



The Illinois Billiard Club

"The Country Club of Pool and Billiards"

1975 - 28th Anniversary - 2003

"Billiards ... America's coin operated public pastime."

By Jim Parker

Since the 1800's billiards in America has been divided into two distinctively different divisions of social interest and benefit. Divisions referred to as simply public and private. The public side of billiards had by the close of the nineteenth century risen to social prominence, yet by the mid-twentieth century fallen to become more of a cultural embarrassment as opposed to an enhancement. Since, to a large extent the game has been kicked about, exploited and given little dignity. While billiards more promising and ever affluently growing existence has been the result of the private side of our society. ...Having evolved within most every detail in complete contrast to the public side of billiards.

Most specifically, history tells us it has been within private homes, private clubs, schools, civic, community and fraternal organizations that billiards has managed to maintain a level of dignity, integrity and usefulness to an often more progressive side of our American culture. And it is within this division of billiards that the game itself has generously contributed socially, mentally and physically to those all too clever and understanding of its true and wholesome significance to man's never-ending search for higher degrees of excellence.

No matter how much the public side of American billiards (pool) changes, to an overwhelming extent it remains the same. During its earliest public appearance in the nineteenth century, in between horse races the game was commonly found and used as a pastime by the patrons of public betting houses. Defined, the word "pool" refers to a collective wager or bet. Thus, gambling houses were commonly referred to as "poolrooms." Today, some one hundred and seventy years later and even while typing this report, you will find on the Internet, the public side of pool associated with off track betting houses. Yet an even more questionable fact is this same public notice of activities and locations, bears the name, endorsement and meeting place for one of our countries oldest and perhaps largest national billiard organizations. For any trade or game association claiming leadership and industrial improvement, at best, this is an odd marketing strategy. And as an effort to influence the social upgrading of billiards in America, is insane-ly so.

While I'm reasonably certain there were earlier attempts to promote billiards in America by means of public notice, my oldest documentation of that fact is a newspaper article from the New York Morning Herald published in 1839. ...Six years before John Brunswick, a Swiss immigrant and woodworker began building and selling billiard tables.

On October 3rd, the Morning Herald featured two ads promoting two of New York's separately owned and operated billiard emporiums. The first promotional ad began by stating: "Reading and Billiard Room ... Exercise and Amusement," the ad went on to give the rooms location; "over Stoneall's Coffee House, and under Fuller's Gymnasium." The second ad began with: "Bassford's Billiard & Chess Rooms, entrance 1.75 Ann street, and joins the Museum, 218 Broadway." The museum was owned

and operated by the unique 19th century showman and promoter Phineas T. Barnum. At the time, Barnum's museum was located next to Bassford's on the corner of Ann Street and Broadway. If billiards had ever been fortunate enough to attract the sincere interest of Phineas T. Barnum himself, today in all probability, Tiger Woods seven time sudden-death play-off for the title would have been on a billiard table, not a golf course. But so much for billiards misfortune and frankly that was a minor loss in contrast to what this industry availed itself to in its later years.

In the 1830's, public billiard rooms in America had seen little change in conception from when first introduced to the public in France nearly a century earlier. In 1760, on the streets of Paris ... reading rooms, taverns, cafes and billiard rooms first became licensed for public use by the French provost of guilds. As in Paris during the 1760's, American billiard facilities of the 1800's were commonly viewed as public gathering places for the social interests of men as opposed to both genders.

Without the support of other businesses, products and services, as indicated by the Herald's 1839 advertisers, the upscale presentation of billiards, then, as today, had with little exception ever been able to soundly support itself through its own services. ...And seldom considered a viable source of income or secure business venture by any majority of successful entrepreneurs.

To attract public interest and generate income, billiards had to rely on other businesses that included saloons, chess rooms, reading rooms, coffee-houses and even gymnasiums. Incidentally, don't think for one minute that billiards was a thriving enterprise just because of its 19th century existence, it wasn't. Similar to billiards of today, the more illustrious side of the game required astute marketing and a constant vigilance on behalf of its investors. Especially when protecting their patrons from a sub-culture clientele that could easily pollute an otherwise promising billiard emporium.

In the city of my birthplace, Chicago, like New York, San Francisco and St. Louis, the more illustrious billiard rooms were first born the son's, and result of America's industrial revolution. Their birth was during a time that we as a nation saw small frontier clans evolve into growing urban civilizations. In their teens, they provided competitive and social activity to soldiers of the civil war, and as adults, to soldiers of civil rights. In the summer of their careers they witnessed the birth of aviation, and in the winter of their lives, watched, as humankind soared into the heavens in search of the extraterrestrial.

By the 1920's the popularity of upscale public billiard facilities had risen to such an enormous demand that within less than one square mile of Chicago's downtown district alone there was an excess of some 600 actively used billiard tables. The games remarkable evolution was to a large extent due to men and their families like Mr. Thomas Foley along with the Louis A. Bensinger and W. P. Mussey families. Foley as the pioneer, began his campaign of boosting the game's popularity as early as 1866. The Bensinger family built a billiard dynasty that housed some 200 billiard tables within their four loop locations alone. And the W. P. Mussey family featured as many as 88

tables and amphitheater in just one their two elegant loop billiard palaces that also serviced their clientele with a huge barbershop and restaurant.

Yet as sure as Tom Foley was dean and father of Chicago billiards since 1866 when first promoting billiard tournaments on the front page of the Chicago Tribune's four-page newspaper, by the 1970s it had all ended. With the closing of "Randolph Recreation," the Bensinger's only surviving room, Foley's 19th century kingdom of Chicago's elegant billiard rooms, like other hallmark rooms across the land, died and forever disappeared into oblivion. In retrospect, how sad, as such an enduring pillar of America's social evolution, that at the time of their demise neither a coffin, funeral service or eulogy was offered by what had then become a cold, insensitive to social progress, and to an overwhelming extent, subculture clientele.

For generations to come there'll be those claiming their new billiard facilities are part of this division of American billiards. Yet in reality, they'll be no more than illusionary props and plastic imitations of Chicago's and other great cities illustrious billiard rooms. Rooms that had for more than a hundred years, ever so firmly and proudly, put their stamp of social progress on our nations register of cultural evolution.

While the great billiard rooms of America had died and lie buried in shallow unmarked graves, the game itself did not die, nor ever shall. Billiards, and all of its cue games, while sick and wounded by abuse, poor industrial management and public exploitation, was as alive as when Foley himself first began boosting its social status in the 19th century. What the game now needed was social reinvention and given a new marketplace.

Included in the long list of reasons leading to billiards public demise was economics that among other reasons included the income versus cost of housing the enormous, regulation size commercial billiard table. Typically, during billiards Golden Age the playing surface for both pocket and carom tables was five by ten feet, which required two hundred square feet of floor space for one single table. While that figure would be somewhat reduced by both the quantity of tables and their space saving room arrangements, the ever rising cost of rent, real estate development and land values made a proprietors overall operational cost more than just difficult to afford. To help control this problem, by the early 20th century most all of the larger billiard facilities were located within second, to five floor walk-ups ... buildings offering limited, if any, passenger elevators. The higher the floor the cheaper the rent.

Another effective way to help control ever rising operational expenses was to incorporate other forms of activities and the sale of by products. Much the same way billiards did in the 1830's. It was this business strategy that eventually led to the enduring marriage of billiards and bowling within one facility. Today's ultimate and proven successful solution of using smaller billiard tables was still nearly two generations in the future. Remember this is billiards, not computer technology, and a game supported by patrons rarely interest in social and business progress as they were in their personal and immediate self-preferences that seldom included

change. Even to this day there's a small division of billiard promoters still clinging to versions of 19th century marketing ...and failing at most every turn.

Manufacturing small size pool tables was certainly nothing new to the billiard industry. By the close of the 19th century billiard table manufactures were well on their way into building both plain and elaborate tables that measured as small as three by six feet. But the primary purpose of providing smaller tables was to service the home and private side of billiards. While the 1920's saw small tables advertised as portable, they weighed some 400 pounds and were still built with three-piece slate designs that required bee's wax seaming and were sensitive to movement much like the traditional larger regulation tables. All with the exception of athletes of that era, like Jim Thorpe or Jack Dempsey, these tables proved anything but portable, and further, lacked any form of automatic payment control such as a coin mechanism.

Some twenty years before billiards mid-twentieth century collapse, two residents of San Antonio Texas, Mr. Frank E. Pavelka and Mr. Harold W. Thompson, invented a table that while unknown to them at the time would one day resurrect the failing public side of the American billiard industry. Together, the two Texan's designed a revolutionary new style commercial game table. On December 30, 1930 they filed their design with the United States patent office. The following March 24, 1931, the U.S. Patent office approved their application, and with this action officially launched the beginning of a new and promising era for billiards in America.

Pavelka and Thompson's concept of inventing midget-size game tables became contagious. Less than two months after the Texan's filed for their first patent the U. S. Patent Office began receiving a flood of applications containing similar concepts. One of the more significant designs to follow and later approved on June 23, 1931 was from a Chicago resident by the name of Isaac H. Burnstine. Burnstine's version was submitted as a "pool table" and not simply as a "game table" as was the Texans design. Plus the new comers design was more ornate and included the first recognized coin mechanism controlling the operation of a commercial pool table. All of this gives Isaac H. Burnstine credit for inventing the first panted coin operated pool table in the United States.

On May 1, 1931, another Chicago inventor by the name of William G. Ehrhart joined in the search with his midget table that now reduced his predecessors eight and ten pocket versions to Ehrhart's new six-pocket design. On August 8th of the same year, Texas galloped back into the game of inventing small commercial pool tables. Mr. Charles A. Toce, a resident of Houston Texas, submitted his design for a coin operated table that aside from its eight pockets began to look similar to today's coin operated pool tables.

The victorious Isaac M. Burnstine who submitted his design earlier that year was a man that obviously was determined to take on all comers and never to be out-classed. On September 18, 1931, Burnstine marched into the U.S. patent office, opened his briefcase and took out his new patent application along with its attached drawing. Then, he officially filed for what would become on November 17, 1931 the most elaborate version of