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ENTERPRISE

By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS



How a Local Bar Holds History Of a Small Town

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Decades ago, places like Guinan's Pub & Country Store in the river hamlet of Garrison, N.Y., were a mainstay of American life -- homes away from home where citizens convened to share pints and swap advice and town gossip. But in this era of big box retailers and chic hotel bars, the neighborhood hangout is an endangered species.



Yet these once-prolific gathering spots hold the stories that make up the history of our nation's towns. When they disappear, so does that history.

In her book "Little Chapel on the River: A Pub, A Town and the Search for What Matters Most," published today, Wall Street Journal small-business columnist

Gwendolyn Bounds explores Guinan's past, present and what the future might hold. She chronicles the struggles of 79-year-old Irish owner Jim Guinan (pronounced Guy-nan), his wife and children to keep the family business alive through the years, and reveals what draws an eclectic cast of patrons, herself included, to the bar.

An excerpt:

* * *

It's March 1977, and a young West Point cadet crouches in the bushes with a fellow classmate, staring intently at the neon signs on the opposite bank of the Hudson River. Night is falling and the red-haired boy, a husky plebe named Thomas Endres, is bored and restless, weary already of the regimen of military life. He's only come to play lacrosse and to live down the words of his father, who told his son when he graduated from high school with his long hair and well-honed disdain for authority: "West Point? You won't be accepted there. It's a man's school."

Right now young Cadet Endres is looking for a diversion and assumes, correctly, that the neon signs across the river belong to a bar of some sort. The cadet is nineteen, old enough to drink legally, but that's of no importance by West Point rules that prohibit drinking within 20 kilometers of the academy when off-post. However, the headstrong cadet figures that by putting a river between him and his instructors, he's probably in pretty safe territory. So as the sun dips below the hills around West Point, Cadet Endres coaxes a buddy down to the academy's yacht club, where they commandeer a dinghy and slip the boat through the weeds and marsh until they are directly across from the twinkling neon lights. Then the pair begins cutting across the river in silence, save the rhythmic dip of the oars rippling through the water.



Their plan might have gone smoothly, except that Cadet Endres underestimates the currents of the Hudson. He's rowing as hard as he can, but the neon signs are slipping past him. Mischievous as always, the river carries the cadets past their mark and finally dumps them ashore several hundred yards downriver, near Arden Point. Sweaty and disheveled, Cadet Endres ties the boat to a tree

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Gwendolyn Bounds
Guinan's Pub & Country Store, featured in the new book "Little Chapel on the River."

stump and the exhausted boys make their way through the muck and up along the train tracks until they reach Jim Guinan's door.

Inside is a crowd of about eight to 12 men. Some are playing darts. The cold, dirty cadets traipse into the back and size up their surroundings. The crowd pauses for a moment to examine the new arrivals, red-faced and breathing hard in their muddied army-issue sweats. It is the bartender who speaks first. "Well, well," says Mr. Guinan with a grin. "I'm glad to see there are still some cadets who have the balls to sneak over here."

* * *

Cadet Endres has a beer. Then he has one more. And one more, and well, just one more until his curfew is fast approaching and he's in no shape to row the boat back across the Hudson with those quick-moving currents. Mr. Guinan realizes this and corrals a well-built and relatively sober guy named Don to drive the boys back over. He pats Cadet Endres on the shoulder and hands him his phone number. Tells him rowing over is fine and shows the proper spirit, but maybe he should just call next time he needs a lift.

The next day, Cadet Endres feels great, although he's a little concerned because he left the rowboat tied to a stump just south of Guinan's. A day and a half later, he tentatively makes his way back to the West Point boathouse to see if he can spot the craft across the river. And there, to his surprise, lashed up snugly in its rightful spot, bobs the stolen vessel. Somehow, the Irish bartender has managed to have it returned with no one the wiser.



Gwendolyn Bounds
View of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point from Guinan's Pub & Country Store.

Cadet Endres stops rowing across the river. But he doesn't stop going back to see Mr. Guinan.

Sometimes the cadet sneaks out with upperclassmen in their cars. For a period during his sophomore year, he hides his own car illegally around the post. In a pinch, he telephones the bar and Mr. Guinan sends someone to pick up him and a few pals at the academy's gate. Mr. Guinan always remembers each of their names and treats them as equals. But that doesn't stop the boys from getting cocky sometimes. They get going playing darts and empty a few beers. Then they start boasting about how they can beat the Irishman at his own game.

One night Mr. Guinan lets them get good and riled up, and then when he's got the attention of the crowd, he stands up and walks around the end of the bar.

Cadet Endres and his buddies are grinning, sure they've got him beat. And then, POW. Mr. Guinan lands a dart right in the bull's-eye. He leans over to the silenced boys and tells them it's important to be able to back up your boasts. That you don't want to be someone who "has flies on 'em."



Guinan Family Archives
Cadet Endres (left) and Jim Guinan (middle) in 1977.

That is to say, don't be a bullsh -- er.

Cadet Endres never gets caught going to Guinan's. And he actually stops hating military life quite so much. He leaves West Point's gates, becomes a pilot and flies with the 101st Airborne Division. But even after he makes his way through Korea and Somalia -- even after he sees the world -- he never forgets Mr. Guinan or Garrison.

Cadet Thomas Endres goes on to become Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Endres. And in 1990, he comes back to the Hudson Highlands with his nephew, son and wife, Sandy, to visit relatives. The colonel decides, for old times' sake, to stop by Guinan's. Warns his family as they are approaching the screen door, "Now I don't know if he'll remember me. It was a long time ago."

The door swings open. Everything looks the same. Wood floors still trampled so tender they almost feel like dirt. Compressors running. Candy counter overflowing. And there, in the back, the colonel sees Mr. Guinan sitting on the far stool leaning against the wall, his head hanging slightly, body backlit by the sunlight so that he's just a silhouette.

Lt. Col. Endres steps into the doorway, and the noise makes Mr. Guinan look up. There isn't even a pause.

"Ahhh," says the barman. "I knew you'd come back, lad."

* * *

West Point graduates only owe a minimum of five years' service after graduation. Yet it's now been almost a quarter of a century since the cadet who never wanted to attend West Point went on active duty. Even more ironically, perhaps, Lt. Col. Endres now works at West Point as director of all cadet activities. He's grown into a charismatic, barrel-chested man who's built neat and muscular like a spark plug. His blondish-red hair is cropped into a sharp military flattop.



Gwendolyn Bounds
Lt. Col. Tom Endres (left) and
Jim Guinan in 2004.

The colonel takes his job seriously -- managing a multimillion dollar operation, running hundreds of clubs and teams, restaurants, all entertainment and everything extracurricular the cadets do. But on Monday afternoons he'll hop in his silver Porsche and slip across the river to the little green bar of his youth where everyone just calls him Colonel Tom.

If it's summer, Lt. Col. Endres will have his own boat tied up (legally this time) down at the dock under Mr. Guinan's window. The colonel's own home has become something of a halfway house for cadets these days, and many afternoons he and his wife linger around the bar waiting to bring a few bright-eyed boys to their place for a home-cooked meal. Sometimes Mr.

Guinan will come out to sit at the colonel's elbow. In front of the two men is a picture tucked into the corner of the bar's cracked mirror. The image captures a baby-faced Lt. Col. Endres as a cadet, seated at the bar, impish grin spreading over an empty glass, as a much younger Mr. Guinan stands nearby raising his full glass to the camera.

Lt. Col. Endres is not one for bulls -- t. No, he learned that lesson well. But ask him what he thinks about his days of endless beer and darts and tales and he'll tell you this and he'll look you in the eye.

"It was one beautiful, warm time."

Adapted from the book, "Little Chapel on the River: A Pub, A Town and the Search for What Matters Most" by Gwendolyn Bounds. Copyright 2005 by Gwendolyn Bounds. Published by William Morrow, HarperCollins Publishers.

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