

The Semaphore

A Publication of the TELEGRAPH HILL DWELLERS

Issue 191

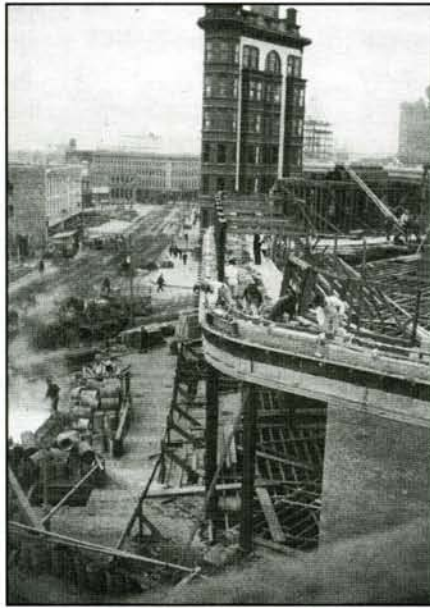
Summer 2010

THE COMSTOCK SALOON EVOKES THE CITY'S BRASH AND BAWDY PAST

By Ernest Beyl

An encouraging new enterprise has taken root recently at the south edge of North Beach at 155 Columbus, right where it intersects with Chinatown and the old International Settlement on Pacific Avenue. It's the Comstock Saloon—whose operators, Jonny Raglin and Jeff Hollinger, believe it is poised firmly as a go-to social hub and hang-out for neighbors and visitors.

And early signs indicate that the two who prefer the designation "saloonkeepers" to the more proper "proprietors" would seem to have the concept right: an honest bar and restaurant serving no-nonsense drinks and traditional, old-time San Francisco food.



The Comstock is rebuilt after 1906 disaster.

So the Comstock Saloon is not a slicked-up new cocktail lounge and trendy dining salon. But rather it evokes—legitimately in this case—San Francisco's brash and bawdy past—a past that includes the infamous Barbary Coast (originally called Sydney Town because it was largely populated by convicts who had escaped from Australian prisons).

Jonny Raglin and Jeff Hollinger come to the new operation with good saloon credentials. Both, until recently, were with the highly successful Absinthe in Hayes Valley—Jonny as bar manager for five years and Jeff as general manager for more than

six years. Backing them is Absinthe's parent, Madwill's

continued on page 10

Food Company, whose president, Billy Russell Shapiro, is an active partner. Jonny Raglin, who sports a retro, waxed handlebar mustache and is a serious San Francisco history buff, says, "There's an old school kind of bar and a new school kind of bar. We stand firmly with the old school. We want the Comstock Saloon to be a gathering place, a community center where you can enjoy a beverage, something good to eat and socialize with old and new friends. And we want to be respectful of the Comstock Saloon's place in the history of this city."

There's been a saloon on the site since 1907 when Jim Griffin, a boxing promoter and manager of the nearby Broadway Athletic Club, opened it as the Andromeda Saloon. Soon it was frequented by fight fans and other sporting types. It was reported locally then that business became so brisk... "Angling executives, sharp-talking politicians and homesick sailors all rubbed elbows while brazen prostitutes flaunted coquettish charms at the brass rail of the ornate bar."

"The only exception," Jonny says "was during Prohibition (1920-1933) when it reluctantly became the Andromeda Café." Even then, the Andromeda provided kicks, but by prescription only, with what it called medicinal alcohol.

From 1908 through 1910 there were more than 40 Barbary Coast saloons, cafés and "resorts" along the few blocks of Pacific near the Andromeda. Among them were the Ivy, the Queen, the Bear Café, the Midway, Hippodrome, Dragon, Bella Union, Klondike, Moulin Rouge and the Dixie. It was in a Barbary Coast saloon that an enterprising Irish bartender (is there any other kind) named Michael Finn spiked customers' drinks. He earned immortality in the phrase "to slip someone a Mickey."

In those days business was rough and brisk; so rough that by 1913 the Andromeda Saloon hired Jack Dempsey as doorman and bouncer for about a year before he went on to beat Jess Willard in 1919 for the world's Heavyweight Championship. We're told

by Jonny that Jack Johnson, the first black to win the heavyweight crown, frequented the Andromeda Saloon in his later years. There was even a rumor—backed up by a plaque that hung in the site's more recent San Francisco Brewing Company—that noted bank robber and murderer, Baby Face Nelson, was apprehended in the saloon. Not true, but that's another story.

But Jonny, with his lively interest in saloon history, points out that during Prohibition Baby Face visited San Francisco seeking employment as a rum runner and would have made the presumably "dry" Andromeda Café a convenient stopover.

Decades later, in 1977, the famed saloon had fallen on hard times and became the Albatross, which enjoyed a lively business under new management for a number of years. Then, inexorably, in 1985 the Albatross became just that—an albatross—and the premises morphed into the San Francisco Brewing Company, said to have been the city's oldest micro-brewery and one of the first four "brew-pubs" in the U.S. That operation was opened in 1985 by Allan G. Paul and closed its doors late last year, and that brings us full circle back to the Comstock Saloon.

Jonny and Jeff have carefully restored or re-created their saloon so patrons experience a time warp plunging them back into 1907 or even earlier. Overhead the Colonial Indian pukka walla ceiling fans with their original brass fittings and palm grass blades run the length of a solid mahogany bar that has been restored, as has the tin ceiling. The floor is reclaimed oak. A tiled urinal trough runs the length of the bar. (Some say it's really a long, narrow spittoon.)

The elaborate back bar has been there since 1907 and Jonny and Jeff believe it to be a Brunswick, the pool table outfit that dates back to 1845. It's topped by a four-and-a-half foot, 350 pound bronze sculpture of Emperor Norton, the zany, self-proclaimed, Imperial Majesty of the U.S. who lived here—and ruled benevolently—in the 1800s. (He may have been loony tunes but he proposed a bridge and a tunnel across San

continued on page 12

Issue #191 • Summer 2010

Comstock Saloon *continued from page 10*

Francisco Bay.) The statue was created back in 1939 by North Beach sculptor and jewelry designer Peter Macchiarini and was donated by his son, Dan, who carries on his father's work on upper Grant Avenue.

Walls are decorated with artifacts and memorabilia detailing the history of the saloon and the neighborhood. And there's a small Victorian parlor, ideal for courting (to use the old fashioned term). The adjacent dining room has the original blue and white tile floor and tin ceiling. Presently a jazz trio adds the proper ambience.

Although Jonny and Jeff were celebrated at the Hayes Valley Absinthe for serving scores of fanciful, multi-ingredient drinks, the Comstock Saloon sticks closer to historical precedent. Among the selections are the Martinez (the original Martini said to be first crafted across the Bay in the community of the same name), the Negroni, the John Collins, the Manhattan, and more esoteric drinks associated with old-time San Francisco: the Sazerac Cocktail and Pisco Punch.

Then there's the Hop Toad (rum, apricot brandy and lime juice) that Jeff says dates back to the early days of the city. There's beer, wine and other spirits, of course.

And if you're hungry for snacks, lunch or dinner, Comstock Saloon chef Carlo Espinas can rustle up his beef shank pot pie, a crock of beans, crab cocktail, fisherman's salad, a game hen with oyster stuffing and other "real" food. In Jonny's and Jeff's crystal ball for the future are Hangtown Fry and an Oyster Loaf.

"We're committed to offering a great historic environment and great food and drink," says Jeff.

Jonny has the last word: "We know there are a lot of empty storefronts in the neighborhood these days, but we sense a resurgence of vitality in North Beach. Jeff and I are optimistic. We believe the Comstock Saloon is a class act and that we've got the concept right."



Ernest Beyl is a frequent contributor to Semaphore. His last piece here was "A Saloonist's View of North Beach."