



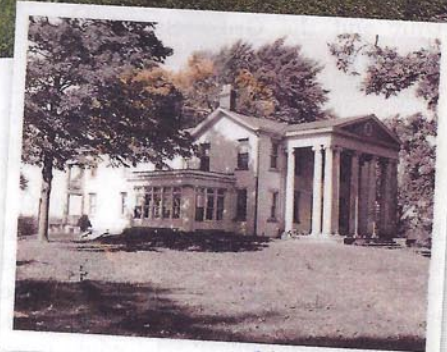
# Southern Hospitality

By Laura Ackley

**T**HE BUILDING THAT HOUSES Tara - A Country Inn was constructed in 1854 by Charles Koonce. Koonce made his money in coal and was known to stand in front of his house and tell any one who was passing, "I own land as far as a man's eye can see in any direction!" He was boastful, but his statement was true. In fact, he owned 1,300 acres as well as 1,600 acres in West Virginia. Over the years the land was sold off in parcels until there were only eight acres left by 1949 when the estate was sold by the family.

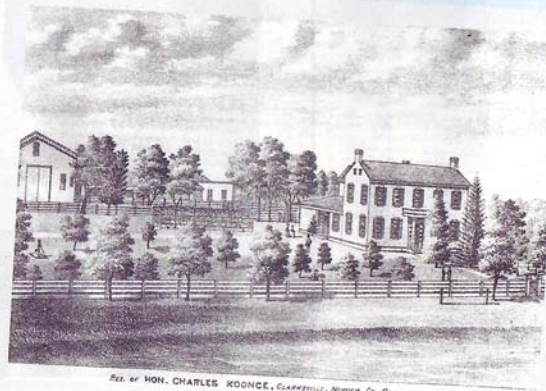
A once bustling town on the Erie Canal Extension, nineteenth century Clarksville was the halfway stop between Lake Erie and Pittsburgh. When the railroad came, Clarksville, now the borough Clark, essentially became a ghost town and was inundated when the Shenango Reservoir was built in the 1960s. Houses, churches and cemeteries were moved and others were razed to make way for the new flood-control reservoir. With most of Koonce's land now under water, the highest point in the area still boasts his beautiful historic home.

Originally built as a red brick federal-style farmhouse, grandson Samuel Koonce whitewashed the home and added the Ionic columns and porches to give it a Southern Georgian plantation charm. After the family sold the home in the mid-twentieth century, the building served many purposes, including



Koonce Mansion served as a tavern and office building before it was vacant for years.

Incidentally, many out-of-town visitors are curious why the main entrance of Tara faces the opposite side of Route 18. The answer is that when the reservoir was built, Old Route 18, Sharon-Greenville Road, which ran to the east of the home past the main entrance, became simply an access road to the lake. The route 18 causeway was built behind the home, making the mansion appear to be positioned backwards.







Jim and Donna Winner bought the Koonce family home in 1984 and opened Tara in 1986.

Shadow Lawn Manor, Golden Eagle Tavern and a consortium office building holding such things as the area cable station. The imposing mansion sat vacant for years.

Jim and Donna Winner created the vision of "Tara" in 1984 when they purchased the home at a public auction. After 18 months of renovation, they opened the doors of Tara - A Country Inn on June 6, 1986, with just a handful of rooms. Two additions later, Tara now has 27 guestrooms and has been critically acclaimed throughout the country. Ashley's Gourmet Dining Room, Stonewall's Tavern, banquet facilities, swimming pools and elegant gardens attract thousands of tourists from across the nation for romantic getaways, weddings and corporate events.

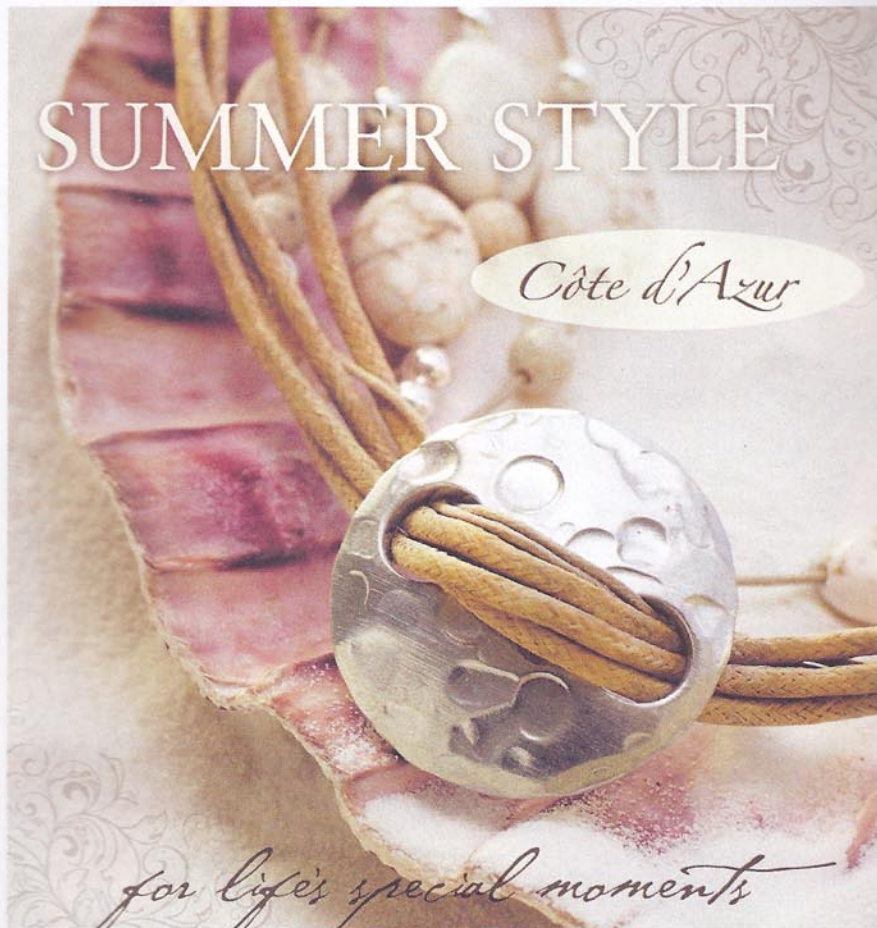
June 2011 marked the celebration of 25 years in business as Tara - A Country Inn. However, the untimely death of Jim Winner in September 2010 made the occasion very bittersweet. Donna Winner remains determined to carry on her husband's dreams of building a strong hospitality and tourism industry in the Shenango Valley. Donna and Jim Winner received the Bill Knecht Tourism Award from VisitMercerCountyPA in 2010, a tribute to all that the couple accomplished to promote tourism in Mercer County. They were also the recipients of the Pennsylvania Tourism and Lodging Association's Innkeepers of the Year Award in 2007, and in 2008 they were handpicked by then Governor Ed Rendell and inducted into the inaugural class of the Keystone Society for Tourism to honor visionaries in destination leadership and community development. ▼

Laura lives in Sharon. She is general manager of Donna's Diner, Buhl Mansion Guesthouse & Spa and the marketing director for Tara - A Country Inn.



Photos contributed.

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