

Speakeasy. . .and live in a beautiful house

Look up the word 'speakeasy' in the dictionary and you find: speakeasy n., a place where alcoholic drinks are illegally sold.

Google up the same word on the internet and you find a computational software company, places to listen to music, a Seattle based internet provider, a San Francisco microbrewery, a theatre company in Boston, a magazine, a language school in Barcelona, an Australian organization that helps people who stutter, a writer's forum, a line of comic books, a breast cancer support group, and a men's a capella group. In short, there is a huge group of people who just like that word. None of them, however, are illegally serving liquor out of the basement of their home.

Twenty-two years ago in 1983 I was a new realtor struggling to list and sell in a market where the interest rates were cresting what today would be an unimaginable 15% per annum. Put that in your financing calculator and watch your purchasing power plummet. One day I previewed a new listing in upper Fremont which at that time seemed to cost a fortune. The listing was for \$250,000, and dude, it was like totally a buyer's market. It was a gorgeous red-roofed Spanish style with a stucco exterior. Inside the rooms were oversized as were all the interior doors. The unpainted millwork and spaciousness still makes each room feel grand and elegant. When I went downstairs to view the basement I was completely surprised to see a vast open room with beau-



The west side of the house still has the original vertical folding garage doors, in good condition. You can also enter the basement through a back door. To the right is the house the Martins lived in before they built this one.

tiful hardwood floors and a large side room area with a cozy fireplace. This portion of the basement was *behind* the garage and was unlike any basement I had ever seen. As it turned out, I was standing in a REAL speakeasy.



Over the years the room and more specifically its history had always intrigued me. On occasion I would close my eyes and try hard to

visualize what had actually taken place in that space. Finally my curiosity got the better of me.

So I contacted the owner and asked her if she knew anything about the speakeasy. She related how her realtor had phoned her in 1983 and asked if she would like to see a house with a ballroom in the basement. She and her husband viewed the house, liked it, bought it and



The only differences between the house today and the 1925 assessor's photo are the mature shrubs in the front yard.

still reside there today.

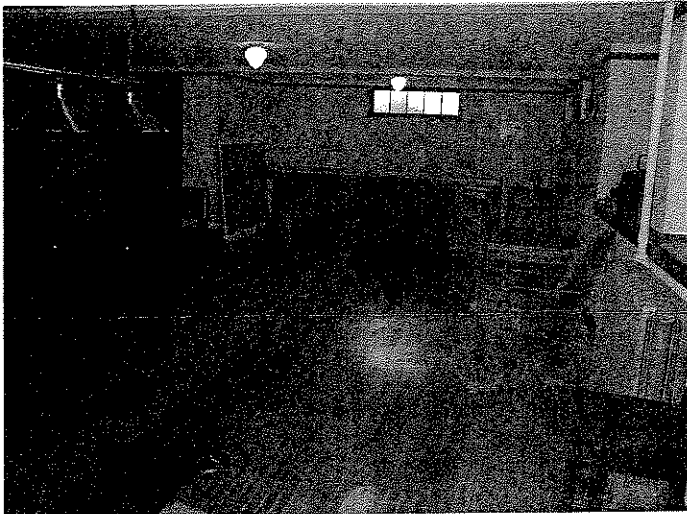
The only information the current owner had regarding the basement was that twenty years ago one of the neighbors *recalled* his uncle telling him about the speakeasy. Apparently the uncle had actually witnessed the bar in action. She had also heard that the person who originally built the home was part owner of Soleduck Hot Springs, a getaway on the Olympic Peninsula which, at that time, was another place where people went and drank during Prohibition. There was a pipe organ at one time in the room. Besides those tidbits there was nothing. So, with the current owner's permission, I decided to look around.

The room is impressive because of its openness. It is L-shaped and measures about 1250 square feet. The small part of the "L" is entered through two glass-paned French doors to an appealing, tiled fireplace flanked by built-in bookshelves. A door in that room leads to another, smaller room with a rather large walk-in safe.

The overhead lighting is low. Daylight enters through yellowish, translucent windows. It not only looks like a speakeasy, but with the dim lighting it *feels* like one. Beautiful maple floors perfect for dancing cover the entire area. There is a wide shelf of solid oak flooring at chest height running part way down one side of the room. There is still a bar. If I squinted hard I could imagine a room full of jitterbugging gin drinkers in what would have been a wooded, sparsely developed north Seattle neighborhood only blocks from what would become Woodland Park Zoo. Come to think of it, it would take little to no effort to turn it back into a

speakeasy.

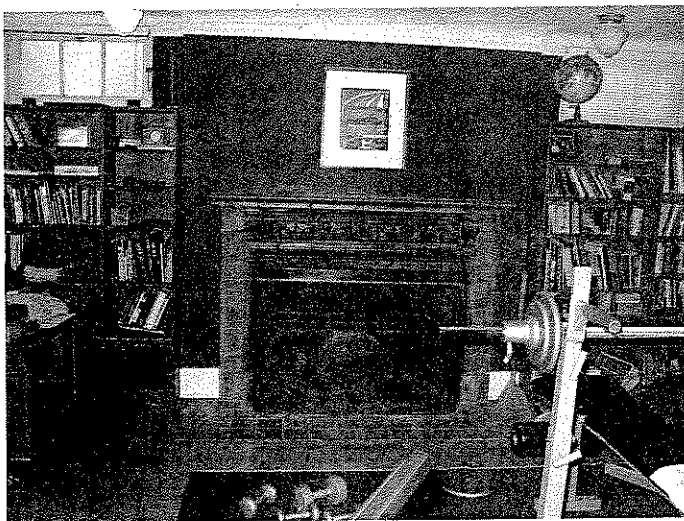
Prohibition (1920-1933 R.I.P.) was referred to in 1919 as The Noble Experiment. It was undertaken to reduce crime and corruption, solve social problems, reduce the tax burden created by prisons and poorhouses, and improve health and hygiene in America. The results of the 'experiment,' after decades of hindsight, are now clear: innocent people suffered;



Looking down the main room towards the bar. Maple floors and plenty of room for a pool table.

organized crime grew into an empire; the police, courts, and politicians became increasingly corrupt; disrespect for the law grew; and the per capita consumption of the prohibited substance – alcohol – increased dramatically, year by year, for thirteen years, never to return to the pre-1920 levels. Prohibition was ratified by Congress on January 29, 1919 and became the law of the land on January 29, 1920.

In the county assessor's records, it is recorded that the house with the speakeasy was constructed in 1916. Since Prohibition became effective four years later, it initially appeared that the speakeasy had been surreptitiously added a number of years after the original construction. This assumption turned



Disregard the owner's gym equipment and imagine yourself and your date repairing to the couch next to a crackling fire after a night of partying.

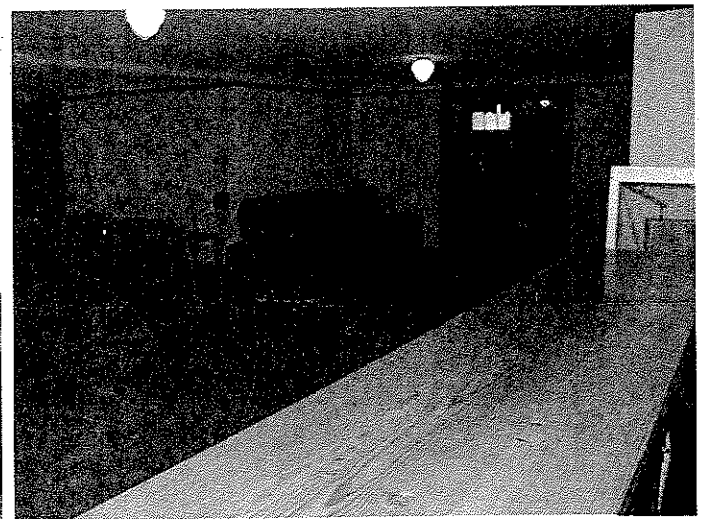
out to be incorrect.

I made an appointment at the Puget Sound Archives and was able to look through the Seattle City Directories which revealed a great deal. Back in the twenties and the thirties the City Directories were published every year. They look like old style phone books only fatter and more squat. They listed everyone in the city as well as their addresses and included many ancillary pieces of information about individuals.

For example, it was common for the directory to note a person's profession or trade, the company they worked at or perhaps owned, marital status, and so on. Phone numbers weren't listed in the 1920's. If you had one of the new-fangled telephones a small bell icon would appear in front of your name. Such facts today would be considered a gross invasion of someone's privacy and would appear to be a welcome mat to identity thieves.

Fortunately for me, beginning in 1938, the directory included a new, additional section which cross referenced all listed residents by address. By looking up the address of the speakeasy house I discovered the name of the owner, a Mrs. M.M. Martin. I then went backwards in time, looking up her name year by year, trying to determine who built the house.

I quickly discovered that Mrs. Martin was listed as a widow which was indicated by "wdw" next to her name in 1936. When I got back to 1934 I discovered her deceased husband's name was Celdon F. Martin. Before he passed on Mr. Martin seems to have been a busy guy in Seattle. He was a building contractor (1931), as well as a general contractor and president of the Seattle Construction Company. In the late 1920's he was president of the Lynyale Holding Company. At that time the economy was, well, roaring. Mr. Martin obvi-



Looking out across the bar towards the French doors leading to the side room.

ously had money. He built homes, and a holding company would indicate assets, perhaps even substantial ones.

Mr. Martin's offices were in the Seaboard Building in downtown Seattle. His construction company moved around that building a lot. The room numbers over the years were 827, 823, 826, 613, 612, 505, 503 and 204. He changed floors three times. Certainly one of those moves had to be because his business was growing.

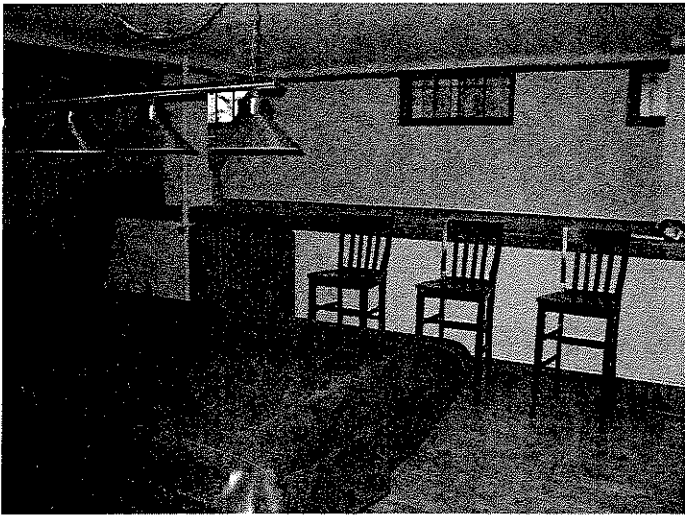
A search of the real estate tax records revealed that the

house was *not* built in 1916 as current records state. In fact in 1921 the land was still vacant. The directory revealed that the Martins lived in the modest house next door which had been built in 1918. Obviously Prohibition had been in effect a number of years before Mr. and Mrs. Martin even decided to



build a house with a speakeasy.

At the City of Seattle Department of Planning an architect, after a complete search of all available records, looked in one last obscure location and found what I had been seeking, a copy of the original permit to build the dwelling. Signed on March 12, 1924, it lists C.F. Martin as the owner, the contrac-



tor and the architect. Assuming construction took at least nine months, the Martins would have moved in sometime in 1925 since that is their address of record in the directory the following year.

Interestingly, a year and a half later in 1926, the owner of the property was listed as a Clinton B. Leigh, who just happened to be a next door neighbor to the east. Further investigation shows that even though Mr. Leigh was listed as the owner, the taxes were being paid by an M.M. Martin. This appears to be a thinly veiled attempt to disguise the ownership of the house, but perhaps there was another reason. Mr. Leigh

was listed again as the owner in 1935.

The information in the tax records is handwritten and often in pencil. You have to wear gloves when you handle the tax books. It feels like history in your hands.

The home's 1938 assessed value was \$2200 and the notes on the card stated "best house in block, all others #2 to 4 (apparently indicating levels of quality). Near schools and car and stores." There were three different owners from 1945 to 1957.

It is easy to conclude that the house was constructed with both of the intentions of having a nice place to live *and* maintaining a bar in the basement invisible to authorities.

Why would a seemingly reputable general contractor decide to engage in a well known criminal activity? Because speakeasies were wildly popular amongst the general population. I would hazard a guess they could be wildly profitable as well.

With Europe devastated and profoundly demoralized by war, a rich and confident America stepped into history's spotlight, impossibly glamorous, stylish, and above all, modern. It radiated self-assurance and boundless energy. The nation was in a festive mood. And the cocktail was its totem.

Women stepped right up to the brass rail and drank with the men. Gin was crowned king.

During Prohibition America's overall consumption levels of alcohol stayed about the same, but those who did drink



drank more and gravitated toward liquor, the bootlegger's choice. Spirits were easier to make, more compact, and less detectable than beer or wine. Prohibition turned a lot of beer and wine drinkers into gin and whiskey drinkers. It changed Americans' drinking habits as well, encouraging the massive binge, the hangover worn as a badge of honor, the barely hidden hip flask, proof that the owner belonged to a dangerous fra-

ternity. After penetrating the inner sanctum of a speakeasy, what was the point of sipping tentatively?

The New York City police stated the number of speakeasies in the Big Apple was 9,000 but one estimate by the *New York Tribune* said there might be as many as 100,000! Extrapolating to a small town like Seattle still means that Mr. and Mrs. Martin's venture was about as far from an isolated experience as you could get.



More views of the room and a photo of the giant walk-in hidden safe, probably not standard equipment in north Seattle homes back then.