

Township Tavern: Dusty jewel, Hilltown crown

By Guy Lounsbury

There is a place, out on Route 146 in the Town of Knox, called the Township Tavern. It is an old building with a rundown look. The paint is faded and peeling, the wood it decorates cracked and chipped. The few neon lights, dimly alive in the dirty windows, give it a forlorn look.

The inevitable hard-used pickup trucks resting on the dirt parking lot add to the sense of desolation. It is a "locals" bar, what others would call a "dive." It isn't the kind of place that invites the unknown traveler through its doors.

It is a dusty jewel; I wouldn't want it any other way. Walk through the door, and you walk into something hidden, strange and wonderful, something that is all too rare in our lives. There is a closeness and familiarity that is alive and warm within those walls.

This is an old business; it might well be the oldest in the town. There is an early picture of the tavern on the wall. The caption under it states the Township Tavern was first established in 1850. The picture might have been taken yester-



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Welcome Hunter reads the sign next to the front door of the Township Tavern in Knox. A warm soup and a cold beer await the weary hunter. A tote board inside lists hunters competing in the pool for the largest buck.

Buckboard wagons and pickup truck

day were it not for the horse and buggy standing in front. The tavern hasn't changed in appearance since it first opened; I imagine that the same might be said of the people frequenting it.

I like to envision what it must have been like 100 years ago with buckboard wagons replacing the pickup trucks, and horses, hitched to the post, replacing the motorcycles on their kickstands. I think that the people inside would still be the same, their worries and concerns, joys and triumphs not much different than they are now.

Sometimes I will sit in there listening for the faint echoes of talk long ago; when the conversation might have been of a dry season, disastrous for the farmers, or of events that would require local men or their sons to don uniforms and fight for high ideals in distant lands. Momentous and insignificant, surely all events in history for the past 150 years have been discussed under that roof.

Somewhere within those rough wood walls, the talk from the old days certainly reverberates still. It doesn't take much imagination, when listening to a group of men discuss who has the fastest snowmobile, to see in your mind's eye a similar group of men discussing their horses with the same convictions. The clothes are different, the faces have changed, but the words have stayed pretty much the same.

Enter the tavern and everyone turns to look. For a moment you are framed in the spotlight, scrutinized. It is an instant initiation rite into the community within. The stools are comfortable, the wood floor rough, and the bar itself worn smooth by countless elbows.

Bowls of munchies are set out; there is a shuffleboard game up against the wall, a dartboard, a pool table, and a jukebox. Such

things are mere accouterments to the magnetism of the place.

People don't come in to be entertained by objects; even mighty television could not withstand the competition of the real attraction. The people who come are the reason the tavern continues to draw and endure. What can possibly be more entertaining than one's own fellow travelers through life? Nothing is quite as fascinating to man as man.

The tavern houses something that cannot be planned or bought; it has to happen of its own accord. It has life, a deep old mellow life, not the false, fabricated, cheerfulness that is found in chain eateries and pubs. The tavern serves gritty raw realism in doses that sometimes can be overwhelming.

The clientele of the tavern is much like the tavern itself, pragmatic and sporting a worn look. Yet, like the tavern, the customers seem to have an undying endurance about them. These are people who live life and some of those lives have been hard.

You can read it in the creases of their careworn faces; you can see it in their rough and swollen hands. They are people who make their way by the sweat of their brows and the ache of their backs. They know the meaning of hard work; many also know the meaning of low pay. They buy each other drinks, and it truly means something. They are real people, the salt of the earth.

Conversations fly around the bar; group debate is the norm; the topics of discussion are incredible.

Everything is discussed, local news and national happenings. Who did what to whom and when. The sounds crest like a wave and fall to a murmur of slow water, over and over again.

The joy of the tavern is that



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Planks for the memories: A shuffleboard from the 1930's dominates the bar. Because of its length, it was brought in through the window. It was purchased in the valley and brought up the hill by truck.

Philosophy and gossip

feelings aren't a part of opinions. Say what you want, but listen to what is said too. Wear thick skin and don't take offense.

It is one of the few places that I have been where the jukebox is turned down so that people might better talk to each other. It

is the only place I have been where there isn't any television and no one cares.

The current owner of the Township Tavern is a woman named Tina. Although there must have been countless own-

ers of the tavern, somehow I suspect that she is one of the best the place has ever known. Certainly the tavern needs her as much, I believe, as she needs it.

She is a remarkable woman and the tavern has taken on an atmosphere that reflects her personality. It has had a rough past but that is now gone. She cleaned it up and refined it in a rough-hewn country-style way. She breathed new life into it. The tavern is what it should be, a place where people can go and enjoy themselves. Those of us who go there are grateful for what she has done.

The people at the tavern have a strong sense of community; they care about one another. Anyone's misfortune brings out a donation jar. And the people do give, the jars fill up fast. Poor people give money to poorer people, sore and tired hands reach out to those who need help. If the brain of the town resides in the town hall and its soul within the church, then its heart lives in the tavern.

I feel as if we are losing something in this country. I was fortunate to spend a couple of years in a small village in England. There, the village's social and political life is centered in the neighborhood pub. Friends and neighbors meet for a couple of pints and to catch up on the latest news and gossip. They celebrate each other's triumphs and bemoan each other's misfortunes. They laugh together and they cry together, and the whole village is closer because of it.

Here, the neighborhood tavern seems to have lost that special appeal and now seems somehow ominous. A line has been drawn in our legal books and the friendly neighborhood taverns seem dangerously close to the wrong side of it. As a result, the local tavern is slowly becoming a thing of the past. Whether this is good or bad, I shall not debate.

But it is undoubtedly a shame that we are also losing the closeness toward one another that the local watering hole once unabashedly brought into our lives. It is just one more piece of Americana that is fading from our scene and we are the less for it.

For the time being, though, I am lucky enough to know of a place that I can walk into on a hot summer's day. A smile and a cold beer will always be there to greet me as I sit down. At that instant, I could ask for nothing more. I am a familiar, my name and my preferences are known, it is a good welcoming feeling.

The tavern is a refuge from the world where I can rest quietly in the cool darkness and listen to talk, gossip, and general philosophizing on life by men and women who know it well. The Township Tavern will endure for many more years, of that I have no doubt. It is a special place.

Someday in the distant future I will bring my own son there for his first beer, should that be his desire. It will be an introduction into a part of America that might be dangerously close to extinction by then. We will sit on the stools housed in that dilapidated old building, a couple of cold ones in front of us and talk about our thoughts, opinions and dreams, adding our voices to those hidden in the walls and years gone by.

Observing a rite of passage that has been handed down for generations, we will become closer, father and son, equals and friends. And for that brief time, in the tavern, all will be right with the world.