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Landmarks: A Schlitz-built tied house being reborn as East Side Tap, saving a structure and over a century of neighborhood stories

By Paul Eisenberg
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A terra cotta Schlitz logo adorns the exterior at East Side Tap at 94th Street and Ewing Avenue in Chicago. The tied house tavern built by the brewery in 1907 was at risk of being stripped of its decorations and potentially demolished before being bought in 2019. (Paul Eisenberg/Daily Southtown)

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The giant terra cotta globe on the second story of a tavern at 94th Street and Ewing Avenue is probably its most notable feature, but a smaller, more ornate vestige of the "tied house" era is what caught the eye of Mike and Laura Medina when they'd drive by or pop in for a lager.

The upper "eyebrow" arch of the building's main picture window was outfitted with an intricate stained glass rendering of the logo for Schlitz beer. Originally built by the brewing company in 1907, the Bamboo Lounge building had been a neighborhood dive for decades.

"Every time we passed by this building, my wife and I said it would be fun, if something ever happens to that building, if we bought it one day," Medina told a group at the bar last week.

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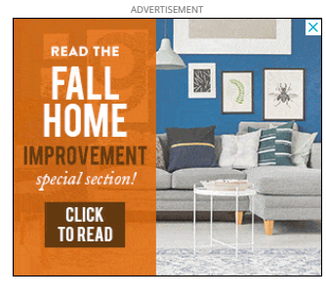

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Mike Medina, who owns East Side Tap with his wife, Laura, discusses the history of the tied house tavern built by Schlitz in 1907 during a Calumet Heritage Partnership program Sept. 8. (Kevin Brown)

A few years ago, a friend from the area was waiting for the bus on Ewing and noticed a window was gone and a piece of plywood up, Medina said.

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"Knowing what I know about where this building is located, the odds that it's going to be something better were kind of slim," Medina said. "The economics of the neighborhood are not going to lend themselves to adaptive use of this building. Someone is going to knock this down. They're going to take the globe, they're going to knock this building down."

Phone calls and messages to a faceless holding company were seemingly ignored, until one cold call finally netted results and he talked to the building's new owner. Medina said he'd be interested if they were looking to sell.

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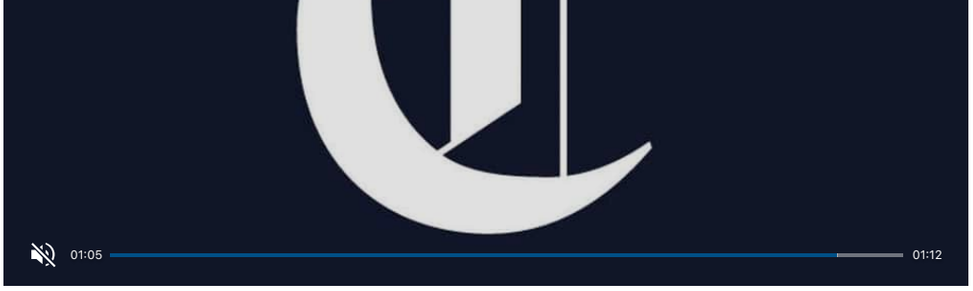

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"They didn't know what they were going to do with it — maybe put offices in," Medina said.

He later learned that owner bought it for the same reason it initially caught his eye. The owner had the stained glass window removed and it's now hanging in a house, Medina said. Beyond that, nothing much happened until 2019, when Medina got a phone call.

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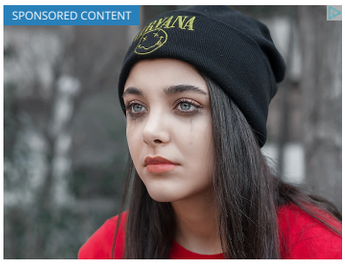
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"They said you can buy it, or otherwise I'm going to strip it. We're going to take the globe off and sell the bar. So what do you want to do?" Medina related.

Medina turned to his wife, and said, "Good news baby!"

The East Side Tap at 94th Street and Ewing Avenue in Chicago. Owner Mike Medina is restoring the "tied house" tavern and hearing stories about its histories from neighborhood residents. (Paul Eisenberg/Daily Southtown)

They closed in September that year and he's been working on restoring the East Side Tap to its early 20th century glory "in fits and starts" ever since.

Four years later, he opened his doors Sept. 8 for a small gathering of interested people at an event sponsored by the Calumet Heritage Partnership and the Field Museum's Calumet Voices exhibit.

About 40 people congregated in the tavern's backroom to hear about Medina's efforts.

Gwen Stricker, a Calumet Heritage Partnership board member, said the event was "inspired by the cultural significance of bars in industrial working class communities" so common to the Calumet region.

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And as a tied house, it has a link to other historic places throughout Chicago. The East Side Tap is one of 40 Schlitz Tied Houses in the city, including the Wrigleyville structure that's now home to Schuba's and the shuttered structure visible from the Kensington Metra station on the Electric Line.

Gwen Stricker, a board member with the Calumet Heritage Partnership, addresses guests Sept. 8 during a program about restoration efforts at East Side Tap at 94th Street and Ewing Avenue in Chicago. The presentation was offered in the tavern's back room, which hadn't been open to the public in decades, owner Mike Medina said. (Kevin Brown)

The gathering was a way to "shine a spotlight on preservation in the Calumet region," Stricker said, a complex area where "industry, residential communities and natural prairies, marshes and dues are so tightly packed together."

It also might have been the first gathering in the bar's backroom in decades.

"This room was padlocked off," Medina said. "There are people who live around here who are in their 40s who never knew this was back here until I opened the door. Nobody ever went in."

Limited resources available to Bamboo Lounge owner Frannie Shirk meant not much changed while she owned it. As Medina has worked over the last four years to restore the building, he's unearthing history.

"It's been a fascinating trip because so much was preservation by neglect," he said. "Nothing changed because nothing needed to change. It worked. No one was going to come in with a new concept and rip all this stuff out."

Tap handles for soda pop at East Side Tap represent "preservation by neglect," owner Mike Medina said, as previous owners didn't have resources or willingness to update items. (Paul Eisenberg/Daily Southtown)

The backroom's tin patterned ceiling shines once again after a bit of restoration. An ancient fan mounted above a doorway remains positioned to vent nicotine from a roomful of smokers. And a Western Union clock, once linked to the home office by teletype to maintain exact time, still churns as it automatically winds. It allowed patrons who needed to punch in at the nearby steel mills, or be back aboard ships on the Calumet River, time for their own last call.

One of those seafarers left a graffiti calling card — his name and the name of his ship — on a bathroom wall that Medina uncovered when he pulled down some old wood paneling. He did a bit of searching and found the freighter, from Norway, had docked here only once, in August 1974.

Other visitors left more substantial, and more mysterious artifacts. Medina said he also found "a bag of foreign currency from the '70s and '80s."

An antique "candlestick" phone survived through the years, along with a cigarette machine Medina had transformed into an Art-O-Mat.

The bar itself, and its Art Deco backsplash, likely date to when Schlitz had to divest the tied house taverns from company ownership in the wake of new laws enacted as Prohibition was repealed. The original bar was probably much more ornate, and considered out of style when the new owners were again serving legal suds.

A Western Union clock at East Side Tap in Chicago from the early 20th century once linked to a master clock elsewhere to ensure it was properly set. (Paul Eisenberg/Daily Southtown)

After Schiltz sold, a series of owners operated the place under a variety of names, but one of its more notable turns came when the Popovich Brothers began operating Club Cello in 1949.

Internationally famous tamburitza musicians, the Popovich Brothers Orchestra used Club Cello as a home base for years, when it became a popular gathering place for the Serbian community, according to Teddy Popovich's 2005 obituary.

"The people who have been in the neighborhood the longest, that's who they remember," Medina said. "The real old-timers remember the Popovich Brothers roasting goats for wedding receptions back here."

Neighborhood lore holds that the Popovich ownership came to an end when one of the brothers, a hero in World War II, was recruited by the Office of Strategic Services to hunt Nazis in Yugoslavia.

Others from the neighborhood remember when Eli Grba used to wash dishes at the tavern while his mother worked there as a server.

"I didn't know who that is," Medina said, "and they say, 'oh yeah, he pitched for the Yankees."

Grba also holds a place in baseball lore as the first player chosen by the expansion Los Angeles Angels in 1961.

While the old buildings and its notable tied house place in Chicago history are great elements, Medina said the stories that were generated there, such as the backroom tamburitza receptions and the seafarer's visit, are also worthy of preservation.

An art deco display case behind the bar at East Side Tap in Chicago holds vintage Schlitz items. The bar was built by Schlitz as a "tied house" tavern in 1907. (Paul Eisenberg/Daily Southtown)

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"In neighborhoods that are not as well served in Chicago, things like this (building) go away, and those stories disappear with it, with no fanfare," he said. "People come back and say this used to be here, and they point to an empty lot.

"Those stories are important, and it's important that this is here and it stays here, just because of that. It's no less relevant because it's at 94th and Ewing than it is if it's (Schuba's) at Belmont and Southport, because everyone knows about that one. This is equally a place people remember."

Medina enlisted the firm Preservation Futures to help get the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places. That and its official landmark status in Chicago — one of eight Tied Houses on the city list — will ensure the place, and the stories, will outlast even his ownership, he said.

"Whatever happens with our stewardship of it, it will be here for someone else in the future," Medina said. "It won't be wiped off the map and forgotten about. I think that's important."

He doesn't know when he'll be able to open back up as a neighborhood tavern, but believes he's closer to that goal than to the beginning of the process. In the meantime, he hopes to acquire the original stained glass Schlitz eyebrow window, now hanging on a wall in someone's house.

"If we manage to get the glass back, we can add it to the city landmark designation so it doesn't happen ever again," Medina said. "That may be wishful thinking, but everything has a price."

Landmarks is a weekly column by Paul Eisenberg exploring the people, places and things that have left an indelible mark on the Southland. He can be reached at peisenberg@tribpub.com.

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