

The name Frank Palumbo always meant the father. But the son took the restaurant over, and

so he had to answer to

an angry neighborhood. By Ralph Cipriano

FRANK'S

PLACE



THE WAITERS WERE CLEARING away spumoni plates and refilling coffee cups when the Sinatra imitator strolled on stage. It was show time at Palumbo's!

Billy Ruth, who grew up shining shoes and selling shopping bags in the Italian Market, doesn't just sound like Sinatra. He has the gestures, the spotlight swagger, and he's skinny, like Ol' Blue Eyes used to be.

The best is yet to come, Ruth sang, and babe, won't it be fine . . .

Two hundred fifty regulars sat in the Sunday night audience, mostly senior citizens, who had just dined on penne rigate and their choice of veal parmesan, stuffed chicken breast or broiled flounder. They'd been coming here all their lives. "You can't beat the prices," they would say. "Where could you go for a dinner and a show and dance all night for \$20?"

But the regulars were dying off. Every year, attendance at the annual banquets and parties fell — from 400 to 350 to 300. No wonder the place was in trouble.

Palumbo's was the symbol of what South Philly used to be, the museum of a bygone era of romance, glamour and power. It was always the same, the faces, the food, the atmosphere, and that's what people loved about it. The brick and stone compound dominated an entire city block just as it had dominated the life of the neighborhood for 110 years.

Inside, the institution billed as America's oldest nightclub was dimly lit and meandering. It had popcorn ceilings, crystal chandeliers, and bars that were carpeted on the sides and topped with black Formica. The regulars overlooked the signs of decay, the worn floral carpets, the drapes stiff with stale cigarette smoke.

Carlton Sinclair was at the bar that night, having a beer. Sinclair, 67, had booked hundreds of acts at Palumbo's over the last 25 years, including this June 12 gig. Here's Sinclair's lowdown on Billy Ruth: "He's like the Elvis impersonators. A very

easy-going act." Sinclair also had booked tonight's comedian, Kenny Adams: "He's young, he's today, he's clean."

Sinclair was thinking ahead to shows in Utica and Albany and New York City. That's because here at Palumbo's, it was all over. Tonight was the last show of the year, and maybe forever. Frank Palumbo Jr. was trying to unload the place. Everybody was talking about it.

Palumbo's was supposed to close at the end of the month, to get ready for a takeover by new management — if the sale went through.

Sinclair was no fan of Frank Jr. "The kid," as Sinclair called him, "is not a nightclub man. Not like his father."

Regrets, Billy Ruth sang, I've had a few. But then again, too few to mention . . .

Once, all the stars came to Palumbo's. Singers like Sergio Franchi, Al Martino and the Mills Brothers, comedians like Jimmy Durante and David Brenner performed here for Frank Palumbo and his guests.

The Voice himself, Sinatra, once sang here back in 1946, at a luncheon for the Red Cross. Carmen Dee remembers. He's the bandleader who's been with Palumbo's since the 1940s, when he was a teenage saxophone player with a pompadour. The skinny matinee idol in the suit and bow tie sang "The Music Stopped (But We Kept on Dancing)" before the bobby-soxers mobbed him. "They tried to rip his clothes off," Dee said.



Sinatra and Frank Palumbo were old pals. The two men always greeted one another with a hug and called each other "Cheech" — an Italian nickname for Francesco. Sinatra returned many times as a dinner guest, courting Ava Gardner over clams spaghetti.

Palumbo's began its downhill slide in the late 1970s, when the Atlantic City casinos opened,

and stole most of Palumbo's acts — Franchi, Martino and Vic Damone, Bobby Vinton, Patti Page and Pat Cooper. But once, instead of only 23 dates in the past six months, business at Palumbo's had been so good that Carmen Dee worked 40 weeks a year. Instead of just five musicians, the Carmen Dee Orchestra had 27, all in tuxedos, playing the old favorites with that Big Band sound. That was when Frank Sr. was back in the office, working the phones, setting up the future.

Now, while the audience listened wistfully, the orchestra cut the tempo in half as Ruth sang the climax of his finale:

Theese little townown bluuuuuuues. Arre melling avaaaayyyyy . . .

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dee said, after Ruth left the stage. "The comedy star of our show. We think he is one of the finest, bright young comics in our business today. Please welcome Mr. Ken Adams."

Adams, a skinny six-footer who is Polish and 36, warmed up the crowd with an ethnic joke.

"I have an Uncle Vito from Italy," he said. "He married into the Polish family 40 years ago. They had two kids. Boy, are they

messed up. They're half Polish, half Italian. They want to beat people up, they forget who."

Budda boom.

"It's so hard to bring home a girl," Adams said. "It's never good enough for my mother. Last year I brought a girl home who was the image of my mother. My father kicked her out."

Adams finished his act to loud applause. "I'll be back here at Palumbo's," he said. "See you in the fall."

BEFORE IT WAS A NIGHTCLUB, BEFORE it was a restaurant, Palumbo's was a boardinghouse that catered to Italian immigrants. It was founded in 1884 by Antonio Palumbo, a tailor from Abruzzo. According to legend, the immigrants used to show up at the docks off Washington Avenue with tags pinned to their clothes that said Palumbo's. They took the trolley to the boardinghouse at Eighth and Catharine, where they could pay 90 cents a week and help themselves to all the spaghetti they could eat. They stayed until they were hired by the railroads, mines or garment factories.

So many Italian immigrants came to Palumbo's that federal officials began to suspect it was a padrone system that was exploiting the immigrants. In 1912, a U.S. immigration official was dispatched to investigate. He reported back that a group of Italian American businessmen had "banded together to aid, comfort and assist their brethren." At the time, the boardinghouse was run by Antonio's son, Frank, the first of three Frank Palumbos to run the place. The agent, Adrian Bonnelly, became a lifelong friend of the family as well as a Common Pleas Court judge.

The first Frank Palumbo died in 1926, when his son Frank was 15. Old-timers in the neighborhood say he committed suicide in a rowhouse on Darien Street after an investment deal went bad. (Frank Jr. says he's heard the rumors about his grandfather,

but says his father told him it was a fatal heart attack.)

Frank Sr. (the second Frank Palumbo) began his career by cutting onions in the kitchen when he was 13. But his ambitions extended beyond the boardinghouse. During the 1930s and '40s, he took thousands of kids on annual trips to the circus, zoo and ballpark. These excursions were highly publicized by reporters who ate and drank for free at Palumbo's, had \$20 bills stuffed in their pockets, and cases of liquor delivered to their cars.

Over the years, as his fame grew, Frank Palumbo built a nightclub and entertainment complex out of 20 rowhouses and a funeral parlor. Every time he added a rowhouse, he knocked down a wall. Nobody bothered to take out permits, so Palumbo's was laced with illegal passageways.

Of course, no city official would have dared call Frank Palumbo on it. He was too big for that.

Frank Palumbo was a husky, silver-haired showman who always wore a simple dark suit. His Main Line mansion had trout in the swimming pool (so his kids could go fishing) and running water in the dollhouse.

Frank Palumbo would walk around the bar before a big show, shaking hands with the customers. "Hey, give 'em a drink," he would say. He gave away gold watches, jumbo bottles of expensive perfume, even the tie around his neck. Everything he did was big. He held a dinner dance every Valentine's Day for all the couples who had been married at the restaurant the previous year. He'd serve his guests filet mignon and champagne on the house, and serenade them with strolling violinists.

His detractors (and there were few during his lifetime) saw a publicity hound and political fixer who had every public official in his pocket. But the legions who loved him

saw a man whose motto was, "If I stop giving, I stop living."

Frank Palumbo died of a heart attack at his son's house in 1983 at 72. The night he died, the locals say, he offered free dinners to the paramedics who showed up to help him. "Take care of these guys," he told an employee. "See that they get something to eat."

Frank Jr. still lives in the brick rowhouse at Catharine and Darien he bought 15 years ago. It's across the street from the restaurant.

Frank Jr. was brought into the business by his father the year before he died. He looks out of place in South Philly. He's small and slender, about the size of a jockey. He dresses in sweatshirts and jeans. He's shy and has a nervous laugh.

"He's not a downtowner," said Nancy Cunningham, a waitress and union steward at Palumbo's Nostalgia Room. "Here's a kid brought up on the Main Line. He doesn't know our ways. Are you gonna fault him for not being sociable?"

People who met Frank Jr. for the first time were stunned. "That's Frank Palumbo?"

That's Frank Palumbo?" said one law-enforcement official. "Downtown, you either have to be big or mean."

Frank wasn't a glad-hander. He hung out in the back of the Nostalgia Room, next to the kitchen, his back to the wall, talking politics with his cronies.

Frank didn't eat at his own restaurant. He would chew on a crust of Sarcone's seeded bread, and wash it down with a beer, but not before he checked the expiration date on the bottle cap.

By the early '90s, Frank had tired of running his father's restaurant. Business was lousy — costing him, he said, more than \$100,000 a year to maintain the place. What Frank, a 40-year-old lawyer educated at Villanova and Widener University, really wanted was to become a Philadelphia judge. And the pols he entertained told him he had a good chance of getting the nomination — from both parties.

VETERAN EMPLOYEES CALLED FRANK Jr. "the kid." After all, they'd been at their jobs long before he was born. Frank hated the nickname. He was the boss now, he'd say. He had lots of ideas for improving the place, but his employees weren't receptive.

"Whatever he suggested, they tried it for a week," said Grace Tustin, a manager who worked in the office for 20 years. "Everything he came up with, they said he's crazy."

The place "ran itself." Employees showed up for work when they wanted and divvied up jobs according to ancient feudal rites. Palumbo's was three separate institutions — the Nostalgia Room and two ban-

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Under the city fire code, Frank argued, restaurants that weren't high-rises were required to have an alarm system only if tenants were living in the building. Frank had two tenants above the Nostalgia Room. But before he sold the property, Frank said, he was moving the tenants out. (They moved in March.) Meehan overruled L&I.

In the weeks before the fire, Frank said he removed five smoke detectors from the Nostalgia Room. He said he didn't want the Espositos to run into the same problems he did.

"The bureaucratic maze that the city is, it made easier sense to just take them out," he said. "It wasn't required, so I took out what was there."

Frank said he told L&I inspectors he was removing the smoke detectors. "This is the first I ever heard of it," L&I Commissioner Bennett Levin said when a reporter asked. "If anybody ought to be doing things right, it's him," noting that Palumbo serves as chairman of L&I's review board.

Even if the alarms had stayed in, Frank insisted, they rang in place, to alert people in the building. And at the time of the fire, he said, Palumbo's was empty. The removal of the detectors, he said, "was completely, absolutely irrelevant to the fire."

So under the fire code, Frank Palumbo, a city official, was allowed by the city to run a restaurant that covered almost an entire city block without sprinklers, fire alarms or smoke detectors to protect the public?

"It's a flaw in the code," Levin said.

WITHOUT INSURANCE, FRANK HAD NO apparent economic motive for arson. The authorities began checking out his union employees, who had reason to be concerned about job security. Especially since the Espositos ran a nonunion shop.

The authorities were especially interested in the employees who worked the last night.

Two days after the fire, two agents from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms went to see Willie Lanzelotti at his parents' home.

Willie the bartender was the employee who locked the place up the night of the fire. The agents had guns bulging on their hips and handcuffs hanging off their belts. His mother was in the kitchen making ziti and gravy with meatballs and sausage. She started crying while the agents sat in the living room, on either side of Willie, firing questions.

"You're the last person out, you're the number-one suspect," one agent told him.

Willie had a chemistry degree from Temple, the agents said, useful knowledge for an arsonist. The agents knew all the

courses he had taken, all his grades. They also knew about the recent argument he'd had with Frank.

Frank had yelled at Willie for opening a wine bottle at the bar instead of at the table. Frank was so upset, he screamed at Willie and told him to go home. Willie went home, thinking he'd been fired. Meanwhile, Frank was walking around Nostalgia, asking, "Where's Willie?"

ABOUT 70 FULL- AND PART-TIME employees lost their jobs in the fire. More than 20 lived in the neighborhood — cooks, bartenders, waiters, laborers and domestics — and they had nowhere to go. So they hung out at Anthony "Lu-lu" Lucchesi's Fish Market, a few doors down from Nostalgia's remains.

"We ought to start charging dues," Lu-lu said.

At Lu-lu's, all the flounder and fluke are kept on ice. Palumbo's had been his biggest customer.

"It was a big chunk of my business," said Lu-lu, who is 80. As he talked, he scaled a fish, and half-circle flecks fell on his arms. "When the fire burned up Palumbo's, it burned me up. The fire should have just kept going and burned my place, too. I would have done better than he did. I had insurance."

Lu-lu was lucky in one respect. His account with Palumbo's was c.o.d. Others in the neighborhood weren't as fortunate.

At the top of the creditors' list was A. Esposito Inc., whom Palumbo's still owed \$235,000. That debt had grown to more than \$300,000, for additional meat deliveries and for taxes and utilities the Espositos had paid since the sale of the banquet hall.

Palumbo's also owed \$4,000 to Isgro Pastries at 10th and Christian; \$4,500 to Michael Anastasio Produce Inc. at Ninth and Christian, and about \$2,000 to L. Sarccone & Son bakery on Ninth Street.

Other merchants were taking a hit. Frank LaRosa, who owns Triple Play Sporting Goods at Ninth and Christian, said that lottery ticket sales were down more than 150 a day. Palumbo's waiters and bartenders were "some of my best customers."

Everybody in the neighborhood, it seemed, had a stake in Palumbo's.

For more than 30 years Mary Buchanico, a widow who lived at Eighth and Fitzwater, had sold banquet tickets for Palumbo's. Frank Palumbo Sr. had set her up. "Don't worry, Mary, I'll take care of you," Mary remembers Frank Sr. telling her. "You'll never starve."

"Mary Butch" would dream up themes for banquets — like Hawaiian night or her famous annual Christmas party. Then she'd sell tickets at \$15 or \$20 apiece, and keep \$1 or \$2 a ticket for herself.

So Palumbo's fire was like a death in the family. And Mary Butch was out of business.

NOBODY CLEANED OUT THE REFRIGERATORS at Palumbo's, so the crabs and fluke started to rot, along with beef and veal and sausage and lobsters, about 100 pounds in all.

Within days, the neighbors were breathing the stench. It hit the pit of the stomach. And got worse when vandals stole the refrigerator door.

Michele Martines lived right next door on Ninth Street. She kept her windows closed throughout the summer. "My whole apartment smells of it," she complained

mistically about saving the CR and looking for investors to rebuild Nostalgia.

When the demolition crew began their work, old men came out of their rowhouses and leaned against brick walls, cigars and cigarettes hanging out of their mouths. Moms pushing baby carriages stopped to watch. Out on Christian Street, the police stopped traffic to let a funeral procession go by.

In a parking lot on Darien, Al the chef, Ronnie the bartender, and Jimmy Schiavo leaned against a fence, watching with open mouths as a 100-foot crane began to knock the place down. Schiavo, 87, was the dean of Palumbo's former employees, with more



On Aug. 3, Frank Palumbo Jr. examines where the fire was believed to have started June 20.

That night, Livia Guarini Cristella of the Lionesses had snapped a last photo (top).

when a reporter visited. "Oh, my God, close the door."

Then came swarms of gnats. "These little flies, they're all over," she said in her kitchen. "They're driving us crazy."

The demolition contractors arrived the first week in August to knock down the Nostalgia Room and Palumbo's banquet hall. But the CR Club was still in fairly decent shape. Frank and the Espositos talked opti-

than 50 years' experience. He looks like a miniature Don Ameche with a Durante schnozz. Over the years, Schiavo had tended bar, cooked, and done odd jobs around the restaurant, like chopping broccoli rabe and shucking clams and oysters.

"It's sickening to see it go down," Jimmy said.

The stench and the bugs were bad enough. Then came the vultures.

They came day and night. Some were grease-stained scavengers in dirty clothes who pushed grocery carts filled with metal scraps. Others, better dressed, drove vans and station wagons.

They poked through the ruins, helping themselves to copper pipes and sinks and pots and pans and air conditioning units. They broke through the plywood workers used to seal the CR Club. They helped themselves to the bar. They left an empty bottle of Courvoisier on the window sill.

Every morning, the birds flew off Ninth Street when the jackhammers began pounding. Michele Martines' house shook while she drank her morning coffee. She sat at her

"I chased a guy down and brought him to South Detectives," Frank said. "I was at South Detectives at 2 o'clock in the morning. They didn't hold him for a hearing that next morning and he didn't show up. It's sad. They don't want to prosecute."

The cops did make two arrests in July, but both cases were dismissed.

The army kept coming. Frank's former employees urged him to hire some help. "We need some guards, we need some protection," said Al the chef.

Ronnie Serafino warned Frank to get the booze out of Palumbo's. There was about \$5,000 worth of alcohol left in the liquor cabinet, said Ronnie the bartender.

his creditors to go in and "take what you can use." And Frank said he would tell the Espositos what was going on.

Gus Sarno, the pastry man, took used rolling racks and a meat slicer that weighed about 400 pounds. It took five men to wheel it out. Gus cut his hand on the slicer. Nobody wanted to buy it, so he gave it away for parts.

The scavengers kept coming. Once, while Frank was being interviewed, a loud bang came from the second story of Palumbo's banquet hall. The fire escape dropped, and a man marched down, like a rogue Santa Claus, with a heavy plastic bag slung over his shoulder. He headed west on Catharine Street and never looked back. Frank Palumbo laughed.

IN AUGUST, THE SCAVENGERS CLEANED out the CR Club. They took toilets and candelabra and a dozen chandeliers, all imported from Italy, the biggest measuring 6 feet in diameter and weighing 150 pounds. They cut it down and carried it out.

While they worked, the scavengers used Sterno to heat up canned clams left behind, washed them down with beer, rum, gin and Galliano, and left the empties on the CR bar.

"They were having a party," Jimmy Schiavo said. Palumbo's last guests.

The scavengers took a copper valve off of a two-inch water main in the basement and 12 inches of pipe from the second floor, springing two leaks. The first-floor ceiling caved in and five feet of water filled the basement. Neighbors' houses were flooded. Hopes for saving the place faded.

"It's like the place's got a curse on it," said George Galdi Jr., a step-sitter on Ninth Street.

Some scavengers brought acetylene torches. On Aug. 18, there was a rubbish fire on Ninth Street that firefighters said the scavengers had set. It happened right next door to Michele Martines.

She'd had enough.

"We're leaving, we can't take it," she said. "I can't live like this. It's a beautiful cool day, and I can't leave my windows open."

She packed up the car and drove her sons down to her sister's place at the Jersey Shore.

The dismantling of Palumbo's continued. Neighbors were getting into the act.

On Aug. 22, Jimmy Schiavo rolled two large, soaked wooden tables out of Palumbo's. He leaned them against his house. "Dry it up, it can be varnished," he said. "I gotta get even. He isn't paying me for the damage down in my basement. He isn't paying nobody."

Jimmy had water in his basement. It blew out his sump pump. He had to buy another.

On Aug. 24, tensions reached a peak.

"What he did to the place, what he did to this neighborhood," Vito Masi fumed. "People are afraid to go to sleep at night."

The back of the CR Club abuts Vito's house on Christian Street. The 80-year-old man spent a week on a couch on the sidewalk on Christian Street, keeping an eye out for scavengers. He couldn't sleep in his bedroom. The firefighters had poked holes in his bedroom ceiling. It cost Vito \$1,325 to repair his roof.

"If he was my son, I'd take a gun and shoot him," Vito huffed, pulling on his suspenders. "And he wants to be a judge. . . ."

"This place is wide open right now," said Vito's son-in-law, Pat Evangelista. "We've got guys in shopping carts walking in like it's a supermarket."

Out on Darien Street, Lee Esposito watched the demolition work. He scowled.

"We're paying for the demolition," he said. "I thought Frankie should pick up the security. Does he expect us to pick up that, too?"

THE NEXT DAY, AUG. 25, AT 12:09 P.M., merchants heard fire engines roaring up Ninth Street. "Well, it can't be Palumbo's," Louis Esposito Jr. said to himself.

No, this time it was the CR Club. Once again, the neighbors watched in disbelief. Boarded-up windows and doors were torn open as 97 firefighters fought the three-alarm blaze.

"Lightning strikes twice; that's all I can say," neighbor Larry Aita said.

Firefighters knocked a hole in the roof, but they had to retreat as flames shot through the opening. They ran hoses through several rowhouses on Christian Street and aimed them at the rear of the compound. Brown smoke boiled through the roof and surrounded the building.

About a dozen houses were evacuated. Three neighboring rowhouses were heavily damaged, leaving five families homeless. The firefighters poked fresh holes in Vito Masi's newly repaired roof.

Neighbors said the CR fire was no surprise.

"We were waiting for it to happen. They were going in all hours of the day and night," said Tom Knight, 53.

Knight had been sound asleep during the first fire when firefighters smashed down his door and ordered him to evacuate. This time, Knight was barefoot when the order came. This new fire left him homeless and shoeless. He bought a used pair of shoes in the Italian Market for \$2.

When Frank walked through the streets, neighbors let him have it.

"Frank, let me tell you something: My house catches on fire, you've got trouble,

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and not insurance trouble," said Frank D'Alfonso, Michele's brother.

Frank Palumbo told his neighbors he couldn't afford security guards because the first fire had devastated him, and besides, the Espositos were now in control of the buildings. "I don't have any cash flow," he said. "I was relying on the demolition contractor and Esposito."

Down the street, Louis Esposito Jr. said that on paper, Frank still owned the Nostalgia and CR.

"It's unbelievable to me," Esposito said. "It was a truly innocent, friendly relationship. The series of events is mind-boggling. . . . It's been a nightmare for us. An expensive nightmare."

ABOUT 6 THAT EVENING, WILLIE THE BARTENDER showed up at the ATF office at Second and Chestnut to take a polygraph test. Willie said he had nothing to hide.

The test room was completely white except for a desk, two chairs, and the polygraph machine, which looked like an expensive metal suitcase. Willie was supposed to stare at a black dot on the wall while he answered questions.

They strapped a belt across his chest to measure his heartbeat. They hooked up a monitor to take his blood pressure. Two sensors on his index and middle fingers measured body temperature. A machine spat out four different lines that looked like seismograph records.

An agent asked Willie to pick a number but not reveal it. Willie chose 97. Is it 91? the agent asked. No. 92? No. Slowly the agent counted to 99. Willie said no each time, as he had been instructed.

The agent noted the results. Then he began asking the serious questions, 12 of them, which he planned to ask seven times each.

"Did you know anything about the fire?"

"No."

"Did you know that this was going to happen?"

"No."

"Did you expect something like this to happen?"

"No."

"Did you feel the building was secure when you left?"

"Yes."

This went on for about 90 minutes. The agent stopped after four series of questions. "I'm gonna let you off easy," he said.

The agent unstrapped Willie. "You're not going to jail," he said. "I knew it wasn't you anyway. Here's my card. If you know anything or hear anything, just call me."

Willie went to the nearest bar and sucked down a beer.

Five people took the test — four who worked at Palumbo's, and one who worked for the company that was demolishing the place. One of the Palumbo's employees flunked the test. But the tests, which are not admissible in court, did not lead to any arrests.

Frank Palumbo didn't take the polygraph. He said the ATF initially asked him to take the test to encourage his former employees to take it. When he learned only a few people were being asked to take the polygraph, he said, he backed out.

ATF spokesman Steve Haskins said the ATF never changed the rules of the game. They wanted Frank Palumbo to take the test. "He was offered and he declined," Haskins said. "We don't change the rules. The rules are our rules. We're doing the investigating."

Haskins said that Palumbo was "no more or less a suspect" than any of the other employees — those who took the test or didn't.

"I didn't take it because I didn't think anyone seriously considered me a suspect," Frank Palumbo said. "Why would I take a lie-detector test? I'm a victim

of a crime. It's like asking a rape victim to take a lie-detector test."

The investigation of the first fire was going nowhere. And now the authorities had another fire on their hands.

The first fire had been declared arson because of how quickly it spread. It started in just one place, the center of Palumbo's, in a pile of about 80 pounds of laundry in the linen closet, authorities estimate. The authorities found no evidence of any chemical used to spread the fire; instead, they said, it was spread by exhaust fans that kicked on because of the heat. A large double stairway near the linen closet became a giant chimney. Doors on the second floor were chained open, giving the flames more oxygen. And the fire moved swiftly through the many illegal passageways that laced Palumbo's.

The CR fire, authorities found, was set in three places, and lab tests showed that gasoline spread the fire.

Investigators had no further evidence — and no eyewitnesses. Who torched Palumbo's remained a mystery that the authorities said might never be solved.

If Frank Sr. were alive, the locals said, cops would ring the place. Frank Rizzo would have raised money to rebuild the place. But nobody came forward to help "the kid."

MICHELE MARTINES MISSED THE CR FIRE. She was lying on the beach in Brigantine when she heard on the radio that Palumbo's was on fire again. She drove back from the Shore by herself.

"I don't want them back here now," she said of her two sons. "It's been a real nightmare."

The basketball net on her second-floor porch had been roasted, and the fire had ruined her back yard. Her mother's house, two doors down, also was damaged, its back porch burned. There was water damage everywhere, and broken windows. Michele and her mother didn't have insurance.

The lot where Palumbo's once stood was covered with piles of twisted fire escapes, broken bricks and charred wood. For a few days, police cars were parked around what was left of the CR. That amused the neighbors.

"The horse is out of the barn," Vito Masi said. "What the-hell's left to steal?"

Frank Palumbo was upset with his neighbors.

"I'm taking a bum rap," he said. The neighbors had wanted a watchman to guard the place from scavengers at night, but the CR fire started at noon.

Frank took a walk down Ninth Street to see Lee and Louis Esposito Jr. He was not happy with their gentlemen's agreement, struck shortly after the first fire. All three men are graduates of the Waldron Academy, a private Catholic school on the Main Line. Lee was in the class ahead of Frank, Louis Jr. in the class behind. Louis Jr. and Frank are both lawyers, but nothing in their agreement had been put in writing.

On paper, Palumbo family corporations owned the CR Club and the Nostalgia Room; the Espositos owned Palumbo's banquet hall. But Palumbo's was worth more if all the land was kept together. So the Espositos and Frank had agreed to sell the properties as a group. From the proceeds, the Espositos would recoup a portion of their debts. Frank owed the Espositos about \$325,000, and an additional \$60,000 that the Espositos had fronted him for demolition work, which was to cost \$120,000. Frank would get any leftovers.

But to Frank, the agreement had strings attached. "You can't take the proceeds and leave me the responsibility" of securing the demolition site, he said.

The Espositos agreed, belatedly, that Frank had a point.

Two days after the CR fire, there was a rubbish fire next to Michele Martines' house. Probably set by a vagrant, Fire Department officials said.

Two weeks later, on Sept. 10, George Galdi Jr. was out on his stoop again when he saw smoke rising from the CR. "I must be going goofy," he thought. "It can't be happening again."

The one-alarm blaze broke out at 4:31 p.m. This time, according to authorities, an arsonist held an open flame to combustible materials. Firefighters had it under control in 20 minutes.

It was the fifth fire at Palumbo's in three months. As in all the fires, there were no reports of injuries.

Neighbors wanted the CR razed so it couldn't go up again. "I want it down tonight," said Theresa Evangelista, Vito Masi's daughter. "My nerves are shot. We never went to bed Saturday night. We were all up. Who can get any sleep?"

The neighbors felt powerless. Where were all the politicians and cops who had packed Palumbo's over the years? When the neighborhood civic association held a meeting on Palumbo's, the politicians sent their aides. If Frank Palumbo Sr. were alive, the locals said, why, the place would be ringed with cops. And Frank Rizzo, he'd start a fund-raising drive to rebuild the place, just like he did when St. Monica's burned down.

But nobody came forward to help "the kid."

In September, a crane operator working on the demolition hit an electric wire and knocked out the neighborhood's power. The worker had to jump out of the crane to escape being electrocuted.

THE LIONESSES FOUND A NEW MEETING hall. The price was higher, and it wasn't the same. At their first meeting, the Lionesses observed a moment of silence in memory of Palumbo's. Al the chef and Ronnie the bartender were out looking for work. Vito Masi got his roof repaired, again, so he could sleep in his bedroom.

People moved back into the damaged rowhouses. Eddie Jones, a laborer at Palumbo's, returned to a rowhouse on Ninth Street that he rented from Frank. There were no windows on his second-story apartment, so Eddie put plastic up.

The bottom floor was rented by Pauline Sterling, a senior citizen who makes religious icons, like the Infant Jesus of Prague. Amazingly, Pauline missed all the fires. She had spent the summer with her son in California.

She returned to an apartment damaged by water and smoke and without heat and hot water. But Pauline wasn't worried about herself.

"My God, it's nothing compared to him," she said. "OK, Frank Jr. didn't have the personality of his father. It wasn't his fault. . . . He's suffered. He lost everything. . . . Whoever did this, God will punish him."

The demolition crew finished its job in October.

At Ninth and Christian, a sign on top of a third-floor brick building still says "Palumbo's Around Corner." A red arrow points the way — to a flattened city block.

Frank still lives across the street. He's still waiting for that judgeship. The bad publicity over the demise of Palumbo's, he said, hasn't helped his cause.

Frank seems lonely. He sat in his Mercedes on Christian Street one day and talked about how his old pals didn't come around anymore like they did when Palumbo's was open.

"I can't do them any favors anymore," Frank Palumbo said. With Palumbo's gone, "I'm just another lawyer."

Epilogue

On Jan. 4, Frank Palumbo Jr. and the Espositos sold their property. Where Palumbo's used to be, the new owners plan to build a Rite Aid Pharmacy. ☐