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**If this Turkish bath could talk ...**

**DAN VOELPEL; The News Tribune**

Dan Putnam didn’t know what a treasure he discovered when he climbed through a manhole and down a ladder 15 feet below 1130 Pacific Ave. in Tacoma.

He stumbled upon an astonishingly well-preserved remnant of 1890s Tacoma – a blockwide Turkish bath with terrazzo tiled floors in green, red, purple, white and ochre and white subway-style tiled walls.

Putnam, CEO of PCS Structural Solutions, ventured underground earlier this year as part of his engineering company’s extreme makeover and expansion of Park Plaza South, one of the two monolithic, city-owned parking garages along Pacific Avenue.

“At first I thought, ‘Wow!’” Putnam said. “Then I wondered, ‘What must have gone on down here?’”

Good question.

Because the Turkish bath belonged to two of Tacoma’s most notorious vice kingpins – Peter Sandberg and Vito Cuttone – during different generations.

“If I were going to name the (top) two people in the underworld of Tacoma, those would be the two I’d name – Sandberg from the early days and Cuttone, who ran the Italian mob after the (second) world war,” said Michael Sullivan, local historian and principal of Artifacts Consulting, a historic preservation consultancy. “If those walls could speak.”

Now, through a twist of environmentalism gone wild, the former bath’s future fame will rival its past infamy.

After Putnam’s company, BLRB Architects, and Absher Construction Co. finish adding a floor of parking and two floors of office space to the future Pacific Plaza Building next summer, they will top it with a “green” roof covered in grasses and native plants. Rainwater will soak through the plantings and into a collection system that will pipe the excess into the old bath.

During the dry summer months, the owners will pump water from the bath-turned-cistern back to the roof to keep the plantings green. They’ll also use some of it to flush the building’s toilets.

The bath’s size – 25 feet wide, 100 feet long and 9 feet deep – combined with a smaller concrete pool room below it, will hold roughly 190,000 gallons, according to Putnam’s estimates.

“I was kind of cool to the idea when the city first suggested it,” Putnam said. “But the more I thought about it, the more I liked it.”

That environmental trick when added to the building’s other energy-saving features should earn the new Pacific Plaza the top platinum certification in Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) from the U.S. Green Building Council.

More than 110 years ago, The Tacoma Baths – Gottlieb Jaeger, president – operated below a Pacific Avenue barbershop and catered to the “green industry” of the day: loggers.

“There were a lot of baths downtown,” Sullivan said. “Before the first world war, if you were lumberjacking or at sea, one of the luxuries of going to the big city was a steam bath – whether it was Turkish or Russian or Swedish. It was a big deal to go in and literally soak the dirt out of every pore. … It wasn’t quite the hedonistic thing you might think.”

Unless Peter Sandberg had anything to do with it.

Sandberg ran Tacoma’s prostitution business around the turn of the century. His payoffs of police and elected leaders eventually won passage of a City Council ordinance requiring the cops to round up prostitutes from the nice areas of downtown and segregate them in Sandberg’s properties between Pacific Avenue and A Street at South 14th Street, according to Sullivan and news accounts.

Sandberg’s signature property? The former Schoenfeld’s Furniture building, which now houses offices for DaVita.

Sandberg bought Tacoma Baths in 1901, added three floors and reopened in 1902 to much civic fanfare as The Kentucky Liquor Co. His full-page newspaper advertisements boasted “the largest, finest and most complete assortment of the best known brands of Wines, Liquors and Cigars ever offered on Puget Sound.”

By 1920, however, a morals movement and the U.S. period of alcohol prohibition, hit Sandberg hard. He died destitute in 1931 – about the time of the rise of Vito Cuttone’s influence.

Cuttone bought Sandberg’s old address in 1940 and rebuilt it into the 400-seat Cameo Theater. The theater’s inaugural motion picture, “Hard Guy,” starred Jack La Rue as a racketeer who ran a nightclub where the working girls married the rich blueblood customers, then blackmailed them into annulments and cash settlements.

Cuttone, meanwhile, ran a protection racket for a range of illegal operations, Sullivan said. If you wanted Tacoma’s cops to avoid your illegal gambling operation, you rented a pinball machine from Cuttone’s company.

“You might make $100 a month on the pinball machine, but you had to pay Cuttone $300 a month to rent it. For that money, Cuttone’s people would come by and make sure the cops did not break you up,” Sullivan said.

Cuttone’s control of Tacoma’s commissioner for public safety eventually inspired citizens in 1952 to throw out their form of government in favor of the council-manager form.

By 1960, the City of Tacoma bought Cuttone’s abandoned Cameo Theater building, tore it down and built the nation’s first moving sidewalk between Pacific Avenue and Commerce Street. The Escalade won Tacoma a national award for urban progress.

Then in 1968, when local architect Bob Evans investigated redeveloping the Escalade, he – like Putnam more recently – stumbled into the Turkish bath.

The Tacoma News Tribune ran a story about Evans’ discovery, including a photograph of him kneeling on the terrazzo floor.

“Oh, yes. I remember it,” Evans, a retired city councilman, said this week. “I used to have a piece of the tile in my birdbath in my backyard. But it’s long gone.”

And he recalls the legends of the baths that he heard 40 years ago.

“As near as I know it, and I have no way to verify this, the bath was below Captain Jack’s Whiskey House. … It was a whorehouse. The ladies went swimming with the gentlemen on occasion. … It has a disreputable history, as far as I know it.”

The Northwest Room at the Tacoma Public Library has no record of a Captain Jack’s Whiskey House, though Sandberg’s liquor store did sell eight premium whiskeys by other names.

No matter. The disreputable history of The Tacoma Baths and its connection to Sandberg and Cuttone soon will give way to a reputable future.