

Yankeetown: Lodge gets new tenant

YANKEETOWN — A local businessman is breathing new life into a piece of Florida’s history, opening a fine dining restaurant in one of Yankeetown’s oldest and most storied structures: The Izaak Walton Lodge.



Ike’s Old Florida Kitchen, the former Izaak Walton Lodge, has been a fixture in Yankeetown for decades. The restaurant is now open for business again.

Mitch Simmons, owner of Neon Leon’s in Homosassa, purchased the vacant building and opened Ike’s Old Florida Kitchen at Izaak Walton Lodge on Nov. 16.

Eugene Knotts, son of Yankeetown founder A.F. Knotts, built the lodge in 1924 to accommodate short-term visitors of the new fishing village. He named it after the famed 17th century author of the “The Compleat Angler,” Izaak Walton, commonly known as the father of fly fishing.

The lodge stayed in the Knotts family for many years, but was purchased by Wayne and Linda Harrington in 1987, years after it had been abandoned. They opened a gourmet restaurant named after Walton’s most famous work. But in 1999, the Harringtons saw the building they had so meticulously restored go up in flames for reasons unknown.

The Harringtons worked to rebuild the structure yet again, but this time it was built without the eight second-floor bedrooms that had housed visiting fishermen and their families in the early part of the last century. Eventually, though, the money ran out. “The Compleat Angler” closed, and the building sat vacant once more.

Until now.

Simmons and his crew worked tirelessly before opening tonight to ensure the restaurant retained the Old Florida feel that is the lodge’s heritage.

The flowing Withlacoochee River passes by the dining area at Ike’s as it meanders peacefully before spilling into the Gulf of Mexico. It is not uncommon to see eagles, osprey, fish and more from a waterfront dining table.

“We were hoping to find a waterfront location and maybe open another Leon’s — which we might still do — and during our searches we found (the lodge) was available,” Simmons said.

Simmons said Ike's, short for Izaak, is upscale waterfront dining, featuring steak and local seafood, as well as more unusual fare like venison, ostrich, buffalo, quail and, of course, gator.

"We're gonna eat things that usually would eat you," he said.