

Bar None

The Death of an Integrated Downtown Pub Evokes Fond Memories from a CUNY Professor

By Dexter Jeffries
Special to New York Resident

It was the only integrated bar in New York. Of course, bars and restaurants in New York City are racially integrated, but this one was truly integrated in the sense of an "integrated" community. People have mourned the loss of certain watering holes since the dawn of Sept. 11. I still mourn the loss of this bar for different reasons. The only integrated bar in New York. Damn!

The Blarney Castle (one of many bars employing this ubiquitous name) was on Chambers Street, Downtown Manhattan, between Church and West Broadway. It's an area of Manhattan that never really recovered from the first crash, the stock market fall of 1987. The other crash in 2001 finished it off.

Staffed by the one and only Vince, an Irishman who hailed from Dublin, not Queens, thank God, it was indeed a sanctuary; he was my savior. For years we never understood each other. That's wrong. I never understood him, but I could tell by his retorts that he always understood me. His Dublin accent was so strong that all I ever heard from his mouth was music, sweet, Irish music. "Oh, good evenin', professorrr... how are ye? Ar' thee students givin' ye a 'ard time? I know dey muusst ... 'cause I see 'em walkin' up 'n' down the road...." Only a bona-fide Irishman would call a New York City street *road*; that was heaven in itself.

I did understand one thing. Perhaps it was because of his European background, his own disposition, being Irish and accustomed to civil wars, that

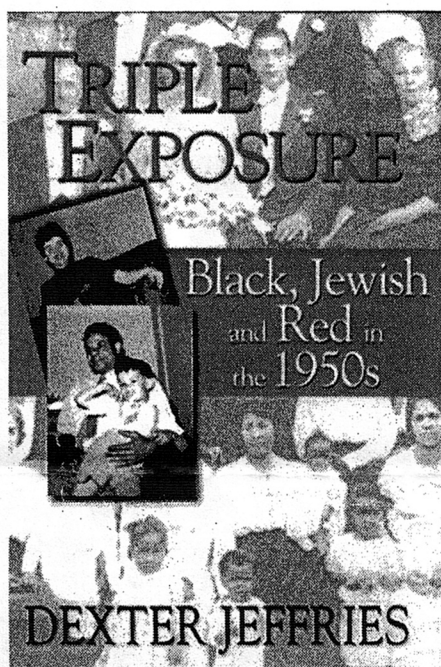


Professor Jeffries: Misses city's only integrated bar

black and white felt safe to be literally shoulder to shoulder as he served two-dollar Jameson's, 50-cent Miller High Lites, and, if you were really a big spender, three-fifty for a Johnnie Walker Black. There were regulars and irregulars, but no one ever felt that haunting tension that makes America a special, strange, and strained place. Those awkward moments between white and black

people when rubbing shoulders were smoothed over by Vince. He made it seem like everyone was just another customer: *Just 'nother man who's thirsty.*

With its 40-foot never-ending bar, bronzed from years of spilled drinks and souls, the Blarney Castle was special. There black and white people could converse, laugh, and lie. Opposite the bar was the steam table that Vince worked with the same grace



that he possessed when dispersing the short mugs of beer and the tall pints. "Vinnie, gimme a pastrami on rye with extra pickles!" With a wave of his hand, Vince would start slicing, saying, "Ya gettin' corned beef, and ya damned lucky you're gettin' that." Boom! The plate would come down in front of the pastrami requester and that was that.

Vince could identify the instigators of sorrow. They did show up every now and then. They could be black or white. They had one goal: To make trouble. To create distress. It would come in the form of a whispered joke or aside. Vince would jump right in as he heard the remark that was supposed to ferment racial animosity. It was quick and simple. "Excuse me, sir, but your business is not appreciated here. Please be gone with ye." Just like that. Simple, expedient.

The Blarney Castle closed in March 2001. I truly miss its black and white character. ■

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