

Taverns a proud part of Port's past

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/013113/tavernSM.png> **Bars were once an integral part of the social and economic fabric of a city that is now grappling with how they fit into downtown redevelopment**

The Bodega tavern, where owner Bill Weyker would expertly pour glasses of cold draft beer and his wife Lucina would serve her famous fish fry and German potato salad, was once a fixture on Franklin Street.

That was in the heyday of Port Washington's tavern scene, when bars — 32 at one point — were a vital part of the social and economic fabric of the city.

Times have changed. Last month, the Common Council, in denying a liquor license application, said a tavern at the site of the former Bodega, which has been a bar on and off for more than a century, is incompatible with downtown redevelopment plans.



In the 1950s and 60s in particular, and long before that, taverns were hardly incompatible with downtown. They were part of its lifeblood.

Lloyd Smith, who operated Smith Bros. restaurant and its popular Shanty Bar, likened the city's taverns to British pubs, where people stop regularly on their way home from work.

"It was almost expected," he said.

Maybe that's a reflection of the community's German and Luxembourg roots, or perhaps of the area's blue-collar heritage.

You can see it reflected in the mirrors set into the elaborately carved wooden back bars that still grace many of the city's taverns.

If you look closely, you can almost see the bartenders of old in their work uniform — crisp white shirts buttoned to the top, ties fastened and aprons tied — as they greeted their regulars each day.

After all, it was typical for men — and until relatively recent times, it was mostly men — to stop after work for a few beers. It was their time to reflect on the day, catch up on the news and gossip and to socialize.

Back then, television was in its infancy and social media hadn't been conceived, so there were few other outlets to disseminate the news, said Mary Flierl, a Port Washington Historical

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Society member who has researched the city's taverns for the organization.

"It was a whole different way of life," Flierl said. "You stayed in town. You didn't have the mobility to go to Milwaukee. If you went to Milwaukee, that was a big thing, an all-day thing."

The names of the bars have changed over time, but they are written in local lore — the Bodega, Blinky's, Bubbles, Lutzen's, the Sketch Bar, Marty's, the Black Hat, Marine Tavern, Columbia Tavern and more.

One of the popular taverns downtown was Janeshek's, today Schooner Pub, run by Frank Janeshek and later his son Stanley from 1935 until 1977.

"The story I always heard was they traded the family farm in Palmyra for the bar," said Stanley's son Stan Jr.

"He was a people person," Janeshek said of his father. "He used to open at 8 in the morning and he'd sit there all day and night. They were long days, but that's the way it was back then."

His father, he said, always dressed up to greet his customers, many of them workers at the city's industrial plants, including Simplicity, Bolens, Wisconsin Electric and the foundries in town.

On paydays, his father would go next door to First National Bank and get "a pile of money" to cash patrons' checks, Janeshek said.

"It was a very short-term loan from the bank, a couple of hours," he said.

Around holidays like Valentine's Day, his father would go to Milwaukee and buy a couple cases of candy and display them at the tavern, Janeshek said.

"It was for the guys who would forget," he said. "For Easter, he used to color eggs with this thick, oil-based coloring. They would just shine. He put them on the bar for everybody."

Sundays and Thursdays were sheepshead and pinochle nights, he said, and on Friday his dad served shrimp with crackers and cocktail sauce for 50 cents.

"A lot of people brought their kids in," he said. "The kids would sit at the tables and have chips and soda, and their parents would sit at the bar and have a drink." It wasn't just stand-alone bars that were popular. Whether or not they were staying for dinner, many people stopped at the Shanty Bar at Smith Bros. restaurant, where bartender Columbus Ratatori held court.

"He definitely had his following," Smith said. "He was the best bartender I've ever known. He always wore a sport coat with a pressed white shirt and a bow tie.

"Columbus knew everybody's drink. You would sit down, and it would be there. The minute

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you took out a cigarette or cigar, there he was with a lighter. And he never disagreed with anyone. If you were a Republican, he was a Republican. If you were a Socialist, he was a Socialist. He never argued a point.”

Bars have been an important part of the city's culture since the community's early days, noted Kevin Wester, executive director of the Luxembourg American Cultural Center in Belgium.

For many men, it was likely their social outlet and a major form of recreation, he said.

“Life then was laborious,” Wester said. “Everything you did took a lot of work. Going to the saloon was probably one of their only forms of fun.

“Saloons were the epicenter of social life for men. That's where decisions were made, news exchanged. It's where they solved the problems of the world.”

Unlike today, when taverns tend to attract a younger crowd that goes out on weekends and lets loose, bars of old were a place where men gathered every day, albeit for a shorter time, Wester said.

“Going to the saloon was more of an adult thing,” he said. “It was a prestigious thing if you owned a tavern.”

Perhaps the heyday for local taverns was in the 1950s and 60s. On Friday nights, downtown Port was hopping as men headed into town to conduct their business, their wives in tow to do their shopping. It was so busy, a police officer would direct traffic.

And a stop at a local watering hole was often on the agenda.

But bars weren't always just a place to drink, however. Often the owner's wife would prepare food, which took the form of snacks provided free for patrons or meals to be sold to them.

For example, Lucina Weyker was known for the fish fry and German potato salad she serves at the Bodega (most recently known as Foxy's), Flierl said.

“She made it upstairs in her kitchen and it was brought down in a dumbwaiter,” she said.

Bink's Cocktail Bar, which today is Pier 6, was perhaps the last bar in the city to offer a free lunch prepared by owner Florian Bink's wife Leone, Flierl said.

Over time, the city's tavern scene has changed, just as society's attitudes about alcohol have changed. Women joined men, not only in the workforce but in the taverns. Drunken driving became a serious issue strictly enforced by police. The drinking age changed, going from 18 to 21.

The complexion of the city changed as well. The factories that were the backbone of the community closed or significantly downsized, and the city took on tourism as its major industry.

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"We still have regulars who stop in every night," said Mark "Chico" Poull, who owns Schooner Pub. "But it used to be 25 to 30 people a night. Now, it's five or so. People don't work around here like they used to. They're working all over the place."

The city's emphasis on tourism and the lakefront, particularly the charter fishing industry, has helped him, Poull said, noting many of the fishermen stop in after their trips.

Poull and George King purchased Janeshek's in 1977, naming the tavern for the schooner glasses that had long been used at Janeshek's and the ships that once plied the waters of the Great Lakes.

King later left the partnership and purchased King on the Hill tavern (today, the Patio) atop St. Mary's Hill.

Through the years, Poull said, Schooner Pub has added to its menu and today is known for its food as well as the drinks and atmosphere.

"A lot's changed," Poull said. "To stay competitive, you can't be stagnant."

He's expanded the bar, adding a party room and back deck that in summer doubles the capacity of the tavern. And he's planning to add on again, this time along the alley-side of the bar as the city makes improvements to beautify it.

Today, the city seems to be grappling with the role taverns will play in the community. The Common Council is considering tightening its rules for issuing and revoking liquor licenses, and will hold a public hearing on the proposed changes during its Tuesday, Feb. 5, meeting.

Image Information: SHARING A LAUGH across the bar has been a tradition in downtown Port for decades at establishments like Schooner Pub, where owner Mark "Chico" Poull joked with Jeff Hoffmann Tuesday. The elaborate mahogany back bar is a testament to the tavern's long history, which dates to at least the early 1900s. Photo by Sam Arendt

Home Page Image: PORT WASHINGTON HAS been home to numerous taverns through the years, as this photo of Franklin Street believed to have been taken in the early 1960s shows. Among the bars on the photo are Janeshek's and Ace's (right side) and the Bodega (left side). Ozaukee Press file photo

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