

BOWLING SINCE 1857

When the Town of Perth was incorporated in September of 1850¹, one of the primary tasks facing its first council was the creation of foundational by-laws by which the new municipal corporation would be administered. One of the first of these, enacted on April 8, 1851, was a law *“For Preventing of Nuisances Within the Town of Perth”*.

Among its 43 clauses, anticipating every conceivable *“nuisance”*, were sections that prohibited driving or riding horses beyond a walking pace; obstructing drains and ditches; storing gunpowder in any container excepting tin, copper or lead; firing a gun within town boundaries; bathing publicly and indecently in the river; excessively or inhumanely beating an animal; and providing intoxicating drinks to children, apprentices, servants, the insane, drunkards or any person of the class designated ‘Indian’.

That 1851 bylaw also made it unlawful for any person *“to keep any house of entertainment of dissolute and disorderly persons, a gambling house, or of ill fame, for the accommodation of persons practicing vice or evil of any kind”*, and that no one could *“keep a Bowling Alley unless said Alley be licenced by this Municipality”*.²

It is curious that bowling alleys received specific mention, as it would be six years before such an entertainment appeared in Perth.

Bowlers claim their sport originated 7,000 years ago in Egypt, as evidenced by articles found in the tomb of an Egyptian child buried in 5200 BCE – nine pieces of stone and a stone ‘ball’ to roll at them. Bowling at pins appears to have originated in ancient Germany, not as a sport but as a religious cleansing ceremony, and centuries later, when it had evolved into a game, Martin Luther (1483-1546) is credited with settling on nine as the ideal number of pins.

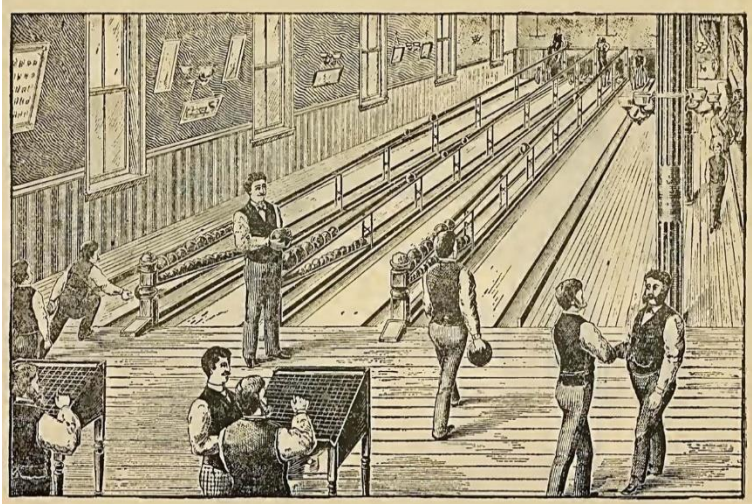


Sixteenth Century Nine-Pin Bowling

¹ An outcome of the Revised Municipal Institutions Act of 1849.

² Perth *Courier*, April 18, 1851.

The game spread from Germany through the Scandinavian countries and then more broadly across Europe. It became so popular in England that, in 1511, King Henry VIII (1491-1547)³ outlawed the pastime for the lower classes and imposed a tax on private lanes to limit them to the wealthy. In the king's view, bowling took too much time away from archery practice and his army depended upon archers. Nevertheless, in 1531 Henry had two outdoor bowling lanes installed for himself at Whitehall Palace.



Bowling Alley c1892
(Courtesy Spalding's Athletic Library)

Eventually emigrants carried the game to the American Colonies where the earliest known reference to bowling at pins appears in Washington Irving's 1819 short story *Rip Van Winkle*. In the United States the game gained an extra pin. As legend has it, since bowling alleys were usually annexes to saloons, the game acquired a reputation for heavy drinking and gambling and, when the State of Connecticut passed a law outlawing 'Nine Pin Bowling', it was circumvented by simply adding a pin. Ten pins remain the standard in the USA today.

Many of these early bowling 'alleys' were no more than a patch of smooth bare ground behind a tavern or in the village square where the game played was also known as 'skittles'. In 1840, however, New York City's Knickerbocker Hotel opened an indoor three-lane bowling alley, but it still used a clay surface for the lanes. By 1850, wood floored lanes were becoming the norm and there were more than 400 bowling alleys, indoor and outdoor, in New York City alone. The sport was also rapidly spreading westward and north into Canada.

The first evidence of a bowling alley in Perth dates to April 1857 when town council received a "*petition from several inhabitants of the Town against licensing of bowling alleys*".⁴ The license application prompting that petition had been submitted by Dennis Kane (1827-1867) who ran a hotel and tavern at 50 Drummond Street, near the Craig Street intersection, opposite the Court House and St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church⁵ of the day.

When the application and its counter-petition were debated, Councillor John Deacon⁶ was adamantly opposed to issuing a license, citing the "*immoral tendency*" of bowling alleys and arguing that an alley in Perth would "*be productive of evil*". Deacon secured some support from

³ On the throne 1609-1547.

⁴ Perth *Courier*, April 3, 1857.

⁵ The original (first) St. Andrews Church was located on the southeast corner of Drummond and Craig Streets from its construction in 1833 until it burned in 1923.

⁶ John Deacon (1823-1909), lawyer later Renfrew County Judge.

Councillor James Bell⁷ who, although of the opinion that a bowling alley was “*merely a place of amusement,*” agreed that “*attached to a tavern, it might lead to drinking and gambling*”.⁸

Deacon and Bell were, however, in the minority. Other councillors spoke in favor of licensing the proposed bowling alley. John Murray⁹ argued that bowling was only “*a harmless amusement*”; Francis Hall¹⁰ thought an “*alley would be a place of exercise, if kept within reasonable bounds*”; John Doran¹¹ observed “*there were different games of amusement – some preferred one, some preferred another, and as a game of amusement a bowling alley could do no harm*”; and Richard Shaw¹² also expressed support the granting the license.

Deacon managed to block the permit, however, at least to the extent of having it referred to a committee (led by himself) for further study. However, when the committee made its report to the council the following July, recommending that the application be denied, it was ignored. Councillors voted five to three in favour of granting Denis Kane his license – Murray, Robert Gemmill¹³, Shaw, Hall and Doran voting ‘Yea’, while Deacon, Dr. James Nicol¹⁴, and Bell voted ‘Nay’. The requisite license was duly issued to Innkeeper Kane.

Innkeeper and bowling alley entrepreneur Denis Kane was born in County Clare, Ireland, the son of James Kane and Bridget Conaughty.¹⁵ The Kane Inn and Public House on Drummond Street was established by his father in about 1832. There is no detailed description of the bowling facility added in 1857, but it seems to have had a single wooden alley, enclosed in a structure attached to, or immediately adjacent to, the Craig Street side of the two-storey hotel.¹⁶ Denis Kane and his wife Ann Farrell (1826-1907) operated the Kane inn and bowling alley, until 1865. He died in 1867.

The year bowling alley pioneer Denis Kane died, Abel Yates, manager of the Cockburn Island Hotel, situated on the north side of Market Square opposite Town Hall, petitioned Town Council for a license to operate a bowling alley to be located behind his hotel. Without any of the debate and delay that surrounded Kane’s permit application of 10 years earlier, Yate’s license was promptly granted – suggesting, perhaps, that the Drummond Street bowling alley had not proven to be as “*productive of evil*” as feared by some.

⁷ James Bell (1817-1904), merchant in partnership with his brother Robert, later manager of the Merchants Bank branch at Perth, Town Councilor, and Lanark County Registrar.

⁸ Perth *Courier*, April 3, 1857.

⁹ John Murray (b.1821), dry goods merchant, later partner in the Murray, Miller & Morris Foundry and captain of the Fountain Fire Company.

¹⁰ Francis Hall (1813-1892), boot & shoemaker.

¹¹ John Doran Jr. (1826-1889), later Warden of United Counties of Lanark & Renfrew, then judge of the Division Court of Nipissing District.

¹² Richard Shaw (1822-1872), eldest son of Senator James Shaw (1798-1878), merchant, foundry owner, publisher of the *British Standard*, later Mayor,

¹³ Robert Gemmill (1810-1894), partner in merchant firm of Porter & Gemmill.

¹⁴ Dr. James Stewart Nichol Sr. (1804-1864), Mayor in 1854-1855 & 1858, practiced medicine at Perth 1837-1864.

¹⁵ Dennis Kane married Ann Farrell (1826-1907) at Perth in 1853.

¹⁶ The former Kane Hotel is today the private residence at 50 Drummond Street East.

Abel Yates, a Quaker, was born in 1827 at Plum Hollow, Bastard Township, Leeds County, the son of Benjamin (James) Yates (1784-1866) and Elizabeth Wing (1787-1871). Before moving to Perth, he had been an innkeeper in Charlottenburg Township, Glengarry County. He and his wife, Polly Ann Phillips (1832-1871), spent only a year or two in Perth, before moving on to manage hotels at Napanee and then Brockville, where Yates died in 1907.

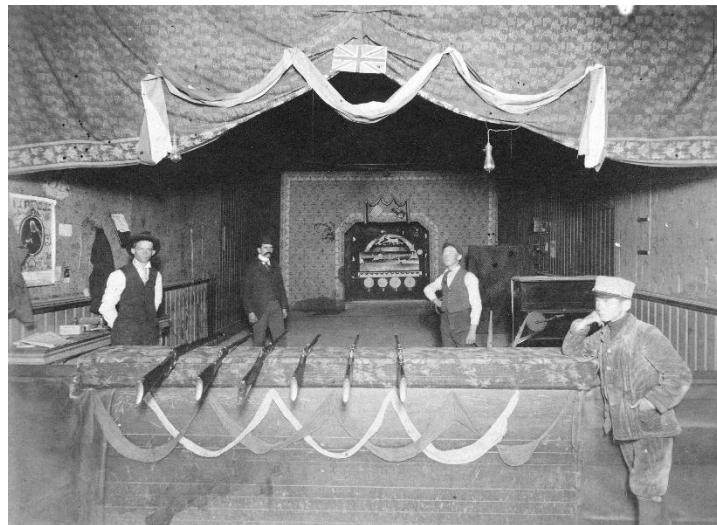
Just a year after its bowling alley was established, the Cockburn Island Hotel was sold and renamed the 'Allan House'.¹⁷ The new proprietors continued to operate the bowling alley for about a decade. At some date in the late 1870s the alley briefly ceased operation, but in 1881 was re-opened under the management of Alonzo Dittrick (1854-1890).

Alonzo, born in 1854, was one of 13 children born to William Dittrick (1807-1890) and Christina Thornton (1814-1897). He married Caroline 'Carrie' Donegan (1861-1885). From about 1880, Alonzo Dittrick also operated a sewing machine sales and repair shop and apparently only ran the bowling alley for about four years. In 1885 he became manager of the Hicks Hotel, 80 Foster Street, and in 1887 was hired as manger of the Provincial Hotel in Gananoque. Dittrick died of tuberculosis in 1890 at the age of just 36 years.

The bowling alley, however, continued as part of the Allan House establishment and in 1887 was expanded to include a billiard table and shooting gallery. However, when the Allan House was sold in 1911, becoming the Hotel Cecil, the bowling alley on Market Square went out of business.

But bowlers were not long left without an alley. In 1912, George Kerr opened the 'Perth Bowling Alley' in the Allan Building¹⁸ at 35 Gore Street East. George Terrance Kerr (1876-1937), the eldest son of John Andrew Kerr (1851-1940) and Mary Wallace

(1847-1902), had been born while his parents lived briefly at Winnipeg but was the third generation of the Kerr family that arrived at Perth from Ireland in 1830. Originally an electrician, he was an entrepreneur who, in 1910, established the Perth Bottling Works, where he produced orange crush, cream soda, lemon soda, ginger beer, siphon soda, sparkling water and other soft drinks for 25 years.



Shooting Gallery
(James S. Matthews Collection)

¹⁷ Purchased by Henry Allan, James Allan, Aaron Broome (1835-1887), and Thomas Jordan (1833-1888).

¹⁸ The Allan Building at 35 Gore Street East was built in 1879 by merchant brothers Francis (1818-1908), James (1823-1908), and Isacc (1840-1875) Allan, sons of son of Francis Allan Sr. (1792-1844). Merchant tailor Francis Allan Jr. became sole owner of the property the following year and owned it until 1914 when it was sold to John Edward Maloney (1868-1931).

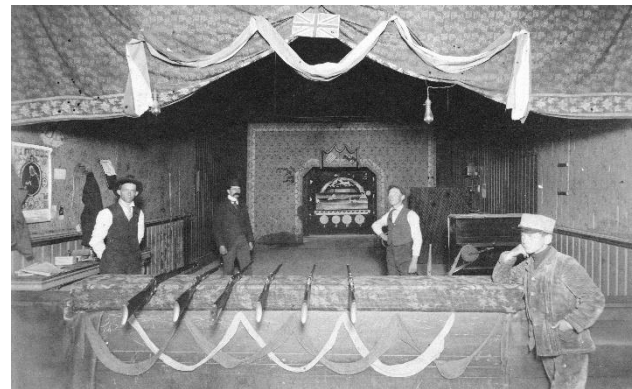
Kerr's new alley boasted two lanes, one box ball alley, a shooting gallery and a "first class barber shop".¹⁹ Perth's first documented bowling leagues were organized at the Gore Street alley with "prizes given out every Saturday night for high scores during the week".



Box Ball Alley
(Courtesy John Hostetler Collection)

'Box Ball' was a modified version of bowling, using smaller balls to knock down five pins set in a parallel line across a wooden alley enclosed with the side-rails. In some versions the pins were free standing and resembled standard bowling pins while, in other cases, the pins were cut-outs suspended from a frame. Invented in about 1903 and manufactured by the Holcomb & Hoke Ltd. of Indianapolis, Indiana, Box Ball lanes were produced in three sizes and designed to be portable so they could be quickly assembled in arcades, amusement parks, pubs, or other entertainment venues, large and small.

Indoor 'Shooting Galleries' of the day were not the midway side-show games we know today, equipped with air-rifles or laser guns. Although air rifles were coming in to use, in the early 1900s patrons often competed for cash and other prizes firing live ammunition from .22, .32 or even larger caliber rifles over a relatively short range at targets ranging from paper bullseyes, paste-board rabbit cut-outs, to bowling pins. Despite the risky mix of booze, bravado and bullets, accidents seem to have been rare.



Shooting Gallery c1900
(Photo by James S. Matthews)

The Perth Bowling Alley employed full time 'instructor' J. E. Morgan and among the first prizes issued to top bowlers on December 20, 1912, were 10-pound turkeys. Tim Lowe was the top bowler of the opening week with a score of 219.

The game played at the Kane and Allen House bowling alleys of the 1850s-1890s was the American 10-pin variety. At the Kerr alley, however, it was the five-pin game, invented in 1909. Responding to customer complaints about the size and weight of 10-pin bowling balls, Toronto alley owner Thomas F. Ryan (1872-1961) replaced it with a hand-sized five-inch (12.7cm) 3.5 pound (1.6 Kg) ball, and had five of the larger 10-pins turned down on a lathe to about 75% of their original size, placing them, equally spaced, on the 36" (91 cm) tenpin triangle. He left the 10-pin lane dimensions of 60 feet (18.288 meters) by 42 inches (106.68 cm.) unchanged.²⁰ Five-pin bowling remains the most common variety of the game played in Canada today.²¹

¹⁹ Perth Museum notes.

²⁰ Some additional variations to Ryan's five-pin game have evolved over the following years.

²¹ In Canada and the United States there are three other variations of the game: nine-pin bowling uses a small ball without finger holes; candlepin bowling has thin, tall pins (40 cm or 16 in) with matching ends, bowled with a small light (1.1 kg or 2.4 lb) handheld ball; duckpin bowling uses short, squat, pins bowled with a handheld ball.

The Kerr Alley also probably offered a much-improved bowling ball. Earlier balls had been made of lignum viaae, a hard, dense, but chip-prone wood, until 1906 when the 'Evertrue' rubber band ball was invented. It was guaranteed for three years against chipping or changing shape and quickly became the bowler's ball of choice. The Evertrue was followed in 1914 by Brunswick Company's rubber compound 'Mineralite' ball.

Kerr's bowling alley got off to a bang-up start, but in January 1914, just a year after it opened for business, the building at 35 Gore Street East was sold and converted to house the Royal Theatre Moving Picture House.²²

From closure of the Kerr bowling alley in 1914, Perth was without a bowling alley for more than three decades. The town's most dedicated practitioners of the sport travelled to Smiths Falls where, over the years, they could bowl at 'Durant's Bowling, Billiards & Lunch Bar' (operative 1909-1953) or the 'Embassy Bowling Alley' (from 1940).

It was not until early 1944 that bowling began its return to Perth. In April, Town Council denied an application from one W. H. Leventhal requesting that the municipal by-law governing bowling alley hours be amended to permit operations later than 10:00 p.m. Leventhal's petition was denied, but at the same meeting Council granted a license to Sylvester O'Donnell to open a new bowling alley.

Perth Courier Ad December 13, 1912

Owen Sylvester O'Donnell (1890-1958), born at Sheridan's Rapids, Dalhousie Township, was a prominent Perth businessman of the day. He and his wife, Janet McEwan (1894-1944), operated a hotel at Lanark before moving to Perth in 1921 where, in partnership with his brother Joseph O'Donnell (1896-1928), he purchased the Titanic Billiard Parlor & Tobacco Shop²³ at 37 Gore Street East. The O'Donnells added a barber chair and shoeshine stand to the poolhall, expanded the tobacco business, branched out into groceries, and developed a wholesale trade that covered much of the surrounding area. O'Donnell was an active sportsman, a member of the golf and curling clubs and an executive of the Crescent Hockey Club. He was also a one-time member of Town Council.

In September 1943 the O'Donnell business was extensively damaged by fire. Reconstruction plans included a bowling alley but, while the wholesale grocery enterprise was quickly re-established, the bowling alley never came to pass.²⁴ The change in O'Donnell's project probably related to more ambitious plans undertaken by Joe Perkins. In October 1946, Perkins began construction of a garage and automobile dealership at #2 Wilson Street and announced that the building's second floor would house an eight-lane, five-pin, bowling alley.

²² Operated by Hannah 'Anna' King-Ball (1866-1915).

²³ Formerly owned by Peter Kanelakos (1885-1959).

²⁴ When O'Donnell retired in 1956, he sold his wholesale business was sold to Loeb Wholesale of Ottawa.

Entrepreneur Joseph Acheson Perkins (1908-1990) was born at Rochester, New York, and grew up at Peterborough, Ontario, and in South Sherbrooke Township near Maberly. In 1938 he opened a Supertest gas station at the corner of Wilson and Peter Streets in Perth. The filling station was soon expanded into an International Harvester farm machinery outlet and then a General Motors dealership, for which the new building was constructed. In time these dealerships became part of Perkins Holdings Limited among other ventures including the Taggart Service Ltd. trucking company, Perkins Realty, and Perkins Amusement Ltd., owner/operator of the bowling alley.

On Saturday September 6, 1947, Perkins Bowling Lanes opened for play, more than a year before the garage and car dealership²⁵. It was *“Reported to be the smartest alley set-up in any town of its size in the province; fluorescent lighting, comfortable seating, and Snack Bar provided for the comfort and convenience of the players and blowing fans”*.²⁶ Bowlers paid 15¢ per game.

The alley proved popular from the outset. League play was underway within a week and public bowling attracted both young and old. However, the alley’s first Manager ‘Red’ Russell found that *“some of the Perth ladies are not quite sure of the attraction of the game, as many of them have not had the opportunity of playing ... [but] Perth ladies will soon be following the example of their sisters in other towns”*.



Not everyone was thrilled about the new business at the corner of Wilson and Peter Street. At their meeting of September 29th, just days after the lanes opened, Town Councillors discussed complaints they had received about noise and the fact that the alley was open until midnight. *“Something has to be done, we cannot have disturbances up to midnight,”* Councillor Alfred Siddall lamented²⁷.

Nevertheless, when they referred to the applicable by-law council found it dated from 1881 and, while it required billiard halls to close by 10:00 p.m., it said nothing about bowling allies. Suggestions were made that the Police Committee should visit the alley, that Perkins be asked or told to insulate the facility, or that the license approved only a month earlier be revoked. After considerable heated but circular debate, however, the matter was tabled to a future date and the issue seems to have disappeared. (Perkins clearly had more influence at Town Council than had W. H. Leventhal whose request for operating hours beyond 10:00 p.m. had been denied just two years earlier).

Despite the noise complaint, the new bowling alley was off to a sound start, but it truly struck its stride when Al Kolarik assumed the role of manager in 1950. Born at Pozlovice, Czechoslovakia, Alois ‘Al’ Kolarik (1919-2011) escaped the Czech communist regime in 1948,

²⁵ Perkins Motors did not officially open until March 5, 1949.

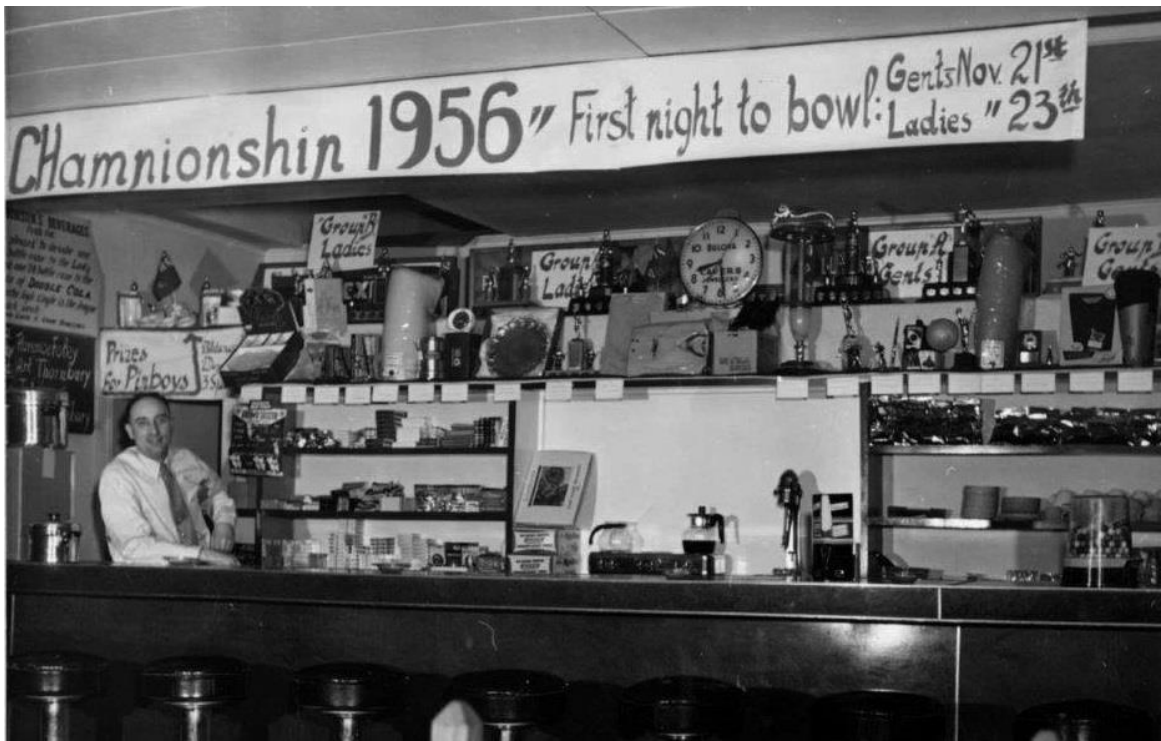
²⁶ Perth *Courier*, March 3, 1949.

²⁷ Perth *Courier*, October 2, 1947.

emigrated to Canada under the International Refugee Program and arrived at Perth in 1949. He was employed for a year as a farm laborer before landing a position as an odd-job man with Perkins Motor Sales until he was placed in charge of the bowling alley.

Under Kolarik's direction, by 1954 there were 10 eight-team leagues comprised of 400 registered players in action -- Teachers, High School, Codes, Jergens, Wampoles, Brown Shoe, Ladies Mercantile, Men's Mercantile, Town & County Mixed, Men's Friday Night, Ladies Friday Afternoon, School Patrol, and two Lanark Village leagues. Kolarik would serve as the much-loved manager of Perkins Bowling Lanes for 24 years, but when he left the job to work full time as a salesman at the Perkins GM dealership,²⁸ the bowling alley began a cycle of ups and downs.

Help Wanted
COUNTER GIRL — Apply Per-
kins' Bowling Alley. 41c



Perkins Bowling Lanes Manager Al Kolarik on duty at the alley snack bar.

(Courtesy of Pauline Kolarik-Williams)

Perkins Amusement Ltd. never generated much revenue for Perkins Holdings Ltd. and by the mid-1970s increasingly fell short of its potential. Much of the difficulty lay in finding a sufficient number of pin-boys and pin-girls to meet demand and keep all of the lanes active. Teenagers had more diversions to follow than had been available in the 1950s. Following the departure of Al Kolarik, finding managers also proved a significant challenge. As managers and staff were always laid off for the summer off-season, from 1974 onward most managers lasted only a year, or perhaps two.

²⁸ Where he became a three-time winner of a General Motors Top Auto Salesman Award.

Business considerations pointed to closing the operation, but Joe Perkins understood the importance of his bowling alley to the town. In 1975 he invested \$40,000 in automatic pin-setting equipment and a general refurbishment of the lanes. But all did not go smoothly. The project was scheduled for completion during the off-season summer months, but problems delayed the annual opening from early September 1975 to January 1976. By that date many of the local leagues and even casual bowlers had moved to the Embassy or Gratton Lanes at Smiths Falls. Another late opening followed in 1976, and when the season finally got underway in mid December, the alley attracted only two leagues of six teams each.

SPECIAL NOTICE
 All Boys wishing jobs as pin-setters are requested to be at the Alley at 3 p.m. Saturday, September 13th for interview.

PERKINS
 AMUSEMENTS Ltd.



The Perkins Building at #2 Wilson Street. The entrance to the bowling alley is by the door at the left.

(Photo by the author, 2022)

In September 1978, Perth *Courier* sportswriter and bowling enthusiast Murray Stone lamented that *“the past three years have virtually wiped bowling out in Perth because of the problems in securing a manager.”*²⁹ *After a short 30 years as part of the sports life of the town, it seems that bowling has now departed for greener pastures, leaving a great many friends to mutter and wondering.*³⁰

²⁹ Perth *Courier*, September 6, 1978.

³⁰ Perth *Courier*, September 28, 1978.

So it went over the following decade, some seasons were better than others but Perkins Bowling Lanes struggled to recapture the glory days of the 1950s³¹ and 1960s and even briefly ceased operation on a few occasions in the 1980s. In 1990 Joe Perkins died and the following year Perkins Holdings Ltd., dragged under by seismic changes in the trucking industry, went bankrupt.

Bowling at Perth survived the upheaval, however. In 1994, John Stewart, a prominent local heritage entrepreneur, purchased the Perkins Building and converted it into a commercial shopping center named 'Perks 'N Things'. Stewart also ensured that the second-floor lanes remained active, operating as 'Alley Cats Bowling Alley'. In 2012, however, the balls stopped rolling at Alley Cats and Perth was left without a bowling alley for the first time in 65 years.



Joseph Acheson Perkins (1908-1990)
(Photo courtesy of Blair & Sons)

Six years later, in 2019, the Perkins Building was purchased by Ireton Fendley Professional Corporation. The new owners rehabilitated the lanes and, in February 2020, reopened the facility as the 'Spare Room Bowling Alley'.

- Ron W. Shaw (2022)

³¹ In the *Perth Courier* of December 2, 1987, a profile of John Mather, Town Clerk 1943-1977, mentions that -- "During the 1950s ... there was also a bowling pin factory ..." at Perth. The author has been unable to find any details of this enterprise.