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**SUMMER 2009**

# Soon Nipi

## MAGAZINE



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**The Lake Sunapee Region's Favorite Magazine!**



# Harbor Gameroom



1982 - Entrance to the Harbor Gameroom, miniature golf course at the side. Mark Humphrey, Doug Cooper and Allan Murray. Photos from the collection of Bret Wirta.

## THE HARBOR GAME ROOM

By Bret Wirta

Pike's Hall was a colorful part of Sunapee Harbor history for many years. It was a cavernous building, tottering along the west bank of the Sugar River where the Quack Shack now stands. My grandfather saw vaudeville on a big stage there. My mom loved it back when it was a roller-skating rink, and my dad remembers watching movies there. But what I remember was one of Pike's Hall's last chapters: when Dennis Hurd, Joel Thomas and I turned that old ramshackle barn into the Harbor Game Room, the largest arcade in the Lake Sunapee Region.

We first opened the Harbor Game Room for business thirty years ago. Now 1979 is pretty recent history, but it was the dawn of the electronic gaming industry. Back then the first video games like "Pac Man" were just becoming popular. It's hard for my teen-agers to fathom that there wasn't always an unlimited number of electronic games available on TV, computer,

or cell phone. If you wanted to shoot up a few space invaders, help Pac-Man munch dots or drive an Indy race car, back in those days you grabbed some quarters and headed down to the Harbor Game Room.

Dennis, Joel and I were just eighteen years old. Bubbling with youthful exuberance and with lots of help from our friends, we cleaned out truck-loads of trash, jacked-up sagging floor joists, painted a huge pinball machine on the floor and pinball logos on the walls, patched the roof, replaced broken windows, plumbed a bathroom, designed a snack-bar counter, built dining tables, and hung out some big signs above the double-door entryway and on the roof. On that Memorial Day weekend of 1979, the Harbor Game Room opened its doors as it would every spring for the next five summers.

We filled Pike's Hall with about thirty video games. We had pool and foosball tables

# Harbor Gameroom



*From the balcony - filled with pinball machines, video games, pool & foosball tables - and youngsters!*

in the middle of the room, and we lined up the pinball machines in an alcove that jutted precariously out over the Sugar River. We served snacks behind a curved counter at the entrance. Upstairs, we remodeled the old projector room into a small apartment, where I stayed. This lessened our worries about robbery and gave me a pretty cool place to live each summer. I would go to sleep every night with the sound of the Sugar River roiling through the narrow opening in the gates as it left Lake Sunapee on its journey to join the Connecticut River.

We were open from eleven in the morning until eleven at night, and one person worked the entire shift. One summer my brother Mark worked for us and often my dad filled in while I walked across the road for dinner (One legendary story my dad tells is that I disappeared and left him there making change for two days). Though the shift was long, work consisted of chatting with friends and making sure everybody was having a good time, so it wasn't too difficult a job. We wore Harbor Game Room tee-shirts (which we also sold). Joel's mom sewed us heavy aprons with deep pockets where

fistfuls of quarters jangled as we walked the floor. If business was slow, especially in the early afternoon or at dinner time, we could always open up the games, click off free credits and play them with our friends. But most of the time we were pretty busy, making change, cooking snacks, fixing jammed coin slots and, since we billed ourselves as a place for the entire family, making sure there was no rowdiness.

We were always trying new ideas to attract the families that were visiting the Lake Sunapee Region. We installed a gas pizza oven and upgraded our snack bar from frozen sandwiches to home-made pizza. We purchased a mini-golf course, which we laid out on the concrete parking lot on the west side of the building. We built a water fountain and wishing well (I suspect that many coins were fished out for non-charity use). I took pictures of our customers for a slideshow that played continuously on the old movie screen on the south wall. One summer we installed Skee-Ball alleys complete with tickets and prizes. We didn't allow smoking or drinking, and we even changed our name to the Harbor Fun Center for the last couple



# Harbor Gameroom



*Boys playing foosball. The building is gone now - today there is an outdoor pavillion at the site.*

of years to portray a more wholesome image. Though we did attract some moms and dads to our miniature golf course, and they might order a pizza or two, the Harbor Game Room remained a place for kids to just hang out. "It was our place in Sunapee Harbor," Joel said.

Weekdays were busy, but on weekends the Harbor Game Room was packed. Dennis remembers loading up with a thousand dollars in quarters from the bank on Fridays. Kids stood in line to play their favorite game or just to talk. Actually, they didn't talk - they shouted, because we had all the games turned to full volume; their beeping, booming and shrieking echoed off the walls. The music was loud, too, and when the jukebox stopped playing we'd open it up and click off a couple dozen credits. There were a lot worse summer jobs.

After a couple of irate visits from parents whose family piggy banks and wallets had been lightened by their children on the way to the Harbor Game Room, we decided to allow the local kids to work for us for free credits on the games. We had a gang of pre-teenagers who would line up in front of the big double doors before opening so they could sweep the floors, clean the bathrooms, wipe off the video screens

and run errands. Each task earned them credits that we would click off on the video games when they were done. The little kids would always scurry through their tasks, throwing their brooms and cleaning supplies in the back hall and shouting with anticipation, only to be sent back groaning to sweep a twenty-foot swath of floor they had missed. I enjoyed their energy (and not having to sweep the floor). Once a year we'd have a pancake breakfast just for them as a thank-you for all their work.

We ended the summer with a big after-hours party every Labor Day weekend. After that all the games were hauled away and we drove off to college. The last year of our lease we hired Steve Cousens to manage the Harbor Game Room, because by that time Dennis, Joel and I had graduated from college and left Sunapee for careers. Steve did a great job, but the roof was leaking everywhere, the floor joists were sagging, and no amount of paint could hide the fact that Pike's Hall was feeling its age. In addition, a small Japanese company named Nintendo had just released a video console that one could play at home without feeding it quarters. We closed up the Harbor Game Room for good on Labor Day Weekend of 1984. I think

# Harbor Gameroom



*Girls playing pool at the gameroom.*

there were some desultory attempts to throw a few games in Pike's Hall after that, but the magic was gone. The property was purchased by the Sunapee Riverway organization, and like all the great hotels and halls of the Lake Sunapee Region, Pike's Hall was torn down in the early 1990s.

Coincidentally, Dennis, Joel and I live within a few hundred miles of each other today in the Pacific Northwest. We've chatted about the Harbor Game Room many times over the years, and what it meant to us three kids, fresh out of high school. I think Dennis said it best in a recent email. The Harbor Game Room "shaped my life as it gave further proof that I could do anything I made up my mind to. Some people never achieve a realization that they can do great things and thus, they seldom do. I think I knew anyways, but the Harbor



*Front: Joel Thomas, Bret Wirta, Mark Wirta  
Rear: Dennis Hurd. Summer of 1980.*

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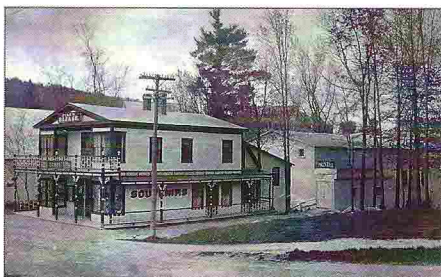
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## SUNAPEE HARBOR, N.H.

Game Room helped to prove it to myself early on."

Last summer my family and I strolled around Sunapee Harbor when visiting the area. While we waited in line for ice cream at The Quack Shack, we watched our son, Garrett, play a simple game somebody had bolted to the deck railing. If he swung a metal ring suspended on a string in a perfect arc it would hook at the bottom of the post. When Garrett finally hooked the ring he shouted with joy, right there where the Harbor Game Room once stood.



*Pikes Bazaar, Pike's Hall in the rear building. Movies, roller skating and plays were done there. Circa 1900?*