The William Penn Speakeasy

The secret is out. During Prohibition, Pittsburgh’s grand dame, the William Penn Hotel, hid a speakeasy under her skirts. The illegal bar reopened as a classy little gathering spot, called, of course, “The Speakeasy,” on December 5, 2012, the 79th anniversary of the end of Prohibition.

This intimate hideaway is tucked under the lobby, with a new bar fashioned around the contours of the base of the original bar, soft lighting, plush scarlet seating, and lavish brocaded wall covering. When you step inside, you feel as if you’re doing something mischievous.

“We knew it was a speakeasy,” said Bob Page, director of sales and marketing for the hotel, now the Omni William Penn. “There were individuals who told us that it was, and we knew the secret escape route was there. The room was used for storage for 50 years, even though the old bar was in there, on the original terra cotta flooring,” said Bob, “and the back hallway exit that was utilized as an ‘escape’ route during police raids, still exists.”

There were few clues to the past, because no records were kept of the illegal establishment. We do know that in 1919, the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited the sale and manufacture of alcohol, was ratified. It went into effect on January 16, 1920, lasting 14 years, until the 21st Amendment repealed the previous amendment, on December 5, 1933.

It’s not clear when the term speakeasy originated, but it is often attributed to our own area. In Pennsylvania, in 1888, the Brooks High-License Act raised the state fee for a saloon license from $50 to $500. Kate Hester, who had run a saloon in McKeesport, refused to pony up the new license fee and wanted to keep from drawing attention to her newly illicit joint. When her patrons got too rowdy, she hushed them in a hoarse whisper: “Speak easy, boys! Speak easy!” It wasn’t long before Hester’s “expression became common in McKeesport and spread to Pittsburgh,” noted the New York Times in 1890. “Some day, perhaps, Webster’s Dictionary will take it up.”

Local people came forward with evidence of the creativity used to circumvent the law. In 1920. Alcohol was permitted for medicinal purposes, resulting in a plethora of prescriptions. “In The Speakeasy,” said Page, “we have three prohibition prescriptions on the wall dating back to 1926 where a doctor prescribed alcohol for patients, and they were able to go to the pharmacy and pick up the booze. These were provided to us from a gentleman and his wife from Bloomfield who were cleaning out some boxes in the basement of their pharmacy, and they came across them.”

And they have some very old booze. “We have three bottles of whiskey on display that pre-date the opening of the hotel. One of them is Overholt Whiskey, from a distillery founded by the grandfather of Henry Clay Frick,” said Page. The hotel opened in 1916 and these old bottles are dated 1911, 1912, and 1913. By 1881, Frick was the sole owner of the distillery, and, as builder and owner of the William Penn, he became the supplier of rye whiskey for the hotel. Perhaps he saw Prohibition coming down the road. We can only speculate. The farm had another resource that Frick was quick to see: there was coal on the Overholt farm, and Frick realized that coal, when burned to become coke, was useful to the steel industry. The rest of that story determined the future course of Pittsburgh history.

The menu at The Speakeasy is a conversation starter. The “Wigle Whiskey Mint Julep” features Wigle Barrel Aged Whiskey, made locally in the Strip District. The distillery is named for Phillip Wigle, who, defending his right to distill without a crippling tax, sparked the Whiskey Rebellion. The “Moscow Mule” features locally made Boyd and Blair Vodka. The “18 Liberty” is a blended drink,
drenched in local color. According to the *New York Times* of 1891,

Mrs. Keyser at 18 Liberty Avenue has repeatedly been arrested. If fined, she pays promptly and resumes. If sent to the workhouse, she submitted to imprisonment, philosophically. The last time her house was raided it was found to be arranged uniquely. A trapdoor had been cut in the floor and an ice chest constructed underneath. The floor was carpeted and an innocent-looking table stood over the trapdoor. There was every arrangement to quickly conceal all evidence of the traffic in case of surprise.

The menu offers local beers and other distilled whiskeys from Pennsylvania, while providing a painless history lesson.

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