

any patented coin operated, small size pool table in the history of American billiards, and to this day it has never even remotely been equaled.

Burnstine's little two-by-four version featured six pockets and for the first time an elaborate Victorian design. Complete with some seven different hardwoods, all milled and built into the table to handsomely expose each of their various wood grains. The design also included fluted legs with metal foot guards and built in table levelers, beaded score markers complete with felt covered cue holders and elaborately carved exterior pocket coverings. The coverings were actually connected to gully's and a ball return system activated by a highly polished nickel-plated coin slot (probably a penny, nickel or dime). The pool tables upper design incorporated double ogee woodcuts along the exterior rail assembly and even a conveniently located polished nickel-plated rack hook. I wouldn't be surprised if on the unseen sides of the table you'd find a glass and ice holder, a small bar stocked with one-ounce whiskey, vodka and gin bottles, along with a built in record player. A record player that would have probably included a small selection of jazz singer, Al Jolson favorites, including the popular and appropriate song of the tables great depression era: "Hey Buddy ...can you lend me a dime!"

On December 28, 1937 and just three months before legendary Jimmy Caras regains his world pocket billiard title and with it gives today's billiards in America its only single and seven word listing in the 1,374 pages of our nations "Chronicle of the 20th Century," it all came together.

Mr. Joseph C. Allen, a resident of Jefferson County, Birmingham Alabama, actually set the final standards for today's coin operated bar size pool table. While generations behind the elaborate billiard table designs once seen within their majestic billiard palaces of yesteryears and when billiards was still considered a professional sport and not simply today's coin operated public pastime. Nonetheless, Allen's design was adequate for what billiards was soon to become. And to a large extent the table itself resembled its own future. It was small and could better accommodate less skillful players. Plain in design and thus less vulnerable to damage within its future locations of taverns, sports bars and billiard facilities where the sale of alcohol would become their principle income and one day be used to replace sober billiard competition. Plus, the table could be jostled about with little effect on its miniature playing surface. And perhaps the strongest single asset to its new marketplace, it could easily fit into small taverns, or ganged together in larger ones.

For those of us still remembering what the more distinguished public side of billiards once was, and today, see what it has become, all of this might appear as a colossal loss, and considered both unfair and without logic. But in my mind I like to think of this change as a good thing. And as an act of saving what little was left of a game that at one time had built itself to be recognized as a popular national sport that commanded the audience of hundreds of thousands. And as it is seen today, billiards is only resting within a mid-journey resting-place. Waiting for a new generation of visionaries and enterprising people bound together by their sensitivity to social betterment, to redesign and introduce with emphasis on family involvement, the once illustrious public side of American billiards that has been lost and forgotten, so very, very, long ago.

*The Illinois Billiard Club is the oldest, self-owned, operated and prestigious private billiard club in the United States. Complete with an adjoining hundred-seat banquet room. The club was founded for the preservation and promotion of the elegant, historical, professional and social side of billiards. The IBC is not a poolroom, barroom or any other form of public place of amusement. Yet by its design, popularizes the game of billiards to all positive sides of society.*

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Photo's and all illustrations courtesy of The Illinois Billiard Club

**Above:** A very rare and perhaps only photographic documentation of America's first patented commercial coin operated pool table actively in use within its newly licensed 1934 tavern.

**Below:** Featured from top to bottom in their order of U.S. Patent Office approval, are the first federally recognized small commercial coin operated game and pool tables, along with the names of their designers and dates of approval. These are the tables and their visionary inventors that were first responsible for the following seventy-years of commercial activities leading to the design conception and success of today's nationally popular team pool leagues. A concept directly responsible for saving what little was left of a dying commercial division of American billiards.

**Designers:** Mr. Frank E. Pavelka and Mr. Harold W. Thompson - March 24, 1931 / Mr. Isaac H. Burnstine - June 23, 1931 / Mr. William G. Ehrhart - June 23, 1931 / Mr. Charles A. Toce - November 10, 1931 / Mr. Isaac H. Burnstine - November 17, 1931 / Mr. Joseph C. Allen - December 28, 1937.



## A tribute to the men that saved commercial billiards in America.

by Jim Parker

The U. S. Prohibition Act of 1920, forbidding by federal law the manufacturing, transporting and sale of alcohol came to an end in 1933 and with this action also came a new beginning for not only the American liquor industry. New alcohol related businesses ranging from small neighborhood taverns to huge nightclubs and restaurants, now with their precious newly issued liquor licenses in hand, began springing up across America. With this, also began the search for bigger and better means of entertainment that often led to new and enduring popular pastimes.

As seen in this very rare 1934 photograph, it wasn't long after the end of prohibition that small neighborhood taverns began cashing in on a variety of new forms of entertainment. Pending affordability and after field testing scads of various coin operated amusement devices, when recalling the popularity of older and larger billiard tables, many of the newly opened saloons began to install versions of Isaac H. Burnstine's small size 1931 coin operated pool tables.

After the roof caved in on the public side of the American billiard industry during the 1950's, it was primarily the social bonding characteristics and availability of alcohol that was almost entirely to become responsible for the rebirth of commercial billiards. While traveling pool and carom billiard leagues were already part of billiards 19th century marketing, an updated combination of liquor, small size pool tables and masses of participating taverns influenced the birth of an entirely new concept. And don't think for one minute that this was the brainchild of the American billiard industry. It wasn't. They were still hopelessly stuck in the failing ruts of marketing the game through billiards nationally unpopular professional side.

If one single state in the nation were to be linked with the enterprising act of using small size pool tables and small local taverns to organize what eventually became known as bar leagues, it would be the state of Wisconsin. It was here, during the late 1950's that a clever tavern owner disturbed by the loss of his patrons and their revenue due to off premise activities, primarily bowling leagues, began making arrangements with other local tavern owners to organize their own inner-tavern pool league. The concept became an immediate success.

By the 1960's the concept of organizing bar leagues found its way to Chicago's Southside. To encourage the growth of billiards in most any form, an avid Chicago straight pool player entered the picture. He began first by redesigning the dairy states league policies when tightening-up the initial and rather loose rules. Then published a small rule-book and for a slight fee from each of the participating taverns (barely enough to cover the cost of his ink), began well organized and a more formal version of tavern pool leagues.

It wasn't long after that the concept was picked up and used by individual tavern owners and various individuals that became known simply as "league operators." A division of society who's operational policies ranged from honorable and dedicated, to down right thieving and deceptive. Recalling one pair of operators that shortly before the close of an entire season, ran off with their leagues entrusted prize fund.

Today, the popularity of this tavern league concept has successfully dwarfed any and all forms of organized billiards in the long and ever promising history of our nation. Far from billiards more glamorous 19th century beginning, yet a concept that might have never evolved if not through the creative efforts of men that have mysteriously gone unrecognized by the very billiard industry that they have to an overwhelming extent been responsible for saving from its own self destruction.

Whatever the case and situation, I've written this notice of tribute and "Thanks" to honor these pioneers and visionaries for their most appreciated enthusiasm and creative inventions. For it has come to pass that through the achievements of men like Frank Pavelka, Harold Thompson, Isaac Burnstine and the rest of their trend setting colleagues, that the game of billiards is still being enjoyed for what it was first intended. To provide entertainment, competition, and help socially bring together man's greatest worldly gift ...his fellow man.