Known to locals as BBT, Bloomfield Bridge Tavern—serving Polish food and loudly celebrating the owners’ ethnic heritage with a colorful outdoor mural—sits on Liberty Avenue in Bloomfield, Pittsburgh’s Little Italy. As for the namesake “Bloomfield Bridge,” that historic 2,100-foot span, built in 1914, had been gone for seven years when the tavern opened in 1985. The bridge replacing it did not open for another year. The dates are important, because when you visit BBT you encounter an environment that celebrates a familiar version of Pittsburgh history, but one that, on closer inspection, reveals something far more interesting.

The interior is small, with just a few tables and 10 stools at the bar. It’s a little dark, but inviting, with the bartender on a first-name basis with most everyone there. Pictures on the wall celebrate local sports heroes, from recently sponsored softball teams through the Steelers’ dynasty years, all the way back to a one-eyed boxer from Lawrenceville who was a contender in the early 1900s.

BBT seems to epitomize old-time, blue collar Pittsburgh, but the tavern is not a hold over from Pittsburgh’s famously gritty past: it’s a direct result of the city’s more recent
struggles to hold on to its history while becoming something else.

Stanley “Stas” Frankowski was a worker and union activist at the Armour Meat Company. The facility closed in the early 1980s when Frankowski was just a few months shy of retirement. Like thousands of local workers cut loose from shuttered factories, he began building another life. He enrolled in an entrepreneurship class at Carnegie Mellon University and put together a proposal for a deep-dish pizza restaurant. That idea fell through, but Frankowski and his three sons (Steve, Scott, and Karl) bought a rundown bar in Bloomfield to try and make it work.

In a recent interview, Steve Frankowski says his family decided to offer homemade Polish cuisine as a special on Tuesdays, but it quickly became an enormous draw so the Frankowski’s changed their menu accordingly. They also established BBT as a music venue, featuring everything from polka bands to raucous punk acts. The tavern has since served as a launching pad for local bands gone national such as the Clarks and Rusted Root.

“The live music was Scott’s idea,” Steve said. “I was against it. So was my dad. Boy, we were wrong on that one.”

Stanley Frankowski died in 2005, but BBT remains true to his founding vision. The beloved local watering hole still features a live
act every night from Tuesday to Saturday. The beer selection is astonishing for a place of its size. (Particularly interesting are Okocim and Zywiec, imported from Poland.) BBT is also famous for its Thursday special, which offers any high-end beer on display in a large cooler for one dollar.

There is nothing fancy about the food. Steve even suggests that there is little on the menu customers couldn't make at home. "I'll give you the recipe," he says. "Only you have to promise not to open a Polish restaurant within five miles of here."

His confidence is well placed because, all joking aside, there is genius at work in BBT's kitchen. In a strange way, the food has much in common with the traditional Italian fare available elsewhere in Bloomfield. A proper order of spaghetti and meatballs, after all, is a gloriously unpretentious dish. The art is in the execution. The same is true of pierogies at BBT. The Frankowskis' aunt makes them, and they are excellent. Substantial yet light, they are to frozen pierogies what a plate of homemade pasta is to a can of SpaghettiOs®: no comparison.

The Bloomfield Bridge Tavern's interior is cozy and welcoming.
BBT’s most famous offering is the hearty Polish Platter. The “Red” version comes with pierogi, kielbasa, gotabki (stuffed cabbage), haluski (cabbage and noodles), and kluski (homemade noodles and cottage cheese). The “White” is a vegetarian alternative, with three pierogi, haluski, and kluski. Both seem spectacularly underpriced at $9.95. Other highlights include polish potato pancakes and applesauce, a half pound kielbasa sandwich and—for the adventurous—a polish duck-blood soup called Czarnina. (There are also some traditional pub-grub offerings such as pizza, burgers, and chicken fingers. But if you have never had real pierogies, give them a shot. They come in potato/cheese, sauerkraut, and cottage cheese.)

Traditional Polish food in the heart of Little Italy; blue collar to the core, despite being founded when local industry fell on notoriously hard times; a stage for polka bands and punk rockers; a family-run saloon where the only people allowed to swear are the singers. Bloomfield Bridge Tavern has all the trappings of a Pittsburgh landmark, and twice the contradictions.

Bloomfield Bridge Tavern
4412 Liberty Avenue
Open 5 p.m., Tuesday - Saturday
Live music begins around 9 p.m.
www.myspace.com/polishpartyhouse
(412) 682-8611

Sam MacDonald was born and raised in Ridgway, Pennsylvania. His first book, The Agony of an American Wilderness (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) explores the explosive battle surrounding logging in the Allegheny National Forest. He lives with his wife and twin boys in Pittsburgh, where he is teaching composition and pursuing his MFA at the University of Pittsburgh.

Family Saturdays at the History Center

The History Center will launch a new opportunity for families beginning in January. “Family Saturdays” are for children ages 4 - 8 accompanied by their parents, and will be offered one Saturday a month through June. The program is thematically based with a focus on local history, and will always include a reading component, an exhibit tour, and a take-home activity. Family Saturdays are free with admission and offered at two sessions: 10 a.m.–noon or 12:30–2:30 p.m.

January 26, 2008 – Community Quilting
February 16, 2008 – Presidential Parade
March 22, 2008 – Intriguing Illustration
April 26, 2008 – Break It & Make it
May 17, 2008 – Can You Dig It?
June 14, 2008 – Sports: Oh, the Fun of It!

To register for one or more of these fun-filled Saturdays, contact Danni Hale at 412.454.6373 or ddhale@hswp.org