

## Q & A WITH KATHY MANKE

*TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.*

*This month is the fourth installment in the series: Kathy Manke, owner of The Spar and provider of hospitality on Commencement Bay for 25 years.*



The Spar, Commencement Bay's oldest saloon (since 1917), has stories embedded in its walls of the dramatic changes that have swept Tacoma. Kathy Manke has owned the tavern for the past 25 years and reflects on what it means to serve both local inhabitants and visitors, honoring the historical role of the tavern as a community's meeting place.

The Spar sits in the area of Commencement Bay previously called Shuballup or "the sheltered place," by the native Puyallup and Nisqually people who lived comfortably around its shore. In 1864 the area began to develop following arrival of Job Carr who had come west from Indiana to seek opportunities. Later, when New Tacoma was founded to the east, Shuballup became Old Tacoma, or what we now know as Old Town. It had a Yugoslavian community that established a purse seining fishery while others founded lumber mills, ship yards, the smelter, and the Sperry Flour Mill. The waterfront along the bay developed rapidly, and many immigrants were attracted to the area. Ships arrived laden with tea from the Orient. Lumber, coal, and grain were exported in the sailing ships that lined the shores and waited at anchor. In Old Town, businesses sprang up to meet the needs of workers and sailors. There were boarding houses, grocery stores, a butcher shop, labor halls, a school, a hospital, a church and perhaps as many as eight saloons in the two-block area from Starr to Carr streets.

Manke brought extensive restaurant experience from Tacoma's Cloverleaf Tavern and Engine House No. 9, inheriting a legacy in The Spar that advanced Old Tacoma's rebirth. It began with the construction of the David building (the present Spar) formerly occupied by the Radonich Brothers' store and tavern. With the development of the Port of Tacoma and industry on the tideflats and then the gradual closing of the mills, shipyards, and finally even the smelter, Old Town once again slumbered. Then there was yet another rebirth with housing in great demand and businesses coming back. In 1988-1989, The Spar did its part to enhance Old Town's desirability with a major remodel. Finally you could see the view of Commencement Bay from somewhere besides the men's room, and a wonderful old building was restored more nearly to its early 20th Century décor while maintaining its traditions--good food at reasonable prices served in a friendly atmosphere.

### **Q: What is the relationship between the Spar and its location on Commencement Bay?**

A: This place gets a north wind, so navigation to moor here has always been tricky. Even with that, the city's new Old Town Dock, dedicated this summer, has brought more people to the spot. With the

historical lumber mills and fishermen living in the area, this had always been the place for working people.

**Q: What do you notice today about our current working waterfront?**

A: The City of Tacoma has done a very fine job of improving it. I have been thrilled with what has happened with the growth of the Port of Tacoma, the recent Point Ruston project, and walkways for pedestrians. Old Town was the heart and soul of Tacoma when downtown was a mess in the 1980s. The pathways along the waterfront here were dirt. Now it is a highly desirable place to live and work.

**Q: What is a perfect day at The Spar for you?**

A: Being busy. That former customers and employees, many with 20-plus-year associations with the business, return. That the casual and welcoming feel prevails. That an employee who used to work here who is now a teacher at Tacoma Community College returns to cook the Tuesday night specials—just for fun. The crew members bring in their friends.

**Q: What changes have occurred?**

A: Staff has grown. Picture Mert Nichols, who is responsible for the Spar being what it is, singly cooking and serving your dinner and then bussing the table. She was here when I first came, the only person on duty many nights. She worked for four different owners. I like framing and displaying historical photos of what has happened here. It's important to me to show some of the waterfront's history. Judges and longshoremen and historians and construction workers and university students have made The Spar their meeting place over the years. The remodel we did opened up the view to Commencement Bay. University student regulars grew up and had their own children. We took over the coffee shop next door 11 years ago and decided to cater to families including children. It was the only establishment at that time where kids could accompany their parents. The regulars didn't mind. We introduced music, first once a month, then each week. Ted Brown, founder of the Tacoma Old Town Blues Fest, twisted my arm to bring the blues in. Then came an Irish band, then the variety playing today.

**Q: What is The Spar's continued draw for you over these last 25 years?**

A: I love salt water and always have.