

BLOG

Digging For Purple

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The musty basement of a Downtown bar may hold secrets to the Purple Gang's past.



Wayne State grad student Brenna Moloney of Ann Arbor crawls through the tunnel in the basement of Tommy's Bar in Detroit.

"Not so nice Jewish boys" is how they were described by Detroit's Jewish press in the 1920s and 1930s, the heyday for the Purple Gang, a group of bootleggers and hijackers who could be ruthless – or kind.

JN columnist Danny Raskin has a vivid memory of sitting at the Cream of Michigan Restaurant on 12th Street in Detroit, eating banana cream pie with a couple of "Purple guys," when a boy ran in crying. Two guys had jumped out of a truck and tried to grab his sister. When she ran away, they slapped the boy and called him a "dirty Jew."

"The young gents I was with, they were probably around 19 or 20," said Raskin, who was about 15 at the time of the event. "They asked the boy to describe the truck. Then we all got in their car and went looking for it."

The truck was found in Hamtramck. The Purple guys went inside and came back out holding two guys by the neck. "One takes out a gun and puts it in the guy's mouth and pulls the trigger. Click," Raskin recalls. "He told the guy, 'Next time you come around 12th Street, there will be a bullet in it.'"

The group returned to the Cream of Michigan, where a young Raskin asked, "What would have happened if there was a bullet in it?"

"There never are," the Purple guy said.

Raskin said, "They were some ruthless people, some bad, bad Jewish guys, but they did good stuff, too."

Although they may have spread some of their wealth around "Little Jerusalem," the Jewish section of Detroit's east side, and protected kids from anti-Semitic bullies, members of the Purple Gang spent the majority of their time controlling the liquor traffic from Canada as well as a number of blind pigs and gambling houses during Prohibition.

Now, a group of Wayne State University archaeology students, in partnership with Preservation Detroit, believes they may have found evidence of a Purple Gang-run speakeasy in the basement of Tommy's Detroit Bar and Grill at 624 Third St.

An Interesting History

For the past four years, Marion Christiansen, tour program director at Preservation Detroit, has been hearing clues to a long-ago speakeasy associated with the Purple Gang at Tommy's Bar, housed in one of Detroit's oldest buildings, dating from the mid-1800s. Its previous names include the Golden Galleon and Mac's On Third. One of its more intriguing features is a blocked-off tunnel in the west end of the basement.

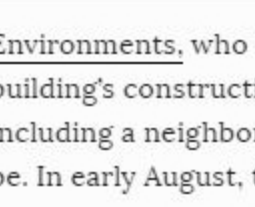
"Historic preservation is important," said Christiansen, who reached out to the bar owner and Wayne State Assistant Professor of Anthropology Krysta Ryzewski, who agreed to conduct a student-led research project at the property. "We're working with the bar owner on a historical designation. You can't just knock down history."

Building and bar owner Tom Burelle is excited about the project. "I've been interested in having the building's history revealed. I've always loved Detroit history, and this project gives me a chance to find out the true history of the building."

Burelle has owned the bar for two years. Part of the basement had its own electrical wiring, and there is nice wood paneling in a basement room that would not have been used by customers. "With the tunnel there, obviously there was something that had gone on here, probably a speakeasy," he said. "I'd heard plenty of stories about the Third Street Gang and the Purple Gang, too," he added.

The area around the bar was the turf of the Third Street Gang, Christiansen said, "and they are loosely tied to the Purple Gang."

Ryzewski assembled a team of student volunteers, led by grad students Shawn Fields and Brenna Moloney, to run the project.



Krysta Ryzewski

Beginning in July, students met once a week to dig into the archives to do historical research. They were split into two teams: One team researched the Purple Gang and drilled down to gang activities in the area. The other group researched the history of the building and went back to tax records, city directories and insurance maps. Structural engineers Pierce Sadlier and Aaron Trobough of Structurally Sound Engineering and architect Jason Arnott of Earth

Environments, who donated their services, were brought on board to study the building's construction. They looked at the building's basement and surroundings, including a neighboring church, and identified where an underground passage might be. In early August, the students gathered at Tommy's for an archaeological dig.

Tantalizing Clues

"We're trying to do some documentation," Fields said, "looking at the building and staging it out. It looks like at one time there was a street-level walk-down. We also found a closed-off room filled with dirt and bottles."

Moloney adds that they're looking for evidence of an outbuilding where perhaps customers entered the tunnel to the speakeasy. "We went to Fort Street Presbyterian Church across the street, which has in its history stories of tunnels that were used for the Underground Railroad," Moloney said. "We talked to a building manager to see where those tunnels might have been and they seem to line up exactly with that original outbuilding. We still have lots of questions."



Student volunteers Don Adzigan of Grosse Pointe Woods and Paul Carlson of Westland measure the exterior dimensions of the bar.

Volunteers Jeri Pajor and Greg Young dug outside the bar, near the area where the original outbuilding might have stood.

"What we're trying to do here is dig down deep enough to see what's underneath the building and what's next to it," said Pajor, whose role in the project was to research rum running along the Detroit River.

"From what I understand, the Purple Gang used to drive over to Windsor across the river when it was frozen," adds Young. "The Purples would buy booze from distilleries such as Hiram Walker, makers of Canadian Club."

According to Robert Rockaway's book, *But – He Was Good To His Mother, The Lives and Crimes of Jewish Gangsters*, by 1926, there were about 25,000 blind pigs in Detroit, and the Purples controlled all the liquor traffic as well as a number of speakeasies and gambling houses. The gang operated them outright or forced owners to pay "protection" money to stay in business.

Pajor and Young dug down about 40 centimeters, finding bottle shards, bricks, a few nails and embossed glass underneath the concrete.

The team is trying to find that "smoking gun" that would tie the Purple Gang to the speakeasy that apparently ran in the basement of what is now Tommy's Bar.

Local Jewish historian Irwin Cohen said that it is entirely possible. "They had them all over, especially near the river," he said.

Raskin is unsure. "The Purple Gang used to own Luigi's Cafe in Detroit," he said. "That's the only one I know of for sure."

The gang was also known to hang out at Little Harry's, a fancy restaurant and piano bar housed in a French colonial structure, which used to be a historic landmark on Jefferson before singer Anita Baker bought the property and razed the building in 1991 to put up an IHOP restaurant.

The students found a connection to Little Harry's in their research.

In the book *Rum Running and the Roaring 20s*, a business card was found with the name "Little Harry" on it. Blind pig owners would have given these guest passes to folks who were approved and tested to enter into their establishments.

"Little Harry pops up in the Purple Gang literature from time to time," Ryzewski said. "Our best source of evidence is this guest pass to this bar at 624 Third St., opposite Union Depot."

Harry Weitzman

Ryzewski's expertise is in historical archaeology, specifically urban history, immigration and how cities have changed over the years. She's part of five different departments at WSU working on a pilot project to develop a downloadable app called "Ethnic Layers of Detroit," which will act as a "geo-storyteller" for the city.

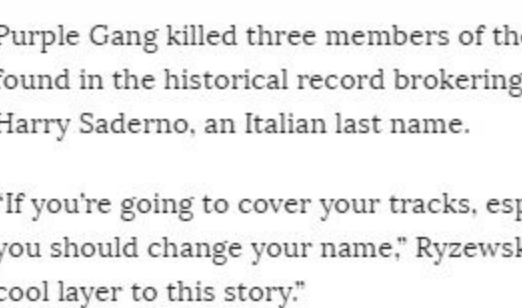
"We're learning that a lot of groups get tagged with ethnic or religious identity but have inner workings with others in order to succeed," she said, "especially this place. It changed hands with Italian and then Russian folks a couple of times. At the end of the Prohibition era, it was owned by a Russian Jew named Harry Weitzman."

After a lot of research, the WSU team believes that Weitzman is the "Little Harry" mentioned on the guest pass, and possible owner of Little Harry's restaurant on Jefferson, which opened around the same time. Students are still doing research to make a definite connection.

What is known about Weitzman was that he was a loan agent who took over the bar from an Italian man named Louis Gianetti when he couldn't pay back his loan. He ran the bar from 1927-1933, during the peak of the Purple Gang activity.

It's also known that Weitzman financed and owned the Grande Ballroom in Detroit, which became a hub of the Jewish community and a hangout for the Purples. His children's initials can be found carved under a windowsill at the venue.

"Weitzman has no known criminal history," Ryzewski said, "but it does seem that he was the host at a lot of venues where the Purple Gang were known to hang out."



Brenna Moloney of Ann Arbor and Greg Young of Pleasant Ridge look at an artifact.

Lead researcher Fields said it seems as if the Purple Gang was at least cooperating in its illicit activities with Sicilian gangsters. According to Raskin, Al Capone was afraid of the Purple Gang, which was known to be particularly ruthless, so he hired them to bring liquor to him in Chicago.

What's strange, though, is that in 1931, after the infamous Collingwood Massacre, in which members of the

Purple Gang killed three members of the rival Third Street Gang, Weitzman can be found in the historical record brokering deals and doing business under the alias Harry Saderno, an Italian last name.

"If you're going to cover your tracks, especially your relationship to the Purple Gang, you should change your name," Ryzewski said. "Shifting identities and alliances add a cool layer to this story."

The team will continue to do research for the next several months. Fields and Moloney plan to present their findings at the Annual Society for Historical Archaeology Conference in January in Quebec City. And Preservation Detroit is organizing a public reveal of the team's findings at Tommy's Bar on Dec. 5, the 80th anniversary of the repeal of Prohibition.

So, is there a smoking gun that connects the "not so nice Jewish boys" to Tommy's Bar?

"The evidence that there was a speakeasy in the basement is overwhelming," Ryzewski said. "The connection to the Purple Gang is still fuzzy, but it seems pretty likely." □

By Jackie Headapohl, Managing Editor

Photos by Jerry Zolynsky