

# A den of GAMBLERS & BOOTLEGGERS

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## FULL TEXT

It was bitterly cold on March 8, 1932, when a fire broke out shortly before 5 p.m. at Miralago, an art deco nightclub and casino on the North Shore. Today, the site is occupied by the Plaza del Lago, a shopping center, and a cluster of high-rise apartment buildings along the Lake Michigan beachfront. But back then, the area where the nightclub stood was an unincorporated sliver of land squeezed in between Wilmette and Kenilworth. This community, known as No Man's Land, had neither fire engines nor the water capacity for fighting fires.

The previous year, Wilmette had withdrawn the fire protection it was providing for No Man's Land, saying it wouldn't be restored until the handful of residents agreed to a fee of \$500 a month. Rejecting the offer as extortion, the residents dug wells that provided them drinking water, but hardly enough to extinguish the fire that raged in No Man's Land that day in 1932.

So urgent appeals for help were phoned to nearby suburbs. Wilmette and Winnetka ignored the calls. But Evanston's firefighters showed up and started pumping water on the flames. Just as the fire was being brought under control, though, Kenilworth police shut off the hydrant Evanston's fire engines were hooked to. The hydrant was on Kenilworth's side of the border, and the cops considered Miralago a den of gamblers and bootleggers. As Evanston's fire hoses went dry, the flames shot up ever higher. Some onlookers claimed that fireworks for special occasions were being stored in Miralago. The North Shore being home to a staunch Victorian code of public behavior, its neighbors were leery of it. A local magazine described Miralago as "a roadhouse on the lake, catering to the young set of automobiling, jazz-dancing, nite lifers."

The previous year, state's attorney's police had raided Miralago, confiscating "several tables, some chips and other gambling paraphernalia," the Tribune reported. "Two hundred dancers in the ballroom of the cafe were not molested."

About an hour after the fire had broken out, Wendell Clark, Kenilworth's city clerk, ordered the hydrant turned on again. He felt humanitarian concerns outweighed the legal niceties. "He explained that the police had been technically correct, as the occupants of the building had no contract for water or fire protection," the Tribune reported.

Wilmette's village president ordered its firemen to fight the fire, and at midnight, Evanston's fire chief persuaded Winnetka's chief to have his crews replace the exhausted Evanston firefighters.

The next morning, the sun rose over a scene of utter desolation. Gone was the ballroom's enormous silver ceiling. Its plush green drapery and murals were ashes lying among the black marble columns. In an encore to the disaster, Miralago's stockholders sued Kenilworth for \$250,000, the damages they suffered because its police refused to open the fire hydrant until it was too late. A judge dismissed the case.

The comedy of errors was fittingly emblematic of that roughly 22 acres of unincorporated land. Sometimes, its neighbors wanted to annex the sliver out of existence. Other times, it was an unwanted orphan – which was OK with its residents.

When the Illinois legislature passed a 1939 bill enabling Wilmette to annex their community, its 75 inhabitants flew a flag reading, "No Man's Land of the Free."

A manifesto explained its iconography:

"The upper left hand corner carries a grotesque laughing mask, which stands for the spirit of the area, dedicated to

providing whoopee for the North Shore citizen. The lower left carries an upraised palm commanding Wilmette to halt at the border unless coming in peace to buy a hot dog or a cooling scuttle brew."

In his book, "From No Man's Land to Plaza del Lago," Robert Shea offers a theory for the origins of the strip that dwelt in a limbo. He notes that federal surveyors mapping the Western frontier drew straight lines on two-dimensional maps. Nascent suburbs defining their borders had to take into account the local topography -- points where the land rose or fell -- and in that adjustment, No Man's Land fell off the maps.

It found its identity when Prohibition went into effect on Jan. 17, 1920. No Man's Land became an enclave of uninhibited capitalism amid suburbanites who were an untapped customer base thirsting for a discreet night out. Along the rest of the North Shore, going to a movie on Sunday was considered shameful. Even after Prohibition was repealed in 1933, booze was banned by local ordinances.

So Sheridan Road, which bisected No Man's Land, was dotted with hot dog stands, barbecue joints and miscellaneous eateries with colorful names: The Shack, The Pink Cottage, the Tornado Tavern, the Lakota Beach roadhouse. It was generally assumed they served alcohol, including by the Illinois State Police who intermittently raided them.

Residents of neighboring suburbs were even more shocked by a 1926 announcement of plans to take No Man's Land upscale. On the drawing board were designs for apartments, a parking garage, a theater on the scale of the Loop's movie palaces, two country clubs and Miralago.

A shopping center, the Spanish Court, would be crowned with a belfry, the Tribune reported in 1928, impishly suggesting: "There'll be a bell which may be used as a curfew for Kenilworth and Wilmette residents who may stay up after 9 p.m."

Locals didn't think it a laughing matter, and a concerned citizens committee called in vain for a referendum to authorize \$500,000 in bonds to buy No Man's Land and turn it into a Wilmette park. The investors in the development proposal -- a group of North Shore businessmen and professionals -- refused all appeals to civic pride, and No Man's Land's makeover began.

The first building completed was Teatro del Lago, which opened in April 1927. The New Trier Citizens Committee took out a full-page ad in a local weekly, urging readers not to attend Sunday showings. But its 1,400 seats were filled for racy movies like "Flesh and the Devil" starring Greta Garbo. Among the locals who worked as ushers were Ann-Margret and Rock Hudson.

When ground was broken for the beachfront hotel complex Vista del Lago, the promoter wielding the shovel promised: "We shall have a world-famous resort with a hand-picked patronage." A 10-story clubhouse would offer guest rooms, a fancy restaurant, a grand ballroom, physical fitness facilities and a rooftop cafe.

But after Wall Street crashed in 1929, memberships didn't sell, and rumors had it that Chicago mobsters were going to bail out its investors. "The Vista del Lago was to be used as a den for gambling, illegal drinking, and other vices," the Tribune reported in a look back at the landmark as it faced bulldozers in the early 1960s.

In any event, Vista del Lago folded, only two stories having been built, and the Depression made it impossible to find financing to rebuild Miralago. No Man's Land reverted to its seedy past. Bootleg liquor was again a mainstay, and police raids resumed. Neighboring suburbs repeatedly tried to vote overlapping townships dry.

Finally, the Illinois legislature passed a bill allowing Wilmette to annex No Man's Land without a vote of its residents, and in 1942, No Man's Land was absorbed by its neighbor. It was declared dry, but residents' insurance premiums went down because it gained police and fire protection.

In the 1960s, a pair of North Shore lawyers resumed the renovation project suspended during the Depression. The Plaza del Lago shopping mall was built, its Spanish architecture echoing its predecessor. High-rise apartment buildings were constructed along the lakefront.

Christina Slavens lived in one and painted a word picture of the No Man's Land of her youth. She and her friends heard that a lot more than dancing had gone on in Miralago. Her account was reprinted in Shea's book.

"Miralago was forever after known as the Ruins and was the site of countless beach parties which became a North Shore institution among teenagers in the Forties and Fifties," Slavens wrote. "The main attraction was the setting --

sitting around a fire, listening to the waves lapping the shore on warm summer nights and imagining what the infamous gambling casino looked like before it was consumed by fire."

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Have a Flashback idea? Share your suggestions with Editor Colleen Kujawa at ckujawa@chicagotribune.com.

CAPTION: Photo: Sheridan Road in No Man's Land on July 1, 1939. ; Photo: The beachfront at No Man's Land, an unincorporated sliver of the North Shore, on July 1, 1939. ; IRVIN HEBERG/CHICAGO HERALD AND EXAMINER

PHOTOS

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