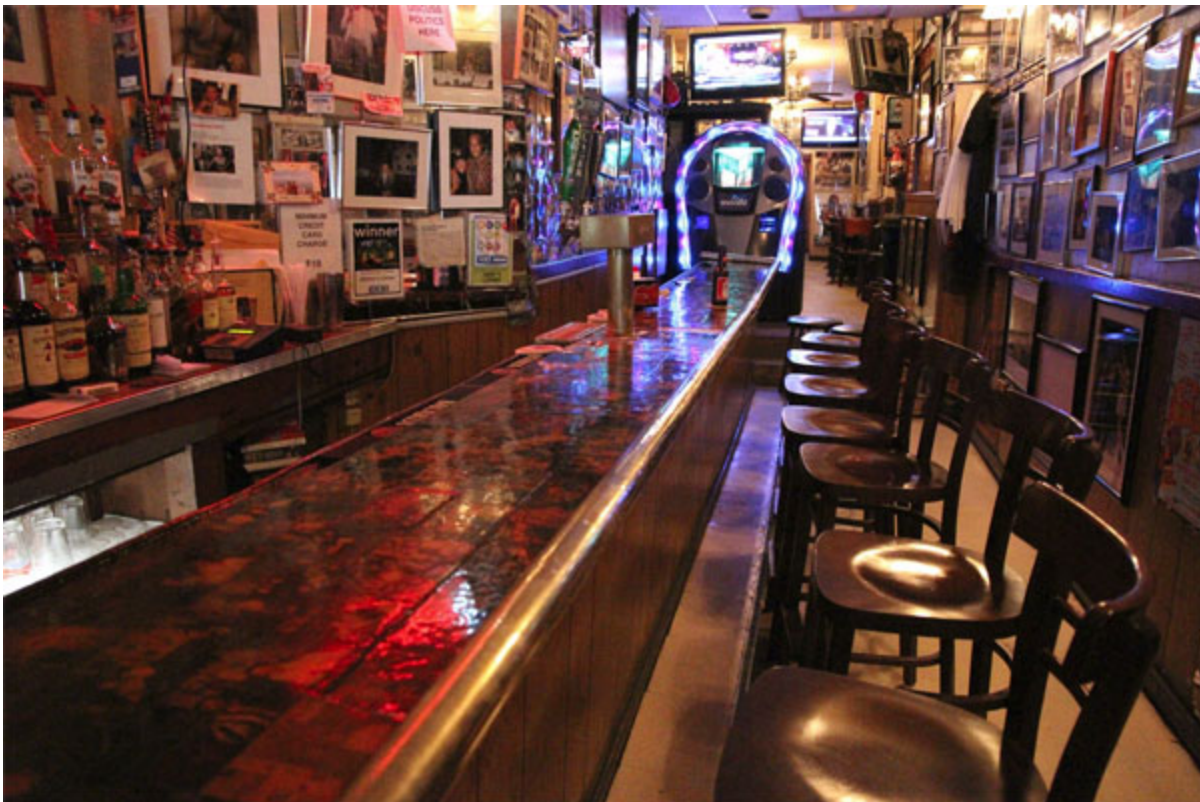


Let's Have a Drink at Jimmy's

 offbeattravel.com/remembering-jimmys-bar-new-york-city.html



Source: [Jimmy's Corner Facebook page](#)

by Mark Orwoll

Imagine the New York bar of your dreams. Well, at least the New York bar of my dreams. If you're a rough-edged literary sort, that bar is Jimmy's Corner, a mainstay on West 44th since 1971. It's narrow, loud, and crowded, but always convivial. About the only decorating that ever occurs there is when someone adds another 8x10 glossy to the walls lined with black-and-white boxing photos -- and even that doesn't happen too often. The air is rife with the smell of spilled beer and the sounds of jazz and Sinatra pulsing from the juke box. And back in the day (and crucial for a young and poorly paid magazine editor), it was cheap.

Jimmy Glenn, the owner, died from complications of Covid-19 in May. He was 89. But at least he left behind a tangible legacy: Jimmy's Corner.

I went to Jimmy's Corner for the first time on New Year's Eve, 1982. In those days, the New Year's celebration in Times Square was a different animal than it is now. Revelers were free to roam the Crossroads of the World as they wished in the hours leading up to and just after twelve, not boxed into police cordons. In the Eighties, while you waited for the New Year, you

could buy a short dog and take a nip on the corner of Seventh Avenue and West 46th Street -- for medicinal purposes, to ward off the December chill -- and the police wouldn't bother you, as long as you were halfway discreet.

There were dive bars on nearly every corner of the neighborhood back then. The early Eighties were the tail end of Damon Runyon's Times Square. But instead of Nathan Detroit, Sky Masterson, Angie the Ox, and Nicely-Nicely Johnson, you had street hookers, three-card monte artists, smack dealers, con men, porn-shop managers, grifters, drag queens, and pickpockets. Nice place.

And in the middle of it all was Jimmy's Corner. I started coming to Jimmy's every once in a while starting in 1987, when I was hired by Travel + Leisure magazine to assign and edit travel articles and, occasionally, write a travel piece of my own. Our office in the Hippodrome Building, at Sixth Avenue and 44th Street, was a pleasant-enough, relatively low-rise, glass-fronted building on the site of the former Hippodrome Theater, where Houdini once made an elephant disappear from the stage and diving horses leaped off towering platforms into pools of water.

I was young, ambitious, and eager to be part of a scene -- ideally, a journalistic scene, full of witty writers tossing off bons mots like Benchley and Parker and Woollcott at the Round Table in the Algonquin Hotel. In fact, a door led from the Hippodrome lobby directly across the street to the Algonquin, where, in those days, the minuscule (who'm I kidding? It was claustrophobic!) Blue Bar sat off to the right of the entrance. (It's since been moved and enlarged.) Framed Thurber drawings, supposedly given by the artist in exchange for drinks, still decorated the walls, and the red-jacketed barmen could make a martini the way Edna Ferber preferred them in 1927.

But who could afford that? At least, on anything like a junior editor's salary? No, I wanted a place that was literary but not snooty, well-stocked but not high-priced, welcoming but not touristy. I became a regular at Hurley's, in a little brownstone that stood in the shadow of Rockefeller Center at Sixth Avenue and 49th Street. The nearby Associated Press could have run its assignment desk from Hurley's, since that's where all the reporters were anyway. But the Rock Center tourists and an increasingly restaurant-like atmosphere soon soured me on Hurley's.

And then there was Costello's, a newspaperman's bar to end all newspaperman's bars. It was a haunt of editors and reporters from the Daily News, whose office on East 42nd Street was just a few blocks away. In previous years some of the New Yorker crowd used to go there too, including Thurber, who once again left his artwork adorning the walls. New Yorker writer John McNulty made owner Tim Costello famous in the Talk of the Town column. Hemingway drank there. John O'Hara drank there. After several relocations, Costello's finally ended up at 225 East 44th Street (along with the transplanted Thurber scribbles), where I would drop by to soak up the atmosphere and the Rolling Rock. But then Costello's was gone. By 1992, the era of the "newspaperman's bar" was over.

That's when I set my sights on Jimmy's Corner. It had everything going for it. First off, all I had to do was stumble out of the Hippodrome Building at the end of a long shift and I was halfway there. The facade defined humble, with its tattered marquee and institutional glass entry door. Like so many New York "Irish bars," Jimmy's joint was long and narrow in the front, with a bar lined with stools that ran along one wall and...well, a wall on the other side. You literally had to walk sideways to go from the front of the place to the rear. That's how narrow it was, and still is.

In the back is a separate "room" with a handful of tables for either two or four guests. Behind that are the bathrooms (which you would want to use only in an emergency), a storeroom, and Jimmy Glenn's office. By the time I started visiting regularly, Jimmy had backed away from actively running the bar, but he came in every day, and was frequently seen shuffling from his office to the till and back to his office, often stopping to greet those customers who remembered him well.

On the walls were pictures of prizefighters, posters from famous match-ups, and other boxing memorabilia. There were pictures of Jimmy with all the greats, including Muhammed Ali. Jimmy himself had not been a professional boxer, but rather a corner man (thus his bar's name) who also trained youngsters in Harlem and elsewhere to learn the manly art and, in consequence, to live like upright citizens.

In the early Nineties, when pre-Disneyfication Times Square was still a pit, you could get a beer at Jimmy's for two bucks (they're still under four dollars even today), so the price was right. You could bump into editors and writers from Hearst (at Eighth Avenue near Columbus Circle), Conde Nast (still on Lexington Avenue in those days before moving to Times Square and then downtown), the New York Times (at West 43rd Street back then), my own Travel + Leisure, and beaucoup other publishers, so there was always a friendly ear or some inside-baseball journalism gossip. And then there was the juke box...

The juke box, according to legend, was strictly limited to Jimmy's picks. And since Jimmy's heyday was in the 1950s and '60s, there was no lack of Coltrane and Ella, Lady Day and Monk, Miles and Johnny Hartmann. You could walk into Jimmy's Corner on a cloudy, cool Tuesday evening and instantly be transported back to 1962. Set midway in the bar, between the main room and the back room, the juke box very well may be the glue that has held Jimmy's Corner together all these years, an emblem of stability in a disposable era. No matter what happens in the rest of the world, you can always get a cheap beer and listen to "Kind of Blue" at Jimmy's.

Despite its roughneck environs, Jimmy's was never a freewheeling place with fistfights and loud arguments. Just the opposite, in fact. A sign above the bar proclaimed, "Let's Not Discuss Politics Here." For the most part, the rule was well heeded. And there were other rules too. Because the front door was so close to the corner of the bar, fire department officials prohibited Jimmy from placing barstools there, in case the place caught on fire and

the barstools impeded an emergency rush to escape. So every bartender (there was rarely more than one on duty at any given time) was adamant in telling customers, "You can't put that barstool there! You have to keep that area clear!"

Nor could you sit at the bar or a table and ask for a glass of water -- unless it was water back with a shot. How many young women did I see come into Jimmy's, take a seat, and politely request a glass of water while waiting to meet their behind-schedule dates. "Sorry, you have to buy a drink if you wanna sit here," was the invariable response. It mattered not how pretty or charming the young woman may have been. Jimmy's was a bar to drink in, not to sip free tap water.

The undisputed boss of the bar, at least during the Nineties and for nearly 20 years after, was the late Swannie Glenn, Jimmy's wife. Swannie brooked no nonsense from her customers, but in slower periods would be happy to chat. Still, if any mischief arose, you would not want to be on the receiving end of Swannie's wrath.

I witnessed an odd visit one afternoon (let's go ahead and say, for reputation's sake, it was after 5 p.m.) when three college-age men came inside. "Hi Swannie," one of them said on behalf of the group. "Um, Jimmy threw us out last night because of our behavior. We just wanted to apologize and tell Jimmy that we're very, very sorry, and we won't do it again, and to please not eighty-six us from the bar permanently." Swannie, small, gray-haired, and utterly frightening when she glared at you, said nothing for a moment. "I'll tell him," she said, finally. "But it's up to him. No promises. Maybe you learned something." The three young men bowed and scraped and, with tentative optimism, backed out of the bar.

But mostly it was a place to meet up with friends. If you were feeling blue, a Monday afternoon at Jimmy's was as good a place as any -- better than most -- to chat up the person at the next seat and take your mind off your problems. Meeting a close pal? Sit at the bar and shout over the music. Looking for your copy editor whose lunch break seems to have extended beyond its generous hour? Send an intern over to Jimmy's to investigate.

Jimmy Glenn's passing is sad. His son, Adam, has been running the show for a few years now. And if the crowds are any indication, business is good. Or will be again, once the bars reopen. So there's reason to be hopeful that Jimmy's Corner will be here for years to come.

But Jimmy's death is also just cause for nostalgia, a reason to look back at the old New York that we've lost, and to toast a New York institution that's managed to stick around. Jimmy Glenn has gone down for the count, it's sad to say. But Jimmy's Corner, thankfully, is ready for the next round.

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