

Smith's of Cohoes

As you walk into Smith's restaurant on Remsen Street, your thoughts instantly flash back through the years to the Prohibition era. The place is a time capsule, little changed since the mid-1930s. Smith's was built in 1873, one year before the Cohoes Music Hall. The building housed a silent movie theater for a time, and was then converted to a pool hall, and into a tavern around the turn of the 20th century.

The restaurant achieved its fame when it was purchased by Michael T. Smith. "Big Mike", as he was affectionately known, became a legendary and colorful figure in regional and state politics, achieving some renown in Democratic political circles on the national level. In the early 1900s, Mike Smith had owned a "beef house" on the corner of Vliet and Garner Streets to provide meals for the elderly and poor. After years of service, the "beef house" burned down and was not reopened. Smith also operated a tavern on Willow Street for many years. Familiarly known as a "poor man's club," it was located in the heart of the Harmony Mills district, and was the first of his real estate holdings which grew to some 90 buildings in the area.

Mike Smith's political career was launched in the 1890s when he held the office of Albany County Supervisor. He could not read or write, so whenever he was asked to read or sign something, he made the excuse that he had forgotten his glasses and could not see well enough. "Big Mike" held tight control of Cohoes politics during the 1920s and 1930s. He was physically imposing – 6'4" and over 300 pounds – and had a knack for drawing attention, as at the 1936 Democratic National Convention, when he entered the convention hall attired in white suit and white Stetson hat, carrying a ubiquitous cigar. His impressive entrance was noted in coast-to-coast radio broadcasts.

Mike Smith and his entourage traveled to the Philadelphia convention on a bus referred to as a "land yacht." The vehicle was equipped with a dining room, refreshment bar and observation platform, as well as a roof garden. The "land yacht" generally attracted more attention than most of the convention's events. The bus was parked in front of convention headquarters, blaring a recording of "Happy Days are Here Again", promoting the re-nomination of Franklin Delano Roosevelt for President. Mike Smith had campaigned for FDR in 1932, lending his support to the then-Governor of New York. A warm friendship developed between them, and flourished even after Roosevelt left Albany to lead the nation. On one occasion when the presidential train was passing through Cohoes, Roosevelt ordered the train to stop just so that he could shake hands with his old friend Mike.

Smith's Restaurant was considered one of the best dining establishments in Albany County. The restaurant was also known as the unofficial headquarters for the Democratic party in Cohoes. Among the patrons over the years was former Mayor of New York Robert Wagner. Because of the bitter political rivalry between Mike Smith and Republican Governor Thomas Dewey, Smith was not able to obtain a liquor license. After several failed attempts, he decided to operate his restaurant without one. No one dared challenge him.

Smith had an appreciation for cars and antiques. He often owned four or five cars at a given time, and over the years amassed a large and valuable collection of antiques. Among his acquisitions were \$100,000 worth of items from the Burden estate; many of these were believed to have originally come from the Vanderbilts. Mike's collections were housed at his Hamilton Street residence, often called the "big house." The structure was an architectural monstrosity, created by Mike's propensity for constructing additions to accommodate the items he acquired. One example was an oriental rug obtained from the Burden estate; Mike found he had no place to put it, so he built a new room around the rug.

Another of Mike's prized acquisitions was the bar at Smith's. The bar, made of African mahogany, extends nearly 50 feet, and at the time was reputed to be the longest bar north of New York City. It is said to have been brought from Tammany Hall in New York City by the O'Connor family, who ran a speakeasy in Albany, and later a bar and restaurant on State Street. Governor Alfred E. Smith was



The bar at Smith's

among the patrons of O'Connor's bar. Because of the size of the bar and its association with notable (and some notorious) political figures, Mike Smith was determined to get it for his restaurant in Cohoes. And so he did. The bar is ornamented with other unique artifacts. Two palace urns of Egyptian revival design grace the back-bar. The 5-foot tall urns are reportedly over 250 years old and are believed to have come from the Burden Estate in Troy. In the front of the bar is a smaller vase once owned by pugilist John L. Sullivan. The circumstances under which Mike Smith came to possess this item are murky.

The dining room at Smith's was added in the late 1930s. The floor of the main dining room has individually inlaid tile. An additional dining room was added in 1949; leaving the restaurant floor plan as it appears today. The huge stone fireplace in the dining room was laid stone by stone by an Italian stonemason from Cohoes. The room's fireplace was originally planned to be along the left wall as one enters the dining room. But when it was partially constructed at this location, "Big Mike" decided he did not want it there and had it disassembled and the wall replaced. The fireplace was then built at its present location, but when it was half finished Mike concluded it was too small so it was rebuilt to its present size.



The staff at Smith's on December 5, 1941. First row, second from right – Ralph Purificato, chef; second row, left – Ma Brow; last row, second from right – Carmie Toma, waiter. Also in the group is Fauncie Veronese. Can you identify any of the other people in this photograph?

The building that houses Smith's maintains its historic appearance, and the interior evokes times past. One need only think of the thousands of stories shared over the bar, and the backroom political discussions and deals over the years, to sense the history of the place, and its embodiment in "Big Mike" Smith.

Michael T. Smith died on December 31, 1949. He was 90 years old. On the day of his funeral, Cohoes school children were given the day off. He will always be remembered as one of the city's most influential political leaders, and a character larger than life.

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