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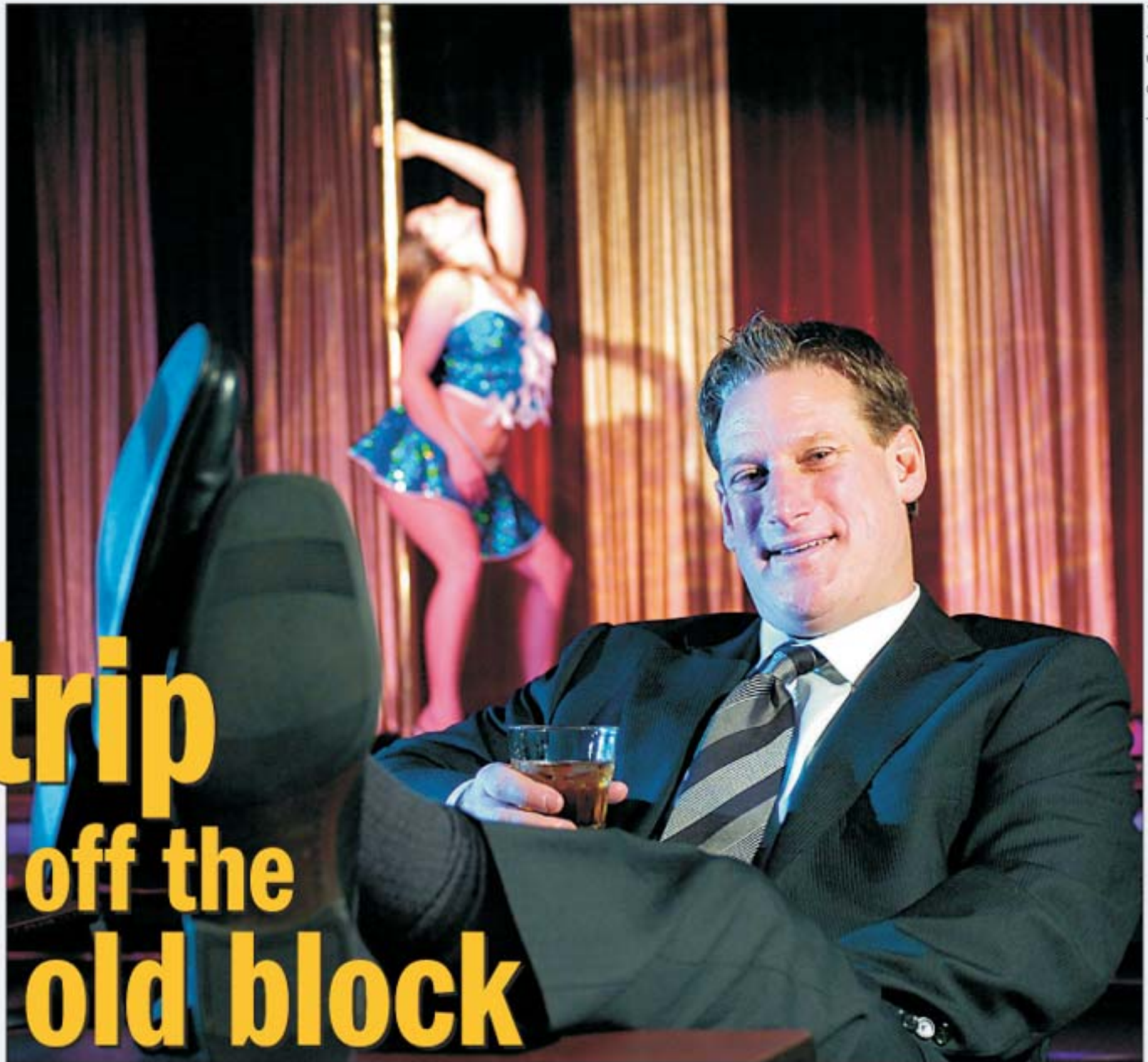
 IN YOUR COMMUNITY
100
 YEARS
 1908 - 2008

midweek edition


Exhausted by idling buses

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Strip off the old block

 by Aaron Chapman
 contributing writer

On stage in the Penthouse nightclub, a pretty girl in her 20s dances to music, flashes a flirty smile and removes her last article of clothing. But there's no hooting or whistling. The audience is polite, and the aging and well-to-do gaggle of onlookers bear little resemblance to the club's regular clientele. Two older men smile over their drinks, while an older woman laughs nervously. "Oh, I wasn't prepared for this," she says.

Tonight's audience, largely composed of a Heritage Vancouver tour group, is more familiar with sites like the Orpheum Theatre than the Penthouse. But perhaps they should have known what to expect. The Penthouse is one of the city's heritage treasures. It's also a venue with a long history

of surprising Vancouverites.

At 1019 Seymour St., the maroon building, neon lit with two painted tin dancing girls hanging out front, is now stylistically out of place among the modern condo buildings gathering around it. But having celebrated its 60th anniversary in December, the infamous nightclub looks to the future.

The Penthouse is one of the longest running family businesses in Vancouver. Current owner Danny Filippone has been a part of that history since his birth in July 1963, when legendary comedian George Burns—who was performing at the Penthouse that summer night—handed out celebratory cigars to club patrons.

The Filippones have been on Seymour for as long as anyone might remember.

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Penthouse boss Danny Filippone hosts everything from stag parties and gay and lesbian nights to Heritage Vancouver tours at the city's most enduring night spot, which just turned 60.

photos: Dan Toulgoet

MAYOR DE GENOVA? • HOMELESS WORLD CUP • IRWIN BARKER

The Penthouse evolved from a 1940s nightclub to a 1970s strip bar

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"I remember trick-or-treating as a kid on Seymour, which is hard to picture now," laughs Danny. "There were just houses then. It was a residential neighbourhood."

The story of the Penthouse doesn't start with pasties and a g-string, but with the Filippone family's arrival to Vancouver from the Calabria region of Italy in the late 1920s. Danny's grandfather Guiseppe bought the empty Seymour lot for \$1,400 and in 1938 built the building that would later become the Penthouse. Home to a number of family-run businesses, from taxi and courier services to an amateur boxing gym, in 1947 it became a restaurant and nightclub under the management of Danny's father Ross and brothers Dominic "Mickey" Filippone, Jimmy Filippone and eldest brother Joe Philliponi—his name misspelled by a customs agent when the family arrived from Italy.

VICTORIA FOX, a pretty, dark-haired, young dancer, has just finished her act on the original stage, which is outfitted with a curtain that dates back to the club's inception.

"I've just started working here, but it's hard not to know that there's a long history to the place," she says cheerfully. "The photos everywhere show that." The interior walls of the club are adorned with large black and white photographs of the Filippone brothers in the 1940s and '50s relaxing with Gary Cooper, Harry Belafonte and legendary boxer Max Baer, among many others.

And while Victoria might not be old enough to know who Frankie Lane and Jimmy Durante were, Danny Filippone grew up with celebrities as guests for dinner.

"I remember my father [Ross Filippone] bringing home Duke Ellington, Stan Mikita, Tony Bennett and others," says Danny. "Not only for dinner. They would have these big parties. Dad would host these casino nights for friends where he would rent all these gaming tables. I remember as a kid wanting to go to bed one night, and there was a roulette wheel in my bedroom. It was just part of the scenery growing up."

But a new social climate was already affecting the Penthouse's gin-slinging and swinging glory days. The impact of television and



Penthouse owner Danny Filippone has watched a cast of characters flow through the Seymour Street club. *photo Dan Toulgoet*

the novelty of free at-home entertainment reduced the popularity of nightclubs. That change, along with a more open moral climate, invited a shift from burlesque dancers to go-go girls with names like "Miss Lovie" and "Dee Dee Special" who evolved into the "exotic" dancers of today.

By the 1970s, with its Vegas glow faded, the Penthouse moved into its next notorious period. Out went the tuxedos, and in went the businessmen in checkerboard slacks and patterned ties. Vancouver nightclub-goers of a certain age will remember the Penthouse of the 1970s. Even my late father, a Vancouver lawyer and contemporary of the Filippone brothers who'd worked for the family on occasions "to get some of the girls they knew who'd been arrested out of trouble," smiled nostalgically at this period. "It was sort of a smoke-filled unofficial city hall," he remembered last year, before he passed away, "where high rollers and hoodlums socialized with a lot of girls around." But not everyone was smiling.

"There were taxis coming and going with girls. It was a zoo," recalls retired constable

Leslie McKellar, who at age 21 was plucked from the police academy for her first assignment posing undercover as a prostitute at the Penthouse. "There weren't many slow nights. It was the place to be in town."

The Penthouse had become the epicentre of high-class prostitution in Vancouver, a well known hangout that hookers preferred over the street corner. The club became a flourishing nightspot for up to 100 working women. "For years the police turned a blind eye to the Filippone," says McKellar. "I think there were too many crooked cops in the '50s and '60s that went to the Penthouse to drink, so the investigation was done outside of the normal police department by CLEU," she says, referring to the old Coordinated Law Enforcement Unit.

McKellar spent four to five nights a week at the Penthouse from May to August of 1975. She would leave the club with undercover officers posing as customers looking for sex, report her findings, then return to the club. She recalls observing a number of underworld figures. "The Filippone acted

the best of friends with them," she says, maintaining an air of contempt even 30 years after the investigation. "I remember the Filippone always being around. You'd automatically think of old Mafia movies—always with their cigars. I never liked Mickey, but Ross was a classy guy. But I was scared of him because he was so observant and never missed a thing."

It's difficult to reconcile McKellar's description with the Ross Filippone of his later years. He changed his lifestyle and late hours, quit smoking and drinking, and became a racquetball player participating in seniors' matches and tournaments around North America and Europe. A spirited character, he died at the age of 84 in October 2007. During a number of *Courier* interviews prior to his death, he told stories about the Penthouse's golden years.

"The police were in two or three times a week," said Ross, remembering the club's early years. "Not just a couple of them—more like 20! It was ridiculous."

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The Filippone helped convince legislators to relax liquor restrictions

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When the nightclub started operations in the puritan heyday of Vancouver's "bottle clubs," liquor licences were restricted to dreary beer halls, which offered no music or entertainment. Bottle club customers discreetly served themselves from concealed bottles, while cabarets served the accompanying ice and mix. The party continued unabated, interrupted only by police raids.

The Filippone brothers were in the right place at the right time. They formed the B.C. Cabaret Owners Association, with brother Joe as president, and lobbied successfully in support of a June 1952 provincial vote that allowed liquor in licensed establishments. More British Columbians voted in support of relaxed liquor laws than for daylight savings time—the other issue on the plebiscite.

At the same time, the family gained prominence in Vancouver's Italian community. Eldest brother Joe, with his infectious personality, humour and clashing style of dress, emerged as the popular face of the Penthouse. "Joe was a leader and very enterprising," Ross recalled. "One time Joe brought 200 Italians to a political rally. If Joe told 'em to stand up they'd stand up. If he told 'em to sit down they'd sit down. If he told them to clap, they'd clap. I always thought, 'God forbid if he went to the toilet.'"

THE CLUB BOOKED a litany of entertainers throughout the 1950s and '60s. If they weren't performing at the Penthouse, celebrities like Frank Sinatra, Lena Horne and

Errol Flynn (who dropped in the night before he died) headed there after a night on the town. On New Year's Eve 1975, police raided the club, and the Filippone were charged with living off the avails of prostitution, profiting from cover charges and tips paid by girls entering and re-entering the club after meeting customers. The club owners were accused of accommodating johns by providing cash advances on credit cards and company expense accounts for services of prostitutes.

The sensational trial played to a packed courtroom for months, featuring lurid details of undercover tapes, bribed liquor inspectors and Crown witnesses who were later proved to have lied on the witness stand. While never acting as "pimps," the Filippone were guilty of looking the other way. On one surveillance tape, Joe Philliponi was recorded colourfully commenting on the cash advances: "I don't care what you do with the money. [You] can go into a bank and say 'Look, I've got two prostitutes outside in a cab and I need \$200,' and the bank clerk wouldn't care."

Wild stories circulated about the club, like the time the visiting Japanese Navy "invaded" the Penthouse in the summer of 1975.

"There were so many Japanese customers coming in that some of the girls learned quite fluent Japanese," recalls McKellar, who provided key testimony at the trial. "Word on the street was that there was a contract out on me."

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The steps of the Penthouse descend into a spacious showroom. *photo Dan Toulgoet*

cover

1983 murder added to Penthouse mystique

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The Filippones won the case on appeal. However, the Penthouse closed for three years while the court case dragged on. Vancouver writer Daniel Francis's book *Red Light Neon* details the history of prostitution in Vancouver and the Penthouse closure of the '70s. "In retrospect, everyone agreed the closure was a major mistake," Francis notes. "The decision caused an increase of the number of women on the street... and led as well indirectly, to the tragedy of the Missing Women." On the prosecution of the Penthouse, Francis writes, "Police drove the sex trade into the shadows, creating the conditions in which predators could flourish." An interesting theory, in light of the recent Willie Pickton trial and conviction.

"I HADN'T REALLY thought about what I was going to do," remembers Danny Filippone of his adolescence. "I was working at Kelly's records, and basically just into playing sports and meeting girls. Hey, I had just entered my 20s, just out of school."

All of that changed on Sept. 18, 1983 when Danny's uncle Joe Philliponi was murdered by Scott Forsyth at the Penthouse in an after-hours shooting. Forsyth had been falsely told by an accomplice, Sid Morrisroe, that \$1 million sat locked in the Penthouse safe. The robbery garnered the men \$1,200 and first-degree murder convictions. Over 800 people, including Supreme Court justices, businessmen and dancers attended the funeral of the "Godfather of Seymour Street."

Rumours involving the Filippone family and the Mafia have circulated for decades. The myth of the family's "mob ties" may have added to the Penthouse legend.

"There were characters like that around the bar in my father's day," says Danny. "I remember a guy named Shoulders and another guy called Big Nick who were tough people. Being Italian, it was hard not to feel that aura and having the last name Filippone.



The modern-day Penthouse focuses on exotic dancers and alcohol. *photo Dan Toulgoet*

There weren't many other prominent Italian families in Vancouver. There were the Capozzis for wines and stocks, the Lendarduzzis for soccer and the Filippones had the nightclubs."

Danny vividly recalls, in the wake of Joe's death, being called to meet his father in the office. "He said, 'You have to make a decision. We have to know as a family if you're going to do this.' They wanted to know what direction things were going and if I'd take over the reins. I said I'd do it. My heart was in it and I liked it."

Danny, who began as a waiter and later managed the club, knew his uncle's legend loomed large at the Penthouse. "It was weird the first couple of years after he was gone. I could still see him around here and hear his voice. I have lots of great memories of Uncle Joe."

WHILE LEADING the Heritage Vancouver tour, Danny demonstrates his family's characteristic ebullience, as well as the unique Filippone-rhythm and tenor in his voice.

He leads an audience of 30 people around the Penthouse, offering anecdotes about each room.

The tour visits some of the upper rooms—usually closed to the public—of the deceptively large building, including the "Green Room," a time capsule of the early 1970s with its green cut-velvet wallpaper. The club's original grand piano still sits in the area of the club once known as "The Steak Loft" restaurant, named for the 1950s novelty of bringing raw steaks to customers' tables so diners could pick which one they wanted.

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Vancouver's strip club scene has been decimated by mass closures

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Even the roots of Vancouver's ubiquitous pizza slice shops can be traced to the Penthouse and Vancouver's first pizza oven.

"It's a unique part of Vancouver's social history," says Heritage Vancouver president Donald Luxton. "It is Western Canada's oldest surviving venue for exotic entertainment and a reminder of the vibrant night life Vancouver once enjoyed."

Danny is proud of the building's past, but he's tried to put his own stamp on the nightclub. The prostitutes are long gone, and the club hosts events like the Jazz Festival, New Music West, local bands, private parties, sports nights and even gay and lesbian parties.

In December, the Penthouse added one more party to its history of revelry—its 60th anniversary. Danny hosted a full house, including screenwriter Chris Haddock and Commodore Ballroom general

manager Gord Knights, as well as local musicians like Crystal Pistol bassist Greg Laikin. As in its golden age, the Penthouse stage featured an array of acts, from burlesque girls to a stand-up comedian. Filippone planned the party with his father, who died before the event, but it's easy to imagine Ross and Uncle Joe smiling down on the affair.

"I think it's important to keep things fresh and try new things. Bringing music back is what Uncle Joe was doing—trying not to rely on a single theme. It's not a place where you just see exotic dancers anymore," says Filippone, noting Penthouse video music shoots featuring Avril Lavigne and Snoop Dogg, and the nightclub's frequent appearance as the Chick A Dee Club on the critically acclaimed TV crime-drama *Intelligence*.

THE FILIPPONE family story encompasses Vancouver's downtown

"I remember a guy named Shoulders and another guy called Big Nick who were tough people."

—Danny Filippone, Penthouse owner

real estate boom. Joe Philliponi's far-sighted real estate investments have paid dividends. A family-owned lot across the street from the Penthouse sold for a princely sum to a developer who will use the site for a multi-storey condo tower. Next to the Penthouse sits the oldest surviving house in Downtown South. Dating back to 1896, it's been Filippone property since the 1930s.

Fifteen years ago, Vancouver was home to 35 exotic entertainment ven-

ues, including Champagne Charlie's, the Austin Flash One and the Niagara. In the late 1990s, Vancouver boasted 4,000 exotic dancers, but that number has shrunk to about 200. The Cecil Hotel site has been earmarked for condos, and other Vancouver exotic clubs face an uncertain future.

Danny has seen them all come and go. "We might go back to us being the only game in town."

He receives regular offers from prospective buyers, but politely declines, noting the club's history and its connection to his family.

"We can paint it, and refurbish it and hold all sorts of special events, but the Penthouse will always have its past and that's what makes it different," he says, adding that restoration plans are being considered. "We want to make it look classic."

And yet, the building still gives up its secrets. Recently Danny unexpectedly discovered a hollow spot in an office wall that contained photo-

graphs of the nightclub in the 1950s and '60s, as well as very early photographs of the surrounding businesses and street life on Seymour. "I have no idea why they were there. My father had no idea about it, and we just think it's something Joe did back in the day, hiding the pictures away in the wall for safekeeping or something." Many of the photos are now framed and hang inside the club.

The Penthouse neon sign on Seymour Street still glows at night. One day the end may come, but the Penthouse has withstood everything from the vice squad to the wrecking ball for 60 years.

"We're staying put. We're happy. Our business has never been better," says Danny. And if the Filippones have any say, last call won't come to Seymour Street any time soon.

Heritage Vancouver returns to the Penthouse on Feb. 20. For more information visit www.heritagevancouver.org.