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Fire takes the Little Harlem Hotel

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As he stood on the curb watching the 70-year history of the Little Harlem Hotel being swallowed in bright orange flames, former City Court Judge Wilbur Trammell reflected that the place was the only landmark the black residents of Buffalo had.





Catherine and Clyde Collins head into 1920s Night at the Little Harlem Hotel in 1984. (Buffalo News Archives)

Trammell recalled being one of 10 African-American students at UB in the 1940s, and how they all met at Little Harlem for 10-cent Buffalo-brewed Manru draft beers. Trammell purchased the building a few years before a February 1993 cooking accident rendered the place a total loss and left the burned-out, salmon-colored shell of one of Buffalo's foremost entertainment landmarks on the emergency demolition list.

Hundreds of the earliest purveyors of jazz played and sang at Little Harlem, especially in light of the fact that they might not have been welcome at other clubs around the city. The Little Harlem's owner, Ann Montgomery, described in a 1934 article as a "middle-aged negro of motherly appearance," was welcoming not only to those of her own race in a heavily segregated society, but also to anyone of any group who couldn't find a place to fit in.



1934. Buffalo Stories Archives

One night, as she ordered a round of drinks for everyone at the bar, she looked to the lone white woman there and told the bartender, "Give that lesbian a drink, too."

As Prohibition agents raided “The Little Harlem Resort” in 1930, it was described as a place “where the color line faded under the stimulus of silk drapes and glittering pianos.”



Buffalo Stories Archives

Those were the days they were trying to relive in June 1984, when Catherine and Clyde Collins came in full costume for 1920s night at the landmark. Today, that site is a parking lot at the corner of Michigan and William.

Feb 13, 1993: Fire destroys landmark club for black stars: Little Harlem Hotel lost

HAROLD McNEIL – News Staff Reporter

The Little Harlem Hotel, a historic Buffalo entertainment landmark, went up in flames Friday.

The curious joined former patrons who looked on in shock but who recalled all the great black entertainers who performed there over a 70-year history.

The two-story nightclub and hotel at 496 Michigan Ave., near William Street, was gutted in a two-alarm blaze that was apparently caused by a grease fire that began in a second-floor rear apartment at 4:15 p.m.

Damage was estimated at \$150,000 to the building and \$60,000 to the contents. Fire officials were expected to request emergency demolition for the building, owned by former City Judge Wilbur Trammell.

Trammell said he was in the building when the fire began. He said the fire was accidental, triggered when a Little Harlem employee and building tenant began heating oil to cook chicken wings.

“I was there. The waiter was there. He went upstairs to cook himself some wings and a grease fire took off. Just three minutes he was downstairs,” Trammell said.

The tenant, who identified himself as James Gordon, stood outside and watched the building burn. He said he left the apartment briefly to use the downstairs bathroom.

“When I came back the whole place was on fire,” Gordon said. “I couldn’t believe it.”

Trammell and several others watching the fire recalled snippets of the landmark’s history. “Any number of outstanding black entertainers (have been here). I met Sarah Vaughn here and Lena Horne,” Trammell reminisced. “It’s all gone just like that.”

Many African-American entertainers — especially those considered jazz royalty — who appeared in Buffalo in the 1930s through the 1950s either performed or stayed in the Little Harlem Hotel in the days when blacks were restricted from other downtown hotels.

Trammell, a longtime patron of Little Harlem, bought the establishment four years ago.

“I bought this for one reason: I thought it belonged to the center-city community. I just thought it was the only landmark blacks had, quite frankly,” Trammell said. “I just thought we ought to keep it and I tried my best to keep it.”

“Ohh,” he groaned, as bright orange flames shot through the roof and a huge chunk of the building’s salmon-colored facade crumbled to the ground. “It hurts to see it. Oh,look at that!”

Back in the late 1940s, Trammell recalled, he and other black students attending the University of Buffalo used to meet every Friday night at the Little Harlem.

“There were only 10 blacks at the University of Buffalo at that time and we all came by here. We

used to drink 10-cent Manru beer. It was made here in Buffalo,” he said.

Tommy Fugate of Buffalo said some of his earliest memories are associated with the nightclub.

“When I was just a little boy I can remember Joe Louis being there . . . Billie Holiday, Billy Eckstein — all of them used to come right there,” he said, pointing to the burning building. “It’s a sense of loss because, face it, black people don’t have that many places to go to now anyway. And this was one of the main spots.”

Conde Peoples, a Buffalo firefighter who was born and raised in the neighborhood around the Little Harlem, said it’s been a part of his life, too.

“My mother and father, I can remember them going out. It was a big night out for them to come to the Little Harlem,” Peoples said. “I grew up and couldn’t wait until I got to the drinking age where I could come to the Little Harlem.”

“I really get choked up when I start talking about it,” he said. “It’s like a part of my life is dying right here. Over 20, 30 years of my life, I’ve spent some good times at the Little Harlem.”

Longtime patron Carl Johnson noted that it was long a favorite watering hole for many of the movers and shakers in the black community.

“A lot of political decisions that affected the city, particularly the black community, were all discussed here,” Johnson said.

Buffalo firefighters received the first alarm at 4:21 p.m., and the second six minutes later. They brought the fire under control at 6:30 p.m. Fire officials said the fire was difficult to fight because the flames had penetrated a loft inside the building.

At about 9 p.m., one of the walls of the building caved in, leaving debris in the streets, which fire officials sought to have removed.

Brent Trammell, 30, who ran the business for his father, said the property is insured but it was too soon to say if the business will be rebuilt.

“It’s a shame that so much history is gone and especially when things were looking up business-wise,” the younger Trammell said. “We were doing some renovation in the back and, you know, this was my thing. It’s killing me to see this.”

Meanwhile, Pam Kehoe, a neighborhood resident, snapped photos of the fire — for posterity.

“The people in the neighborhood care for the businesses that are surrounding us and supporting (us),” Miss Kehoe said. “I’m taking pictures to compare the old building to what the new building will be like because I know Little Harlem will be open again.”