PECULIAR PITTSBURGH (HTTPS://ARCHIVE.THEINCLINE.COM/STORIES/PECULIAR-PITTSBURGH/)

The Barmaid Bill, forbidding Pittsburgh women from bartending, was overturned 50 years ago this month

The law reflected Americans' complex relationship with liquor — and its leaders' views on women.

A 1900s-era saloon in Pittsburgh's South Side. All men. COURTESY OF HEINZ HISTORY CENTER

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Just 50 years ago in Pittsburgh, a woman couldn't stir mixed drinks or pour shots, under an archaic Pennsylvania law banning women from working behind the bar.

Lawmakers repealed the Barmaid Bill five decades ago this month, dropping the patriarchal edict that had been set because of questions about women's morality.

"It's pretty incredible that this happened in Pittsburgh. It is a big deal," said Cat Cannon, Federal Galley bar manager and secretary of the U.S. Bartenders' Guild Pittsburgh chapter. "Our city is really female-dominated, especially in the craft cocktail scene, which is super cool, and more than most, more than any market I've ever seen. Pittsburgh's getting a lot of national attention in the bar community."

These days, Pittsburgh's women bartenders are shaping the direction of spirits and influencing what we drink and why. Cannon ticks off some names: Nicole Battle, Maggie Meskey, LG Swanson, Kimber Weissert, the list goes on.

To understand the law that would have kept those women from tending bar requires a dive into history stretching back to the very beginning of Americans' relationship with liquor — and its leaders' views on women. After stumbling upon mention of the Barmaid Bill, Heinz History Center and Wigle Whiskey teamed up this summer to research the act and told *The Incline* about its history.

Back in colonial times, women worked as tavern keepers, as well as behind the bar, said Leslie Przybylek, Heinz History Center senior curator. In rural communities, the tavern operated as a place for food, drinks and sometimes even overnight accommodations for travelers.

"It was a different kind of institution," Przybylek said. "For smaller communities, it was often the largest building in the town. It was more of a public space."

But as the decades wore on, things changed. The Industrial Revolution churned at a fast pace. Taverns transitioned into saloons — and saloons were a place for men.

"What happens is in the mid-1800s, as the saloon becomes the dominant place where men are drinking, it became more and more unacceptable for women to be there and to be there at all and certainly to be working at the establishment," Przybylek said, noting that Pittsburgh city records show about 40 female saloon keepers during that time. "The catch with the saloon is when it became this male-centered drinking hall."

Many saloons were the place men stopped after (or before) their shift at the mill, Przybylek said. Some were nothing more than a room with a dirty bar where thirsty patrons could grab a drink and go. Others were nicer than the tenements people called home at that time — a place where men could find a usable restroom.

“A lot of men used the saloon as their version of the social club,” she said. “The saloon was (for) the German immigrant, the Italian immigrant, their version of the social club.”

At this turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh bar, note the Pittsburgh Brewing Co. sign at right and the boy with a growler (likely sent to pick up beer for his parents). COURTESY OF HEINZ HISTORY CENTER

In that era, bars were situated in many of the same places you find Pittsburgh watering holes today: Allegheny City, Lawrenceville, the South Side and Downtown, which was home to the fancy bars, the hotel bars and the bars where the politicians hung out, per History Center research.

Around the 1870s came the rise of the “waiter girl saloon,” a place where young female waitresses served drinks to men.

“That was seen as really scandalous,” Przybylek said. “The reputation was that the women were going around table to table, and the men were ordering more than drinks.”

Around 1878, a law passed in Pittsburgh forbidding women to work as waitresses in saloons. But women could still work behind the bar if they owned the establishment. It was seen as a question of “respectability,” Przybylek said, like “What is a woman doing in this very male space?”

One Pittsburgher wasn’t having it with that law, said Allison Burns, director of sales at Wigle Whiskey, who’s worked with the History Center for several years on this research. Fannie Walters owned a Diamond Alley waiter girl saloon. To evade the 1878 law, she promoted all of her female waiters to “business partners” and shared a percentage of the profits.

“If you were a woman who owned the saloon or if you were the wife of an owner, they sort of looked the other way,” Burns said.

The case went all the way to the state Supreme Court, with Walters gaining national fame. Ultimately, the court sided with the existing law instead of the enterprising bar owner, realizing her practice was just a way to work around the system.

Also in this era, temperance movements had been stirring, and this activism became the next big moment in booze culture.

In protest of alcohol, women marched the streets of Pittsburgh, singing hymns, and holed up in saloons to disrupt the crowds, running church services there instead. In one late 1800s temperance crusade, Burns said, 33 Pittsburgh women faced charges of disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace.

And then came Prohibition — and it changed everything.

Women and men alike got into the illegal hooch business, and some argue women were more effective bootleggers, as they were less likely to be searched or treated aggressively.

After Prohibition, each state created its own laws governing alcohol. In 1939, Pennsylvania created the now-defunct Barmaid Bill forbidding women from mixing drinks but allowing them to deliver drinks to patrons, Burns said. Curiously, the law only applied to Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Scranton.

“Women were not allowed to do anything we think of as a traditional bartending role,” Burns said. “You were not allowed to pour a shot of liquor into a glass. You could only touch a finished product like a bottle of beer or a finished cocktail.”

The law curried favor from unions who didn’t want women taking jobs from men and from churches and conservative groups with questions about women’s morals, Burns said. Bar owners who broke the law were subject to a $100 fine and three months in jail.

Nearly three decades passed.

“It doesn’t circle back again until 1967 when they believe that times have been changed, and women have every right to start serving drinks,” Burns said.

The change was sweeping: In addition to lifting the ban on female bartenders, the new action allowed the sale of alcohol on Sundays and permitted the sale of alcohol in stadiums. Gov. Raymond Shafer signed it into law in December 1967.

Cat Cannon at Smallman Galley. COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER SPROWLS

For Cannon of Federal Galley, the anniversary of the repeal is worth celebrating. She’s worked as a bartender at Smallman Galley, lead bartender at Wallace’s TapRoom at Hotel Indigo and senior bartender at Union Pig & Chicken. She’s also a volunteer tour guide at Wigle Whiskey, and she was a part of The Incline’s Who’s Next: Drink class (https://theincline.com/2017/05/16/whos-next-drink-meet-the-15-young-pittsburghers-raising-the-bar-for-the-citys-beverage-scene/).

“My life would have no meaning unless I was slinging hooch, I say it every day,” Cannon said.

She loves balancing a cocktail, interacting with guests and making Cosmos (“I don’t care what anyone says,” she said, “cosmos are delicious”).

After bursting the Barmaid Bill, the cocktail renaissance followed, and women begin to again play a role in the conversation about bartending and alcohol — just as they did centuries ago.

“We’re reclaiming a space that doesn’t need to be reclaimed,” Burns said. “We were always there. We’re just being louder.”

Discover ‘American Spirits: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition’ (https://archive.theincline.com/2017/12/21/discover-american-spirits-the-rise-and-fall-of-prohibition/)

In this new History Center exhibit, travel back in time to the era of flappers, suffragists, bootleggers and temperance workers. See a Prohibition-era “rum runner” motorboat, a re-created speakeasy and original ratification copies of the 18th and 21st Amendments. The exhibition will explore Pittsburgh's connections to Prohibition through historic artifacts. Fun fact: The term "speakeasy" was coined just outside of Pittsburgh in McKeesport. The exhibit opens Feb. 10.

WHERE: Heinz History Center at 1212 Smallman St. (Strip District)

WHEN: February 10, 2018 at 10:00 a.m.

Find out more(http://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/exhibits/american-spirits)