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The Dutch Taps Into History

by [Dan Pearson](#)

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New London tavern and its precursor, The Oak, one of Eugene O'Neill's watering holes

New London -- In 1912, when [Eugene O'Neill](#) was a cub reporter with a thirst for ale, a 10-ounce Narragansett or Ballantine could be had for a nickel in any one of the 27 taverns that lined Bank Street.

After a day covering society weddings or sleeping off a hangover in the newsroom of the New London Morning Telegraph, O'Neill would find himself within walking distance of 69 bars where he could drink away the pain of his family life on Pequot Avenue.

It's a good bet he squinted against the gaslights of every one of them.

Until Prohibition and the world wars changed the way America socialized, the tavern was every neighborhood's community center, its belly stove providing the heat that ramshackle apartment buildings and Federal-era homes could not.

Now, at the close of the century, drinking mores, dietary habits and the entire conception of a bar have changed all that. But, at 66 years old, the Dutch Tavern on Green Street, with its century-old recipe for potato salad, undulating tin ceiling, dark wooden interior and taciturn regulars, remains a throwback.

"It's never really changed. It has always been just like home, or at least the way you wanted your home to be," Al "Scottie" Devlin, 80, a longtime Dutch regular, said, sitting at one of the tavern's tables. "It was always congenial like any neighborhood tavern where you meet your friends, tell your tall stories and drink all the beer you could for whatever money you had."

Since it got a tavern license from the State Liquor Control Board when Prohibition ended in 1933, the Dutch has been owned and operated by five men and one woman. Attempts to make changes - albeit few and minor - have caused ripples. Sprinkling paprika on the potato salad had some patrons taking sides.

During Prohibition, the bar was used as storage space for tires and scrap rubber by the property's owners, the W.S. Alling Rubber Co. In 1933, Mauritz M. "Dutch" Nauta, the former steward at the Order of Hermann Sons, more commonly known as the German Club, bought the building from the rubber company, built the 25-foot-long bar, and advertised that he had "spared no expense in outfitting the establishment to meet the demands of a high class trade."

Edward Rothen and Louis "Wicky" Grabner Jr., bartenders at the German Club, bought the business in 1951 for \$1,100. Except for inserting their recipe for German potato salad into the afternoon menu and employing their friend, George Connaughton, to help with the lunch rush, they made almost no changes.

In 1978, Peter Burgess, a few years out of the Navy, left his father's contracting business in Groton to take over the tavern. Much to the consternation of the silver-haired regulars who sat laconically at the bar, Burgess installed a [Pac-Man](#) video game and let a group of young performers stage original dramatic pieces in the bar.

Last summer, after working behind the bar off and on for 15 years, Peter Detmold, guitarist and singer for the rock band the Reducers, and his partner, Martha Conn, both a part of the vibrant arts scene in the city during the late 1970s and early 1980s, became the [latest New London residents](#) to extinguish the Dutch's neon lamp each night.

Before the Dutch, another tavern operated in the same space on Green Street. In 1906, when bars on the corners of Green and State and Green and Golden streets closed or moved, John H. Murphy, a steward at the Thames Club, opened The Oak. Legend has it that O'Neill, the future [Nobel Prize-winning](#) playwright, drank there, probably in 1912 and 1913 during his days as a hard-drinking reporter when he lived in his parents' [summer home](#) on Pequot Avenue.

After Prohibition, and for the next decade, according to Nauta's son Bob, however, O'Neill, who was third cousin of Nauta's wife, Julia Doyle Kelly Nauta, unequivocally came into the Dutch on sporadic Friday nights to play Pitch with Nauta, Art McGinley, a sports editor at The Hartford Times and old friend of the playwright's, and the Dutch regulars who remembered the playwright from his hellion days as a reporter.

In fact, it's possible that O'Neill combined his recollections of The Oak and the Dutch with those of the bowery dives he frequented to create Harry Hope's bar in "[The Iceman Cometh](#)."

According to biographers and legend, O'Neill drank so heavily at The Oak and elsewhere that he often returned to the Telegraph newsroom, curled up on his desk and slept. If The Oak's interior was anything like that of the Dutch's it might have been a suitable place for O'Neill to escape the eyes of society mothers worried that the aspiring writer was turning their daughters to demon drink.

Today, a patina covers every bit of reflective brass and glass in the tavern, combining with the mahogany and chestnut-colored wainscoting to inspire introspection. The beeps and buzzes of a pinball machine interrupt the low monotone of a baseball announcer's play-by-play. A clock bearing a [Guinness logo](#) sounds the hours, but, for the most part, the Dutch exists quietly outside of time.

But the memories linger.

"Swede (Hendrickson) never tried to strike up a conversation with you just because you were on the barstool next to him. He respected the Dutch for what it was," patron Bill Hurshman said, remembering a regular known for never putting down his [Western novel](#) unless it was to eye a [Western movie](#) on the [television](#).

"He was very sensitive about infringing on anybody's time or space."

The Dutch basement offers testament to the building's longevity, which according to some accounts extends to colonial days. The story is told that the building survived [Benedict Arnold](#)'s burning of the city because a Tory officer was a relative of the landlady, perhaps foreshadowing the Dutch's charmed existence. Layers of wooden floors, now covered by black-and-white linoleum, are buttressed by raw oak logs the diameter of a hubcap. The logs are reinforced by two solid wooden beams.

When Burgess first inspected the upstairs of the Dutch he found panels drawn with 1940's cartoon characters. The drawings were done by [Winnie Winkle](#) comic artist Martin Branner, a former [Oswegathchie](#) resident who participated in monthly Air Raid Warden meetings during World War II above the Dutch. Dutch Nauta used to say the beer and sandwiches he brought to Branner and the other wardens was the "Dutch's contribution to the war effort."

The tavern's finished and refinished tables have slots for drinks and cards. Sepia-tinted photographs of downtown New London and Dutch patrons mix with such mementos as swordfish bills, rusted tin beer trays, dusty cans of [Banks](#) and [Billy Beer](#), an [antlered jackalope head](#), and a charcoal drawing of O'Neill. Five feet from an autographed photo of [Hall of Fame](#) slugger [Orlando Cepeda](#) and a shelf of sports trivia books hangs the bar's most enduring icon, a [1943 picture](#) of Red Sox outfielder Ted Williams shaking hands with Babe Ruth - the pair's first meeting - in Boston's Fenway Park.

Devlin, the venerable regular, said that since World War II the Dutch has been a great place to play pitch and talk baseball because the beer and the food are cheap. The bar keeps Devlin's favorite Ballantine on hand for his weekly visits.

Before Devlin ever set foot in the bar, however, there were already a group of men from the German Club, sailors, longshoremen, and downtown merchants who came for the Dutch's potato salad and pot roast, made by Nauta's wife Julia, and the nickel Narragansetts and Hull's. A native of Lleuwarden, Holland, who came to America, by hopping a ship, Nauta, the Dutch's namesake, worked his way north from Baltimore to New London in the belief that there was a large Dutch population in the city. He was wrong, so he joined the [Coast Guard](#), returned and began working at the New London Shipping and Engine (later [Electric Boat](#)) and began picking up extra money bartending at the German Club.

In 1933, when prohibition ended, the quiet and stern bartender, who eventually lost a leg to diabetes, bought the Dutch. For the next two decades, he would walk down or take the trolley from Ledyard Street at 6 p.m., to play cards with the entirely male clientele who frequented the tavern. At the time, the bar was exactly the same as it is now except for the seafaring and nautical prints that hung on the walls as reminders of Nauta's Coasty days and a ornate glassware Planter's Peanut jar. With the sleeves of his white shirt rolled, smoking a cigar, Dutch would say that the tavern enabled him to "raise seven kids on nickel beer."

Devlin first visited the Dutch in 1946, having seen action in the Pacific during the war. Then, he recalled hyperbolically, a beer and a burger with "what must have been a pound of meat" cost a quarter. The Dutch's hamburger meat was specially ground at the California Fruit and Produce market, then at 79 State Street; if there was a trace of fat when it hit the grill, it was returned.

Devlin and other employees of the Crocker House hotel would sneak over to the Dutch during work for a few pints.

Grabner was an affable but sometimes crotchety man who would perform the "changing of the apron" with Rothen at approximately 4 p.m. every day. Rothen was a meticulous but prickly bartender who always wore a clean white shirt and tie to work. He and Grabner often fought over whether or not Grabner had cleaned the grill or other similar topics. Their vitriolic disagreements often transferred to patrons who caught them at a bad moment.

On [St. Patrick's Day](#), he dyed the beer green and wore an emerald-color tie. Sometimes, Rothen and Grabner would open the bar especially for cadets or construction workers staying at the Crocker House during holidays. Burgess and Detmold and Conn have continued the tradition of holiday parties.

Rothen was adamant about keeping women out of the bar. State blue laws dictated as much. He told his wife that he wouldn't want to serve the type of woman who would visit a tavern by herself. It's been said that when the blue laws changed Rothen threatened to remove the stools so that no woman would be able to sit at the bar.

Although he inherited Rothen's love of the Dutch, Burgess, when he took over in the 1970s, encountered a different scene. The lowering of the drinking age to 18 brought a new clientele that included students. Women and men were equally represented at the bar. Employees and patrons of the nearby Stereolab stereo store on State Street made up a new lunchtime crew interested in music and New London's potential to foster an arts scene. The regulars continued to include retired Electric Boat workers and longshoremen living in a nearby "gentlemen's" hotel."

Through the efforts of the Tavern Players, and bands such as Detmold's Reducers, the Dutch became the nucleus of a local artistic renaissance.

At the time, the [El 'n' Gee](#), now a music club, was a somnolent "old man's bar" operated by Louis "Louie" and Georgia Yacovow. When the Reducers drew more than a hundred fans who drank more than \$400 worth of Yacovow's bottled Budweiser, the music of the New Johnny Five, Paisley Jungle and the Reducers became a weekly fixture, benefiting both the Gee and, 50 yards down the street, the Dutch.

Founded in 1980, the Players brought business and new life to the Dutch with performances of plays. Heavily influenced by O'Neill's barroom settings, their dramas dealt with local topics and history.

"Babe Ruth Meets Ted Williams," a play performed in 1980, imagined what took place between the two Hall of Famers the day the photo in the Dutch was taken. "Whaler's Whittle" examined the city's 19th century whaling business.

Whenever the Players performed, the tavern would fairly heave with hard-drinking fans. Performances and rehearsals were beer-soaked evenings during which cast members might end up dozing on the floor or in the alcove window.

"I can't describe what it was like to be downstairs hearing all the noise upstairs, all the feet moving and the voices. It was exhilarating," said John Maynard, a Player and a part-time bartender. "People would be out the door."

One of the key members of the Dutch community during Burgess' ownership was the raconteur and former merchant marine Wendell Gomes. Living at the Mohican Hotel and the YMCA, Gomes, according to many, was a tavern "figurehead." When Gomes walked in, usually with his brother, Kendall, people in his "pole position" seat at the front end of the bar would make way.

Gomes' bawdy "Sea Stories" of his global experiences as a merchant mariner became part of the Tavern Players' performances. Before Burgess put in sideboard heating, Gomes would come in during the winter and sit silently in a chair over the scalding jet of heat coming up through a grate in the floor.

Detmold said that when he first walked into the bar at 17 or 18, the old men there looked at him as if he were a mosquito they hoped would go away. But because of the cheap Schmitts and [Pabst](#) and the placid interior, Detmold decided to stay.

"I have a real affection for those old guys," Detmold said. "I always felt it was their place."

Detmold said that while the city has changed the bar hasn't. The New London Mall and later Crystal Mall wiped out small downtown businesses. Afternoon drinks and alcohol in general are less commonplace. The simple tavern that serves only beer and wine is all but an anachronism.

Nevertheless, a new generation has taken up baseball scorebooks at the bar. During weekday afternoons, tables are still filled by stockbrokers, city employees, deliverymen and retired pipefitters who sip a lager or cola while they read the newspapers.

In the summer, State Street attorneys in seersucker suits still sit by the fan with a beaded glass of Shaefer and wax nostalgic about the days after World War II when neighborhood taverns like the Dutch graced nearly every street corner.

Ray Ware no longer comes in off the [Fishers Island](#) ferry after a day of house painting to eat shards of glass. Cowboy Sheehan no longer shadowboxes in the tavern's picture window. Harry Rodvugin, who lived for free in the [Lighthouse Inn](#) for a quarter century in return for his paintings, no longer comes in carrying his calfskin of wine, loaf of bread and wedge of cheese. Nauta's nationally known bowlegged cat, who was featured in a Ripley's Believe it or Not panel, no longer sleeps in the alcove window.

But, the Dutch is still open, the Red Sox still haven't won the World Series since the tavern opened under that name, and the beer, six days a week, seven during football season, still is cold.

"When the Reducers toured we used to look for places like the Dutch and I realized that except for maybe in New York or Boston there aren't places like this," Detmold said. "I started worrying that the place would change and there would be too many neon signs and a CD jukebox."

"I feel like I'm carrying on a tradition. The Dutch will do fine regardless of what happens to New London. If New London falls down, it will last. It's lasted this long."

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