926 Triplet Street



Postcard of Gabe's Inn pool on top floor of Gabe's Tower



Michael Fiorella (1866-1934) and Christina D'Edigio (1869-1939), parents of Gabriel, were married on 16 December 1888 in San Polo Matese, Campobasso, Molise, Italy. Michael made several trips to the US the last being in 1902. In this year he made his home in Owensboro, KY, where he already had extended family – Michael’s aunt, Mary Fiorella Velotta (1835-116) and her children were living there since July 1887. Michael’s wife and children did not join him until 1904. His wife, Christina Fiorella, and their children –Veronica (6 years old), Gabriel (4 years old) and Rachael (2 years old), were passengers on the ship Konig Albert that sailed from Naples, Italy on the 10th of June, 1904. They arrived in New York City twelve days later on 22 June 1904. Also on the ship were Gabe Fiorella’s grandparents, Gabriel Fiorella (1838-1918) & Rosalina DeCamillis Fiorella (1843-1926). On the ship’s passenger list it was noted that the elder Gabriel Fiorella was going to join his son, Michael Fiorella, in Owensboro, KY. Gabe Fiorella (1900-1977), his mother, two sisters, and grandparents joined his father, Michael Fiorella, in Owensboro on 27 June 1904.

From passenger list of the Konig Albert:

No. on List.	NAME IN FULL.	Age.		Married or Single.	Calling or Occupation.	Able to—	
		Yrs.	Mon.			Read.	Write.
1	Antonio Corona	25		off. sing.	book keeper	yes	
✓ 2	Saverio D'Angelis	23	✓	✓	workman		
✓ 3	Gabriele Fiorella	66		off. mar.	farmer	yes	
neph	Rosalina	61	✓	Sp.	house keep.	no	
daughter	D'Edigio Christina	35	✓	"	"	yes	
niece	Fiorella Veronica	6	✓	off. sing.		no	
neph	" Gabriele	4	✓	off.	"	"	
"	" Raffaele	2	✓	"	"	"	



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 12 July 1925, p1B:

**M. FIORELLA HAS
BEEN EXTENSIVE
GLOBE TROTTER**

**Owensboro Merchant Sails
8 Times Across Atlantic;
Visits Brazil, But Likes
Kentucky Best.**

Michael Fiorella, fruit merchant at 324 Frederica street, is a distinguished man in a variety of ways. First, he is the father of seven children, three of whom were born in Brazil, one in Italy, while the others are natives of this city. Thus he may truthfully claim there are three nationalities in his family and they are all living here together under one roof. If anyone else in Daviess county can produce something as unique as this. Mr. Fiorella wants to hear from that person.

Again, Mr. Fiorella has been living so long in Owensboro that – as he puts it – he has almost reached the pioneer line. But what seems to please and interest him more than all else is his belief that he is the most widely traveled man in this district.

Mr. Fiorella, now past 59 years, has crossed the Atlantic eight times, was two years in the Italian army, made two voyages to Rio Janeiro, remaining there on each occasion seven years; finally he landed in New York, where, after a stop of three months, he boarded a train bound for Owensboro, where he was to establish a permanent home, engage in a successful business and acquire real estate holdings that would assure him affluence in his declining years.

Brought Parents From Italy

Before departing from New York for Owensboro Mr. Fiorella had brought his parents from Italy to Gotham, and they joined his family on the trek to their new Kentucky home. Mr. Fiorella's father died here five years ago at the ripe old age of 82. His mother, now 82 years, still lives and is enjoying excellent health at this writing.

"Brazil is a wonderful country considered from many aspects," Mr. Fiorella said to a Messenger reporter, "but the health conditions around Rio Janeiro when I was there were bad. They had a yellow fever epidemic and I often wonder how I escaped it. People were dying around me by the hundreds. . . When the plague seemed to be too violent to withstand I boarded a ship bound for Europe. There were 2,000 other passengers on the vessel. The fever broke out aboard ship and more than 1,000 of the passengers fell victims and were burled at sea. Still, I returned to Rio Janeiro again and for seven years operated a general store there. Then the wanderlust got me; I wanted to see the United States again, so I came. And say, in all my travels the best place I've ever been in is good old Owensboro. I have beer, here twenty-four years and every year I like the place and its people better."

None of Children Married

Just one thought disturbs Mr. Fiorella's peace of mind nowadays and that is that Cupid may come to his nest and carry away one of its seven lights. None of his children is yet married and they all live together so happily at the Frederica street home that the "old man" says it would be more than brutal to break it up.

Three of the Fiorella sons are in business. Joseph and William operate a garage at Fourth and Locust streets; Gabriel is the owner of "Gabe's" restaurant at Fourth and Frederica streets. The four daughters, the Misses Veronica, Rachel, Marguerite and Lucille are at home and – so daddy says – never forget the location nor the way to the cash register which is ever at their service in the Frederica street establishment.



Gabriel Fiorella married Agnes Loretta Kurz (12 August 1905 – 29 December 1980) on 10 May 1927 at St. Stephen's Catholic Church in Owensboro, KY. They had six children – Gabriel, Beverly Jean, Peggy Ann, Mary Michael and Margaret Ann.



Gabe Fiorella (1900-1977), and his children, Gabe, Jr. (1928-2009)
and Peggy Ann (1931-2019), and Dixie the dog





Mater Dolorosa (Catholic) Cemetery, Owensboro, KY



Abstracts of Owensboro newspaper articles by Jerry Long

- Owensboro Messenger – 1904: 6/28 p.8 (“The father and mother of Mike Fiorella arrived at noon yesterday from Italy, bringing with them their four children. Mr. Fiorella has been in the fruit business in Owensboro for two years and he is now rejoicing in the presence of his parents, from whom he has been long separated.”)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1922: 5/27 p.2 (Mike Fiorella has bought the soft drink stand on Frederica street adjacent to his fruit stand from Ernest Bonduraunt; his son, Gabe Fiorella, will have charge of the stand)
- Owensboro Inquirer – 1924: 5/29 p.7H (born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, came to Owensboro with his parents when he was three; opened Gabe's Place restaurant in 1922 when he purchased the business of E. A. Bondurant at 326 Frederica Street in Owensboro; his father, Mike Fiorella, who operates confectionery & fruit store next door to Gabe's, came to Owensboro at the invitation of his brother-in-law, Frank Velotta; when he was 18 he entered his father's store and ventured into business for himself when he was 21, owned and operated a motor restaurant on wheels)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1926: 4/25 p.10B (moves restaurant to new location)

- Owensboro Messenger – 1940: 10/29 p.5 (Joseph Velotta sold his interest in Gabe’s Restaurant to his partner, Gabriel Fiorella)
- Owensboro Inquirer – 1947: 7/28 p.10 (“Gabe Fiorella Observes 25th Anniversary Of Establishment Of His First Restaurant”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1955: 8/21 p.1A (“James C. Ellis Buys Miller Field; Price Believed \$150,000”, Ellis & Gabe Fiorella are discussing a new restaurant at 18th & Triplett Streets)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1957: 11/14 p.1A (“Shopping Center Plans Announced: Gabriel Fiorella Heads New Firm To Improve 6 Acres”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1958: 5/31 p.1A (“Million Dollar Shopping Center To Be Built At 18th And Triplett”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1958: 11/16 p.1B (“Gabe’s Shopping Center Will Soon Be Part Of The City”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1959: 3/20 p.1A (“There’s Still Standing Room Only As Crowds Come To See New Gabe’s”, restaurant opened today)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1962: 4/19 p.1A (“Million Dollar, 120-Room Motel Planned For Gabe’s Shopping Center”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1963: 7/7 ("Gabe's Motel Set To Open In October")
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1963: 11/16 sections C & D (special edition on the opening of Gabe's Inn & Restaurant)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1965: 9/26 p.1A (“After 62 Years: Gabe’s Finally A Citizen Of ‘His Wonderful World’, granted US citizenship on 24 September 1965)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1966: 10/28 p.1B (“Local Artist Completes 2,000-Pound ‘Big Gabe’”, Elmer K. Cecil, of 3300 S. Allen St., completes 12 ½ foot statue of Gabe Fiorella)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1977: 1/24 p.1A (Gabe Fiorella dies”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1978: 5/10 p.1A (“Business College chief will buy Gabe’s Tower”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1983: 1/27 p.1A (“Two Nashville but old Gabe’s Tower”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1984: 5/30 p.1A (Gabe's restaurant files for reorganization under Chapter 11 of bankruptcy code)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1985: 4/17 p.1A (“Out to save ‘heritage of Gabe’s: One-time bus boy leads effort to buy restaurant”, by Keith Lawrence)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1985: 5/3 p.1A (“Going, gone, gone: Gabe’s Restaurant auctioned for \$369,000”, by Keith Lawrence; Hank McCain purchases landmark)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1986: 8/8 p.1C (“Restaurant becomes Gabe’s again”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1987: 6/27 p.10A (statue of Gabe will be returned to pedestal on corner of 18th & Triplett Streets), 7/4 p.2D, 7/16 p.1A
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1988: 5/8 "Shine on Owensboro" special edition, pp.20-21 ("Gabriel Fiorella: Hard work made him a legend")
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1988: 5/11 p.1C (Gabe’s Restaurant for sale”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1988: 6/1 p.1C (“2 Owensboro restaurants closing doors”)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1989: 3/27 p.1C ("Gabe's wave of the future is from Burlew perch", by Dan Heckel; statue of Gabe Fiorella has been moved from Gabe’s Shopping Center to Burlew Boulevard Mini-Storage, statue was built by Elmer Cecil in 1965)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1989: 6/22 p.1C ("Gabe's Restaurant being razed; convenience store will be built", by Stewart Jennison; Gabe's was started in 1922 by Gabe Fiorella Sr.; in 1959, the location was moved from 326 Frederica St. to the corner of 18th & Triplett streets;

Fiorella died in 1977; Hank McCain and three other investors bought the building in 1985; it operated for a time as Hank's Steakhouse and then as Gabe's under a lease to Mark Hanselman; but revenues weren't adequate to pay overhead on the large building, which spans 24,480 square feet on two floors; the restaurant closed last June. the corner parcel of about 1.4 acres will be sold to Pantry Inc.; the remainder of the Gabe's Shopping Center property is owned by Fiorella's descendants)

- Messenger-Inquirer – 1989: 10/14 p.1B (“Future uncertain for former motor inn”, by Keith Lawrence)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 1999: 12/26 p.3E (“Hi, Neighbor! Fiorella took a simple hamburger wagon and became a legendary restaurateur”, by Glenn Hodges; the life of Gabe Fiorella was truly a Horatio Alger story, son of an Italian immigrant, Fiorella he transformed his hamburger wagon into one of the nation's finest restaurants, known across America as the "Steakhouse of the South"; he came to Owensboro by the way of Brazil and Italy; he was born Nov. 9, 1900, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, the third of the six children of Michael and Christina Fiorella; Gabe's father arrived in America from Italy at age 15, but he found conditions in the United States too difficult and quickly returned to Naples; after he married Christina, they went first to Spain, then to Portugal and later to Brazil, there he worked as an interpreter for a contingent of Italian laborers building a railroad through Brazil, when revolution broke out in that country, Michael Fiorella returned to Italy with his wife and their three oldest children, Joe, Veronica and Gabriel; Michael Fiorella in 1902 migrated to the US and located in Owensboro because his brother-in-law Frank Velotta had settled here; with the help of Joe, Gabe built a small hamburger wagon and parked it at the northwest corner of Fourth and Frederica streets near his father's business, it was a busy corner the spot became a favorite gathering place for people downtown; he called the little restaurant on wheels, "The Sanitary Hamburger Wagon"; he and Joe built a second and larger wagon, the "Little Seal," in 1922 he moved inside a building at Fourth and Frederica, which before Prohibition had been Abe Baer's Saloon; when World War II was over, he took the next building north on Frederica and renovated both its floors; from the 1930s to the 1950s, Gabe's Restaurant at 324 Frederica St. enjoyed its golden years; in May 1950, Gabe was grossing \$350,000 a year, and he had 65 employees with a payroll of \$90,000; the restaurant was open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, serving around 1,400 meals a day; in 1949, customers from every state in the nation and 19 foreign countries signed the register at the front door of Gabe's; the restaurant attracted such celebrities as Bob Hope, Burt Lancaster, Roy Acuff & Jack Dempsey, James C. Ellis, the Owensboro multimillionaire & Gabe purchased the old Miller Field ballpark and they put up a restaurant, shopping center and motel at the Triplett Street site between 18th and 20th streets; after Ellis' death Gabe bought his half of the property from the (Ellis) estate; in March 1959, the new Gabe's Restaurant opened at 1816 Triplett St.; in 1966 Gabe placed a 12 1/2 foot-tall statue of himself at 18th and Triplett, the hand raised in his famous wave to passing motorists; in November 1963, with 35 other investors, Fiorella opened the 12-story motel, Gabe's Inn, the round building with 120 rooms was at the time Kentucky's tallest structure outside of Louisville; in its final years, the restaurant at 18th and Triplett streets fell on hard times; profits declined, and it was forced into bankruptcy court in 1984, it was purchased by new investors in 1985, but the once great restaurant never recovered, the building was demolished in 1989 and a convenience store was built in its place; the shopping center and motel still remain, the latter under different ownership)

- Messenger-Inquirer – 2010: 11/18 p.1C ("Gabe and his food pushcart might not make it in Owensboro today", by Keith Lawrence)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 2012: 9/13 p.1C ("Peanut butter ought to be in title", by Keith Lawrence; Gabe's 1935 menu)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 2020: 6/9 p.1A ("Wrecking ball begins razing Gabe's Tower", by Renee Beasley Jones)
- Messenger-Inquirer – 2020: 6/21 p.1A ("Gabe's Gone for Good: Former hotel was once city's finest", by Keith Lawrence; when Gabe's Tower Motor Inn opened on Nov. 16, 1963, it was the talk of Kentucky and southern Indiana; the silo-shaped hotel at 20th and Triplett streets, which was then the tallest building in western Kentucky at 175 feet, if you counted the beacon on top; that day, more than 10,000 people - one fourth of the city's population - stood in long lines outside, waiting to tour the 120-room, 13-story hotel; it's 12th-floor restaurant, Gabe's Atop The Tower, was credited with being Kentucky's first high-rise restaurant; the pool at the top was a big hit; there was a TV show, 'Breakfast At Gabe's,' that ran every morning; Gabe Fiorella Sr., the man who built it, was the toast of Owensboro; today, the iconic building has set empty for 15 years, since October 2005, and is in the final stages of demolishing it; when people asked why the building was round, Gabe Fiorella Jr., whose father headed the company that built it, said, "I had gone to Chicago to a restaurant convention. They had a picture in the paper there of two round buildings (Chicago's 65-story Marina City, two round towers that were then under construction). I brought it back and said, 'Daddy, if you want to build something crazy, build something like this'; Gabe Sr. and his 35 partners did just that, the cost was \$1.4 million, construction began on Dec. 19, 1962, and took just under 11 months; in 1959, Gabe Fiorella Sr., then Owensboro's most famous restaurateur, became one of the first downtown businessmen to migrate to what was then the suburbs; he bought the old Miller Field baseball stadium at 18th and Triplett streets and built his "Steakhouse of the South" on the corner with a shopping center just west of it; in 1963, he became "the man who parlayed a hamburger into a silo," as Fiorella joked when the steel-reinforced concrete hotel opened; it was 80 feet in diameter; its 120 rooms included 10 executive suites, no room was more than 17 steps from an elevator or stairway, and every room had an outside view, the beacon on top was said to be visible five miles away, the pool on the top floor was 19 feet by 40 feet, and ranged in depth from 3 feet to 8.5 feet, the outside of the hotel was covered with red, white and blue baked-in transite wall panels to add to its distinctive look; once the Executive Inn Rivermont, which was razed in 2009, opened in 1977, Gabe's glory days were over after only 14 years; Owensboro Business College bought the tower in 1978 and converted it to offices, classrooms and a few hotel rooms for special occasions; in 1983, the college sold the hotel to two Nashville men, Frank Davis and Bert Ferguson, they spent more than \$100,000 on renovations, got a Best Western franchise and reopened the tower as a hotel; then, in June 1986, Senior Adult Ministries Inc. of Asheville, NC, announced plans to buy the property and convert it to an apartment complex for the elderly, the group, which was affiliated with the Presbyterian Church of America, sought \$5 million in tax-free industrial revenue bonds from the city; in October 1987, the church group reactivated the project with plans to spend \$1.9 million converting the hotel into an apartment complex to be called Franklin Oaks, but the plans fell through, and the hotel closed in the fall of 1988; it sat empty for three years, then, with a surge in local tourism, Davis and Ferguson reopened the Tower Motor Inn; a few years later, it was sold to the

National Foundation for Retirement and Housing Preservation, which also had plans to convert the property to apartments for senior citizens; in 1997, Cyprus Connection Inc., a local group headed by George Christodoulou, bought the tower for \$408,000, hoping to bring back its glory days; two years later, it became a Knights Inn and in 2001, the name was changed to Sun Hotel; in 2005, Cyprus Connection sold it to Regency Tower LLC and its managing partner, David Mirani, who announced plans to convert the property into luxury condos, by November of that year, Cyprus Connection was suing Mirani, saying he had yet to make the first payment on the property; in 2006, Sherajul Hoque of Madisonville bought the building at auction for \$263,000 and \$2,700 for the building's contents; in 2008, Presidium Real Estate Developments of Chicago announced plans to convert the building into a senior citizens housing complex, but that never happened; Hoque finally sold the property in May 2013, to a group of Pennsylvania investors for \$185,000, they said they would spend \$6 million to restore it as a Best Western Premium hotel, it never happened; in 2017, they sold the building to Bob Zimmerman, an Owensboro businessman, for \$500,000; last year, after wrangling with the city over the property for two years, Zimmerman sold it to the city for \$360,000; the city made one final effort to attract developers to the tower, but it received no offers)

