

CURTIS BAY (BALTIMORE)

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Archie Bunker's Taverns

Down in Curtis Bay, The Bars Say it All

By Van Smith

The main drag of Curtis Bay enjoys what may be the city's highest concentration of liquor establishments outside of Fells Point. Eleven bars, two social clubs, two packaged-good stores, and a strip club line a sliver of this historic neighborhood in the city's industrial far-southern reaches. Its two north-south boulevards--Pennington and Curtis avenues, both one-way streets since the 1960s, after the nearby Harbor Tunnel was built--form an important portal for the city, one well-traveled by truckers and commuters. They also frame the neighborhood's bar culture, where Curtis Bay's long legacy is told over beer, cigarettes, and pool amid the sights and sounds of video poker, jukeboxes, and televisions.

An outpost among city neighborhoods, Curtis Bay feels the part. It's been so since it first was developed by industrial interests at the end of the 19th century, when the B&O Railroad's coal pier and car shops were built there--at that point the only major industrial investment along the city's waterfront south of Fort McHenry. Before then, the area had been a quaint way station for farmers bringing produce and supplies to and from Baltimore. With a stroke of a pen in 1918, Curtis Bay was annexed to the growing city from Anne Arundel County, and has remained a hive of industry ever since--less job-heavy and less polluting now than during the peak spasms of 20th-century production, perhaps, but still humming at a steady clip.

Yet Curtis Bay in many ways is at odds with the rest of the city, and at times seems to rue its Baltimore citizenship. When lit up at night, the elevated conveyances that serve the piers form a gradually sloping "V" that is visible from downtown--a beacon marking the distance between Curtis Bay and the city at large.

The isolation, though, is far from complete. State Sen. George Della, who has represented Curtis Bay for two decades in Annapolis, says that back in its post-World War II heyday the area was a "very active, very vibrant community--even up into the '70s. There were a ton of big employers there, and that's why the bars prospered, because of all the workers." In the decades since, Curtis Bay has been tossed about by the same problems that beset the city at large--violence, poor school performance, high poverty, high teen-birth rates, and child abuse and neglect, to name a few. Della notes that in recent years "a lot of effort has gone into chasing the hookers away and chasing the druggies away," as well as "landlords who don't maintain the homes."

Despite the sometimes heart-wrenching reminders of these ills, Curtis Bay remains at home with itself. A tenuously comfortable order rules day-to-day life. Kids, white and black, can be seen playing in the neighborhood streets, careful to avoid the truck traffic. Relative calm and safety and an adequate measure of prosperity seem to prevail.

Originally created with downtown capital, Curtis Bay has always been bright on the radar screen of powerful interests. The plants, tank farms, and piers that give residents jobs also supply prodigious amounts of revenue both to industrialists and the government till, so the pull of politics is ever at Curtis Bay's sleeve. The bar district, too, has its far-flung webs of influence.

Curtis Bay's bars serve as a cluster of community gathering places, homes away from nearby homes. The timeworn tavern district makes perfect sense: to the east is an unbroken wall of industry, which still dips into the local labor pool, and to the west homes nestle on a quickly rising hill. Between work and bed, then, there's always a corner pub. And there always has been since 1934, after Prohibition was lifted.

At Taylor's 5000 Tavern, where a red-headed matriarch named Ann Taylor has been running the show since 1945, knowing patrons openly muse on the neighborhood. Many words are spoken, but the essential point is clear: In nearby Brooklyn it's all about the churches, but here in Curtis Bay it's all about the bars. And the smoky prism of the neighborhood's saloons casts a colorful light on the neighborhood's proud past and downtrodden but hopeful present.

The small Friday-night crowd in Pennington Station is split over whether it would be a good idea to warm up to a couple visiting members of the press. A bar mirror is hand-painted colorfully with the homely slogan there are no strangers here, only friends you haven't met, but it's corollary--we'll stay strangers if we never meet--seems the rule tonight. Credentials are checked, and a hushed debate ensues. A jolly, mustachioed fellow finally breaks the embargo and saunters up to introduce himself as Ray Reed, former oil-company service manager. "Born and raised" here, he says proudly as he sticks out his hand. "Sixty years in the neighborhood. What do you want to know? Ask me some questions."

Reed hooks his thumbs in his belt loops and proceeds to explain the lay of the land. A rapid recitation of neighborhood trivia is followed by a call for yet more grilling: "What else do you want to know?" he implores, like an ace student who knows all the answers. This prompts an open-ender: "Well, what would you like to have a newspaper say about your neighborhood?" "It's a nice area," he says without hesitation. "This neighborhood's good. Strictly Polish. The problem is when they tore the old buildings down and moved the blacks in. I'm not against blacks, but they move blacks in here. What are you going to do?"

Up Pennington Avenue at the Rave Inn, a younger, mixed-race crowd enjoys the jukebox, chatting and laughing in small groups as a few loners sip and smoke alone between trips to the video-poker machines. "Tainted Love" comes on, singing alone at the bar, gets solitarily angry at the urban beat: "Songs for niggers to jig to, that all it is," she says in a quiet, venomous monotone. When the pregnant pause between songs ends, the opening strains of "Stairway to Heaven" change the room's mood entirely. The couples sit down again. The angry woman, suddenly happy, proclaims it a "good song" and proceeds to sing every word.

The issue of race is unavoidable in Curtis Bay. Racial diversity has been slow to come to the area--and in the heavily populated bar district, it's only just begun to arrive. For the greater Brooklyn-Curtis Bay area, the demographic shift has been pronounced: The minority population comprised nearly a third of the population in 2000, compared to a 10th in 1990. In the 16 populated census blocks that make up the Curtis Bay bar district, however, the proportion of minorities--primarily African-Americans--increased from less than one percent to a mere 11 percent over the same period. (African-American residents of Curtis Bay approached for this article declined to comment; messages left with 6th District City Councilperson Melvin Stukes' office were not returned by press time.)

Some of the more vocal white locals presume a cause-and-effect relationship between the presence of minorities and neighborhood decline (census data indicates that homeownership has dropped, while housing vacancies have soared). "I used to try to run them out, but I've given up--but I got friends who still do," says one tavern habitué who asked not to be named. ("If you put my name in there, I'll be shot tomorrow," he explains with mock-seriousness.) The attitude seems akin to a generations-old blood feud: The fighting is long over, but it's still a matter of pride and duty to express your traditional disdain. On a personal level, though, the bar scene seems to resemble the neighborhood as a whole: Reserved open-mindedness quickly turns to full-on affability once newcomers have proven themselves innocuous.

Down at the Eagle's Nest on Curtis Avenue, a black man and a white man play game after amiable game of pool as they pull from their beers, and the round-robin at the shuffleboard-bowling table is integrated, too. The only sign of discord comes not from culture clash but from a broken car window up Curtis Avenue at Cheyenne's, another neighborhood joint. "Somebody busted out my passenger window," an irate guy with a beard roars as he bursts through the door. "Three hundred dollars. If it was a Grand Am or something, it would be \$50. But it's an El Camino. They don't make that shit anymore. I just want to find somebody to hurt. But I can't do that anymore. I ain't going back to jail anymore."

At Cheyenne's Smokehouse Pub, a few police officers grab some grub near the kitchen door as a DJ plays country and rock tunes for a paltry Thursday-night crowd. The long menu lists standard pub fare, but the kitchen's all out of most everything--steamed shrimp will have to do tonight. The pool table is jealously held by two one-on-one players who won't accept a challenge, but the bartender is sweet and the DJ is friendly as can be: "Whatch'ya like? Country or rock 'n' roll? Both? How about some George Jones?"

A visitor would never guess that a friendly place like this would have once been a lair for a cocaine ring, but in 1995, when it was called Marty's and under previous ownership, police seized 15 weapons and \$10,000 in cash here as they arrested the owner and an employee for possession and distribution of drugs. The bust stands as a testament to how things have changed in Curtis Bay's bar district. With notable exceptions, the storied walls of many local taverns have given way to fast-grab entrepreneurship--sometimes of the shady sort--after a long legacy of stable family ownership.

Before Cheyenne's was Cheyenne's or Marty's or any of its other incarnations, it was Garpstas Tavern. From 1934 to 1980, sons and siblings of the Garpstas family held the liquor license. Anne Taylor, of Taylor's 5000 Tavern, remembers it as a "stag bar" with no chairs to sit on--except in the dining area, where women were allowed. After 46 years of calm and stability under the Garpstases' steady hands, the place became Archie Bunker's Tavern in 1980. At the time, the CBS sitcom *All in the Family* had just become *Archie Bunker's Place*, transplanting the show's titular working-class angry white male out of the Bunker household and into the bar business; the new owners of the old Garpstas presumably were trying to capitalize on Hollywood. It stayed open as long as the sitcom's brief run, collapsing in debt in 1984. City Liquor Board files reflect nearly 20 years of turmoil and confusion ever since.

The former Garpstas Tavern then became the Spiral Staircase, Joe's Pub, Marty's, and Chubby's Pub before the Cheyenne's sign went up a couple years ago. When Joseph Laumann owned it in the mid-'80s, Joe's Pub was raided for illegal video-poker payoffs and suffered the indignity of a patron's wallet being stolen by a prostitute. As Marty's, when Michael Chiles and Betty Ellis were on the license, there was another gambling raid--plus busts for sales to minors, assaults, and a drug-dealing patron--before Chiles was arrested on dope charges in 1995. Since then, one man was picked up for assaulting the new licensee, another came in and threatened the bartender and two patrons, there was another bust for video-poker payoffs, and a disorderly patron broke the establishment's glass door.

When the Garpstases ruled the roost, it was clear who the owners were. Since then, actual ownership of the bar has sometimes been hard to ascertain. Taylor says the three gentlemen on the liquor license when it was Archie Bunker's Tavern were surrogates for a ghost owner. In 1986, in the aftermath of a gambling raid, according to Liquor Board files, "one Wilbur Martindale alleged he was the actual owner of the business although licensees and Board's files do not reflect same."

Martindale actually did own the property where Cheyenne's operates--until last December, when it transferred to a company named after the pub's address, 4314 Curtis LLC, which is headed by former Cheyenne's licensee Paul Rothenberg. The new licensee, meanwhile, is listed in the Liquor Board files as "Gail P. Leslie," whose listed residence in Brooklyn is co-owned, according to property records, by Gale Patrick Leslie and Carol Mosack--a former co-licensee with Rothenberg.

When Mosack and Rothenberg held the old Garpstas license in 2000 and 2001, the corporate owner was P. Roth Inc., a dissolved company whose affairs were wound down by attorney Frank Shaulis. Shaulis, of West Friendship in Howard County, is one of three licensees for Fantasies, the spacious strip club 10 blocks south on Pennington. Shaulis' name also appears on the incorporation papers of Leslie's newly formed company, Cheyenne's Inc.--the current owner listed with the Liquor Board. Shaulis did not return calls for comment.

The twisted fate of the old Garpstas Tavern is a microcosm of the neighborhood at large: Many years of familiar faces and trusted connections have given way to a shaky era of rapid and complex change that challenges the old ways. Some places have stayed in clear, consistent hands for decades at a time, and thus exude a certain permanence and a strong sense of locality--much like segments of the local populace. Still others have been in a state of entropy from the start, switching hands and changing names at a steady clip for most all the decades since Prohibition. The stories of such bars weave Curtis Bay into a broad cloth of connections and characters.

The Fantasies liquor license has been tossed around like a hot potato. Taylor recalls that, until it became a strip club, the location had been "a colored place." In 1934, it was called Brownie's Café. Then, in succession, it became Chester's Lunch, Lil's Café, Andersons Inn, Bayard Lunch Room, Cleve's Lounge, and Mingo's. As Bay East in 1982, it first won approval for go-go dancers, and adult entertainment has been the staple ever since. Shaulis, listing a South Baltimore address as his

residence, took over the license in 1991, calling it the House of Class. Two others--Marc Rosenberg of Owings Mills and Lorraine Cummings of Pikesville--joined him as it switched ownership in 1995 to Kimmico Inc., under which it was first called the Platinum Club, and now Fantasies.

Kimmico Inc. is a player in political circles, showing up in the campaign-finance reports of key state senators--George Della, in whose district the club is located, and Nathaniel McFadden, the chairman of the city's Senate delegation. It also hires topnotch lobbyists from Semmes, Bowen, and Semmes to forward its interests in Annapolis.

Fantasies has high connections but has also seen its fair share of trouble under Shaulis. In 1995 the establishment was found guilty by the Liquor Board of prostitution, nudity, gambling, and selling to a minor. Most of the problems arose from a bull roast featuring naked dancers--although one was reported to be wearing Baltimore City police uniform shirt with an official baltimore police patch on the upper sleeves. Since then, the establishment has had a few reports to the Liquor Board--two assaults and a robbery in 2000--but only one guilty ruling in 2001 for illegal nudity.

But Shaulis is not the only figure behind Kimmico according to the paper trail. The company contact for Kimmico in the State Ethics Commission lobbyist list for 2002 is "Cal Brockdorff," who also is resident agent for the company that owns high-dollar property where Fantasies sits--Jaguar Asset Management Inc. of Laurel. Jaguar purchased this prime piece of real estate for \$750,000 in 1994.

Calvin T. Brockdorff is an intriguing character. In 1983, when he was 26 years old, he was arrested in D.C. with \$1 million's worth of cocaine, according to *Washington Post* coverage of the bust. During the 1990s, he built a company called the National Fitness Network, which often does business as the Mid-Atlantic Fitness Network, signing up corporations and health insurers to offer discounted health-club memberships to their employees and customers. And in 2001, he briefly made waves in South Florida, where he opened Orbit, a 2,000-capacity nightclub, over the protests of the club's posh Boynton Beach neighbors. The club is now called Ovation and is under new management, according to its Web site. Attempts to reach Brockdorff, including a faxed letter, were unsuccessful.

On the Fantasies liquor license, Shaulis lists his home residence as 1649 S. Hanover St., a property he and his wife own in South Baltimore. At that address is a pub, Covahey's Tavern. A few blocks east, on Bend Street, is the Friendship Inn. Shaulis owned this, too, until he sold it in 1998 to Raymond Makarovich, who transferred it Monica Makarovich last year.

The Makarovich name is a familiar one in the Curtis Bay bar district. The patriarch, Raymond Makarovich, is said by locals to have passed away, but his offspring and in-laws continue the family tradition of owning bars, vending-machine companies, and racehorses--concerns that put them all over the map, not just in Curtis Bay.

Ann Taylor doesn't charge a penny to play songs on the jukebox at Taylor's Tavern. "Don't need a license for it because I don't charge," she explains. She says she got it years ago from Makarovich: "He owed me \$500, so I just kept the jukebox." Where the license would normally be displayed is a business card, browning with age: Cadillac Amusements, 3729 S. Hanover St. The address is for Norma Jeans, a bar in the heart of Brooklyn's business district that is still in the Makarovich family. Cadillac Amusements is gone, but a new Makarovich vending-machine company, DRM Inc., is alive and well at that address, and dutifully paying its political dues by contributing to Sen. Della's campaign coffers.

The Backstretch, the Rave Inn, and the now-defunct Sports Inn (whose license now belongs to a packaged-goods store on Pennington, the Soda Pop Shop) are all Curtis Bay establishments to which the Makarovich family has been tied through Liquor Board records. Outside of Curtis Bay, the Makarovich name is on the properties where the venerated Scallio's (now called the Hollins Street Pub) sits in Soweb. And over near the Westside Shopping Center on South Bentlou Street, a Makarovich is on the liquor license for Rosie's Pub, whose property is owned by Joseph Laumann, the former licensee of the old Garpstas Tavern when it was Joe's Pub.

The picture that emerges is one of a fiefdom--a city enclave where power courses through the hands of a few local burghers who have surprising and far-flung ties to the larger world. Shaulis and the Makarovics are obviously well-connected people. Theodore Sanford, the owner of another Curtis Bay establishment, is, too. The Sanford name appears on a number of liquor licenses over the years, and local community activists say they are going to keep a close eye on the newly added second floor of his bar, Thumpers. He maintains the addition will contain office space, but more than a few locals murmur suspicions about what the red light out front suggests about the true nature of the expansion.

Between them, Shaulis, Makarovich, and Sanford appear to have a lot of pull. Their supporters say that's good. "If you need something taken care of, they can take care of it," one barfly who's friends with Sanford says. But others in the neighborhood question the wisdom of having a strip-club lawyer, a poker-machine man, and a bar owner broker so much of the local power.

It would be nice to know what the old owners of Garpstas Tavern would have to say about the changes in Curtis Bay bar scene since their bygone era of seatless stag bars, when pubs tended to stay the same for decades and you always knew who was in charge. But the last of Garpstas Tavern's owners, Anthony Edward "Cookie" Garpstas, a World War II veteran and Curtis Bay native, died at 85 last year, having spent his final years in Riviera Beach in Anne Arundel County.

At Annie's Pub--a glistening, newly renovated place on Curtis, rebuilt after an extensive fire--owner Anna George has called the shots since 1964, and other members of her family did so before her. On a Friday afternoon, the bartender, Diane Smith, keeps up a good-natured banter with two regular patrons, Jack Allman and Mike Kitchner. George is napping, but those on hand are more than happy to share their thoughts about the neighborhood.

"Years ago you could leave your doors open down here," says Allman. Those days are long gone, he explains, and goes on to tell a story about almost running over a prostitute on a recent, freezing cold night. "Must've been some kind of pimp to have her working in that cold," he remarks, adding that "all those streets used to be cobblestone" in Curtis Bay. "Wouldn't that be nice if they still were," Smith chimes in with a chuckle. "The hookers would have a hell of a time walking the streets."

Crime, while bad, is not as threatening now as it was only two years ago, explain two patrons of Taylor's who asked that their names not be used. "A guy was shot dead, right in the head, across from my house two years ago," says one. "He was a druggie anyhow. Deserved it," the other retorts, adding that "things have gotten better since. There have been a lot more patrols--thanks to our mayor. You gotta give credit where credit is due. And these undercover narcs have been working hard."

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Let me put it this way--they're good at their jobs."

At the Gas Light, a stack of community newsletters sits on the bar. The "Eyes on Crime" section lists Curtis Bay police data for November 2002. Here's the bar district's tally: four aggravated assaults, a burglary, two thefts, and a stolen auto. With a new Communities on Patrol block-watch program getting started, hopes are high that a heightened sense of community-driven safety will prevail.

Either way, there's still Taylor's Tavern, where the same ornamental paper bell that was hung for the grand opening in 1945 hangs from the ceiling today, dusty and fragile but unmoved and unchanged except by age for almost 60 years. The old-timers, who gather here to talk about the news and the neighborhood and the glory days, play video poker before putting in early. They seem much the same as that paper bell--unmoved, unchanged for years, and quite content.

Ann Taylor, remembers putting up injured veterans on cots on the pub's floor after WWII. She remembers visits from late mayor and governor Theodore McKeldin and late state Sen. Harry McGuirk--baseball great Micky Mantle even paid a call once. And she remembers Sen. Della as a youngster. "He used to run with my son, Lindy," she explains, chuckling as she tells a few anecdotes. The only trouble the bar has ever been in, according to Liquor Board records, was connected to politics; under previous ownership in 1936, alcoholic beverages were served on Election Day--an illegal act then, drawing a \$25 fine plus administrative costs. That's a long time to keep a bar's nose clean.

Taylor's "workshop"--the kitchen--is open for lunch and dinner and is known for serving the fattest fried-oyster sandwiches around. And the beef-and-noodle soup is homemade, right down to the noodles.

"I'm chief cook and bottle washer," Taylor says. "It's all family here--the same old place, the same old people."

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