

Local

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Pubs find nothing but bad luck on tap

The plywood walls of the Elco Tap on East Pontiac Street are covered with broken car parts and messages written in Magic Marker.

One reads, "Juke Box: \$5,000, Tables and chairs, \$2,000, Plywood wall for Christmas, priceless."

The walls weren't always plywood. They were cinder block, until Dec. 17, when a driver with plenty of booze in him, but no insurance, plowed into the pub. The car hit one side of the building, drove all the way through, smashing the juke box and tables and chairs, and pushed it all through the wall on the other side.

Patrons, particularly four who like to show up at the pub for breakfast at 7 a.m., showed up with two-by-fours and plywood and built temporary walls until the building can be repaired properly.

The crash was just the latest in a series of blows that have hit the Elco Tap and other pubs in the last few years.

Pubs were once important places in America, where people gathered and talked and planned; where people could have a couple of pints, loosen up, let their hair down and be open and honest.

The Constitution was written in a pub, says Tony Henry, owner of the Deer Park Irish Pub on Leesburg Road. Parts of Vatican II were hammered out in pubs. Lots of other deals were probably made in pubs.

But pubs are under pressure today.

"No. We're under attack," says Pete Tsuleff, owner of the Northwood Bar and Grill on Maplecrest Road.

First, changes in the law let other retailers sell liquor. Big retailers were able to get sweetheart deals from distributors, they say. That let them sell liquor for less than the pubs had to pay for it. Sales fell in the pubs, which once sold 70 percent of all liquor. Today they sell less than 20 percent, they say.

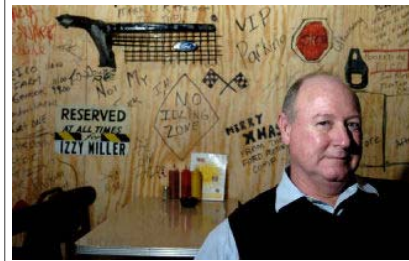
Then the clients began to fade away. Mark Coates, owner of the Elco Tap, said workers used to come in for breakfast before work or pick it up and take it to work. They'd come in for lunch, drop by after work for a couple of beers, or come by in the evening for dinner.

It made for good business at the Elco Tap, which has been in business since 1954 and run by Coates' family since 1959.

"The perception of a bar is, if you go there for lunch, you're drinking," Coates says. But most of his lunch patrons don't drink. They eat. "The Cadillac Coffee guy told me I sell more iced tea than any tavern in town."

But the factories began to close, taking the customers with them. Coates rattles off a list of the plants – sources of customers – that have disappeared from his neighborhood, closed or gone elsewhere: Harvester, Zollner Piston, ITT, Magnavox, Rae Magnet Wire, Phelps Dodge, Mobile Aerial Towers, Tokheim, Fort Wayne Foundry.

Today, the clients of the Elco Tap live in the neighborhood, Coates says, but none of them work there any more. They all work in small factories in outlying towns, in Whitley County, or Noble County, or Adams or DeKalb. Factories aren't coming to Fort Wayne, he says. They're going elsewhere.



Laura J. Gardner/The Journal Gazette



Mark Coates sits in front of his wall inside Elco Tap on Pontiac Street, where someone drove a Ford truck into his bar and out the other side Dec. 17.

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Then came a crackdown on drunken driving. Driving with blood alcohol content of 0.08 percent made you a criminal, so people quit coming by for even a couple of beers.

Pubs used to make money selling lottery tickets. There's not much profit in it, but even that shrank when sales fell after the lottery went to computer-generated numbers. When the lottery used balls, players could watch the numbers pop up, Coates says. When the state started using computers, people started to believe the lottery was rigged so that heavily bet numbers wouldn't be picked, he says.

It's almost certainly not true, but that's what people think. Now, the Elco Tap is one of the few pubs that still sells lottery tickets, but it's not a big money maker.

Pubs tried Cherry Masters. They were money generators. Profits from the video machines paid his utility bill, Coates said. They also generated \$12,000 a year for the state in the form of income tax that he paid, Coates said.

Then those machines were eliminated.

Last year, Coates had to cut what he paid his employees. He said he can only afford to pay them minimum wage any more. He doesn't pay himself anything now. He's living off savings.

He also dropped the insurance on his pub, just to save money. So when the driver – the uninsured driver – plowed through his place a week before Christmas, he ate the loss.

Now, he says, the city wants to ban smoking. He has a license to sell cigarettes, Coates says, but people won't be able to smoke them. To him, it's absurd. It's a new prohibition, he says. He pulls out a letter from the Indiana Licensed Beverage Dealers Association.

"Now the ATC (Alcohol and Tobacco Commission) is going to send kids in to try to get served so they can bust me. I've never served a minor in my life. Now I gotta worry they're going to send someone in."

Coates is hoping the legislature approves some type of online gaming that his pub can use. That will be his salvation, he says. If it doesn't, he's doomed. He'll go the same route as the Grand Saloon nearby, which closed, the Sportsman on Wells Street, which closed, and other pubs.

Lots of pubs are on the brink. Henry says his business declined 25 percent last year. Tsuleff said his business fell 30 percent last year. Coates' business was off 40 percent.

"In all the years I've been in the business, I can't figure out when I became the bad guy," Coates says. "I pay my taxes. I support the community," and support charities. "I was a Boy Scout leader at the Methodist Church. I had kids make Eagle Scout."

Tsuleff is accustomed to being regarded as the bad guy. His dad owned a tavern on East Wayne when he was young. He swept floors there starting when he was 5 and became a grill cook at 12. When he tried to join DeMolay in high school he was turned down. His dad owned a tavern. That meant he was of questionable character.

Drunken-driving crackdowns have hurt business, Tsuleff says. The crackdown irritates him, especially when he gets stopped on the way home from work. He doesn't drink, he says. He never has. But he's been stopped three times on the way home from work about 1:30 or 2 a.m. He says he's always told he was weaving. He wasn't weaving, he says. He was just stopped at random, he says.

Loss of Cherry Masters cost him income. They made him good money, but they made good money for the state, too, he says. "I paid a lot of taxes. I paid taxes on every penny, and in my tax bracket that was \$25,000."

Now the city wants to ban smoking. He'll be allowed to sell cigarettes but he won't be allowed to have ashtrays. They will become paraphernalia and become illegal. He'll also be required to call the police when a patron lights a cigarette, he says. If he does that, all the police calls will make the place look like a trouble spot. He'll be labeled a nuisance when it comes time to renew his liquor license.

Worst, he's convinced it will hurt business. He rejects claims that it won't have any effect. "I'm in the business," Tsuleff says. "I've danced the dance. I've lived it." He knows what it will do, he says. He tried a smoke-free place 12 years ago. It didn't work, but business boomed when he put up outside tables that permitted smoking. "If I take a 20 percent hit, I'm done. I can't pay my bills. My lease is up in August. If it passes," he's out of business, he says.

In the end, Tsuleff says, the pub, the neighborhood bar and grill, will go the route of the mom-and-pop grocery. "Applebee's and Ruby Tuesday will take over."

*Frank Gray has held positions as a reporter and editor at The Journal Gazette since 1982, and has been writing a column on local issues since 1998. His column is published Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. He can be reached by phone at 461-8376; by fax at 461-8893; or e-mail fgray@jg.net. To discuss this column or others he has written recently, go to the Frank Gray topic of "The Board" at [www.journalgazette.net](http://www.journalgazette.net).*

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