

PunchDrunk: The Life and Death of the American Pool Hall

Once a game of high society, pool—and the oft-demonized pool hall—have experienced a muddled history in both pop culture and real life. Sarah Baird on how the bad boy of barrooms is aging in 21st-century America.

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Of all the barroom games out there—from darts to video poker—pool has always struck me as the most romantic, even in supremely decrepit environs. It’s a game for strategists. It’s also a game long tied to societal ills, with pool halls serving as the much-maligned dens of sin where game and drink rendezvous.

These seedy associations have become so commonplace over the course of the 20th century, that it’s difficult to imagine pool’s previous, far more respectable, incarnations as a game beloved by Renaissance-era monarchs and Civil War soldiers (who even collected trading cards of their favorite billiard players).

In the 21st century, the game’s havens are once again experiencing the kind of identity crisis that often comes with age. Like the former bad boy who succumbs to a bad back and trades in his motorcycle for a Subaru, pool halls are just not as wild as they used to be.

When I went looking for a holdout in Memphis last fall, all signs pointed me towards the legendary People’s Billiard Club. Founded in 1904, People’s firmly carries the torch as the oldest continually operating pool hall in the city and, perhaps, the entire country. Just a stroll away from the roving packs of tourists humming Joe Jackson’s “Walking in Memphis” and the Technicolor blight of Hard Rock Café, People’s scripted neon fizzed modestly in the night sky.

Now over a century old, the bar was—during the “golden age” of pool in the early 20th century—an emblem of rip-roaring, pool shark culture and a haven for beer swilling men, where roughnecks and Tennessee gentlemen engaged in friendly competition over a shot and a beer. Even during my visit, it seemed as if I had accidentally strolled into a meeting of a secret, chalk-dust baptized fraternity. Like so much of barroom culture, pool halls have long been male-dominated territory, the game’s competitive ferocity adding a helping of testosterone to the clubhouse mix.

While the exact origins of the game itself is muddled at best, we do know that the game was played in 15th-century European royal courts and is referenced in French nobles' journals as well as Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Even as the church consistently demonized it, pool found friends in high places, from wealthy businessmen to Abraham Lincoln, who called the game "health-inspiring."

By the 1920s, the pool hall had fallen from grace to become the poster child for liquor-tinged depravity, and a place for men to escape from the societal structures of home and family. Amongst the church-pew whisperers—who feared gambling nearly as much as hard booze—there was a belief that the game itself could lead their innocent children down a path of wicked drunkenness.

A scene from the *The Music Man*—the 1962 classic musical about the infiltration of pool hall culture into a wholesome Iowa town (c. 1912)—is an embodiment of this fear. In the film, con man Harold Hill's signature song extolls (as a means to his own end) how playing pool is the "gateway drug" that turn boys into carousing ne'er-do-wells:

"Oh, you've got trouble! Right here in River City! With a capital 'T' and that rhymes with 'P' and that stands for 'pool!'"

"[Pool is] the first big step on the road, to the depths of degrada—I say, first, medicinal wine from a teaspoon, then beer from a bottle!"

The Music Man hit during the sweet spot of pool's second coming on the silver screen, depicting the gilded excess of the Robber Baron-era. This wealth encouraged the construction of billiard halls for gaming gentlemen who also enjoyed a drink and an occasional scuffle. It was during the 1950s, though, that pool halls became a seedy pop culture phenomenon.

This mid-20th-century movement was primarily fueled by hunky Paul Newman's turn as the pool shark "Fast" Eddie Felson in 1959's *The Hustler*, which portrayed the world of pool halls as seething with boozy, working class indignation. When Felson meets his love interest Sarah Packard, she reveals how a prim looking girl like herself found the pool hall side of the tracks:

Eddie: *So why go to college?*

Sarah: *Got nothing else to do on Tuesdays and Thursdays.*

Eddie: *What do you do on the other days?*

Sarah: *I drink.*

For spaces so long associated with this booze-fueled chaos, the physical layout of pool halls is often marked by meticulous, rank-and-file order. Behind the biker buddies at the People's bar, rows and columns of emerald-topped rectangles formed a grid across the pool hall floor so tidy it's as if someone attempted to [LARP](#) an Excel spreadsheet, with each pool table operating as its own, uniform cell. This Spartan aesthetic choice is, of course, most apparent when a pool hall is all but empty and the clink of a few rogue ice cubes in a watered down glass echoes with greater fervor than cue against ball.

Pool halls are often found this way today, existing not as hot beds of pearl clutching, hard drinking debauchery but slow burn activity with occasional seismic spikes. On any given night in the New Orleans area a steady in-and-out trickle of regulars, billiard league semi-pros and emboldened first-date goers make area halls hum.

Of course, this is not to say pool halls are now saintly institutions. A quick search for "[pool halls](#)" in the *Baltimore Sun* archives from the past 20 years reveals headlines that read like midcentury stereotypes: *Liquor board fines pool hall and tavern! Four masked gunmen rob late night crowd at pool hall!*

Even the National Republican Campaign Committee still believes that pool is, at least, a *little* scandalous. In an August 2014 press release, they accused President Obama of being "more interested in playing pool, drinking beers and grabbing burgers." Furthermore, they equate it with slouchery: "So it's no surprise a majority of Americans now view President Obama and his administration as incompetent."

If only members of Congress could break into a well-choreographed dance number to support this accusation, à la *The Music Man*.

But one-off instances of pool hall scandal—real or fabricated—have little bearing on how these dens operate today. Strict laws, which so famously banned the sale of alcohol in pool halls, have been mostly lifted for decades, even in small towns that still pride themselves on a teetotaler mentality. Franklin, North Carolina’s 1948 ban on drinking in pool halls was one of the final ones to go, repealed with some degree of consternation in 2011.

“Folks, let’s face it, our demographics are changing,” [said Franklin Alderman Bob Scott](#). “I think the old ordinance is a lot like one of those old ordinances that you can’t hitch your horse to a parking meter.”

Perhaps, pool halls are simply learning how to age gracefully. A little quieter and rusty around the edges, they can relax into comfortable barroom seniority, with liquor as an unwavering, faithful life partner instead of a Clyde to its Bonnie.

When I saddled up on a stool at People’s last year, a particularly gruff bartender asked me, “You play pool?” pulling himself away from the Duck Dynasty reruns playing on the bar’s TV to reveal he could easily pass for an extra on the show. The hall was a ghost town, except for a pair of bikers in patch-covered, fringe-lined leather vests cracking open Miller Lites.

I garbled a “no” and quickly ordered a Jack Daniels, wishing to god I could better fake how to hold a pool cue.

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