

## OUR TOWNS / Charles Strum

### **Tavern Serves Drinks and Old - Time Ambience**

Before there was “Duffy’s Tavern” or “Cheers” or the play that created America’s most endearing barfly, Elwood P. Dowd, there was McGovern’s, a real Irish pub in the heart of Newark when Newark was home to a large Irish population.

“Duffy’s Tavern” is long gone from radio, “Cheers” is about to leave prime time forever and the Irish immigrants who came here generations ago have moved to the suburbs.

But they still come to McGovern’s Tavern, much as they did in 1936 when Frank McGovern converted a tiny speakeasy on New Street into a pub that also served as an ad hoc employment office and home away from home for his countrymen.

Rubbing elbows with the older crowd are some of the new, Irish or not, who work as Newark’s police officers, firefighters and secretaries, as well as lawyers, judges and bureaucrats. So are graduate students and faculty members from Rutgers, Seaton Hall and the New

Jersey Institute of Technology. And so are friends of the late Frank McGovern and the man he sold the business to, William Scully.

Mr Scully is as voluble a taproom wisecracker as ever came from County Galway. But ask him the secret of McGovern’s longevity and he responds with the words of a straight forward and sincere businessman.

“We like to think we pour a good drink at a fair price” he says.

And so he does, but the answer is incomplete, especially in a city like Newark, which once supported about 600 taverns and now lists barely more than 100. They disappeared when the factories closed, when the movie houses and department stores departed, when the rooming houses grew empty and the streets were deserted after dark. So the question persists: How did McGovern’s survive?

“It’s a friendly place” said Ed Mueller, finishing a sandwich and a beer.

“It’s the jewel of Newark” said Alan Howe.

“It’s a rare day when fewer than half those at the bar are not regulars,” said Ben Stevenson, getting a little closer to an answer. His lunch hour vodka and tonic is usually on the bar by the time he walks from the front door to what he calls his assigned seat. “The place has

changed only minutely over the years,” he said.

So Mr. Stevenson and the others participate in whatever it is that draws people to a dark congenial room with a convivial proprietor and just enough beer or whisky to cool the blood or loosen the tongue. They come because it is safe and familiar. Mostly they come because they are welcome.

This was a lesson that Frank McGovern and his successor learned well. McGovern’s is no Brigadoon (which was in Scotland, after all), but both are places that time forgot. And that is the little secret of McGovern’s survival, the place never changed, never tried to be something new or new fangled. It still serves corned beef and Guinness.

There are plaques of Jack Kennedy and photographs of other Irish politicians, as well as four large murals depicting pastoral Irish scenes. The jukebox leans heavy toward the Clancy Brothers. And at lunch time, a waitress appears, a genial apparition at a patrons elbow, to take a sandwich order. There are no checks, she makes change from a cigar box.

But what is absent from the barroom and which was never there to begin with, is perhaps far more significant than what hangs on the walls. There

is no television set in McGovern’s. To have one would be an accommodation to what a longtime customer, Frank Tully referred to as “the ruination of man”. Think of it, he pointed out: without television, patrons are compelled to engage in conversation with one another and Mr. Scully! The moral: Getting ahead or staying ahead means marking time with life’s verities. And this means grappling with sentiment and the human condition, an admission that may make pubgoers and publicans self-conscious. Fortunately, there is a suitable interpretation from the fictional Mr. Dowd, a sweet-natured inebriate to whom a man-sized rabbit named Harvey frequently made himself visible.

“We have entered as strangers – soon we have friends,” Mr. Dowd explained in a soliloquy on the pleasures of a local tavern.

“They come over. They sit with us. They drink with us. They talk to us. They tell about the big terrible things they have done. The big wonderful things they will do. Their hopes, their regrets, their loves, their hates. All very large, because nobody ever brings anything small into a bar.”

“Beautiful,” Mr. Scully said