

erebus

Portland's Haight-Ashbury

BY ANDREA RONNING

I WAS 14 in 1968. That was the year I first discovered the new-age counterculture right here in Portland. The year I first walked into Erebus.

Erebus incarnated the atmosphere of the times. Smuggling the 1960s direct to Portland, it was a Happening — a doorway into the psychedelic world of incense, water pipes, black lights, and love beads. Erebus was an avant-garde boutique heralding the arrival of America's latest trends in fashion and lifestyle. It was also the crest of a wave marking the start of the Old Port's resurrection.

In 1967, 19 buildings lined Center Street. Today, only eight remain. Fifty-two Center Street (the Thomas Gill House) was vacant before Herbert Gideon opened Erebus, but its rich history dates back to 1869. In 1868, three wooden buildings existed on the site, all the property of Thomas Gill: his grocery store, his home, and a dwelling occupied by nine Irish families. When a fire broke out in a nearby stable, all three burned to the ground. A single house, built of brick, replaced them.

Gill, a native of Galway, Ireland, died of fever at the age of 56 in 1875, when his property went to his children. The house changed hands twice. Then, in 1908, it became the Fraternity House: "a community center offering without the distinction of sex, sect, or age, a place of pleasant resort and a means of self-improvement at little or no expense." Its sponsor, Portland Fraternity (formed in 1870), conducted a free evening school for 25 years until the city opened its own free school. Fraternity House had an art school, a music school, game rooms, and a drama club. Area residents used the building for plays, parties, dances, and as headquarters for more than 30 adult and juvenile organizations.

Following World War II came the migration to the suburbs. With a car in every driveway, Portland's trolleys and trains disappeared. By 1960, the Old Port neighborhood had lost a quarter of its population. Many buildings stood vacant and neglected or were used only commercially. It was the rough part of town, and Dad made sure we locked our car doors whenever we drove through.

Then, the 1961 demolition of Union Station awakened people to the threat of urban renewal plans which called for the leveling of old city buildings. The restoration movement slowly grew until, in 1977, the Old Port Association and Greater Portland Landmarks were formed.

Herbert Gideon, with Erebus, was a pioneer of the Old Port resurgence. The Jamaican native started Erebus as a retail store on Congress Street in 1967, but soon decided to move to larger quarters closer to the waterfront he'd roamed as a child. "Back then, there was no Exchange Street as we know it today," Gideon says. "No stores, just boarded-up buildings. I turned up Center Street and saw the Fraternity House all boarded up with a little sign in the window saying 'Contact Center Parking Corporation.' I had the feeling that it was a fortuitous discovery."

What Gideon didn't know then was that the building had been condemned and scheduled to be torn down to make room for four parking spaces.

Gideon leased the building for \$100 a month and began renovating.

"A 40-pound dog walking on the second floor would rattle windows downstairs," he recalls. "We re-posted the floors, which were collapsing, with Douglas firs and timbers. The first floor was a basketball court/auditorium; the second floor had a lot of rooms; the third floor housed a toy library; and the fourth floor was a reading area. There were showers in the basement. We made our retail store on the first two floors and later the third."

By 1971, Erebus was well established. Like the Fraternity House, it was founded on high ideals... the



humanistic vision of the times. Gideon promoted free rock concerts, community workshops, and a celebration of Earth Day.

Erebus's bookstore, later called the Great Works Bookstore, offering publications for "the mind, the body, the earth, and the spirit," became the Book Co-op in 1974, sharing space with the Good Day Market across Center Street. Subjects included astrology, handicrafts, ecology, natural foods, metaphysics, and mysticism. Sound familiar?

But fashion marches on. The new and unique become old and outdated. The Erebus Float Shop (waterbeds) opened in 1979 when Erebus became the Tijger Trading Company. But the transition from imports to New Wave and Punk clothing never caught on in a big way around here. Sunshine Surplus & Salvage, another Gideon offshoot across the street from Erebus, sold vintage clothing in 1975, but a year later, it, too, was gone.

In April 1982, Erebus went into Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings. At auction in May 1984, Priatham Singh paid \$190,000 for the parcel of land including the Thomas Gill House. Now converted to office space, 52 Center Street is listed with Mark Stimson Associates for \$550,000.

Erebus is history, but The Tree Cafe, Gideon's latest venture, offers live music. The club's walls are draped with fabric, and second-level alcoves create a treehouse effect. There's room to dance. Seriously.

The Old Port resurrection that Erebus helped usher in has never slowed down. Buildings keep popping up like mushrooms in a damp cellar. But alongside staggering economic development we still hear from those voices who would preserve that which is valuable from the past. From the Age of Aquarius to the Age of Neo-Enlightenment... from New Age to New Age, again.

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