

Night at the fights — everybody's punchy



The Sun-Times and the Better Government Assn. ran a Near North Side bar, the Mirage, for four months to investigate corruption and fraud in the tavern business. This is the 24th article of a series that ends Sunday.

By Pamela Zekman
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The Mirage's customers got along just fine. They drank, joked, gambled and danced to the jukebox.

Then there was the night they all tried to kill one another.

It was a night at the fights — the kind of night every tavern owner fears most. More than 40 people were in the Mirage the night of Sept. 2. No count was kept on the punches thrown. But a participant, experienced in such matters, put the fight in perspective.

"It's a good thing you guys called the police," he said. "Otherwise, somebody probably would have ended up dead."

The Mirage — a tavern operated for four months by The Sun-Times and the Better Government Assn. at 731 N. Wells — knew the standard equation of the tavern business. Alcohol plus people equals trouble. A tavern can minimize the risk by not letting its customers get drunk. But sometimes all it takes is a little alcohol and a bad temper to get a fight going.

A tavern never knows when it's going to happen or how bad it's going to be.

The Mirage actually got its first taste of violence some 24 hours before the flat-out barroom brawl. Call it a preliminary match before the title fight.

Fay and Kay, two young women who seemed the best of friends, were tippling through the evening of Sept. 1. Then, shortly after midnight, Fay became angry with Kay.

The bartenders heard shouts and looked up to see Fay and Kay throwing punches at each other. The women wrestled. They tore at each other's hair. It was a rough enough tussle to knock down five barstools.

It was a mistake for Fay to go after Kay. Fay was small. Kay was not. And it was a mistake for the Mirage bartenders to go after Kay, too. William Recktenwald, the BGA chief investigator, came up behind Kay and tried to put an armlock on her. It did not go nearly as well as he had learned in hand-to-hand combat training.

Craig Kinzer, a BGA investigator, also moved into the fight and nearly caught Kay's fist full in the face. He ducked just enough so that the punch glanced off and sent his wire-rimmed glasses flying across the tavern.

The two bartenders finally managed to pull Fay and Kay apart. Both women were told the tavern was suspending them for the next two weeks. But that wasn't the end of it. Kay hung around after Fay stalked out. Kay said she had a good reason.

"That crazy Fay," Kay said. "She's out there waiting for me. I bet she went up to her apartment and got her gun."

Other Mirage customers agreed that Fay supposedly kept a gun. Recktenwald went to the front window and looked across the street. Fay was standing there with two friends. She was holding something that shone silver in

MIRAGE REPRINTS:

Reprints of The Sun-Times' Mirage series will be available soon after the series ends Sunday. Watch for further details.



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'That place is really going up for grabs.'

the street light. Then she hid it behind her back.

The Mirage called the police. Maybe there was a gun. Maybe not. Better safe than sorry.

The police evidently agreed. A squad car arrived within 60 seconds and both officers jumped out with their guns drawn. One of them took a combat position behind the car.

Another squad car arrived seconds later. Two more officers jumped out with guns drawn.

Seven more squad cars arrived during the next minute. Four of them stopped. The other three, seeing that the situation was under control, kept moving.

Fay and her friends put their hands up. All were searched and questioned. There was no gun. But the Mirage and its customers had been well served and protected by the police that night.

The Mirage's telephone rang about 30 seconds after the police had left. It was one of Kay's two friends from across the street. His name was Ray. "I'm going to do everything I can to close that —ing place down!" he shouted.

Ray hadn't enjoyed being frisked. He would later calm down.

The Mirage hoped the incident would serve as a lesson to all. But no such luck. The barroom brawl occurred the next midnight. The police might as well have hung around.

It was the beginning of the three-day Labor Day weekend and time for everybody to get mellow. Lorenzo and Rick, two smiling tipplers, had spent the evening mellowing on whisky and beer. Then Lorenzo made his mistake. He decided he wanted to dance with the wives of several other customers.

Lorenzo had been buying drinks for these women. He thought that gave him the right to embrace them, too. A husband disagreed.

"Hey, why can't I dance with the girls?" Lorenzo asked.

"Because they don't wanna dance with you," the husband said.

Lorenzo shoved the husband. The husband shoved back. Then Lorenzo tried to take a punch at the husband. The wife got in the way and caught the punch. That did it.

Suddenly everybody in the Mirage seemed to find a reason to punch out the person next to him. That is how barroom brawls usually work. The men fought and the women screamed. One woman did her best for femin-

ism by moving into the fight. Someone slugged her in the stomach.

Craig Kinzer, the intrepid BGA investigator who had his glasses punched off the night before, remembered how bartenders handled these brawls in the old Westerns. The bartender is supposed to leap across the bar and into the thick of things. That is what he did. Someone picked him up and threw him against a wall.

A few of the customers grabbed their beers and jumped out the front door. "That place is really going up for grabs," one told a passerby.

And so it was. Recktenwald, the BGA chief investigator, had traveled through hundreds of Chicago area taverns doing various kinds of undercover work. He had seen countless barroom brawls. This, he later said, was the worst.

Jeff Allen, who played the role of Mirage owner, tried to play the role of peacemaker. He went down hard. A customer shouted a tactless remark about someone's wife. "She's a pig! She's a pig!" he taunted. A fist in the face sent him sprawling.

It was Rick who got the worst of it. Rick was the drinking buddy of Lorenzo, who had started it all. Someone had already smacked

a cocktail glass against Rick's head. The glass didn't break but his skin did.

Now Rick, woozy from the hit, wandered into the middle of the fight. "My friend, my friend, he needs help," he said.

Rick just barely got those words out. Then, as chance would have it, three people punched him out simultaneously.

"It was kind of a coincidence," a brawler said the next day.

Lorenzo, meanwhile, had grabbed a beer bottle. He knew from watching the movies what a formidable weapon a broken beer bottle can be. But he had no luck here. He slammed it against the wall and against a pinball machine. The bottle simply wouldn't break. So much for the movies.

A bartender dived behind the back bar to call the police. Recktenwald moved out the front door toward a police call box. The sound Lorenzo made with the beer bottle was like that of a small revolver going off. Recktenwald moved with new urgency.

At least five squad cars arrived within the next minute. The Mirage was bathed in flashing blue lights once again. About a dozen of the Mirage's customers had escaped to the sidewalk, beers in hand, at that point. The fight was beginning to subside.

The police looked over the situation and decided not to make any arrests. There were, inexplicably, no serious injuries. But the police announced they were getting tired of nightly trips to the Mirage.

"We can't keep coming down here," one officer said. "This is your bar. You're supposed to control the people. You can't keep having fights in here."

The Mirage couldn't have agreed more. That is why it immediately suspended Lorenzo and Rick.

The police pulled out and everybody prepared to go home. There was a brief threat of more violence when one of the jealous husbands went to his car and grabbed a jack handle. But he was restrained by his friends. Enough was enough. The neighborhood seemed to agree on that, too.

The Mirage bartenders went back inside to clean up the mess. It was then that they noticed an old tippler sitting quietly in one of the booths. He had somehow managed to sit in the booth, sipping a martini, throughout the brawl.

"Can I have another drink?" he said. "The service in here is terrible."

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Seniors seek better services

By Patricia Anstett

A coalition of more than 100 senior citizens groups Thursday drew up a "senior citizen's bill of rights" calling for improved services to elderly Chicagoans.

The demands, to be presented to city officials and legislators, included calls for more beat policemen to patrol high-crime areas, taxi and utility discounts and no-fare rides on public transportation for senior citizens.

The bill of rights was drawn up by Metro Seniors in Action at a rally at the Sheraton Chicago Hotel.

Proposals to curb crime against senior citizens evoked the greatest comment among some 350 seniors attending the rally.

Margaret Person, co-chairman of the Metro Seniors group, said that despite growing concern about crime against seniors, only a few

neighborhoods have beat patrolmen to police areas better.

Al Peterson, co-chairman of the group, said Chicago lags behind cities like Philadelphia and New York City in providing special services to seniors. Senior citizen groups have made demands repeatedly to the mayor, former Police Supt. James Rochford and others, but received no definite promises, he said.

Peterson estimates that if the city solved one problem facing seniors — cars parked at bus stops, causing seniors to walk into the street to board a bus — it could collect \$100,000 a day in lost parking fines.

The city, he said, has 13,000 bus stops, about half of which have at least one car parked illegally each day. If the city collected the average \$20 fine for parking in such zones on only 5,000 of the cars parked, it would collect \$100,000 daily, he said.

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