



Newport's White Horse Tavern

by M. D. Carnegie

When architectural plans for what became the Rhode Island State House were drafted in the 1730s, Newport officials became embroiled in bitter controversy about the direction the new building should face. The avant-garde thought it should be toward the waterfront and the town's main thoroughfare, a nod to commerce at a time when Newport was one of the most important cities in the colonies. A vocal faction of traditionalists demurred, countering that it should point at the tavern hard by, to which the General Council was in the habit of repairing, and which, at half-a-century-old, was already something of an institution itself.

Well, the old State House is now home to District Court, whence the felonious can barely catch sight of the Atlantic for all the tony harborfront shops, and nowadays Rhode Island pols are more likely to be discovered in the minimum-security wing of the state correctional facility. But the White Horse Tavern still stands, smack where it was built in 1673. It is the oldest continuously operating public house in our United States.

Though the thirsty can no longer fortify themselves with a dram of crank, much of the tavern has remained as it ever was. Outside, a hand-painted wooden sign announces simply: Cocktails. Inside, the floors are still black and unlevel, the enormous central fireplace still roars. There is no piped-in music, no buffalo wings or nachos supreme. Food, of the French variety, is available in helpings inversely proportional to their expense, and the several dining rooms attract a necessarily well-financed crowd, whose cash is largely as *nouvelle* as the cuisine. Newporters like things that are

old, however, especially money, and in the town where Cornelius Vanderbilt is still thought a bit of an *arriviste*, it is the bar at the White Horse that is the last refuge of those who make their money the old-fashioned way—by inheriting it.

There were at least six licensed taverns operating in the town by 1691, and competition for the tippler's farthing was keen. Location counted for a great deal, as the State House architectural flap showed. And cultivation of the right clientèle, as always, was critical. The Marquis of Granby, a competing pub, was



the favored watering-hole of the Hessian soldiers in the Fusileers. Secret plans were routinely discussed there over a few steins, and the Hessians believed themselves so secure in their native tongue that they never bothered to clear the place out when talking business. Anyhow, they'd never have tossed out the barmaid who served them; young Gertrude had emigrated from Germany at age three, young enough to learn accent-free English. She listened to everything, then passed the information to a patron, a slave named Cudjo, who would then get word to the local patriots. The rest, as they say, is history: the Marquis of Granby closed after the war.

The first owner of the White Horse on record was the lesser-known Willie

Mays. He handed it down to his son, but Mays *fils* was already in the midst of a staggeringly successful career as arms-dealer, rum-trader, and at-large privateer. The place was then acquired by Jonathan Nichols, who would become deputy-governor of Rhode Island. The White Horse stayed in the Nichols family for two hundred years. It changed hands several times before being purchased by a group of Texans a decade or so ago. That sale raised a few hackles around town, with some public hand-wringing about selling off a piece of local history, and a good deal of venting of local prejudices against Southerners. Just yards away, after all, Ted Turner had capped off a successful defense of the America's Cup by staggering fifth-in-hand off the side of the dock, and plunging flush into the briny deep. But the gentlemen from Texas took some pains to quell native suspicion, and in fact only two great changes have been made during their tenure. The tavern is now also the titular Atlantic headquarters for the Fort Worth Yacht Club, and it now operates at a profit.

There are guidebooks that will tell you people visit Newport for the fabulous mansions of the swells, but they are also the sorts of books that advise which pricey waterfront café serves the better eggs Florentine, and how your holiday would be incomplete without a stop at the village scrimshoner's. They are not to be trusted. In fact people come to Newport, in the summer at least, because it is full of blonde girls, heartbreakingly beautiful blonde girls. There are German *au pairs* and Grosse Pointe debutantes, Manhattan photo assistants and Aussie round-the-world sailors. There are baronesses, tennis pros, and jewelry-designers here; there are rich heiresses with trust funds. They are all

M.D. Carnegie is a writer living in Rhode Island.

blonde. Of a summer's evening, there are more blondes in this town than in the Swedish Green party.

And, as my Palestinian date remarked on our walk to the White Horse, they are often half in the bag. A beautiful and historic seaport town full of drunken blondes is apt to be popular with *l'homme sportif*, and as we waded through the sea of sweatshirts from colleges I'd never heard of, she allowed as how the forms of courtship in the West appalled her—the drunken whoops, the upsetting of trash receptacles, the public profanity, the puking. It was a warm and typical summer night in Newport. I thought the White Horse would be the perfect antidote.

As always, the patrons, nattily turned out in loafers and cranberry trousers, looked like a Cos Cob alderman's assembly. These were men who had spent their lives sailing and negotiating bond deals, and now they were having a few Scotches with which to wind it down. Life must have seemed very fine to them, and I felt a twinge of nostalgia for the days before the World Wrestling Federation and *Animal House*. We took seats at the bar. On my right sat a woman, fortyish, and to her right was her date, a stout Beau Bridges *manqué* sort of character with that great perturbless visage of the well-to-do. As they were a bit lit up, they broke custom and asked us where we came from. Kuwait, my date responded, to which the man said, "Fine country," sounding as much like a Hemingway safari guide as he could. He had just been to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE working on some large communications deal.

"Too many weeks without a drink, I'll say," he said, grinning warmly and applying the finishing touches to his old-fashioned. My date nodded knowingly, though as a faithful Muslim she has never tasted alcohol. And where was I from? We native Newporters love being asked this question.

"Blumpy's *Mayflower*," his date blurted out as soon as he'd packed off toward the loo. I was so stunned that I wasn't sure I'd heard her properly; maybe it was Bunny, or Bumpy, or Buzzy. This was the very best sort of lineage, of course, but to reveal it thus was a gross error of protocol, and I felt rather ashamed suddenly. Further conversation revealed that she was not married to him.

She wasn't even blonde, after all—probably not even Protestant.

Well, there we were at the White Horse Tavern, me and Blumpy and our non-Protestant dates, one an Arab teetotaler and the other a potted Italian Catholic. Blumpy was too civil ever to mention my date's not drinking, which is something of a sin on the seersucker circuit. And for my part I never raised the *Mayflower* issue. We were, after all, two gentlemen who met at a bar, and that is a rare enough thing in our Republic today, indeed. We had a couple more rounds, and talked warmly about the sailing and the business potential in the Arab world and the jazz festival. We shook hands and called it a night, and when my date and I walked outside again, the frat boys had dispersed, and the stars were out. I felt more at peace, as if some of the tranquility of the old geezers had come to me simply by my having shared their space along the bar.

I wanted some more of that tranquility in the winter, when I felt oppressed by the cold and the tinny refrains of the Christmas carols blaring from every speaker, and when I popped into the White Horse on a rainy Thursday in December, the fire was going great

blazes. But the place was empty, save a small party who were lunching with the tavern's curator. She was lecturing the guests over their pastas primavera, and straightaway it just didn't feel, well, right. The feeling of warm security had been supplanted by a tense air of guilt. I couldn't figure it out until the curator said, "I want to tell the real story, because the real story is a story of many peoples, and not just one." And then, of course, I knew what was wrong.

But I said nothing, not even when, as an aside at the end of her talk, the curator allowed as how she'd purchased books to be distributed to poor kids at Christmas, and was then returning them in favor of something else. "Imagine," she said, "if I'd given the story of Cinderella to some little black girl." A gentleman would never have pointed out her assumption that all poor kids are black, nor would he have been so crass as to mention that perhaps the timeless romance of a young girl's fantasy come true might actually have a wonderful effect in the child. I didn't either; I only asked what she'd buy instead. "A big Tonka truck," she replied. I walked back out in the rain, dreaming of the blondes of summer. □

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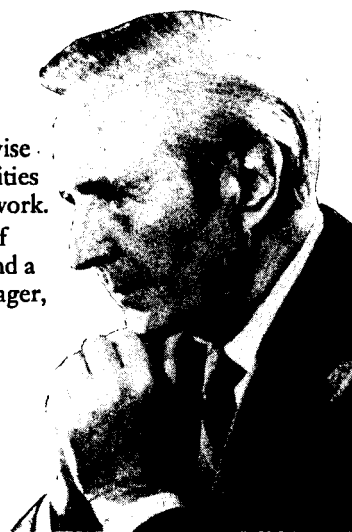
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Horsing Around

by Jonas Bernstein

Moscow, December 23

The mosaic on the side of a building across from Dobrinskaya metro station—where I catch a train each day to my job at *Moscow News*—proclaims “We Are Building Communism” to the oblivious multitudes doing holiday shopping at the kiosks below. In the chaos that is today’s Moscow, just who’s building what—if anything—is difficult to ascertain.

Gregory Kazankov, a young businessman and political consultant who also teaches chemistry at Moscow State University, is an anomaly in a sea of Russian pessimism. Over dinner at Pizza Hut on Kutuzovsky Prospekt, he shrugs off such seemingly negative indicators as the replacement of Yegor Gaidar with Viktor Chernomyrdin, the former energy sector chief and an old-line nomenklaturist, as prime minister. Kazankov believes the disintegration of the state sector and the concurrent march to the market are accelerating “at the micro level”—that is, in daily life—and are irreversible, with the government more a spectator than a player.

After dinner at the apartment of one of my expat friends, an American metals trader, the TV is giving a different atmospheric reading: a live television talk show, with an audience asking questions of a panel of experts, is focusing on the question of land privatization, a problem that has yet to be tackled in earnest. Repeatedly, questioners state their fear that “the Americans are going to buy up all our land.” An hour later, on a “60 Minutes”-like program called “Black Box,” the subject is black-market sales of vital organs to Western buyers: Russia, it seems, is joining Brazil and other Third World countries as a major exporter. A

Jonas Bernstein is an editor for the English-language edition of Moscow News.

crooked doctor is exposed, Mike Wallace-style, on camera. Moments later, a Russian medical specialist opines that the Americans are buying human tissue here in order to study its makeup and to design anti-Russian genetic weapons. This rather astonishing statement passes without commentary.

At midnight, I leave my friend’s place for home. At Leninsky Prospekt metro station, a train pulls in. The door of the car opens to reveal a man covered in blood lying on the floor. Another is sitting on the bench clutching his head. Evidently, these two, who seem to be drunk (a very common sight) as well as injured (an increasingly common sight), started a fight with three young guys (two long-hairs and one short-) and lost. The short-hair is alternately kneading his hand, clearly damaged in battle, and ringing the emergency intercom. The train remains motionless except for its doors, which are mindlessly opening and closing. The car, half-full, is completely silent, and no one appears the least bit interested in what’s happening; some of the riders are reading newspapers. None of the metro employees or the police are particularly interested, either, so after a few minutes one of the long-hairs simply picks up the beaten-up drunk and deposits him, like a Hefty bag filled with garbage, on the platform. A lone militiaman finally shows up, and as the train pulls away a discussion of who did what to whom begins.

December 24

It’s 10 a.m., and I’m chatting with Irina, one of the editors at the *Moscow News* English edition, before I begin my daily routine of editing and hanging out in the magazine’s bar. Three gentlemen walk through the door and into the neighboring office; they appear to be of Oriental extraction.

“I think they’re Chinese,” Irina whispers.

“Maybe Kazakh,” I reply, wanting to appear knowledgeable.

Moments later, the three appear before us, led by Natasha, another editor. “Jonas, these men are interested in hiring your services to edit some English translations,” she says. “But it’s on your own time. They’re from Korea.”

The apparent spokesman of the troop smiles at me beatifically and holds up a package.

“Okay,” I say immediately—South Korean businessmen with contracts written in English. “What is it?” I ask him, pointing to the package.

“It is a chapter from the memoirs of our Leader,” he says in English. “There will be 700 pages in all, due by the end of February, 400 rubles a page.”

Our Leader? Whoops—wrong Korea.

Realizing that such work doesn’t exactly conform to the guidelines of either the National Forum Foundation (from which I am receiving a grant to help build democratic institutions in Russia) or the National Endowment for Democracy, one of its main contributors—nor of the Registration of Foreign Agents Act, for that matter—I improvise: “Thanks very much, but I’m really too busy to take on such a big project.” Being thoughtful, I add: “Maybe my colleague is interested; she’s also a native English speaker.” I run down the hall and quickly tell Lucy, a young British woman right out of journalism school and in search of other media experience and extra money, about this chance for some free-lance editing—nearly 700 bucks at the current exchange rate, I note. “It’s the memoirs of Kim Il-Sung, by the way,” I feel obliged to add.

Lucy talks to the trio and says maybe, and they leave a chapter with her. “We will return tomorrow at three,” says the