

Ed Thomas Cigar Store (cont)

By TOM GAVEY
Staff Reporter

Belleville's downtown has changed dramatically over the past 150 years -- as much as the city itself. But in that time there has been one unvarying constant: Ed Thomas Cigar Store on Front Street.

Yet that will change Feb. 15 when the store's current operators, Bill and Sue Bailas, turn the operation over to its new owner, who will open a delicatessen.

Then, another era in city history will quietly end.

While the store hasn't always borne the Ed Thomas moniker, the name has been there long enough to burn into the memories of most life-long city residents. Some believe the site dates back to the city's first commercial dealings

and was home to Belleville's first Indian trading post.

Larry Palmer of Stirling worked for "the" Ed Thomas in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He says that even then the store had a long and colorful history.

"They had matches in the store that said the building had been a place of business for 115 straight years. That was in 1949."

Added Palmer: "It was the gathering place in Belleville. On Sunday the store had every newspaper imaginable. Also, Eddie Thomas made a point of having enough money on hand to cash pay cheques for construction workers on Friday."

Although the inside of the store has changed many times since Ed Thomas -- and then son Don -- ran the operation, one thing has remained. The huge wooden bar at

the end of the store is said to be at least 153 years old.

"That bar came from the first saloon in Belleville. It may have been refinished once, but that's the same bar that was there when business started," said Palmer.

"Cigar" may have been long in the store's name, but ice cream was Thomas' true claim to fame. For decades the Front Street establishment was renowned for its ice cream cones.

"The ice cream was beautiful. Ed Thomas was so good with the children that their parents would bring them back time and again," says Ernie Asselstine, a store regular for 40 years.

Bill Bailas took over the operation three years ago and until recently he had no intentions to close. But, he says an offer was made that was too attractive to turn down. A delicatessen will open at the site some time in March.

The historic bar, however, will be saved. Bailas plans to remove it from the store and place it in his home.

He says there are people in their 70s and 80s who have been coming into the store since they were children.

"It's going to be a sad day when we close the doors here. I don't think you could ever replace the atmosphere of this place. We've come to think of our customers as our downtown family," Bailas says.

While there are memories of old-fashioned ice cream, discussions over hard-to-get newspapers and the like, Bailas says the old building also has some notoriety in its past.

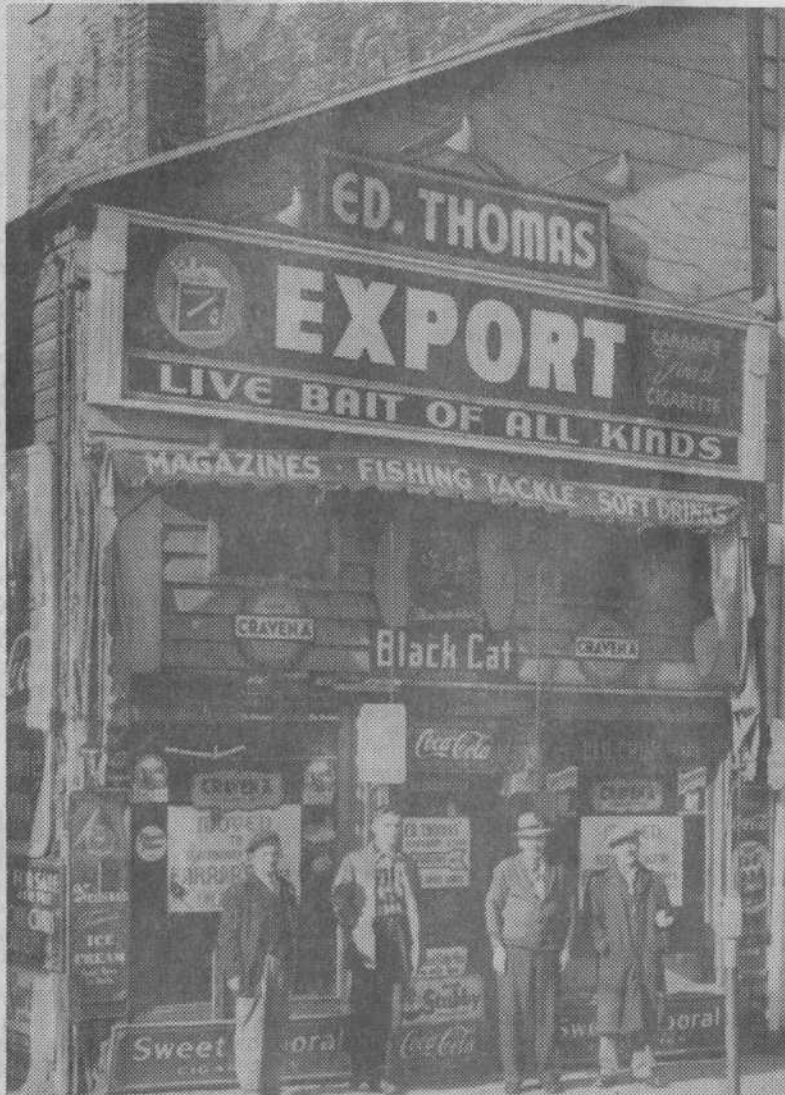
"I guess there used to be some pretty wild card games upstairs in the old days. I've been told a lot of money changed hands when some of Belleville's well-heeled citizens got together for some poker," says Bailas.

Ed Thomas has been dead for many years, and his son Don, who operated the store for 25 years, has also passed away. Still, the name stayed with the store.

"It would have been foolish to change the name. Everyone will always know this building as Ed Thomas'. Years from now, people will still call it by that name," Asselstine says.

The decline in tobacco sales forced Bailas to branch out into more magazines and even food. Bill Bailas says the store could never be run like it was when Ed Thomas was in charge. In effect, he has had to change with the times.

"The big sellers in the old days were tobacco and magazines. That was the hallmark of the store, along with the ice cream. With the decline in cigarette sales, nobody could survive that way today," says Bailas.



This is the way Ed Thomas Cigar Store appeared 40 years ago. Ed Thomas himself (in fedora) poses in front of the store which was legendary for its ice cream cones. To his immediate left is Larry Palmer, who worked for

Thomas in 1949, when this picture was taken. Palmer remembers the store as a "gathering place", a tradition that has survived to today.

(Photo courtesy of Larry Palmer)