

Silvermine Tavern serves last pint

By Laura Kenyon

Editor

After eight decades of filling the bellies, hearts and souls of New Canaan residents with sticky buns, jazz music and historic New England beauty, the Silvermine Tavern shut its doors Sunday.

“The Silvermine Tavern is closed,” a voice proclaimed on the restaurant and inn’s answering machine Monday morning. “Thanks for 80 great years.”

After meeting media inquiries with a tight lip since Friday — when the questions about rumors of the closure were met with, “That’s what they’re saying” — owner Frank Whitman Jr. told the *Advertiser* Monday, “Yes, we’re closed.”

Whitman cited last summer’s high energy prices, a drought of corporate holiday parties and other events, and the winter weather — which brought several weekend storms this year — as reasons for the close.

“Business is pretty slow and we just can’t keep going at this level,” he said.

In an area so dependent on the financial industry, he added, the lack of use by organizations was particularly

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The porch is empty at the Silvermine Tavern today, four days after the historic restaurant and inn closed its doors. (Laura Kenyon Photo)

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rough on the tavern.

"When you pull that corporate piece," he said, "it leaves a big hole."

"It's much more than a business decision," said Whitman about the tavern that his father, Francis C. Whitman Sr., purchased in 1955. "It's a very emotional decision."

Whispers of the closing began earlier this week when a photography show and opening reception, originally scheduled for Sunday, were canceled.

Whitman said Friday that he was in the process of notifying those with reservations or events planned at the site — as well as the property's 35 employees — in hopes they would not find out first from the media.

Perhaps a testament to the tavern's sentimental value, however, the whispers grew in volume over the weekend. Sunday boasted a full parking lot and a wave of diners sitting down for their last sticky bun.

"It was an exceptionally busy day," Whitman said about the rush.

"Lots of people have a lot of affection for the tavern," he added, describing the joy associated with running a business that brings people together for all manner of happy occasions — from weddings and anniversaries to birthdays and graduations.

"The tavern has been the hub of the community," 17-year Silvermine resident Emily Kelting said Monday, "so it's very

sad for all of us who live in Silvermine... It's a sad comment on the times that they couldn't make it. Everyone who lives here will really miss having that as a community spot."

Praising the charm and unique character of the Silvermine area, Kelting said the tavern was "a source of community pride." In addition to "wonderful meals, jazz nights (and) history dinners," she said the tavern often hosted Silvermine Community Association meetings, art shows, wine dinners and "meet and mingle" cocktail parties.

Noting the tavern's brunches, antique wood beams and serene setting — which include a deck overlooking a swan-visited river — resident Faith Kerchoff lamented the loss of "another piece of history."

"Probably three towns claimed it as their own," she said, referring to New Canaan, Norwalk and Wilton.

That piece of history may last, however, as the property for now remains in Whitman's hands.

Listed at \$4.5 million in 2007, the property consists of five buildings, according to SilvermineTavern.com, including: The tavern itself; an old mill, which dates back to the 1600s and is the oldest on the property; a coach house, which was said to be used as a "still" during Prohibition; a former gatehouse, which was consolidated into the main building, and a country store, directly across from the tavern.

With a history dating back more than 200 years, the tavern buildings were once owned by the Englishman Henry Guthrie, who operated a shipyard and three water-powered mills along local rivers. The tavern's post and beam construction dates from this period.

The country store had many identities over its history, used at various times as

a general store, church hall, blacksmith shop, dance hall and temperance hall.

The tavern's current function began in 1906, when Otto Goldstein purchased the building as his home. Hosting nearby friends, artists, musicians, actors and writers for which the Silvermine area is known, he sold beer and other drinks in his taproom — which according to the tavern's history "became a favorite Saturday night gathering place."

J. Kenneth Byard bought and officially named the Silvermine Tavern after the repeal of Prohibition, offering afternoon tea, food and overnight accommodations.

Francis C. Whitman Sr. — he and his son both graduates of Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration — put his name on the site in 1955, bringing a passion for hospitality that he would pass on to his son, Frank.

Unsure what history has in store next for the property, Whitman said he has not yet decided whether to open the inn for banquets. For now, those who had booked events over the coming months have been advised to make other arrangements.

But with the deed still in hand, hope prevails that Silvermine will not lose its community hub.

"Our first choice would see the inn and restaurant use continue," Whitman told the paper.

"That would be terrible for our community if it was developed in a way that really wasn't fitting with the feel of Silvermine," Kelting said.

"We all feel terribly for Frank and Marcia," she added. "It's just too bad and we really hope and pray that somebody will buy it and continue it in its present form."