remembering the Shire

Once upon a time, there was a little village by the sea. The villagers worked hard, and the villagers played hard. Fortunately, there was a haven for the villagers, a place they could gather to eat, drink and be merry, and where live music played every night of the week. This haven was known as The Shire. And unless you're relatively new to Cape May, you probably remember The Shire.

Story by Kate Chadwick





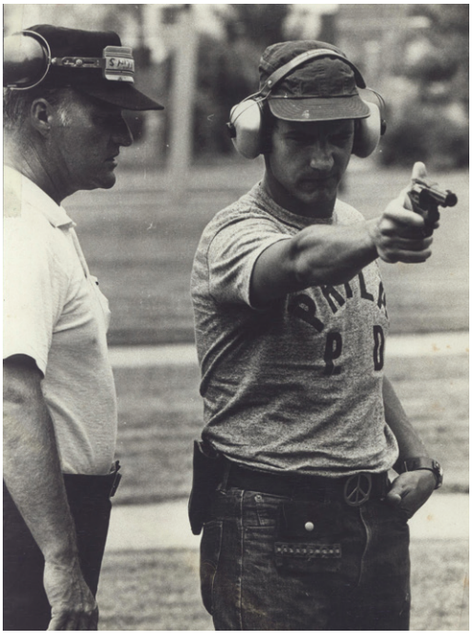


Shire regular, the late Lonnie Bell, with an unknown nurse and, right, Shire owner Wayne Piersanti at a Halloween party in 1989 or 1990.

THERE are good bars, there are great bars, and there are legendary bars, and The Shire, a Cape May mainstay at 315 Washington Street from May 1982 until owner Wayne Piersanti sold the liquor license to Congress Hall in March 1997, was a legendary bar. This is not to downplay the fact that it was also a successful restaurant, mind you, but if you ask most people who frequented the place in its hey-day, odds are you'll hear "I LOVED that bar!" (At least that's what we heard every single time we mentioned we were writing a story about The Shire, anyway.)

We recently sat down with Wayne, whose personal story is as fascinating as the bar's. In his pre-Shire days, he was a Philadelphia police officer, and his current occupations include realtor, commercial developer, property manager, and teacher. This is a man who, as he so aptly puts it, doesn't like to be pigeon-holed. His open, friendly demeanor, quick wit, and shrewd business acumen lent themselves perfectly to the business he called home for nearly 16 years, but, like all good things, it eventually came to an end. Here are some highlights from our conversation about the man, the place, the legend that was The Shire.

What made you get out of the business? There were a couple of reasons. I feel it's important to try to do a wide variety of things before the hearse comes to pick you up. I felt like that was one of the things I wanted to do with my life, but it had become somewhat repetitious after 16 years or so. It's like Muhammad Ali – always hanging on for one more fight, one more fight, except it was one more season, one more season. If you hang on too long, though, you might lose what you had, and in a sense diminish yourself, because you're not putting your whole heart into it anymore. Another issue was that it was starting to not make sense from a balance sheet standpoint – it was transitioning more and more to a restaurant, less liquor in relation to the amount of food sold, and fewer and fewer places were featuring live music. Live music is expensive, by the time you pay the band and the bouncers, etc. The liquor being sold wasn't supporting that expense anymore. It just wasn't going to be cost-efficient in a room of that size – that many bar stools couldn't support the music anymore, what with liability insurance, taxes going up, and so on. Plus, at my age and with a family, it was just getting to be too much.



OFFICER IN TRAINING
Wayne Piersant at Philadelphia Police Academy, where he graduated in 1973. Note the peace sign belt buckle. Opposite: Wayne pictured recently at the old Shire location.

So you went into it with the idea of a bar with live music that sold food, as opposed to the restaurant being the priority? Well, yes. And we could have just gone with that transitioning I mentioned, and focused on the restaurant aspect of it, but then we would have become just another Cape May mall restaurant with $12 hamburgers, and that wasn't really what I wanted to do. The music is what made it The Shire.

So you had live music seven nights a week? Unfortunately, yes [laughs]. In all the years we had the place, there were only probably a handful of nights in all those years that we had private

THE TROUBLE WITH EATING ITALIAN FOOD





...is that five or six days later you're hungry again. — George Miller

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parties or for some other reason didn't have live music.

There really isn't anyplace around here that offers live entertainment seven nights a week anymore, is there? I'm just realizing this now as I'm talking to you. Well, Walmart has entertainment every night – you just go there and hang out – it's a funny gig, I do it all the time. Seriously, and not to sound self-serving, but even if there are bars like that out there now, I doubt the owner knows everybody in the place. That was my living room, you were my guest, and we were going to have fun tonight – that was the way it worked. Don't be an ass, don't start fights, don't break anything, don't stand on the chairs, and we'll all get along just fine.

You probably had to break up a couple of fights and talk a couple of people down from chairs once or twice, I'll wager. Actually – we had a really eclectic mix of people, but everybody got along pretty well. In fact, one of the best things about the place was the eclectic mix of people. You had every type of person in there, yuppies, locals, just all types, and the music was the bonding thing. Most other places at the time were offering top-40 cover bands. I figured all I had to do was find 125 people in the entire county who were not looking for that, and I'd be packed every night.

You had several types of music, if I recall (and I admit my recollections are somewhat fuzzy). Yes, we started out with a predominantly jazz format – the first band we had there on a regular basis was actually a swing band, a holdover from the previous owners.

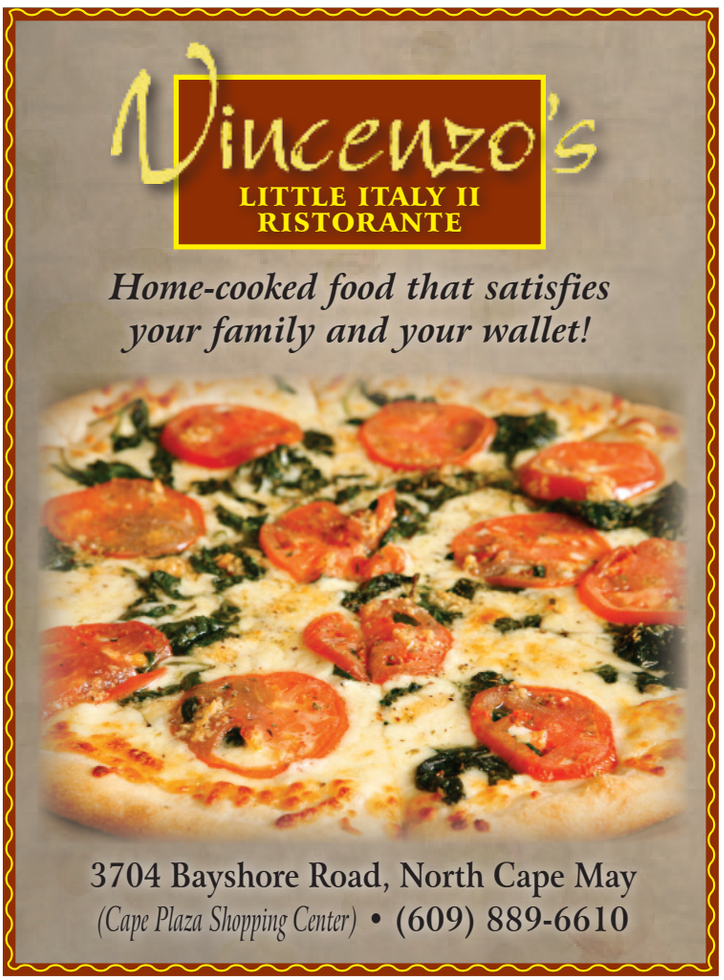




MOMENTS TO REMEMBER
Becky and Mark Chamberlain at the party marking the last night of The Shire in 1997. Right: Mike Dempsey worked as a busboy and filled in on drums for Steve Green and the Elevators.

So it was already a bar when you bought it? Yes, it was a bar called The Old Shire Tavern. Since I didn't have the money or the ideas for a sign, I just got rid of "old" and "tavern" and called it The Shire. And that worked for me, because that's where all the little hobbits hid.

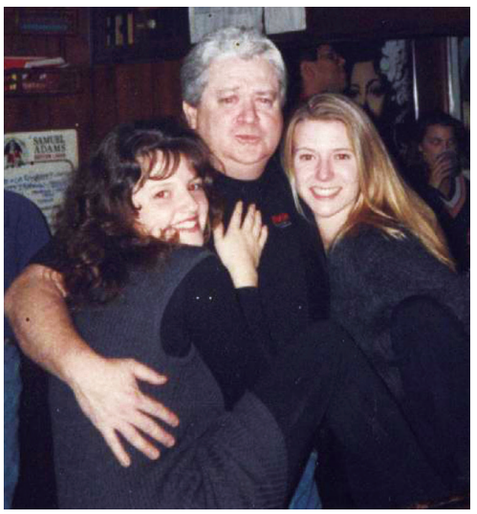
That's very cool – so back to the music. Yes – we started with a jazz format, but to be perfectly honest, jazz enthusiasts are notoriously cheap. And with live music, you have to get them on their feet and off their seat to make any money, so we changed it up a little. We did blues on Monday and Tuesday; what I'd call Third World – reggae, salsa or Latin-inspired, or sometimes











CHARACTERS FROM THE SHIRE
Left: Chris Day played several times at The Shire. Left to right: Jenn Carpenter, middle Mike Kelly and right is Tracey Tinkler. "Good people, good times and good friends to this day," says Wayne.

even country-and-western, on Wednesday and Thursday, and then Friday, Saturday, and sometimes on Sunday, we'd go with a mix of jazz-oriented acts – something that would have a really good funk, an R&B beat, something to get you moving. Sometimes on Sunday we'd bring in some original rock and roll. It was a real mix, and we had a rolodex of probably over 200 bands. We were looking mostly for original music, which meant that people would play relatively cheaply just to be heard. I would say to a band – the audience is your judge. If they're still here at the end of the second act, you're good. If they're gone, you suck and we probably won't be seeing you again.

How often were you there? Were you there just overseeing things, or did you actually work there? Are you serious? It was a 9-to-5 job, as in 9:00 am to 5:00 am! A couple of one-hour breaks, twice a day, eating in my car in the parking lot so no one could bother me, and then going home to shower and be back by 9:00 pm.

What was your best night there? And your worst? Huh – I honestly never really thought about that…..

We can come back to that. Yeah, let's come back to that – I've got to think for a minute.

Do people approach you all the time to lament the passing of The Shire? Yes! That's why I don't go out during the daytime. I go into town really, really early and I'm out by noon. I even get accosted on the ferry. It's difficult – even happened today, at Avalon Carpet and Tile! I find it remarkable that people remember it so fondly, but the town was different then.

Different as in better? Wow – hard question. Let's say Cape May was a very bohemian, artsy community then, and it attracted a really interesting group of people. We'd probably get arrested today for half the stuff we did back then.

Have you thought about best night? Probably the last night our bartender, Sue Doran, worked full-time. It somehow became this crazy water pistol, water balloon, soda gun, hose-from-the-kitchen, knock-down, drag-out water fight. People still tell me that was the best party ever. It was just such a wild, wild party – and no one would leave! I honestly just don't know how it evolved. The rugs in the place just squished for weeks after that. Another time, we had this wonderful waiter, Rob, who unfortunately has since passed away. He had an awesome sense of humor. Well, some sort of event was being held on the lawn at Congress Hall, so he just walked down the mall in his uniform with a tray,



lifted a bunch of hors d'oeuvres, walked back and started serving them to our customers on the patio. I couldn't believe my eyes, but then I always encouraged individuality and a sense of fun. I hope Curtis [Bashaw] doesn't get too upset if he reads this!

And how about a not-so-great night? Well, I guess I can remember a night or two with a bad band, and that can really kill a good night. If there's a line forming to get OUT of the place, you know you've got a bad band.

Where do you like to go when you go out now? I don't really go out much – I get to bed pretty early these days. I mostly go out with my wife, because I won't drink and drive. I like Mayer's. I can walk there and crawl home if I have to. I also like the Harborview. And The Brown Room, for sure.

Do you do the real estate thing full-time now? No, I gave up full-time about three or four years ago. I've taught real estate courses at ACCC, I manage the property where The Shire was, which I still own, along with a couple of other properties. Managing them is about a 30-hour-per week job in and of itself.

Do you ever regret closing The Shire? Well, actually, here's what I do. Whenever I want to revisit that era, I invite 200 people over to the house, tell them they're going to party their asses off while I slave over a 400-degree stove in the back and poke my head out every once in a while they get drunk, and pee or throw up wherever the hell they happen to be standing. And then when we're done and I'm trying to clean up, a cop can come over and tell me I'm playing the music one minute after hours, and then I can hang out in City Hall till 5:00 in the morning, waiting around for my summons so I can be in court a couple of days later. Of course I'm kidding, but that's what I think about when I miss the place.



LAST NIGHT AT THE SHIRE
"Frankie Flowers" from Wildwood, Jim Penn, Jimmy Sheeran, Wayne Piersanti, Tracey Tinkler, Jenn Carpenter, and Mike Kelly. The Shire closed for good in March of 1997.

Any lessons learned from your experiences at The Shire? Well, I'll tell you probably the most important one. Sometimes I used to worry that, having gone from being a police officer, wanting to make the world a better place, to running this crazy bar – well, it just wasn't important enough, you know? And one night I was sitting lamenting to the late, great Mrs. Carney, and she said to me "Wayne, there is absolutely nothing wrong with people having a good time, and that's all there is to it." And that stuck with me, because she was right.

