

New York Times Sunday, March 5, 2000

It's Easy Being Green

An Irish Bar in Newark Where Conversation Is Served With Lunch

by Joseph D'Agnese

I went to McGovern's recently in search of a sandwich and a drink. The sandwich was corned beef because, as the waitress advised me, this time of year nothing else will do at an Irish bar.

Her advice was good, because when the sandwich arrived – moist, tender, flavorful and tucked on a plastic plate with chips, pickles, cole slaw and a little pot of spicy mustard – I found myself eating even the tiniest flecks of meat that had dropped to my plate. I was in heaven. I ordered a beer, and settled down to eat my meal in peace.

But I should have known better. One doesn't fade into the woodwork here. That would be rude. In no time I found myself deep in conversation with a man twice my age, a sweater-clad Irishman who nursed a bottle of Michelob, a shot of vodka and a plate of gravy fries. If it's true that some people sing for their supper, then at McGovern's, an Irish tavern that has stood on New Street downtown since 1936, people chat for their lunch. Sure you pay for your meal in cash, but there's no way you can enjoy it without joining in the conversation. Talk is the real currency here.

I learned this when a fellow seated to my left, a first-timer, looked up from his bar pizza and flagged down Bill Scully, owner of McGovern's and known to some as the Real Mayor of Newark.

"Excuse me," said the first-timer. "You have a sign over there that says 'At McGovern's, we love football!'"

"Yes that's right," said Mr. Scully, who has tended bar here since Valentine's Day 1958, when, as a Galway lad of 20 1/2, he arrived fresh from Ireland and went directly to work for Frank J. McGovern, then the owner. "And we do. But we have no TV."

It's true. If you scour every corner and peek into the big back room as well, you'll not turn up a single television. Mr. Scully won't have it, though he will allow a half dozen for Super Bowl Sunday. Few patrons seem to mind.

As bars go, McGovern's has always been something of a standout. For six decades it has served factory workers, politicians, athletes, newspaper reporters, cops, firemen and more recently, students from nearby campuses of Seton Hall, Rutgers, and the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Its walls hold an exhibit of the Irish immigrant experience in New Jersey. Hanging there are hurling sticks and police badges, Celtic posters, maps of Erie, a portrait of J.F.K and John-John, and photos of St. Patrick's parades, a hunting dog, a battleship, basketball players and Irish golfers inexplicably attired in their B.V.D's. Six smoky murals – with images of Mount Rushmore, Lenni Lenape Indians and Irish Castles – hang on the wall. Firefighter's hats and police helmets dangle from the ceiling. There are pinball machines and a jukebox crammed with the Clancy Brothers, the Irish Rovers, the Chieftains, the Dubliners and a little Elvis.

My favorite photo is found in the back room, not far from a second bar. It shows Mr. McGovern and his St. Patrick's Day cronies posed in front of the tavern, dressed in top hats and tails. Children in knee socks cluster nearby

In the pre World War II days, Mr McGovern ran the place as an unofficial employment agency for his fellow Irishmen. "Frank always knew where the jobs were," said Thomas Johnston, 75, a World War II veteran and longtime patron. "And there were

lots of jobs. If you needed work, he'd pick up the phone and see what was around".

GI's stationed in wartime Europe and the Pacific fondly recalled the joint through which they had passed while stationed at Fort Dix. New Jersey was synonymous with Newark then, and Newark with McGovern's, even in a city that teemed with bars. Back home from the war, those men knew the quickest way to meet a girl was at a weekend dance at McGovern's. The girls and their mothers, not permitted in the bar area, used to enter the back room by a side door. Waiting for them were the neighborhood's eligible fellows.

The photos that hang in the back room tell the story. Flowers and tablecloths decked the tables. The gentlemen wore suits, the ladies dresses. In one photo you can make out a sign listing the "tariff". Imported whiskey cost 50 cents, highballs 40 cents, beer and soda a mere 15 cents, "amusement tax" included. The band played, the kids danced, and they fell in love. "That's where I met my wife," recalled Mr. Johnston's brother, John (Dixie) Johnston, 69. "In that back room. We all did."

Mr. Scully, who married the boss's niece, took over the bar in 1968, just as Newark was heading into its period of racial turbulence. The bar hunkered down in its block between Washington and Halsey Streets, and kept serving rounds of Guinness. Mr. McGovern died in 1989 at the age of 88. By then Mr. Scully – known for his handlebar mustache, his accordion playing and singing his trademark line "is everybody happy?" – was well on his way to keeping the place alive. Anyone who buys a drink gets Mr. Scully's portrait in the form of a bar coaster emblazoned with his caricature. "That's me – big ears and a mustache," he said.

Johanna Wall, 83, whose own bar, the Shannon Lounge, has been a fixture on First Street in Hoboken for 47 years, said of Mr. Scully: "He's got a great personality. He used to come to my place every New Year's Eve and give us some songs." And balladeer "Irish" Billy Briggs, owner of the pub Tir na nog on Hamilton Avenue in Trenton, called Mr. Scully "New Jersey's finest bartender".

Over the years, even as immigrants moved out to the suburbs, they always remembered to bring sons and daughters back to the barroom behind the plain brick façade. It is not so much how the place looks, but how it feels, that matters. "For the Irish, young and old Irish, it's tradition," said Dixie Johnston. "If you come into Newark, you have to come to McGovern's."

They come for food, for drink, for talk. Today women as well as men dine and lift a glass here. Lunch is the busiest time, when downtown office workers vie for a seat. Graduate students from Rutgers Law School, just around the corner, sometimes commandeer a table in back and suck down juicy, fist sized hamburgers while poring over books and briefs.

All who enter are greeted with a boisterous "Helloooo!" Mr. Scully, keeper of the taps and flame, still works the bar at lunch, ringing up orders, making change, answering the phone. And his back-bar patter never lets up: "How are you doing lads?" "Hey, Mr. C – how are you?" "Mike, can the boys have two beers?" And occasionally, he utters a line that seems lifted from another time: "The gentleman on the other side of the bar would like to buy you two a drink. Will you let him do that?"

Sixty-four years of a city's history have passed through the two front doors. The ghosts in the back room –vigilant, benevolent and thirsty – keep watch over the living. And Mr. Scully, the current master of ceremonies is simply grateful that the place has survived.

The crowds keep coming and Mr. Scully is a big part of the reason. But whenever a patron tries to tell him that, he always simply says, "We serve a good drink at a fair price."