

Demolition company razing Padua

► The Watkins landmark hosted Bing and Bette and FDR when it was a resort, but it has been vacant since 1970.

By KELLEY QUINN
Star-Gazette

WATKINS GLEN — The Glen Springs Resort survived the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the Great Depression. But it couldn't beat the economy of the 1990s.

Its magnificent history — Bing Crosby crooning in the parlor, Bette Davis dancing in the ballroom, and Franklin D. Roosevelt bathing in its bubbling springs — couldn't override the power of money.

The Glen Springs complex — later a boys' school — has been a temptation to investors and developers for more than 25 years. But the lack of financing left the building in such deterioration that it was beyond repair.

This week, the former resort for the rich and famous is falling victim to the wrecking ball, the end result of several proposals gone sour. But the razing could clear the way for future business deals, one official said.

"It was a wonderful place and I had some great times there," said 94-year-old Talitha Botsford, who played her violin for Glen Springs guests during her early 20s. "It's so sad. (The demolition) makes tears come to my eyes."

Workers for R & L Perry Construction of Reading thought they would have the building torn down by Wednesday, but it wasn't that easy. Steel beams make the demolition difficult, said employee Harold Ayers. The company hopes to have the work done by the end of next week.

The Glen Springs Resort closed in 1942 and was bought by the Franciscan Friars, officially known as the Assumption Province of the Order of Friars Minor.

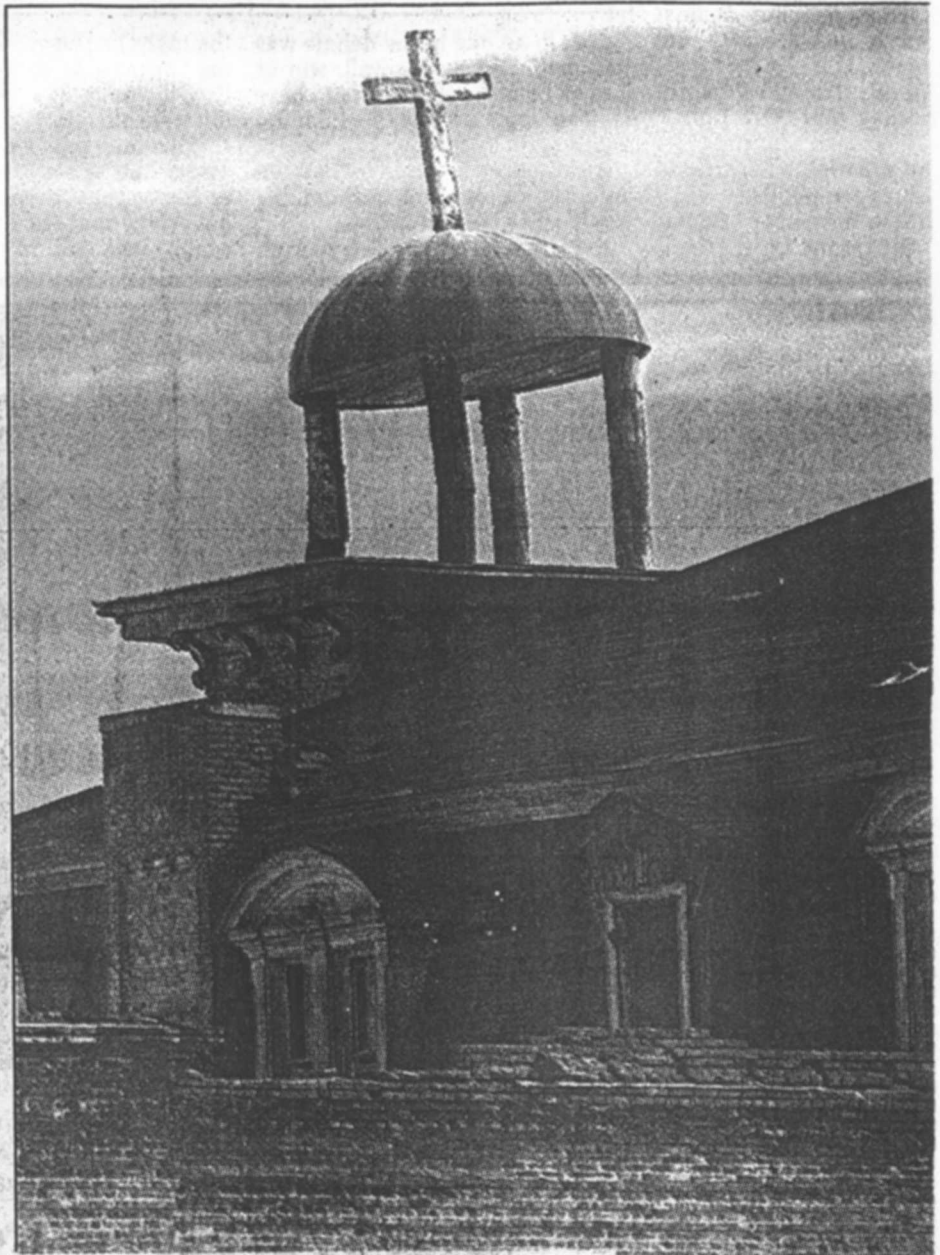
The order used the building as an all-boys school — St. Anthony's of Padua High School — from 1949 to 1970.

Although it's been vacant for nearly 26 years, the complex has become a frequent target for vandals and trespassers in the past year. And without renovation money, the building quickly went downhill.

"The decision to tear it down was made three months ago," said the Rev. Austin J. Budnick, the priest who oversees the

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- A look back at the history of Padua/7A
- Bottling plant may come to Padua/7A



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ABOVE, A SHINING SYM James Rogers, father of B Perry, owner of R & L Perry Construction, Reading, he put the copper dome on to the former Glen Springs resort. The Perry company is tearing down.

LEFT, HOLDING HISTORY Brian Perry of R & L Perry Construction holds a cornice from the ballroom of the Glen Springs resort. Perry said Wednesday he will give museums some of the memorabilia from the razed building.

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property. "It just wasn't safe anymore. It's a question of whether or not you want to live in the past or in the future."

But on Wednesday, the past made its presence known. Workers knew they were demolishing a piece of Watkins Glen history.

While pieces of marble and classic architecture were ripped from their frames, Brian Perry hustled to salvage every bit of history he could.

While Perry's father, Bob Perry, owns R & L Perry Construction, his grandfather — James Rogers — helped build the Glen Springs complex.

So for Brian Perry, the demolition was one job he'd rather have missed.

"My grandfather put the dome up there," said Perry, looking up at the building's crowning element, tarnished from time, but topped by a cross that still stands tall. "That's solid copper."

Perry's grandfather was a caddy for the resort and also ran its boiler room.

"It outrages me," Perry said of the demolition as he watched the second floor ceiling crash in. "This was the Saratoga Springs of the Finger Lakes."

Perry knows the history of Glen Springs. He's studied it, he's heard it.

"The Rockefellers, the Roosevelts — they were here," he said. "There was a real patriotic attitude about New York state at that time. There was a mystery about the area's folklore — the glens, the Indians ... and then there was the Glen Springs."

Perry had hoped that someone would front the money to restore the Glen Springs, but a last-ditch effort in 1995 fell through when developer Norman Kelly failed to



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The history of Padua

- ▶ **1847:** The first hotel is built on the west hill above Watkins Glen.
- ▶ **1870:** Lake View House opened by Judge George G. Freer.
- ▶ **1878:** Judge Freer dies; hotel closes.
- ▶ **1890:** William E. Leffingwell buys property and opens Glen Springs Resort. It would entertain the rich and famous who came for the spring water, mineral water and scenery.
- ▶ **1942:** The 196-bedroom, 65-bath resort closes.
- ▶ **1946 - 1948:** Cornell University rents the facility and renovates it for housing for married students.
- ▶ **1949:** St. Anthony's of Padua High School and Franciscan Minor Seminary opened by Franciscan Friars.
- ▶ **1970:** Padua school closes.
- ▶ **1970 - 1974:** Glen Springs Academy, a private school, opens in 1970 but does not reopen for the 1974-75 school year.
- ▶ **1990:** Developers plan hotel, townhouse, convention-center complex but withdraw idea.
- ▶ **1992:** Another group of developers wants to build an amusement park on the site. They never went through with the concept.
- ▶ **1994:** Developer announces interest in turning property into spring-water bottling plant, an inn, conference center and single-family homes. Plans were withdrawn.
- ▶ **January 1996:** Demolition of the Glen Springs buildings begins.
- ▶ **March 1996:** Demolition expected to be completed.

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come up with enough cash.

Kelly, of Hamburg, N.Y., wanted to buy the acreage and turn it into a spring water bottling plant, a 140-room inn and a conference center. He made a \$50,000 down payment on the \$1.1 million property, but never paid the rest.

The property was put back on the market by the Franciscan Friars, who still own the land.

The razing of the structure has drawn few spectators, said R & L's Ayers. Some people come by to snatch a brick or two, just to have a piece of history. Others stop just to get a final look.

Perry stood in amazement as the ballroom was torn down. Thoughts of Charleston contests and Bette Davis filled his mind.

"There it goes," he said after part of the ceiling caved in. Running

quickly to the site, Perry grabbed a cornice that topped one of 16 columns in the ballroom.

Perry will take salvaged material, including pieces of a marble bathtub and a Victorian fireplace mantle, and likely will donate them to a museum. He wants ensure that the resort is remembered.

"A lot of famous people have been through those doors," Perry said. "It's a shame. It really is."