

100 Bars in 100 Days

Hops MacBarley's 2012 Key West Bar
Boondoggle
"The Peace, Love, and I.P.A. Tour"

BAR 27:

Shanna Key

www.shannakeyirishpub.com

1900 Flagler Avenue

Monday 8/13, 9:15 pm

Smithwick's Irish Red Ale (draft)

This is the closest bar to my house.
Google Earth says it's all of 403 feet

– that's 135 yards, or 123.3 meters, or 0.08 miles – from my front door to Shanna Key's side door. In a pinch, with a decent warm-up, I could make it there in less than 30 seconds. In my *prime*, mind you, it woulda been about 15, but I am not in my prime no more. Hops is just a slow motion replay of his former self (in drinking too, which is kinda disturbing).

I worked my way through college by barbacking at an Irish bar in the burbs of Boston. The Harp & Bard it was called – now say that out loud in a Boston accent – niiiice -- and it was on US-1 in Norwood. Jacko remembers it well; he worked just down the road at The Club Car, which used a real railroad car as part of its design.

Yup. Same damn highway. US-1. I would defy anyone to drive from there to here using only US-1. I'd give anyone \$20 if they could do it. Twenty U.S. freaking dollars.

Cash! There, the gauntlet has been thrown down. Show me something.



One year, the owners of the H&B challenged another local Irish bar to a St. Patrick's weekend race billed as The Beer Mile. The premise was this: fill up a green beer at the Harp and carry it while you ran the "mile" (later measurement later showed it to be 0.84) to Concannon's Irish Heaven. Now, this was in the mid-70's when "the running boom" was just catching on, and the

ridiculously non-athletic owners of both places were trying to be trendy. What a clueless cast of characters. In less than two years, they ran their goldmine of a bar into the ground with baaaaaad gambling choices. How does an *Irish* bar fail in *Boston*??



The other thing about the mid-70's was that I was a varsity middle-distance track athlete for the screaming BC Eagles then. Some of our team was renowned more for our post-meet keggers than for our speed. We did Chug Relays for time, beer-miles on the track at midnight, naked-beer-miles on the track at 2 a.m., naked-cross-campus-miles at 4 a.m., so.... *carry* a beer? WTF? I don't *drink* it?? What kind of dumbass race is this?? I don't care if it *is* 10:00 a.m. This is beer we're talking about!

So we lit out at a pedestrian pace, Wally and me just jogging along ahead of a herd of cows. What a joke. Not even breathless, we got inside the Heaven, just as the owners/timers' car came screeching in, had our beers measured – hadn't spilled a drop (you got to drink whatever you didn't spill) – and chilled out at the bar while we waited for the herd to waddle in. The barkeep poured us our return beer, but since we had to wait so damn long for everyone, we downed those as soon as he turned around, then pled ignorance.

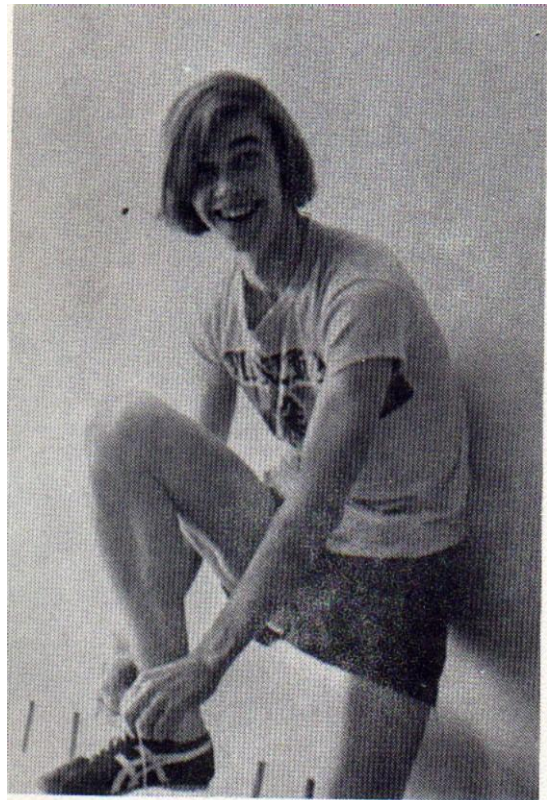
When we finally were ready for the return leg, I just said *Screw this stupid ass shit*, grabbed my beer by the top of the glass for better stability, and hit the damn gas. It took about four minutes on my watch (so I knew it was not a mile!), which gave me time to sit at the bar, chug my green one, have Tommy (my barkeeping mentor, rest his blackberry-brandy-loving soul) pour me a fresh one, chug that, and settle in with a casual one before the timing crew of Moe, Larry, and Shemp came breathlessly through the door. Tommy looked at Moe (our owner) and said in his own dry way, *Where the fuck have you been? You had a fucking CAR, for Crissake!*

But I digress. Speak up when I start doing that, huh?

So, anyway, there's my sillyass self, lacing up the old Onitusaka Tigers, and wearing my good luck *Munich 1972* shirt. Stoned to the bone, and going for an 8-mile run. Jayzuz, how the hell did I *do* that?

Not much to report from Shanna Key on this quiet Monday night, which is part of the reason why I'm filling the space with very thinly connected Irish bar stories. The link was how fast I could have run to this bar in my prime.

S-Key will always be a bar to me, but it's a good restaurant too. I've had my usual fare here several times – burger, or meatloaf, or something else typically carnivorous – and



been quite happy about it: portions and flavor, thumbs up. They have some Irish specialties too, like Shepherd's Pie and Goatherder's Cake. But I rarely eat here for the same reason that I rarely eat at any restaurant; I'm just not quite in the eat-out-every-night economic bracket. There is more money for beer-swilling on the town if I do my eats at home.

They do a bucket of fifty – yes, 50 – chicken wings for \$30. That 60 cents per wing, so put away the calculator. They get good crowds for soccer and for Steelers games, so I bet those wings just fly out of the kitchen. Hahahaha. I kill myself sometimes; most people can only kill themselves once.



It's hard to believe now, but the ESPN Friday Nights Fights boxing thing that draws good crowds to Mallory Square is only 10 years removed from being in the back parking lot of Shanna Key (which was Our Place back then). I remember standing on the sidewalk and watching some decent boxers displaying their pugilistic prowess – standing three feet closer, inside the 3-foot high plastic-net fence, would have cost \$10.

The card also included some "pick-up" bouts as filler. The public was invited to don the gloves and slug it out. Got a beef with someone? Settle it in here. Don't like that guy loud-mouthing next to you at the bar? Challenge him to a round or two. As you can imagine, those were hilarious. They often lost all sense of boxing very early. Trouble is, you just can't fight the way most people really fight when you're wearing those big hand pillows, so that was funny to watch too.

The highlight of that night, though, came about halfway through, when an electric car that was traveling up Bertha came screeching to a halt, and none other than Hulk Hogan stepped out of the driver's seat, fist-pumping and rah-rah-ing the event. Naturally, the crowd turned and flocked to Hulk, and even the boxers stopped in mid-round.

Hulk stayed for only a minute or so. He wanted to give his stamp of approval to the proceedings, but he saw the havoc he was wreaking, and exited stage left. He's not the seven-foot-tall Thunderlips from *Rocky III* fame, you know. He's not even my height. But the Hulk is the Hulk, and he's been making that schtick work for a long time now.

So anywaaaay, this was a Monday night, and I didn't really have any intentions of going out, buuuuuut you know how that all goes sometimes. I texted Jacko to see if he wanted to hit up the Key for "one" and watch some football. Jacko doesn't live as close to it as I do; his front door is a good 30 feet farther than mine. If he begged off, then I'd stay in and veg, maybe do a little keyboard plipping.

But, his response was decisive (and predictable) -- *Be right there.* – so we took the walk.

There were three people at the long bar. Empty seats abounded. I let Jacko lead the way. In certain bars, Jacko gets the notion that he has His Seat. In others, like the Gecko, he never sits at all; his usual seat is on his feet. But for years, at Jack Flats, he'd sit in the same seat at the bar. If it was taken, he'd be shaken. He'd adapt, but grudgingly. And as soon as His Seat was vacated, he would relocate to it. Some things just feel right.

So, I suspected that this was the case here, because we pulled into only two seats that were between the pair and the single near the middle of the bar. The guy to my left gave us kind of a funny look about it, but I just nodded, shrugged and sat. It wasn't quite as bad as being on an empty beach and having somebody plant an umbrella and blanket ten feet away from you, but he still seemed to think we belonged elsewhere.



The barkeep, Nancy, greeted us with good cheer. We responded in kind and ordered up a couple of libations: Smithwick's for me and Miller Lite for Jacko. As she was serving us, for some reason I was saying to Jacko that the first beer that I ever really drank regularly was Falstaff. Yeah, Falstaff. Wow.

Nancy overheard that and a long and lively conversation ensued about our early drinking days, first-time buys at liquor stores, what we drank in high school, and first-ever drunks. It's a little alarming to realize that both she and I did

our first-ever boozin' with Boone's Farm Strawberry Hill wine. It was our first-ever booze-puke as well. And neither of us ever had even a sip of that vile vintage ever since.

The Falstaff part goes back to the Harp & Bard too. As a barback, I busted my butt to keep the bar and all the cocktail waitresses well stocked with booze, ice, glassware, and whatever else they needed. I was good at it, and the waitresses appreciated the effort. They were called *waitresses* back then; *servers* had not yet been invented. And, yes, they were all women. When did the word *waitress* become a bad word?

To show their appreciation, they would take turns sneaking me a beer. The barkeeps did the mixed drinks, but the waitresses poured their own mugs of beer and glasses of wine. On a busy night, nobody ever paid attention to how many beers got poured, so an extra Falstaff draft would soon appear on the window sill behind the curtain back in the bus area. It never got me shitfaced – it was only Falstaff and I was a college dude – but it did make the nights go a bit better. I'd be a good mood, so I'd cheer up the waitresses, and they'd give cheerier service, which meant they'd get better tips, and then I'd get better tip-outs. Win all around. Further proof that beer – even if it is just Falstaff – makes the world better.



I did that job for almost four years, and only stopped because the place couldn't make payroll for a few weeks in a row. Pretty good reason to jump ship. In a lot of ways, that barbacking gig was the best job I ever had.

My first-ever *taste* of beer, though, was Schlitz. Oh yeah. In the can. Dad gave me a taste of his beer when I was about ten. I thought it was horrible. And it was the kind of can that you needed an opener for; you made a triangular cut in opposite sides – that new-fangled hippie pull-tab shit hadn't been invented yet. And what an advance that was: those curly strips of aluminum created tons more litter, and exponentially increased your chances of cutting your foot at the beach.

Well, the Shanna Key "crowd" thinned out quickly. The two people to our right gathered their goods and departed before I ever took a swig. The guy on our left stayed for a while. He once tried to join the conversation, starting a sentence to Nancy, but when she had to dash to the kitchen, he let his sentence die in mid-air and never turned it towards us. Fine. Be that way.

By the time I ordered the second of my "one" beers, that dude had split too. Jacko and I sure have a way with people.

Nancy got a roll with the Memory Lane stampede, and we pretty much deferred to her crazy stories. Being a barkeep sometimes means you're on stage entertaining the masses. Also, I didn't feel the need to get into an *Oh yeah, you think you were stupid, listen to what I did* competition. We just laughed, drank our beers, nodded, and said, *Yup, sounds way too familiar.*

Noise was not a factor this night. In fact, it was almost eerily quiet. When they get a crowd going in here, though, like for a soccer match, or an Irish party day – or when

they've had a band playing – and it's deafening. The walls don't absorb sound, they just bounce it right back at ya, so it gets LOUD in a hurry.

Well, we ostensibly came here to watch football, but we didn't watch a single play. Too busy talking. Nancy said it would get busy between 2:00 and 4:00 AM when the bartenders downtown got off work; Monday nights always do. That would be a long and empty four hours before that was would be happening.

We paid up, wished Nancy well, tipped Nancy well, and set out for the long walk home.

