

The Culture and Traditions of Tallahassee, Florida Bars

By Michael G. Lortz

In 1999, Florida State University was voted number one party college in America by Princeton Review (1). Much of the credit for this dubious distinction goes to the bars and pubs of Tallahassee, Florida, Florida State's home. Tallahassee has a plethora of drinking establishments, many of which are a short walk from the university campus.

A majority of these drinking establishments are located on Tennessee Street. The "Tennessee Strip" is home to such bars as Bullwinkle's, Fatty and Skinny's, and Ken's, to name a few. In the 35 plus years that students have been enjoying themselves on the "Strip", as well as at other locations throughout Tallahassee, several traditions have developed.

One of the more famous of these traditions is the "Tennessee Waltz", named after the Official State Song of Tennessee (2). Culturally Florida.com defines the Tennessee Waltz as visiting the Tallahassee bar scene on weekends the Florida State Seminoles play their home football games (3). To those who frequent the "Strip" however, it has a quite different meaning.

According to Emily George, a senior at Florida State, the "Tennessee Waltz" is a rite of passage for Tallahassee residents who celebrate their 21st birthday. After "warming up" with a "pre-party" celebration, the birthday person, along with his or her friends, go to Bullwinkle's. There the birthday person receives a birthday sticker to wear on their chest. The benefit of wearing this sticker is that every bar on Tennessee Street gives the birthday celebrator a free beer or other drink with valid proof of ID. The "Waltz" concludes when

the birthday celebrator has either visited all of the eight bars on the “Tennessee Strip” or they have gotten sick from the over consumption of alcohol.

Over time students have added traditions to the “Tennessee Waltz.” For example, when a member of a group of girls turns 21, the entire group dresses up in a certain theme. Some of the more popular themes include Hawaiian, Cowboy, or 1980s-retro attire. The birthday girl is usually designated by a crown, boa, or tiara (4). So famous has the “Tallahassee Waltz” become, it has been mentioned in Sports Illustrated (5) and on the Florida State University website (6).

The “Tennessee Waltz” is the only major drinking tradition in Tallahassee that involves more than one establishment. Many places have their own traditions and nuances that distinguish them from the rest. What follows is a journalistic report of visits and interviews conducted by the author.

October 20, 2001

Indian Harbor Beach/ Sebastian Beach, FL

I started my study on Tallahassee bar traditions not in Tallahassee, but in Indian Harbor Beach, Florida, home of Poor Paul’s Pourhouse. This bar shares its name with one of the many on Tallahassee’s famed Tennessee Street. I was curious to know whether there was any connection between the two bars other than their name. There was also a Seminole football game that night so I figured where better to watch the game than a place that would be full of fellow Seminole fans.

Poor Paul’s is a typical sports bar with televisions mounted around the bar and a large screen television in the middle of the establishment. There was a large array of Florida State paraphernalia posted around the bar.

As I watched the game I noticed whenever a customer purchased a pitcher of beer the bartender would spin the bargain wheel. The bargain wheel was a solid wooden wheel mounted on a post by the bar. Similar to the concept of the wheel of fortune, the wheel had notches on it and it was divided into several colored sections (red, blue, yellow, black, etc). The customer “called” his or her color as the bartender spun the wheel. If the wheel stopped on the customer’s color, he or she would receive a free pitcher of the beer of their choice.

After the Seminoles won the game and the crowd left I had a chance to interview the bartender, Dave Brooks. Dave had tended bar for 18 years starting in Simsbury, Connecticut. He informed me that Poor Paul’s had been opened in 1999 and is frequented by all genders mostly of age 25 and up (7).

Dave also told me of Poor Paul’s special theme days. On Wednesday nights, the Poor Paul’s NASCAR club meets. Saturday brings together the Brevard County Seminole Club, a member of both Seminole Boosters, Inc and the Alumni Association. It is headed by Brendan McCarthy and conducts such activities as an annual golf tournament and gives away a \$1000 scholarship (8).

When I asked Dave about any association between the Poor Paul’s Pourhouse of Indian Harbor Beach and its namesake in Tallahassee, he told me that although the name is not trademarked and can be used freely, the owner of the Tallahassee bar disapproves of the use of the name elsewhere. An interesting side note to the situation is that the owner of the Indian Harbor Beach Poor Paul’s also owns a neighboring bar named the Purple Porpoise, the namesake of which is in Gainesville, Florida, home of the Florida Gators. The use of this name is approved by the Gainesville bar owner (7).

After thanking Dave for his time and leaving Poor Paul's Poorhouse I headed down SR A1A to the Sebastian Beach Inn. This is a small little beach bar that frequently showcases live music. When I arrived, there were approximately 20 people there. As the night progressed and the band finished their set, I was able to interview the bartender, Eddie.

Eddie had worked bar for 34 years learning on the job at a bar named Badlands in Ohio. He told me the Sebastian Beach Inn had been opened for over 25 years and that it was primarily a blues and reggae bar. Although he claimed the bar was patroned by people of all ages and ethnicities, I only saw middle aged white people there. Also of note was that the Sebastian Beach Inn was along the Poker Run of motorcyclists in the local area. When I inquired about this tradition, Eddie introduced me to a man sitting at the bar named Ted. Ted was a local biker with both the Independence Chapter of Brevard and the Harley Owner's Group (HOG) (9).

According to Ted, a Poker Run is a charitable benefit drive in which each biker puts in an entry fee of \$10. This fee enables the biker to acquire a playing card from each participating establishment. The biker with the best hand after the run is over receives half of the benefit money (10). Once I finished talking to Ted, I called it a night, returning to Tallahassee the next day to further my research.

November 13, 2001

Tallahassee, FL

The first Tallahassee bar I researched was Fatty and Skinny's, located on Tennessee Street. Fatty and Skinny's is an Irish pub with a large array of imported beers

for the customers to choose from. While there I interviewed the bartender, a college age girl named Jenine.

Jenine told me Fatty and Skinny's had been opened for about 10 years and its main patrons were men of various ethnicities over the age of 21 (11). Besides its theme and its product array, Fatty and Skinny's was mostly devoid of recognized tradition.

After interviewing Jenine, I met a man who claimed to be a founding member of the famous rock and roll band the Eagles. He introduced himself as Randy Meisner and continued on about how he was taking a Greyhound bus to Tempe, Arizona to go to Lake Tahoe with 70's singer/ songwriter Jackson Browne (12). A week later I did research on Mr. Meisner, who was indeed a member of the Eagles. However, the man at Fatty and Skinny's claimed to be 63. Randy Meisner is 55 years of age. I also read an online article about an imposter in Atlanta claiming to be the classic rock band's bass player. Was the individual I met really Randy Meisner? Or merely an imposter?

While congratulating myself on meeting a rock legend (?) I walked down Tennessee Street to Ken's.

Ken's is the oldest bar on Tennessee Street, having opened in 1966. It is a beer/ country bar catering primarily to the Greek (fraternity and sorority) community of Florida State. Inside Ken's is a pool table and several dart boards. I talked to Carl Ots, who had worked bar at Ken's for three years. He claimed to have learned how to tend bar by being an alcoholic. He also told me the hardest part of his job is dealing with a possibly unruly crowd.

Carl told me of the many traditions associated with Ken's. The bar has held an annual charity golf tournament for the Shriners since 1995. During the tournament, the golfers traditionally drink a beer per hole.

Another tradition at Ken's is the Mugs Club. The Mugs Club is an original tradition at Ken's, having been done since its opening in 1966. In order to join the Mugs Club and have a mug posted behind the bar, an organization must stay at Ken's from open to close for 2 days. This is a variation of the original tradition that was a Sunday to Tuesday camp out outside of Ken's. This tradition was changed due to liability concerns.

The bartenders at Ken's have their own traditions. Behind the bar, they give free beer to any girl who gives the bartender her bra. Outside of the bar, they annually make a trip to Biloxi, Mississippi for a weekend of fun. They even have their own identity, the Hondo Club. In order to join the Hondo Club, a new bartender must place a \$100 bet on red or black on the roulette table at a Biloxi casino (13). After interviewing Carl I returned home, finishing my research for the night.

November 14, 2001

Tallahassee, FL

On my second night I continued researching the bars of the "Tennessee Strip." I started the night at Poor Paul's Poorhouse. Poor Paul's has been opened for 20 years and is located underneath the adult toys and games store on Tennessee Street. It is a small bar without much circulation and a tendency to become very smoke filled.

Inside Poor Paul's Poorhouse I interviewed Eric, the bartender. He has currently been working at Poor Paul's for 4 months, having accumulated eight years total bartending time, starting in Daytona, Florida. Eric told me Poor Paul's clientele is mostly 25-35 year

old white males. Poor Paul's has a drinking special every night of the week and has some of the cheapest beer prices in town. On every Wednesday, there is a meeting of the Poor Paul's Dart League (14).

Having already visited the Indian Harbor Beach Poor Paul's (October 20, 2001 entry), I asked Eric what he knew of any connection between the two establishments. Because of his limited experience at Poor Paul's, he directed me to Jim, the bar's manager. Jim stated he wasn't sure about the situation but added that he thought the Indian Harbor Beach bar was making a royalty payment for use of the name (15). After talking to Jim, I left Poor Paul's and headed to neighboring Bullwinkle's.

Bullwinkle's is possibly the most famous Tallahassee bar, having been named on both Playboy magazine's "100 Best College Bars" (16) and Playboy's College Bar Survey "5 Places to Party Like a Rock Star" (17). Bullwinkle's has a unique set-up. It is divided between a dance club inside and a stage outside, frequently used for local music acts.

At Bullwinkle's I interviewed another bartender named Eric. He told me Bullwinkle's has been opened since 1979 and that people ranging in age from mid 30s to mid 20s frequent it. Bullwinkle's has different theme nights ranging from Wednesday College Night (free admittance and free domestic beer for college students with a valid college ID) to Saturday Ladies Night. Eric also told me patron traditions at Bullwinkle's include the gathering of the Friday night happy hour crowd and the Wednesday night gathering of the Florida State Anthropology Department (18). After taking advantage of some free domestic beer, I continued my research by going to the Leon Pub.

The Leon Pub is located approximately five miles from the “Tennessee Strip” on 6th Street. It is a tiny pub featuring two pool tables and one of the largest selections of beer in Tallahassee.

When I arrived, there was a large crowd at the Leon Pub and I found it difficult to interview the bartender, who used to be a neighbor of mine. When the crowd finally left, I was able to interview her. Her name is Kayse and she has worked bars for two years, the last four months of which have been at the Leon Pub. Kayse told me that the pub has been opened for eight years and that most of its customers are white drinking age males. The only tradition the Leon Pub is involved in is as the meeting place of two gentlemen-an uncle and his nephew- who get the same beer everyday (19). After finishing talking to Kayse, I went home, satisfied at the research I acquired.

November 18, 2001

Tallahassee, FL

The last bar I decided to research was Brother’s, Tallahassee’s only gay bar. Brother’s is located on Tharpe Street. When entering Brother’s, I noticed it is divided into three sections: an outdoor area with a small bar; the main bar area, containing a pool table, a juke box, and two televisions; and a dance floor area, also containing its own bar, as well as tables and chairs surrounding the dance floor.

While at Brother’s, I had the opportunity to interview one of the bartenders. His name was Adam and he had worked at Brother’s for a year, being taught how to tend bar by Nathan, the bar’s manager. Adam told me Brother’s had been opened for eight years and of course, was a gay bar. It is owned by the same individual who owns Club Park Avenue, a dance club in downtown Tallahassee.

Brother's is often frequented by people of all ages, ethnicities, as well as all sexual orientations. Its traditional theme nights are Sunday night 80s Night and the Saturday Night Drag Queen Show led by Tony Denise. Even the bartenders at Brother's have their own tradition of saying "Hey girl." to patrons of every gender.

One of the more interesting answers I received from Adam was when I asked him "Who are the traditional patron groups of the establishment?". Adam gave me an extensive list including "old gay men, young gay men, lesbians, married men, 1980s punks, college students, frat boys, sorority bitches, rednecks, goth kids, drag queens, and "try" sexuals, those who will "try" anything" (20). After thanking Adam for his time, I left Brother's.

November 24, 2001

Tallahassee, FL

This was an unplanned night as far as my research went but is necessary in order to explain Tallahassee bar traditions. My friends and I decided to go out to Brother's for the night. This time I was a little more comfortable going into a gay bar because I thought I knew what to expect. I was only partially correct.

At approximately one am, after spending an hour and a half on the dance floor, the lights came on. At first I thought Brother's was closing but I knew it was too early. I then realized I was about to witness the Drag Queen Show firsthand.

After everyone had circled the dance floor, the first "gender illusionist" (as they are referred to in Brother's advertising) entered the dance floor. She (for the purpose of gender classification in this research, anyone posing or desiring to be a specific gender will be regarded as such) was the master of ceremonies for the show and initially told the crowd

Tony Denise would not be in attendance tonight. After the crowd sighed their disappointment, the MC told them what they were getting in tonight's show- "a white one, a black one, a little one, a big one, and me." Then she went off stage.

The first drag queen came out a few minutes later. She was a large black "woman" wearing typical dance club attire. She walked on to the dance floor to the beat of an old 1980s pop song. Then, to the crowds' approval, she began to dance. It was a very sultry, seductive dance, full of hip gyrations, blown kisses, and other provocative gestures. She would purposefully tease some of the men standing around the stage. A few would even venture on the floor to dance with her. After each brief "flirtation", she would receive a dollar, similar to the "reward" given to erotic dancers at adult entertainment establishments.

Following the first drag queen was a huge white "woman." There was no mistaking she was actually a man. Like the first, she danced around the floor collecting dollar bills and teasing the men. This time even some of the ladies surrounding the dance floor danced with the drag queen.

Finally the third performer came to the stage. She was the MC who had opened the show. She danced very provocatively to the latest Britney Spears dance song "I'm a Slave." She was not only smaller than the first two performers, but much more athletic, being able to do things such as leg kicks on the dance floor. She made quite a bit money after very exotically dancing with a very attractive young female.

Once the MC had finished her routine the dance floor lights returned to their original setting and the crowd resumed dancing the night away. The drag queen show had

taken approximately 30 minutes. I had definitely enjoyed witnessing this Brother's tradition firsthand.

Conclusion

Although not every bar in Tallahassee is full of traditions and customs, each did have its own "personality." Even the patrons of each bar, from the macho fraternity brothers at Ken's to the drag queen performers at Brother's, had their own collective culture. It is these cultures and personalities who establish the many traditions associated with the Tallahassee bar scene.

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