

Mirage revolving door for life's misfits



The Sun-Times and the Better Government Assn. ran a Near North Side bar, the Mirage, for four months to investigate corruption and fraud in the tavern business. This is the 22d article of a continuing series.

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A tavern has its regulars. It has its irregulars, too.

These are the people who visit only once or never stay long. They see lights shining, hear people talking and decide to come in. Why not? No place else to go.

The Mirage — a Tavern operated for four months by The Sun-Times and the Better Government Assn. at 731 N. Wells — never knew who would come drifting through its front door.

She was an old woman in a white pleated dress. Her dyed black hair was carefully in place. "I am the Holy Ghost Lady," she said. "The Lord told me to come in here."

The Holy Ghost Lady walked several steps into the Mirage and sat, uneasily at a barstool. She asked for a cup of black coffee. She talked, slowly, quietly, about what she does.

"I walk all over the city," she said. "I am a missionary filled with the Holy Spirit."

The Holy Ghost Lady walks from tavern to tavern to save souls and accept offerings. She talked of a Pentecostal orphanage to be built on the Northwest Side. She said she had been born again in 1939 and ordained a minister in 1961.

She opened her large black purse. It contained a Bible, religious pamphlets and a laminated certificate of ordination. Sun-Times reporter Zay N. Smith — Norty the bartender — sat down with her and gave her a dollar. The Mirage gave her another five.

"I don't go into every bar," she said. "I only go into a bar when the Lord tells me to. But the Lord told me to come into this bar, and see, you gave me a dollar. And the bar gives me money, too. The Lord sees to this."

And sometimes, she said, there is more than an offering.

"I remember one bar I went into years ago," she said. "It was on Archer Av. — I'm not sure exactly where. There was a man. The Lord told me to go into this bar and talk to this man."

"And this is what happened. I put my hands on this man and he spoke to him in a language I do not know. It was Latin I was talking!"

"I said what the Lord told me to say and the man began to cry. He said to me, 'Did you know you were talking in Latin?' The man was a Catholic, and he said he knew Latin. He cried and we prayed together. He said he would never be the same. He said he would do the Lord's work now."

She sipped her coffee once more and prepared to leave. She closed her eyes briefly as if to summon her strength. She stood up, gave Norty three religious pamphlets and squeezed his hand.

"I go where the Lord tells me to go," she said. "I walk 40 blocks, 50 blocks a day. Sometimes I am very tired."

You could tell the man was drunk. It was the way he reached for his beer. He kept missing.

Louis — that seemed to be his name — was a small man with a hoknose and random missing teeth. He wore a tattered cap. He had probably been kicked out of a half-dozen taverns already that night and was wandering from door to door.

Norty the bartender had not been alert. Louis had somehow got his hands on a beer.



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And there were soon indications that this was not going to work out.

"Will you get this creep off me!" said the woman seated next to Louis.

He was climbing all over her and making vaguely sociable sounds. He was just trying to say hello. Norty pulled him off the woman and put him back on his barstool.

"Believe!" Norty said.

Louis turned to the man on his right and started going through the man's shirt pocket.

"But don't worry about her," the officer said. She's been in here before. She's a little wacko, is all."

The man was not amused. Norty pulled Louis back and stood him up.

"I'm sorry," Norty said. "I'm afraid you're going to have to leave."

Louis tried to focus on what was happening. He had lost his audio and video some hours ago, but he finally seemed to understand. There was only one question. Where was he? Or as Louis put it: "Wha-ah I?"

"You're at the Mirage," Norty said. "731 N. Wells."

"Don't tell him where he is!" the woman said. "He may come back!"

"Good thinking," Norty said. "You're at Butch McGuire's."

"Boosh McGaha," Louis said.

"You like Butch McGuire's?" Norty said. "I'll get you a cab."

"I'll help pay for it," the woman said.

Louis started to move toward the woman again. "I wah say gbah tuzzah prittah lady," he said.

"You can say good-by from afar," Norty said.

"Wha far?"

Norty nudged him toward the door. Louis did not take the hint. Norty lifted him off the floor and took him out onto the sidewalk.

Louis tried to stand up and face Norty. But all he did was fall forward into Norty's arms.

He grabbed Norty as tight as he could and started making noises like a man about to throw up.

"Louis!" Norty said. "Behave!"

Louis somehow regained control. Norty wriggled free and stood clear. Louis an-

nounced he did not want a cab to Boosh McGaha or anywhere else. He just wanted to walk some more.

Norty pointed him north. It seemed as good a direction as any.

The woman wore a faded print dress under a black raincoat. She was maybe 60. Her hands were shaking. Her eyes were wide.

"Please," she said. "Please tell me where I am."

Norty looked up from his night bartending and grabbed her as she started to teeter. There was no alcohol on her breath. But she could barely stand.

"You're at 731 N. Wells," Norty said.

"The police," she said. "Please take me to the police."

"What's the matter? Can I help you?"

"You... no, you are much too young. Please. The police."

The East Chicago Av. Police Station was only a few blocks away. Norty led the woman from the Mirage to his car outside. It was all she could do to lift her legs into the car.

"I've been walking," she said. "I've been walking for so long."

Norty started the car.

"No, please," she said. "Holy Name Cathedral. Could I please go there first?"

She was still shaking. She gasped more than breathed. She leaned her head forward and wept.

"The police," Norty said. "I think we'd better take you there first."

"Yes. All right."

The woman would not, or could not, tell the police her name. She carried no identification. The desk officer told her to go sit on the bench. Norty helped her over to the bench, where she sat and stared at a penny and a nickel in her hand.

"We'll take care of her," the officer said.

Norty stayed a few minutes with the woman. She would not speak further except to say thank you. There was this much for certain. Something had gone wrong and she didn't know what to do.

Norty checked back a few days later. A different officer said he recalled vaguely what had happened to the woman later that night. He said she had wandered off when the shifts changed. She had simply walked back out the door.

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"But don't worry about her," the officer said. "She's been in here before. She's a little wacko, is all."

So that was it. That settled everything.

Norty the bartender looked up from the bar sink and saw Wesley.

Wesley just stood there smiling. His hair was white and so was the stubble that covered his face. He wore an old blue coat that was last laundered when Lyndon Johnson was President. One eye was shut with disease. His broad smile showed two teeth. Both needed pulling.

"Good evening," Norty said.

"I wah bwml de plah heh," he said.

"I guess so," Norty said. "What's your name?"

"Wessala ah wanna bleh," he said.

"That's a nice name."

Wesley was drooling now — and smiling more broadly than ever. He had found a brightly lighted place with people laughing and a jukebox playing. Wesley, you could tell, didn't often find himself in a place like this.

Or maybe his name was Leslie. Or even Larry. Norty worked on him for about five minutes trying to get him to pronounce his name. It sounded a little more like Wesley than anything else. Norty went to get him a beer.

Wesley clapped his dirt blackened hands and made a sound that indicated both contentment and lung congestion. He looked as if he were winking at Norty. But it was only that diseased eye together with the smile. A derelict's wink.

"I gah stay heh a foo days, okayhuhh?" he said.

"I'm afraid you can't stay that long — maybe a few minutes but not a few days," Norty said.

Peggy Lee was singing "Fever" on the jukebox. She was always singing "Fever." Norty saw to that. And now Wesley was bouncing to the beat.

"Wahha see me dancehuhh?"

Wesley moved out into the middle of the tavern. He wasn't quite dancing, but he sure was trying. Every few seconds he would jump as high as he could, land as hard as he could and let out a whoop.

It was when Wesley started harmonizing, like an old hound dog, with Peggy Lee that the other customers made inquiries.

"Must be some wino who came over from Clark St.," one said. "Don't you think you ought to get rid of him?"

Probably so. Wesley was trying to make friends now. He was going up to people and smiling and drooling and saying words only he could understand. He thought he had it made. But it was time to go.

"I'm afraid you have to leave, Wesley," Norty said.

"Ewa de pluh heh?"

"I'm sorry. I really am."

Norty put his hand on Wesley's shoulder. It slipped off because of the grease. He got a better grip and led Wesley to the door.

Wesley began to sense it was all over. He went slowly outside. Then he turned and looked back through the window. He stayed there for five minutes.

That made some of the customers uneasy. Another bartender went to the door and shouted, "Go home! Go home!"

The bartender missed the point. Wesley was out on the sidewalk. He was already home.

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