

The Wildcat Cafe

MAP ID: C-63

DESIGNATION: HERITAGE SITE

ADDRESS: 3507 Wylie Road (Lot 4NW/5NW, Block 2, Plan 68)

CURRENT OWNER: City of Yellowknife

OCCUPANT: Wildcat Café restaurant

CURRENT USE: Commercial

BUILT: 1937. Repaired 1976-1977. Rebuilt in 2011.

CONSTRUCTION: Original log. New steel pile foundation in 2011. New log addition and frame roof in 2011.



DESCRIPTIVE HISTORY:

The Wildcat Café was the first permanent restaurant operation in Yellowknife. It was built in the fall of 1937 by Willie Wylie and Smokey Stout with the help of Margaret Wylie and Colin Wylie. The café served good meals for a dollar. In 1939, Carl and Dorothy Jensen bought the cafe and added the front ice-cream and soft-drink parlour. They also operated a steam bath in an adjacent structure. It was the scene of many important community events including a November 11, 1939 war veteran banquet, for which the café was able to obtain a liquor permit, the earliest record of a licensed drinking function in Yellowknife at a time when the liquor laws were very strict in the NWT. Carl Jensen decided to focus on his taxi business and sold the restaurant to Mah Gow in June 1941. Gow was likely the first Chinese entrepreneur in the community. The Wildcat Café was very successful in the post-war gold but the activity soon died down and with the development of the new downtown core, Old Town businesses had to either relocate or close down. Mah Gow was an older man of poor health, and in April 1951 he closed the business and left Yellowknife.

Tungsten Corporation of Canada Limited appears to have acquired the property during 1951 and may have used the building for storage. Red Hamilton then acquired the building and planned to demolish it in 1956, with City approval. A group of history-minded citizens recognized the historical significance of the old cafe and arranged for the Yellowknife town council to buy the building. Legal issues prevented any work from being done until September of 1960, when the now incorporated Yellowknife Museum Society and students from Sir John Franklin high school cleaned up the grounds and boarded-up the windows and doors to prevent further vandalism. The hope was that the building could one day be rehabilitated but the Museum Society had other priorities at the time. An attempt to reopen the café in 1967 was unsuccessful as health authorities had concerns about the state of the building. By 1970 the structure had visibly deteriorated and the City threatened to knock it down. A proposal then came from Territorial Hotels Limited in 1972 to restore the building and operate a licensed year-round restaurant. The City of Yellowknife Historic Sites, Restoration and Acquisition Board approved the project. Although the Wildcat Café was advertised for business during 1973, the rejuvenation was but brief and the building was again boarded up. The community banded together and formed a new society, The Old Stope Association, who took over the task of fixing up the building under the lead of Christine Bayly in 1976. Rehabilitation was done in stages, with the “Wild Kitten”, a confectionary stand in the front of the building, opened in June 1976. Repairs continued during summers of 1977 and 1978 with Andie Gedye as project manager. The City provided grant funding and local businesses and citizens volunteered time and material. After a series of delays, the Café was opened in time for the summer season of 1979 with Stephen Fancott as manager.

The Wildcat Café became Yellowknife’s most famous restaurant and a major tourist draw. It was managed at first by the Old Stope Association, followed by many groups under contract with the City. Progressive deterioration of the foundation logs continued after 1978 without intervention and in 2010 repairs were authorized by the City at a budget of \$500,000. Rick Muyres won the bid to rebuild the Wildcat Café log-by-log, re-roof, and construct a new steel-pile foundation. Work began in summer of 2011 and continues in 2012.

NOTES:

REFERENCES:

NWT Council Minutes, Nov. 4, 1939
The Yellowknife Blade, June 29, 1941
News of the North, April 13, 1951; Feb. 24, 1956; April 27, 1956; September 8, 1960; May 7, 1970; May 4, 1972; May 26, 1976; June 23, 1976; June 30, 1978; August 25, 1978; June 15, 1979 The Yellowknifer, March 23, 1978
CNT Phone Directory, 1973