

Middleton's Colonial Motel to take a room in history

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MIDDLETON — The offers to sell have come in over the last 10 to 15 years, but now is the time for Tom Trotta.

His family has owned the 55-year-old Colonial Motel, 3001 Parmenter St., since 1977 but on Monday, the 31 doors of the business were shuttered.

The towels are going to the Towne Edge Motel in Edgerton. Some of the small refrigerators and the deck chairs from the indoor swimming pool will move to the 20-room Skyview Motel in Prairie du Sac. Much more goes on sale today.

For about \$1.3 million, developers are getting about two acres of land for a three-story office building with underground parking.

Before there was a bypass and prior to the arrival in Middleton of bigger names like Marriott, Hilton, Fairfield and Staybridge, there was the Colonial. Its closure and planned demolition ends an era of old-school motels that at one time were clustered on Highway 12 on this city's north side.

"There are plenty of rooms (in Middleton) but not in that niche," said Van Nutt, executive director of the Middleton Chamber of Commerce. "The Colonial was a savior for a lot of folks."

Room rates started at \$37 a night. A pool-side room with two queen-sized beds and a twin topped out at \$59 a night.

The Trotta family's hospitality and strict rules were included in the price.

"Our rates are the same regardless of the time of year," Trotta said. "Over the years, we looked for repeat business. We relied on people coming back."

Some worked in the construction trades and would stay for weeks at a time, year after year. Others would spend the weekend for football games at Camp Randall or the Midwest Horse Fair or World Dairy Expo at the Alliant Energy Center.

For the unfortunate, the Colonial was a haven after a divorce or fire or because bad credit got in the way of a lease for an apartment. Weekly and monthly rates made it affordable.

"Depending on the time of the year, the clientele varies greatly," Trotta said. "I think we'll be missed, for sure."

In July, Trotta began sending letters to those who had contacted him over the years about buying the place. Of the 30 letters sent, seven parties expressed an interest and three made offers. Brad Duesler, of Food Concepts, and Brad Hutter, of Mortenson Investment Group, had the top bid.

When the 295-room Holiday Inn West (now the Marriott Madison West) on John Q. Hammons Drive opened in 1990, the Colonial was the only other option in the city. The Midview, Porky's, Rest Well, Simon and Sunset motels had already closed.

Today, the city boasts almost 1,000 rooms, most of which have been added over the last five years, Nutt said. Developer Terrance Wall has plans for two hotels.

Andrew Wood, a professor of communication studies at San Jose State University in California, has also studied the nostalgia of motels. The age of the properties and their owners has led to the decline of the classic, small, road-side motel, he said.

"Hearing that these pieces of architectural Americana are declining saddens me greatly," Wood said. "Many of the old-timer owners, folks who bought after (World War II) have passed on, and a second generation of their children or close associates are now looking to retire. A potential third generation likely doesn't look with confidence toward a life of motel ownership."

Dave Kurschner, with Wisconsin Motel Realty based in Barron, about 50 miles north of Eau Claire, said some motels are being torn down because they were built in high traffic areas that are attractive to developers. It's also easier for motel franchises than privately owned motels to get financing.

"There are more smaller franchise motels that are going up that are taking the revenue away," said Kurschner. "Some of the independents will do well but if an area is good, sooner or later you'll see a medium-sized franchise go in."

When the Colonial opened in 1953, Highway 12 passed about 100 feet from the motel's nine rooms.

Trotta's parents, Richard and Hazel Trotta, bought the motel in 1977 for about \$125,000.

Richard Trotta had been a successful football coach in Waunakee and the district's first superintendent before taking a job with the state Department of Public Instruction in 1965. After raising six children, Hazel Trotta was looking for a challenge.

When she saw the motel, she called her son, Tom Trotta, a UW-Madison graduate who was trained as a teacher but working as an exterminator in Florida, to help her manage the motel.

"I've been here ever since," said Tom Trotta, 59. "Her and I ran the place with no other housekeepers."

Hazel Trotta died in 2006. Richard Trotta was killed last December when he was hit by a car after retrieving the mail from his mailbox at his home on Highway 19 in the town of Sun Prairie. He was 84.

The residence, connected to the back of the motel was expanded in 1978. The Trottas added six units in 1981 before selling the business to Tom Trotta in 1986. In 1988, he bought a neighboring lot and added 16 rooms and an indoor pool.

And in 2005, after almost 20 years of debate, intensive planning and three years of construction, a \$126 million project that widened Highway 12 to four lanes from Middleton to the Wisconsin River and rerouted the road away from the Colonial, was completed. Trotta said revenue continued to grow after the bypass was built but at a much slower rate. The motel, with revenue of about \$260,000 a year, did not close because of the bypass or a lack of business, said Trotta, who plans to fish and golf in retirement.

And while some other motels in the Madison area have had problems with drugs and prostitution, Trotta said his motel has avoided those problems with a strict set of rules that were instituted by his mother.

His two daughters worked at the motel for a time, along with several other family members.

"We all did maid work," said Katie Trotta, 24, whose father, Richard Trotta Jr., 58, has worked at the motel for about 30 years. "I still think how I cleaned here when I clean my own house."