

St. Michael Historian



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Saying Farewell to Die Ecke

(that's "the Corner", as in the Corner Bar, for you non-German-speaking folk)

By Bob Zahler

The Corner Bar was like church. There. I said it. Now, before all the cries of "sacrilege" come spewing out of your mouths, let me explain. A church, in addition to being a place of worship and holy place of God, is also a place where people celebrate important moments in their lives. When we associate a particular setting to a singular happy occasion or to many happy moments, those feelings become attached to that place. It's almost as if the place itself created the happiness. That seems to be how many feel about the Corner Bar. Like church, the Corner has been a place of celebration and of joyful moments; a place where you gathered with friends or to make new ones; and a place where the troubles of the changing world could be temporarily forgotten. Since the announcement of the closing of the Corner Bar in early December 2019, people started coming back to that place where so many happy memories were created.



Above: The Corner Bar in 1963 when owned by Cletus and Lucy Barthel. The Corner closed on January 19, 2020 and will be demolished by the county sometime this coming spring or summer to widen the streets and improve visibility.

For many who dropped by the Corner Bar in the months of December and January, it was their first visit in a long time, perhaps in many years. For some it was as if they felt an obligation to toast the place that played a part in their early adulthood; or maybe it was an attempt to refresh those memories from long ago in the hope that they could get them to last a while longer. For others, coming back to the Corner was an acknowledgement of the role that the Corner Bar played in St.



Above: Frank Zachman and Joe Vetsch at the Corner Bar in 1959

Michael history in general and a desire to be a part of that history during the bar's final days. And perhaps it was a combination of all of those reasons that people swarmed the Corner Bar. That was certainly the case for me, personally. From my interviews with others of my generation, I discovered that all of us considered the Corner Bar to be *the* place in St. Michael where you had to visit when you became a legal drinker. My 19th birthday occurred while I was attending St. Cloud State University and living in the dormitory. I celebrated the occasion with friends in St. Cloud establishments, but I distinctly remember that being a legal drinker was not going to feel real until I came back to St. Michael and ordered my first beer at the Corner. After that, the Corner Bar was the place my high school friends and I would use as our meeting place when we were home from college, and then it became the place where I would bring friends from out of town who wanted to visit a "local establishment", and then it was the place where I would make occa-



Left: longtime bartenders returned on January 5th for a reunion before the bar's closing. Starting at left: Allie Hartkopf, Cindy Uselmann, Sandy Doboszinski, Donna Barthel, and Kandy Nelles. One of them likely served this writer's first legal beer in St. Michael back in 1985. For many people, their fond memories of the Corner are related to seeing these friendly faces behind the bar.

sional visits when celebrating an event such as a birthday or to toast the memory of someone who had recently passed away. For me, the Corner Bar was quintessential St. Michael. It combined history, friendship, and familiarity. It was the place that, despite some remodeling over the years, always felt the same; and there was great comfort in that.

The Corner Bar held a special place for those of us who grew up in St. Michael prior to the development boom that started in the 1990s. Perhaps it was the fact that nobody could come into town without seeing the Corner Bar since it was located at the one and only major intersection (and by "major intersection", I mean the only crossroad where there was a stop sign). The Corner Bar was as much a fixture in the landscape as the historic church. Even though it had changed hands multiple times throughout its history, and some owners tried to change the name, it was still called "the Corner Bar" regardless. Our parents and grandparents referenced the Corner Bar in their recollections of days gone by, and as a youngster you started to associate the Corner Bar with coming of age; and not just in the legal sense, but in that self-awareness sense of being an adult. While I had heard stories of people who had had too much to drink at the Corner Bar, or who were even known to be barflies, I never felt that the Corner was a place of ill repute. In 1990 when the city and historic church celebrated a joint centennial, Fr. Burton Bloms referenced the Corner Bar in his homily at the celebratory mass. Fr. Burton, who literally grew up next door to the bar, said that he had always felt that "the Corner Bar was an extension of the church." He was joking, of course, but there's always some truth in humor. Some older residents remembered their parents stopping at the Corner after mass on Sunday (some Corner Bar owners were closed on Sundays, but not all). The idea of stopping at the bar after mass is not so foreign considering the German heritage of St. Michael's citizens. The negative association with alcohol was brought to the United States by certain Protestant immigrants. Catholics, especially German Catholics, never had a problem with alcohol consumed in moderation. Beer on a Sunday was simply a part of family socializing. For some people it was even a part of their daily routine. Dale Barthel, who ran the Corner Bar with his parents Cletus and Lucy in the late 60s and early 70s, recalls regular customers who came in for a beer and a shot after picking up their mail at the post office down the street, as well as those who came in after work for "a quick one" before heading home. In Germany this is still referred to as *Feierabendbier* or "end of work beer". Dale said that even the priests had a tab at the Corner, which his dad usually forgave, for beer and liquor to have on hand at the rectory for visiting priests. For the most part, the parish and the Corner Bar had "an understanding" with each other.

Before 1972 the Corner Bar had more of a mature feel to it. The drinking age was 21 and those who were under age had little problem getting beer to drink at someone's house or a party in the woods. The Corner Bar, then, catered to those adults who were just out to meet up with friends, play some cards, maybe hear the latest music on the juke box, but mostly just to sit around and "talk smart." Harvey Zahler says that in the early 1950s, when the Corner was owned by



Above: Erv and Rose Primus. In the late 60s and early 70s Erv helped out as an occasional bartender while Rose worked as a waitress. At age 91, Erv was likely the oldest former employee at the Corner Bar reunion on January 5th.

Lee Reinhart, the Corner Bar was “like a second home;” and by that he meant that it was just a place where he and his friends felt comfortable and welcome. He knew the owners personally and they knew him. Through the years, the Corner Bar proprietors who understood how to create this feeling of welcome usually did well in business.

In the days before Karaoke and when the only music came from the speakers of the jukebox, the Corner was mostly just abuzz with the sounds of loud conversation and laughter, not nearly as rowdy as it was in later years. Weekdays, in particular, were generally pretty slow with only the regulars stopping in. Lucy Barthel kept track of the till receipts in a small date book. A typical weekday in 1963 brought in between \$120 and \$150. Fridays and Saturdays were busier with receipts between \$200 and \$400. Of course, drink prices were a lot lower then. An 8-ounce glass of beer was ten cents; a basic shot of booze was a quarter; and cocktails were 35 cents. It should also be noted that some of the till receipts were for burgers, snacks, and candy. Holidays, like the nights before Independence Day or Thanksgiving, were busier; and then Christmas Eve and New Years Eve always brought good crowds too. Those, Dale said, were always fun nights to work because people were in such good moods. On weekends and holidays part-time bartenders included Lloyd Zahler, Dale Meyer, Jimmy and Jerry Hackenmueller, and Erv Primus. Dale said that his parents knew the customers so well, that if someone left money on the bar top, his mom would keep it so that she could return it to them the next time they came in.

In 1972 both the national voting age and Minnesota’s legal drinking age dropped to 18, both as a result of the feeling that if 18-year-olds could fight in Vietnam, they should be able to vote and drink alcohol. This also happened to be when Barthels sold the bar to Jerry and Pat Cielinski. Cielinski’s remodeled the bar: lowered the ceiling and opened up the wall left of the bar into what had been part of the living quarters for the Barthels. Ceinkski’s renamed the place “Jerry and Pat’s Corner Bar Lounge”, but as stated earlier, it was still just “the Corner” to most people. The bigger change was in the clientele. By the mid 70s the Corner Bar started becoming more of a hang out for the younger crowd, the 18 to 23 year-olds. To be certain, many of the older regulars were still coming in during the week, but the weekends started taking on a louder, more youthful feel.

After brief ownership by Ray Barker between 1974 and 1976, Lowell and LaDonna Zachman took over the Corner Bar. 1976 was also the year that Minnesota decided that a drinking age of 18 made alcohol too accessible to kids in high school and so the legal age was raised to 19. The Zachmans were a great team: LaDonna managed the business end with a keen eye while Lowell was one of the most hospitable barkeepers ever. He was a master of the art of “BS”, but he also knew how to keep his customers happy. For example, the tradition of coming to the Corner Bar after exchanging wedding vows at the church started before Lowell and LaDonna took over the bar; but according to Kandy (Moser) Nelles, who bartended for Zachmans between 1978 and 1985, Lowell started a practice of giving a free bottle of champagne to the newlyweds. He understood that his gesture could keep the wedding party buying drinks awhile longer before they decided to hop to another bar. Zachmans also used to give a special glass birthday mug to customers when they turned 19. Marty Zahler, who bartended part-time for Lowell, recalled a time that a customer was starting to get a little rambunctious and Marty threatened to bounce him out of the bar. Lowell calmed him down saying, “Marty! Have a few drinks. Relax. If you throw everybody out, we won’t have any customers.” That was classic Lowell.



Above: Mary Johnson served drinks at the Corner Bar for just shy of 25 years. She was one of the reasons why people felt welcome and kept coming back.

That same sense of welcoming and customer service carried over with new owners Scott and Dorothy Braun when they bought the Corner Bar in July 1993. Many of the bartenders who started with Lowell and LaDonna continued working for the Brauns. They included Cindy (Zachman) Uselmann (1974-1978, 1988-2018), Allie Hartkopf (1978-2013), Donna (Becker) Barthel (1983-2020) and Sandy (Zachman) Doboszanski (1983-2000). Mary (O’Donnell) Johnson started working

for the Brauns in 1995 and worked continuously until the bar closed in January. Most of these bartenders worked evenings and especially weekends on a part-time basis. Dee Huikko worked as the daytime bartender for about the last 20 years.

The fact that these bartenders worked for as many years as they did, is a testament to both the way they felt valued by both the Zachmans and the Brauns. When current and former bartenders were asked what they liked about working at the Corner Bar, all of them said that they enjoyed their customers and that the Corner was a fun place to work. Mary Johnson emphasized that Scott and Dorothy were really good business people, very caring individuals, and incredibly good community members. She said that the Brauns never said “no” to a request for a donation or to help with a benefit for someone fighting cancer. Their generosity not only included making baskets for silent auctions, but also in being willing to help any employee who needed it. Clearly, Scott and Dorothy understood that their bartenders, their customers, and their community were key to their own success and happiness.

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Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

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But it was mostly these friendly and hard-working bartenders that gave the Corner Bar that feeling of familiarity. I have to admit that when I brought friends from out of town to the Corner Bar, I felt a sense of pride when the bartenders called me by name when I walked in. I felt a little like Norm from the TV show “Cheers”. Even though I didn’t frequent the Corner very often, being recognized by the bartenders made me feel important. And when you get down to it, I think that was the thing that made the Corner Bar so special to many. Whether you were a pre-boom native or someone who came to St. Michael or grew up here after the population boom, The Corner Bar was the place where St. Michael still felt small. You walked in and you knew people and people knew you. And if you didn’t know someone, that didn’t last long. This feeling of familiarity is what many St. Michael businesses lost as the town grew, but the Corner Bar managed to retain that feeling until the end. It was one of the last remnants of the town we used to know, and I think that’s why so many wanted to come back for one last drink, to try to hang onto that feeling a little while longer.

After six very busy weeks, the Corner Bar had its final “last call” on Sunday, January 19, 2020. The county purchased the property and will demolish the 1897 building sometime in the next few months. After widening the streets, enough property would remain to erect a small commercial building, but it won’t be anything like the Corner Bar. It could never be. That was a feeling that isn’t likely to ever be recreated.



Above: This sign hung above the front door of the Corner Bar. On January 19, 2020 it took on another meaning.

Upcoming Events

All events and meetings held at the Gries Lenhardt Allen Library Room at St. Michael City Hall

Monday, March 9, 7:00 PM

Regular Board Meeting

Monday, April 13, 7:00 PM

Annual Meeting & Regular Board Meeting

Monday, May 11, 7:00 PM

Joe Psyk book talk: “Midnight: My Pet Crow and Friend”