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Monday, March 7, 2005

Will aquarium be one more Detroit treasure that will end up hidden?

By Betty DeRamus / The Detroit News



I haven't figured out what to serve at memorial services for the Belle Isle Aquarium, which now sits on death row waiting for the gas.

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Potato chips? Why not? Detroit is the potato chip capital of America, and back in the 1930s, 22 local companies sliced, fried and kept folks supplied with chips. There's only one left.

Guests at the aquarium's final send-off could wash down their chips with swigs of Cold Duck, the bubbly blend of champagne and regular wine introduced at the Pontchartrain Wine Cellars on West Larned. Surely you remember the Wine Cellars, one of many long-closed dusky downtown bistros.

Oh, it would be quite a party, a salute to all the institutions lost, the icons forgotten and the history allowed to die.

After the city buries the aquarium, perhaps I could lead an expedition to Detroit's Palmer Park. The west side park so beloved by joggers and walkers is the site of a two-story, four-bedroom log cabin that was built in 1885 and was once the summer home of Sen. Thomas W. Palmer and his fleece-spinning wife, Lizzie. Last time I checked, it was boarded up.

Of course, people hungry for rich scoops of local history and culture still have options. They can visit museums, go to stores selling jars of Sanders fudge topping and clocks made of automobile parts or pick up some Tupperware and remember that it was Brownie Wise, a divorced Detroit mother, who figured out how to sell tons of covered plastic containers at home parties. Or they can take in a show at the 10-story Fox Theatre, the largest continuously operating theater in the country.

The other day, I flipped through a 1997 city of Detroit pamphlet titled "Fascinating Facts About Our Fine City," which informed me that Detroit was the first city in the country to "assign individual telephone numbers, hold a state fair ... witness Henry Ford build his first car, use radio-dispatched police cars (1922), host an ethnic festival series ... pave a mile of concrete road (on Woodward Avenue between Six & Seven Mile in 1909), install a traffic light (1915) ... develop an urban freeway (the Davison in 1942) (and) found an 'urban coalition' (New Detroit) organized to improve education, employment and economic development."

But it's no special thrill to roar down a freeway, and ethnic festivals only spring up in warm weather, most selling the same brand of smoky sausages and T-shirts.

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Sooner or later, if you really want to show someone Detroit's heart, you wind up on Belle Isle, Detroit's island park and home of the oldest continuously operating aquarium in North America.

Barring some last-minute miracle savior, Detroit now plans to close the aquarium on April 3. Meanwhile, supporters continue collecting money, and visitors keep crowding the place, posing for pictures and saying their goodbyes.

I understand the city's need to slash expenses, but I'm not sure it's smart to shut down a 101-year-old institution that can't be duplicated and might not ever be replaced.

But all I can do is plan the final dinner. How about some chocolate bumpy cake with a tall glass of nostalgia on the side?

Betty DeRamus' column runs Monday, Wednesday and Friday in Metro. Reach her at (313) 222-2296 or bderamus@detnews.com.

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