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History of Neighborhood Corner Bars Explored in New Exhibition at Baltimore Museum of Industry

Baltimore, Maryland -- The Baltimore Museum of Industry (BMI) will open a new exhibition on Thursday, October 12 exploring the role of corner bars in Baltimore neighborhoods. Titled *The Neighborhood Corner Bar: A Baltimore Story, 1870-1920*, the exhibition will be permanent.

From the 1870s to 1920, corner bars—or saloons—became fixtures in working-class neighborhoods throughout Baltimore. Made possible by the direct sponsorship of breweries, corner bars were social centers where patrons could grab a “free lunch” with the purchase of a five-cent drink, discuss politics and labor organizing, send and receive mail, cash paychecks, and even find jobs or financial assistance. Warm in winter and cool in summer, these “workingman’s clubs,” as they were known, provided community and security for the regulars who made them their own.

As social institutions, corner bars reflected the segregated and exclusionary practices of their time and place. For one, they were almost exclusively male. Working women could partake in free lunch—provided they entered the side door, or the “ladies entrance” and ate in the back room. In the evenings, working-class women would get their beer to go, a practice called “rushing the growler,” and would then partake with neighbor women on stoops in courtyards where they could keep a watchful eye on children playing. Black patrons could not enter the saloons through any door in white or white ethnic neighborhoods for fear of rejection or outright violence for attempting to cross the color line in segregated Baltimore.

“The corner bar was a microcosm of the neighborhood it served, reflecting the heritage and values of the nearby residents—even their views on political and social issues” says Rachel Donaldson, curator of exhibitions and collections at the BMI. “George Ruth, father of George Herman “Babe” Ruth, displayed his views on the labor movement by hanging a “*Union Bar*” sign over the entrance to his saloon. Beyond just watering holes, corner bars were spaces for discussion among patrons, becoming vital community centers in the neighborhoods.”

Like other galleries at the BMI, *The Neighborhood Corner Bar* exhibition is immersive. The exhibition features a long wooden bar with a brass rail and a mirrored cabinet in the rear, both flanked by historic beer advertisements, sample menus, and photographs—many of them

donated by local family members of past bar owners during community collecting events held around the city.

This project has been financed in part with State Funds from the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority, an instrumentality of the State of Maryland, and Maryland State Department of Commerce. The opening reception is made possible by PNC Bank.

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The Baltimore Museum of Industry is located at 1415 Key Highway, Baltimore MD 21230. Free onsite parking is available. Tickets and information at www.thebmi.org and on Facebook and Instagram at @BMlatWork.