



7 MINUTES AGO

Temperature in New York City reaches 100 degrees as eastern US swelters under extreme heat wave

23 MINUTES AGO

Why Roman Voss chose the Gophers, even after Alabama rolled out the red carpet

42 MINUTES AGO

BCA investigating inmate death at St. Louis County jail

1 HOUR AGO

'Frozen' smashes box office records at CTC

NO SECTION

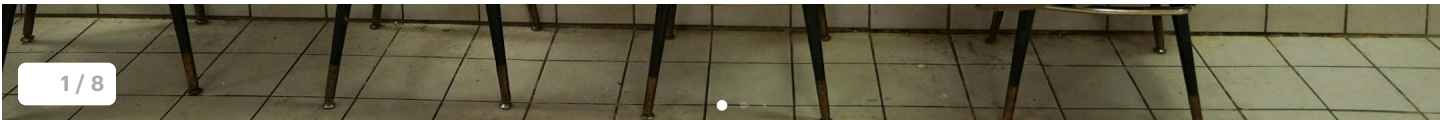
110-year-old Polish dive bar is one of South St. Paul's hidden treasures

The Polish National Alliance outpost is tucked away in a basement.

By Jenna Ross

MARCH 28, 2019 AT 2:32PM





Bartender and the National Polish Alliance outpost president Lonnie Finke talked with regulars during a quiet Thursday night. (Star Tribune/The Minnesota Star Tribune)



- Comment
- Gift
- Share
- Listen

The regulars at this bar in South St. Paul are storytellers, and one tale that always earns a few laughs is how they discovered this place. One woman heard about it from a co-worker, another from a friend. Never, ever, did they spot the club by simply driving by.

"You've gotta check out this little bar in the basement of a house."

That's how Lonnie Finke heard about the Polish National Alliance outpost, or PNA, where he now manages the bar and serves as club president.

"It took us 45 minutes to find the place," Finke says while fixing a drink on a Saturday night. "We probably drove by a couple times."

This 110-year-old institution is on a residential street – in the basement of a duplex. Decades ago, club leaders tore down its trademark hall and rotting floorboards and in its place erected a simple, single-story home. Beige stucco. Red roof. On its left side, a small sign glows green: "OPEN." That door leads to a staircase, then to a brightly-lit basement bar, where the regulars are so regular that Finke has considered mounting nameplates.

A longtime part-time bartender here, Finke took charge of the club last year, a little reluctantly. The former president, like presidents before, had wanted to shut the bar down. It's tough running a dive bar – especially one disguised as a house. But Finke had been handling the ordering for a while and knew he could make it work.

"We don't need to make money," he says. "We need to pay the bills. To provide a good meeting place to have a drink and have some fun."

Finke appreciates the history of the place, the customers who tell the story of how their parents got married here, back in the day. Polish, Serbian and Croatian immigrants moved into this neighborhood in the early 20th century to work in the now-defunct meatpacking plants, setting up clubs steeped in their culture, where they could speak their own languages. The Polish founded the PNA Lodge 1033 in 1909, choosing as its mascot Zagloba, a mythical hero of Poland.

A drawing of him, holding a sword and a sudsy beer stein, greets customers today.

"The hall became a meeting place for the society, but it was also a gathering place for the men and women who worked hard in the yards all day," according to "South St. Paul Centennial 1887-1987: The History of South St. Paul" by Lois Glewwe, a thick, leather-bound copy of which is kept in the club office. "Its bar and restaurant were open every night and on weekends, and entire families met there to exchange news from home, to discuss their plans for the future and perhaps most importantly, to be together."

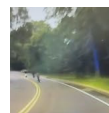
A new, brightly-colored mural nods to that history, knitting together Poland and South St. Paul, with castles on one side, meatpacking plants on the other and churches on both. Artist Richard Hubal, who has illustrated other histories onto prominent Twin Cities walls, painted the roofs on both sides red, a nod to the connection and pride between the two places.

"I know it takes a little bit of thought in a bar – in a bar in a basement," he says, chuckling. "But it might work."

Hubal, who lives nearby, painted the PNA hall as it once was, a Polish flag flying high, as it does today. Outside it are traditional dancers, as old club members described them, baseball players from back in the day and a handful of club regulars. "That way," he says, conspiratorially, "they protect the mural." Finke, the club president, faces away, highlighting his gray ponytail.

Few of the patrons are Polish, these days. Most haven't bought the insurance policy or annuity required to be a member. But many can recount the club's more recent history. The bar crawls, the charity events, the times they saved the bar – for another month, for another year – by drinking all the beer. To keep up, a bartender served bottles out of the closet, too.

Most Read



TWIN CITIES SUBURBS

Police cracking down as riders on motorized bikes become a problem in west metro



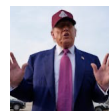
NEWS & POLITICS

Melissa and Mark Hortman will lie in state at Capitol on Friday, private funeral to be held Saturday



OUTDOORS

Goodbye windshield stickers? Why Minnesota is looking to create a new kind of state park pass.



POLITICS

Minnesota Poll: Donald Trump's approval rating at 45%, similar to first-term highs

"For a few years, it was month to month," says Brian Waldroff, 53, a club member, over a \$3 Michelob Golden Light, the only beer on tap. "But we made them beaucoup bucks so they could pay taxes, pay expenses, keep them going another year."

A few weeks after moving to South St. Paul about eight years ago, Waldroff won \$200 playing pulltabs here and used the cash to buy a bed. He did repairs for beers, donated a TV to the bar and put out a pickle jar, collecting donations for another.

The club relies on its members, who bring pulled pork for football games. Midwinter, the ATM at this cash-only bar has been out for weeks because the only person who knows how to handle it, the club's 83-year-old treasurer, has pneumonia. Her name is scrawled on the bar's "buddy board," a list of drinks purchased by one patron for another's next visit.

It's about 5:30 p.m. on a Saturday, and Katherine Lenertz has abandoned her usual bar stool for a game of pool.

Lenertz has lived in South St. Paul since she was 8 years old, "and I never knew this place existed." Now 64, she appreciates the chill, older crowd.

"It's a place for people in their 50s and 60s who don't want the rowdiness, who just want to come down here and chit chat, play some pulltabs, do a little dancing," she says. The bartenders and regulars look out for one another, she says.

"I can leave my purse laying on the counter, go to the bathroom, come out and it's still there," Lenertz says. "Try that in downtown Minneapolis."

The Polish National Alliance outpost in South St. Paul is in the basement of this duplex. (Star Tribune/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Bartender and Polish National Alliance outpost President Lonnie Finke, above, talked with regulars at the bar, which is tucked away in the basement of a duplex. (Star Tribune/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Share

Comment

ABOUT THE WRITER

Jenna Ross
REPORTER

Jenna Ross is an arts and culture reporter.

See More

More from No Section

See More >

NO SECTION
Homegazing

NO SECTION
No. 6 Georgia rallies to beat Georgia Tech 44-42 in eighth overtime, bolsters playoff hopes

NO SECTION
Photos show arrest of suspect in the shooting of lawmakers in Minnesota following a huge search

The man suspected of killing a Minnesota lawmaker and wounding another crawled to officers in surrender Sunday after they located him in the woods near his home, ending a massive, nearly two-day search that put the entire state on edge.

To leave a comment, [create a username](#).

✦ GIFTS FOR MINNESOTANS

CELEBRATE MINNESOTA

Strib Store is your one-stop source for unique art puzzles and books for all Minnesotans.

Shop Now

COMPANY

- About Us
- Contact Us
- Work for Us
- Donate
- News in Education
- Minnesota's Best
- High School Sports Hubs
- Mobile and Tablet Apps
- Policies and Standards

ADVERTISE

- Get in Touch
- Advertising Opportunities
- Media Kit
- Classifieds
- Public Notices
- Obituaries

BUY

- Strib Store
- Photo Reprints
- Full Page Archive: 150+ years
- Back Copies
- Commercial Reprints
- Licensing

SUPPORT

- Help and Feedback
- Manage Your Account
- Newspaper Subscriptions
- Digital Access
- eEdition
- Text to Speech

WEBSITE

- Terms of Use
- Privacy Policy
- Cookie Settings
- Accessibility Statement
- Site Index
- RSS