

West side Subway Club earned notoriety in late '50s

Try as he might, Bloomington Mayor Robert McGraw could not close the Subway Club, an afterhours “set-up” joint on the city’s west side that he once described as a gathering place for “perverts, bar girls, bootleggers and gamblers.”

Located on 900 block of West Chestnut Street, the Subway Club was one of several such establishments in the city. Set-up clubs typically opened at 1 a.m., just as the city taverns were legally required to close. Patrons paid a cover charge—thus becoming “members” of the “club”—and as such were allowed to bring their own booze. These clubs, which then remained open into the early morning hours, provided nonalcoholic mixers and other “set ups” for the hard stuff purchased earlier and elsewhere by members.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Subway Club had the well-deserved reputation as the rowdiest, most lawless place in all the Twin Cities.

The Club derived its name from the pedestrian “subway” built in 1916 that ran under the south end of the once-sprawling, bustling Chicago & Alton Railroad yards and shops complex. The underpass, connecting the 900 and 1100 blocks of West Chestnut Street at opposite ends of the rail yards, enabled west side residents to avoid the danger of crossing multiple lines of congested train traffic.

The Subway Club occupied one-half of the first floor of a substantial three-story 19th century brick building not more than 65 feet from the tracks. For years it was the Chicago & Alton Hotel, and then served as home for the Alton Community Club and later the GM&O Cafe, among other businesses.

Louis DiBattista, the Subway Club’s proprietor, was said to have been a “country club steward, tavern operator and bartender” prior to opening his set-up place on West Chestnut in the fall of 1956.

From the beginning, DiBattista’s club was known as a “haven for intemperates of every description.” Sometime in the late spring of 1957, the Bloomington police put the club under surveillance. Then, at 4:30 a.m. on Saturday, June 8, a five-man Bloomington police detail led by Chief Fred Giermann raided the club. Armed with a search warrant, the cops seized “a quantity of cheap whiskey.”

The 43-year-old DiBattista was charged with illegally selling liquor under both state and city statutes, as well as violating state law by operating a gaming house. On July 11, 1957, Police

Court Magistrate Walter Reiner fined the club owner \$200 or \$300 (accounts vary) plus \$40.80 in costs on the state charge of illegal liquor sale (the two other charges—running afoul of both the city liquor ordinance and the state gaming law—were ultimately dismissed).

Two months later, Magistrate Reiner found DiBattista guilty of assault and battery, fining him another \$57 and court costs. That altercation, which left a 21-year-old woman on the floor of the club unconscious, occurred June 30.

The following spring, on May 11, 1958, Bloomington police, backed by county sheriff's officers, staged a second raid on the Subway Club. Evidence collected this time around included "a quantity of whiskey and beer, two dice cups, a numbered 'roulette type' wheel and a smaller automatic electronically operated numbered wheel." Arrested once more, DiBattista faced new state and local charges for selling alcohol without a license and possessing gambling devices.

In early Sept. 1958, The Pantagraph reported that the defendant had "chalked up more court time than many lawyers in the past year and half because of his alleged and proved illegal operations at the club."

One month later, at 2 a.m. on Oct. 1, five sheriff's deputies arrested the embattled owner at his club for aggravated assault and inflicting "severe personal injury" on a Gibson City man, who had to be hospitalized.

Late that same month, a McLean County Court jury, after hearing four days of contentious, conflicting testimony, held DiBattista guilty on three counts of illegal liquor sales stemming from the May 1958 raid. "The trial set a recent record for longevity," remarked The Pantagraph. "Probably more than 1,000 pages of testimony were recorded."

DiBattista, sentenced to four months in state custody, served his time at the state penal farm in Vandalia. Upon his release, he headed straight back to Bloomington. In May 1959, DiBattista and Robert Bacon, a 36 or 37-year-old who split his time between Bloomington and Peoria, partnered to remake the Subway Club as a "mixed-race" afterhours establishment. In other words, they hoped to open the club's doors to African Americans at a time when most—if not all—bars in the Twin Cities were strictly segregated.

Plans to make the west side set-up club "interracial" infuriated Mayor McGraw. "I'm not going to stand for it. I'll get police, the building inspector, the fire inspector—anybody to close that place," he said. "It's not a matter of discrimination. I'm doing this to protect the Negroes as much as the whites." Such was the state of race relations that McGraw's tirade drew no public complaints or outcry.

At any rate, the plan to welcome black patrons was quickly dropped, and that summer, Bacon was shot twice and severely wounded in a “tavern fracas” in Peoria.

By the fall of 1960, Mayor McGraw was at wit’s end with the Subway Club thumbing its nose at the law. “One more complaint,” he said on Oct. 26, “and I swear I’ll close that place once and for all ... I’m just damn fed up.”

One week later, McGraw ordered the police department to station a uniformed officer at the club during its open hours. That policy took effect on Nov. 4, 1960, and two weeks later, DiBattista capitulated, agreeing to cancel the club’s lease and use its space to expand his Hickory House restaurant, which occupied the other half of the building’s first floor.

“I hope that’s the end of it,” declared McGraw. But of course, it was anything but!

On Nov. 22, 1961, the police raided the still-open Subway Club, arresting 14 individuals, five of whom were women, for watching an adult or “stag” film. “The club,” acknowledged The Pantagraph, “has operated almost continually since the closing announcement.” Despite claims of innocence, DiBattista was charged with exhibiting “immoral pictures.”

The end of the Subway Club finally came on the morning of Jan. 23, 1963, when the three-story building that housed the notorious set-up joint was lost in a ferocious blaze. With temperatures reaching 16-below zero, firefighters battled the cold as much as the smoke and flames.

The Subway Club has been gone for 56 years, but its legend lives on.

On Feb. 26, 1958, a 32-year-old Bloomington man and a 28-year-old Danvers resident brawled outside the club. Both were charged with drunk and disorderly conduct and, being unable to pay the \$54 fine, spent the night in jail. “It was never established in court,” noted The Pantagraph, “whether they had been fighting each other or someone else.”