

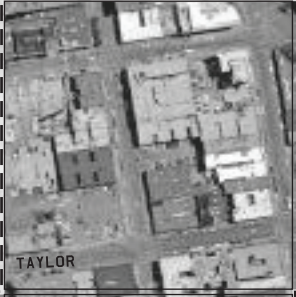


San Francisco Speakeasy

A Walking Tour of San Francisco and the Prohibition Era

Nicole Santucci | 2010

San Francisco Speakseasy



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A Short Introduction on Speaking Eas(il)y

The term 'speakeasy' refers to an establishment from which alcoholic beverages were illegally sold during the United States Prohibition, between 1920-1932. It also refers to the casual manner in which one would order a drink during the Prohibition; in order to avoid raising suspicion, bartenders would often request that their patrons 'keep quiet and speakeasy'. The period of time between the enacting of the 18th Amendment, prohibiting the sale, manufacture, transportation and consumption of alcohol, and the 21st Amendment, the repealing of the 18th Amendment and all that it restricted, was relatively short-lived, yet action-packed. An entire array of new activity and vocabulary rapidly appeared and vanished as a result of the American resistance towards the Prohibition and the government's eventual compliance to the population's demands. The absence of these quirky time-specific practices and vibrant morales creates a certain poignancy that's intrinsic to the present's reflection on this particular fragment of history. Though (for the majority of us) our only experience of this time is through stories and accounts, this instance of history seems to partly dwell in the present by way of our collective nostalgia for the uncanny spirit of the time. The vibrancy of the characters and overall context of the 'Roaring Twenties' also left a powerful impression on what constitutes society today, especially here in the Bay Area where the population continues to stay loyal to its history of resisting moral legislation of any kind.

The enacting of the Prohibition was the culmination of a number of movements, spearheaded mostly by pietistic religious denominations seeking to enforce an universal abstinence from what was perceived to be immoral behavior, such as drinking and prostitution. Interestingly enough, this fear of unorthodox behavior and progressive social transformation paralleled America's first sexual revolution. As the icon of the liberated flapper emerged and women began to question their traditional role in the home and disobeying society's limiting expectations, pious communities responded with a desire to project a sense of control on the population's system of morals and values. However, this attempt to exercise control completely failed, and the "Noble Experiment" ended up catalyzing a considerable amount of violence and mayhem rather than repressing it. The majority of the American population resisted the imposed restrictions, and the drinking culture simply relocated their spirited operations underground, in both a literal and figurative sense.

Suddenly, with the enforcement of the Volstead Act, bars were hidden below ground and behind semblances. Because the population's demand for alcohol continued, the manufacture and smuggling of alcohol exploded in popularity. The industry simply relocated from federal oversight into an unregulated realm, leaving a great deal of opportunity for exploitation. Communities of organized crime took over the government's responsibilities, many officials became corrupt in their participation, profits went untaxed, vast amounts of personal wealth were made, and the entire country suffered a rapid spike in violence and crime.

The Bay Area, in particular, curiously served as a sort of peaceful microcosm or safe haven from the rest of the country plagued by organized crime. This unique atmosphere was a result of a number of factors. Eighty-three percent of San Francisco voters positioned themselves against the Prohibition, and for a number of years, there was an complete absence of local enforcement. Also, for some reason or another, despite numerous attempts, the mob was never able to establish much of a presence on the West Coast. San Francisco and the greater Bay Area's substantial drinking habits were supported by a complex network of illegal and covert operations, yet the area was known for remaining relatively peaceful. The Bay Area network included around 2000 speakeasies hidden throughout the city, a good number of smuggling import sites in nondescript locations along the coast, and an array of innovative bootlegging operations in the East Bay.

For obvious reasons regarding the speakeasy culture's clandestine nature, there is a shortage of documentation of the illicit activities and sites hosting these activities. Therefore, the majority of the visual content in this tour is dependent on imagining, envisioning, stories, and accounts rather than direct photographic analysis. The appeal and atypical quality of this tour lies in the notion that the included information was only accessible to the most savvy of locals during the Twenties, and the locations are bygone venues of vice and crime rather than generic tourist amusements. While psychologically visiting these buried and forgotten places and moments, you are encouraged to reflect on and remember the past, but also to embrace and celebrate your present experience, as this tour is intended to result in anything from a traditional bar-crawl to a nostalgic historical indulgence. Whenever it seems appropriate, toast to the Robin Hoods of the Roaring Twenties - the saloon owners, bootleggers, smugglers, and defiant civic officials - and indulge in the pleasures that they have endowed upon us. Salute to the continuance of our local legacy of resistance against moral legislation and most importantly, don't forget to speakeasy.

2 New Montgomery



The Palace Hotel | 1920

During the Prohibition, the Palace Hotel maintained its stately public identity and continued to cater to the conservative traditional lifestyles of their old guard guests, yet the establishment still managed to invent a surreptitious method to capitalize on the population's rising tendency towards 'social vices' and high demand for jazz and booze. When some of the guests expressed distaste towards the gradual introduction of tangos, fox-trots and other modern dances, management placed discrete signs prohibiting such gyrations, but there was never any attempt at enforcement when the young crowd resisted their effort. The hotel's website notes that on the first of January in 1920, the Hotel staged a public response to the restrictions set forth by the Eighteenth Amendment, and the closing of the Pied Piper men's bar was bid farewell with a gathering and a ginger-ale toast. However, the savviest of guests were still granted access to an abundant amount of alcohol. All one had to do was order 'flowers' for a date with dinner, and the bouquet came complete with bottle of whiskey in the box (NPR). If a guest preferred to drink in a more social environment, the popular speakeasy, House of Shields, was conveniently located right down the street, in the basement of 39 New Montgomery.



Sir Francis Drake Hotel | 1928

History is the keystone to the St. Francis Hotel's glamorous appeal and identity. Upon entering, take note of the preservation and restorations of the antique interior details and the elaborate palate of rich surfaces and a traditional aesthetic. This might serve as an appropriate time to make your way over to the recreation of the old-timey Bar Drake and celebrate the remembrance of the forgotten past; the hotel's website even claims that inside the bar, "Time stands still," and offers a portal to a moment in the past when, "... Having a drink meant defying the law, and quite possibly having the night of your life."

When the hotel opened in 1928, each guest room door featured a Servidor, a two-way cubby which allowed for discrete deliveries. Suspiciously, this innovative design was especially handy during the Prohibition, as it provided for unwitnessed transactions of alcohol. Another infrastructural artifact of the Prohibition can be uncovered in elevator car number 2. In here, with the assistance of a key, the curious button marked "M" used to carry guests to the furtively located speakeasy, still wedged between the lobby and the second floor mezzanine (SF Gate). Today, the room is deemed a fire hazard, and therefore physically inaccessible and forgotten. Take a moment to visit the space through the means of your imagination. What you do not see is a narrow, cramped, hot room, filled with the haze and effluvia of cigarette smoke. The lantern-lit concrete walls, void of any windows, still display scribbles of onetime guests and bootleggers. The hard-shelled luggage that was once used to smuggle in the booze remains sprawled across the floor, left only to collect dust, along with the original 1920s wooden shelves and a few antique bottles still hanging on the wall, tucked out of site and forgotten.



St. Francis Hotel | 1920s

In order to access the speakeasy of the St. Francis Hotel, a visitor was required to casually navigate through an offhand route of passageways and conversational exchanges. During the Prohibition, the following set of directions would guide privy locals and visitors to a secret room where law did not apply; a space that would fail to even register on the radar of the unaware St. Francis guest. Firstly, the operator controlling one particular bank of three elevators keyed the guest down to the basement with the delivery of a predetermined password. Once the patron made their way below the territory of official hotel operation, one more password was prompted by a man peering behind the square-eye cut out of a heavy wooden door (SF Gate). Inside, guests were free to wet their whistle and indulge in the array of sensual pleasures that characterized the atmosphere of the twenties. Only underground and hidden or behind an elaborate semblance was behavior void of the excessive regulation enforced by law. Allegedly, this space now serves as the carpenter's storage room, and is now occupied by copper pipes and sagging lumps of drywall among a few small but precious remnants of its speakeasy days, such as the original long brass rail and elevator bell housing (NPR). Only the resurfacing of poignant memories that took occurred in the now lifeless, utilitarian basement of the St. Francis can renew the energy of the absent camaraderie and spirit of the Roaring Twenties.

450 Powell



Coffee Dan's | 1927
Slide Nightclub & Lounge | 2010

Coffee Dan's first opened underneath the Cable Car Theater, soon before re-locating to the basement at this address sometime during the 20s. Don't be fooled by the name, while flapjacks and coffee were in fact served upstairs, the establishment was best known as a riotous speakeasy and cabaret. The venue effectively served as a subterranean funhouse of vice. Behind a secret pivoting wall and at the bottom of a playground slide, Coffee Dan's claimed the title of the noisiest joint in the city (Smith). The space can be best characterized and remembered by an endless cacophony of sounds bouncing off the walls of a small dark room - the roaring wave of wooden mallets rapping on tables as patrons applauded and called for service, the occasional clatter of a dish shattering in a gesture of the upmost appreciation, and the constant fluttering rhythm of live jazz. All the while, in the midst of an illicit yet popular service to the community, Coffee Dan's somehow managed to attain international fame while operating as an illegal speakeasy, as the space was featured in two early talkies, *A Night at Coffee Dan's* and *The Jazz Singer*, both filmed in 1927.

Today, the line out the door on Friday and Saturday nights prevents the business from maintaining a discreet identity, as this address is presently occupied by the posh, modern Slide Nightclub and Lounge. Inside, however, the design achieves an attractive hybrid between modern aesthetic and a few throwbacks to the location's fascinating old world identity. Slide's website boasts, "Slide is modern and sophisticated but it is also reminiscent of the age of gangsters, flappers and bootleg revelry of the past." The DJ system is veiled behind a 20s baby grand piano, the surfaces are bathed in mahogany with copper accents, and, not to mention, a custom built slide alludes to the location's history of entering with extravagance and style.

501 Jones



The Ipswitch - A Beverage Parlor | 1921-1923
JJ Russell's Cigar Shop | 1923
Bourbon & Branch | 2010

Allegedly, this street corner has housed served alcohol since 1867. Sure enough, the restrictions imposed by the Prohibition did not interrupt this location's festive history of providing booze and a social gathering place, rather, it merely forced the establishment to temporarily alter the way in which it operated. With the passing of the 18th Amendment, the site's traditional enterprise plunged underground, and between 1921-1933 a speakeasy operated behind a series of guises. While the corner managed to continue catering to the San Franciscan drinking culture, the community served was limited to loyal, savvy locals and anyone else privy to the nonchalant modes of navigating into the subterranean speakeasy.

Between 1921 and 1933, this address was listed as "The Ipswitch - A Beverage Parlor" in the San Francisco Telephone Directory. For the remainder of the Prohibition, the speakeasy was veiled behind the faux-business, JJ Russell's Cigar Shop. The bar was located directly below the street-front semblance, and moving in and out of this exclusive space simply involved a series of orchestrated exchanges. Once a guest made their way into the store after delivering a password, a trap door leading to the bar down below was opened only after the guest requested a particular brand of cigar. In preserving a low-key front, the speakeasy featured an elaborate network of secret exit tunnels, allowing the guests to casually resurface on either Geary, O'Farrell, further up Jones, or a full block away on Leavenworth (bourbonandbranch.com).

Bourbon and Branch, the bar presently operating at this corner, carries on the address' tradition of serving spirits in a clandestine manner. The bar successfully capitalizes on its location's unique history and our nostalgia for the past - operating behind a sign reading 'The Anti-Saloon League', a reference to a politically influential historic organization behind the Temperance Movement and the Volstead Act, and maintaining a nondescript facade, penetrated only by a couple of boarded up window and heavy doors. Entrance to the main bar, in addition to a secret library hidden behind a revolving bookcase, is granted only with the delivery of a predetermined password. Patrons who make it inside are asked to adhere to a set of 'house rules', which recreates the enchanting atmosphere of a social vice of the past - requiring patrons to speak-easy and keep their cameras, cell-phones and other post-modern devices and mannerisms tucked away. While this is certainly one of the most enthusiastic attempts at historical accuracy, the essential thrill of partaking in crime cannot be recreated.

982 Market



Warfield Theater | 1928

The experience of this particular fragment of history does not require any matter of witnessing or visual processing, but instead imagining and envisaging. In front of the main building containing the theater, underneath the surface of Market, once existed another popular speakeasy - a space, a node in the underground network where San Franciscan nightlife prospered and flourished during the Prohibition. This once well-known and often frequented destination was severed into two with the barreling through of the underground transportation tunnels housing both BART and MUNI. The space has since been deemed structurally unsound, and today, the remains are accessed only through a collection of stories, descriptions, and visions. According to one account, the surviving fragments of the speakeasy, on either side of the modern transportation vessels, still contain physical artifacts of the forgotten past. As masses of people pass through this instance of space below Market and in front of the Warfield, they are unknowingly straddled by a plethora of authentic forgotten remains - walls covered in fantastic murals, grandiose light fixtures, and ornate furniture from the twenties (NPR). With the introduction of new programs and uses below Market Street, the space has become a physically inaccessible underground source of out-of-site, unexplored urban archeology.

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Cover Page, Palace Hotel, Sir Francis Drake, St. Francis, and The Warfield – courtesy of SF History Center, SF Public Library

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