

Walkabout: Last call for the Park House

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By Diana Nelson Jones / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Aah, the Park House. Another casualty of 2020, it was my home away from home (after the newsroom) for so much of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Pittsburgh's oldest tavern, at 403 E. Ohio St. in the North Side's Deutschtown section, is closing on Dec. 31, according to a letter written to patrons on the [Park House website](#).

Zamir Zahavi, the owner for the past 16 years, wrote that the closure is neither street nor pandemic related: "It is simply time for me to take my falafels and hummus ... and move on to another adventure!"

The bar has been marketed since late summer by Specialty Group, whose broker, Terri Sokoloff, said there has been interest.

"We're cautiously optimistic," she said. "We had four tours on two listings. We have interest from folks who are relocating from other cities."

Many old regulars are probably feeling as I do, nostalgic, hoping that the new owner won't change the name of the Park House or its ambience.

Its proximity to Allegheny Commons Park is the accepted explanation of its name.

I haven't been back but a few times in the past 15 years, in part because of the departures of my favorite bartenders, Patrick Madden and George Ifft. But my heyday coincided with the bar's heyday. I racked up enough hours there that, if hours could take up space, mine would occupy at least two entire booths that had once been in the back.

Before Zamir brought falafel, hummus and bluegrass bands to the Park House, it was owned by Matt Hoss and, before him, Phil Powell.

A sign on the door included a clown and the words "No Bozos," which people seemed to take to heart.

"I remember two fights in all the years I was there," George said during a recent phone chat.

He worked at the Park House for 10 years, until 2005.

"Phil created the Park House as we knew it," George said. "When Phil hired me, I said, 'So what is my authority?' and he said, 'When you're behind the bar, you have total authority.' We were strict, which was one of the reasons we did well."

The food was better than typical bar food, and there was free popcorn in a machine at the end of the bar, with baskets for people to scoop their own.

The Park House was my Cheers. I would go there with a [book](#) or a [journal](#). I would go after Pirates games. I met colleagues and other friends there after work.

The building was constructed in the 1890s, and a bar was in business continuously from then until Prohibition, when it was a bakery and candy store. When Prohibition ended in 1933, the bar became known as the Park House.

It attracted every different kind of person, but old regulars remember the one thing we all had in common — the aroma of cigarette smoke and deep fryer grease on our clothes.

"Yeah," George said, laughing. "Guys told us their wives knew where they were" because of that smell.

The bar had blue and white tile floors littered with spent peanut shells during each night's camaraderie. Many of us were outraged when the tile was covered with wood. Something to do with the health department, I learned. The wallpaper looked like it belonged in a girl's bedroom in the '70s — a floral design on a field of dusty pink. As incongruous as that was, the Park House had too much personality for the wallpaper to matter.

Every day, Patrick, the world's best-read bartender, would write a trivia question on a chalkboard behind the bar. He was a great conversationalist on all topics, most notably literature and writing.

One memorable night, after a Pirates game, the bar was so crowded, you had to nudge people aside with a gentle elbow to get to the restroom. Umpire Joe West, rotund and red-faced, was holding forth by the jukebox while George held forth behind the bar.

“We were a local bar for all of Pittsburgh,” George said. “We had a cast of regular characters who were all interesting — media people, celebrities, actors, cops, three straight Pirates managers, umpires. We had the round table in the back that had regulars.

“One great memory of mine was sitting in a booth with August Wilson talking boxing. He drank coffee and chain-smoked.

“I think half the friends I’ve made in my life I met there.”

George began working at the Monterrey Pub in the North Side’s Mexican War Streets shortly after leaving the Park House and has since been idled by the pandemic. My neighborhood is all waiting for, hoping for, the pub to reopen one day.

Everyone is yearning for a 2021 that’s a far cry better than this very awful, sad year. It’s a little sadder to know that it will be ushered out with last call at the Park House.

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