



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE

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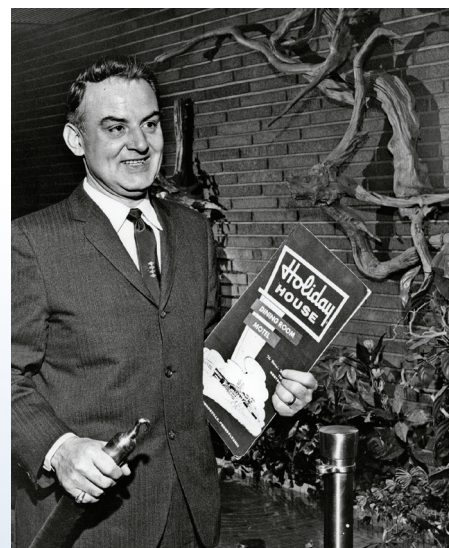
By Matthew Strauss, Director,
Detre Library & Archives

Backstage at Monroeville's Holiday House

Along a stretch of Route 22 known today more for strip malls than nightlife, the Holiday House once attracted top-tier musical and comedic acts to the outskirts of Pittsburgh. John Bertera, along with his brothers James and Mario, established the business on the grounds of a former used car lot in Monroeville in 1955. The choice of location proved to be a wise business decision, as Monroeville's population nearly doubled in the 1950s with Westinghouse, U. S. Steel, and Koppers all building research centers in town. In addition, the extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike to Monroeville in 1951 led local boosters to dub the interchange, the gateway entrance, and Monroeville itself as the "Gateway to Pittsburgh."¹

In a full-page advertisement that appeared in the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* to promote its grand opening, the Holiday House Motel and Supper Club was described as an "ultra-modern and luxurious spot" that featured a spacious dining room capable of seating 650 guests, a coffee shop, and 18 motel rooms.² Bertera was able to parlay the entertainment connections he had made while managing the Vogue Terrace in McKeesport so that Holiday House customers could enjoy dinner while catching performances by entertainment legends such as Ray Charles, The Temptations, Tony Bennet, Milton Berle, and Phylliss Diller. As business grew, so did the club, and the purchase of adjoining properties allowed for the expansion of the motel and entertainment spaces.

Bert Sokol, John Bertera's son-in-law, eventually joined the ownership team and managed the club's bookings. The Bert Sokol Papers and Photographs, donated to the Heinz History Center's Detre Library & Archives, contain materials that offer a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the Holiday House's operations. Contracts with visiting performers are often amended with lengthy lists of demands that the Holiday House staff were



Holiday House co-owner John Bertera.

obligated to meet, including arrangements for overnight accommodations, the hiring of backing musicians, and the provision of backstage refreshments. Dog-eared address books reveal extensive contacts in the industry and include entries for entertainment legends such as Sammy Davis Jr., Bob Hope, and David Letterman. Photographs depict not only visiting entertainers but also the many receptions and banquets held at the club that provided a steady stream of income.

As entertainment tastes changed, the club tried to keep up, occasionally booking rock and country acts to gauge interest in different genres. Though these experiments never proved popular, the club capitalized on the disco craze by opening the Backstage dance club. Described by the Duquesne University student newspaper as having "an atmosphere of something akin to a Las Vegas discotheque," the Backstage featured elaborate lighting effects, an array of mirrors, and a smoke machine, all of which combined to create a convincing "boogie-down"

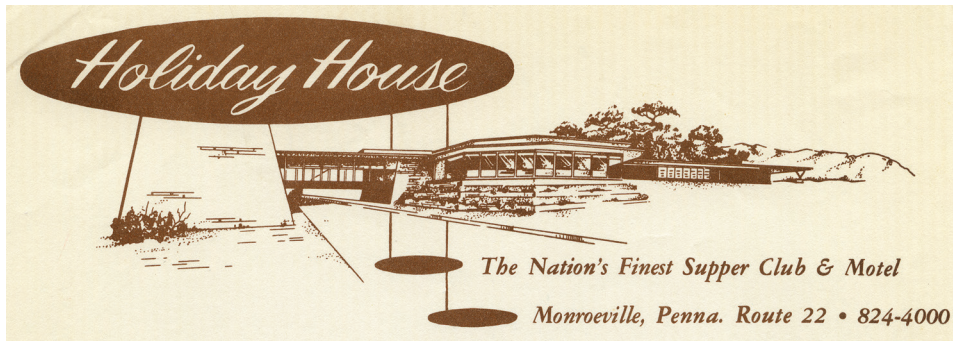


Holiday House co-owner Bert Sokol (left) with comedian and Pittsburgh native Marty Allen.

All HHC Detre L&A, Bert Sokol Papers and Photographs unless noted.



Above: Holiday House dining room and stage.
Background: September 1963.



Holiday House letterhead.

atmosphere.”³ The Backstage attracted a loyal cadre of dancers, including Nancy Churma and Janet Bussi, who recently donated photographs to the Library & Archives that vividly capture the weekly dance contests held there.

The Holiday House was not the only suburban supper club bringing in big-name acts during those years—other establishments included the Merry-Go-Round on Washington Boulevard, Twin Coaches in Rostraver, and the Ankara in Pleasant Hills. (The well-known Bill Green’s had already become a shopping plaza by 1953.) John Bertera sold the Holiday House

in 1981, and the new owners had trouble keeping the business profitable. After the club closed for good in 1988, it was torn down and replaced by the aptly named Holiday Plaza shopping center, marking an end to an era. 🌟

¹ *Federal Communications Commission Reports: Decisions, Reports, Public Notices, and Other Documents of the Federal Communications Commission of the United States*, (United States: Federal Communications Commission, 1964), 665. Monroeville was seen as the new gateway to the city when the Turnpike was extended westward beyond Irwin; for example, see “Signs of Progress,” *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, March 11, 1952, and “Monroeville Gets Land Sale Approval,” *Pittsburgh Press*, Sept. 24, 1952.

² Holiday House advertisement, *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, Oct. 9, 1955.



Dancers at the Backstage club.

HHC Detre L&A, Nancy Churma and Janet Bussi Photographs.

³ Dave D’Aloiso, “‘Boogie-down’ party at Backstage Discotheque,” *Duquesne Duke*, March 25, 1976.

⁴ Matthew Breilis, “Holiday House future in limbo as debts mount, owners bicker,” *Pittsburgh Press*, Oct. 11, 1983.



Smithsonian Connection

“I do know we never had the dress or the uniform. The face could be either of us [daughters Mary and Margaret].”

—John Kane’s daughter Margaret Corbett to Leon Arkus, October 19, 1988.

The son of Irish Catholic parents, John Cain (later Kane) grew up in West Calder, Scotland. He immigrated to the steel mill town of Braddock, PA, in 1880, and spent most of his life as thousands of workmen did, grinding away at low paying jobs—mostly as a commercial painter of rail cars, houses, and buildings—to make ends meet. When he could, Kane drew and painted, creating a world of beauty built from his imagination and everyday experience.

***Lassie in Kilts* by John Kane, oil on canvas mounted on fiberboard, before 1934.**

Courtesy of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. All artwork by John Kane © Estate of John Kane, Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

