

# Work in Woodside: At Doherty's Bar and Elsewhere

BY JACK DOHERTY

At the start of the twentieth century, Woodside was semirural. But by 1909 the Queensboro Bridge had connected Manhattan and Queens, and by the 1920s Woodside was attracting large numbers of new residents as elevated train service (the "el") was operating and the Long Island Rail Road had built an important connecting station on Sixty-first Street and Roosevelt Avenue.

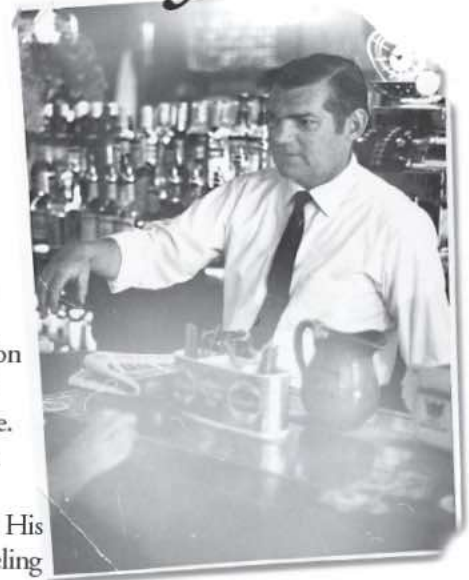
My father, Tom Doherty, and his brothers were among many Irish immigrants who settled in Woodside in the 1920s. They first found work in New York City as "sandhogs." This was the popular name for men who dug tunnels under the waters around the city with picks and shovels. Sandhogs were human moles, digging and shoveling deep

down in darkness, always soaked and dirty. Before surfacing, the men had to go into decompression chambers for two hours to avoid "the bends" — a crippling disease. It was cruel work, but many Irish did it.

One day my father got lucky. His left hand was smashed while shoveling muck from the huge excavating machines. His middle finger had to be amputated, which ended his sandhog days. Consequently, during the 1930s my father drove a cab and tended bar.

During the same decade a local business boom continued in Woodside to meet the needs of the burgeoning population. Roosevelt Avenue became the main shopping street. Other stores were located on side streets just off the avenue.

The stores and shops reflected



*Illustration: (top) Jack Doherty at work in the business bought by his father for \$1,700 in 1941.*

*(bottom) A busy evening at Doherty's Bar during the "Golden Age" that began during the late 1940s.*



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*Illustration:  
Christmas parties  
were held annu-  
ally at Doherty's.  
They included  
entertainment for  
children and  
adults. Elsie  
Doherty (back,  
center) came from  
Co. Leitrim and  
kept the business  
operating after  
her husband's  
death in 1944.*

the ethnic diversity of Woodsiders. Italians owned fish and vegetable markets and shoe-repair stores. Germans opened up bakeries, ice-cream parlors, and delicatessens. Greeks owned a couple of florist shops and hash joints, the latter consisting of only a few stools and a countertop. Jews worked as druggists, haberdashers, and dry cleaners; they also owned candy stores and convenience stores. The Irish opened up bars all over Woodside once Prohibition ended in 1933.

My father was no exception. In 1941 he begged and borrowed enough money to buy a bar on the corner of Sixty-fifth Street and Thirty-ninth Avenue. He changed the name to "Doherty's." The price was \$1,700. In those days, the cost of buying a bar was determined by how much business it did. This one did a very modest business, taking in less than \$25 per day.

Six months after buying the bar my father got lucky again. The United States went to war. And because World War II generated work for nearly everyone, the bar prospered.

Sadly, my father died of a stroke in February 1944 at age forty-seven. My mother, Eliza Jane Doherty (known to everyone as "Elsie"), took over. Born in County Leitrim, she had only a third-grade education and didn't think she could run a bar. But she wanted to keep the business alive for me, her only child, in case I couldn't succeed on my own.

#### THE GOLDEN AGE AT DOHERTY'S

Much to her surprise Elsie discovered she had, as she said, "smart brains," and Doherty's Bar did very well. In fact, by 1948 she had managed well enough to buy the building, which included the bar, two other stores, and three four-room apartments. She and I moved into one of the apartments, and in 1949 I became the day bartender in Doherty's.

My mother and I became a great team. I learned from her to treat customers with respect. My mother became the official greeter at night, and her presence attracted more female cus-



tomers who, in turn, attracted more men. The women knew Elsie would make sure no men bothered them — unless of course they wanted to be bothered.

It can be argued that there has never been a golden age for blue-collar workers in any land. Historically, political and economic power have been held by elites, not by workers. But the twenty-year period from 1948 to 1968 was in fact a golden age for working-class Irish in New York City. Their unions had clout! Politicians had to answer their needs or else. They enjoyed decent pay and good benefits. A good number of Doherty's Irish customers had jobs with Con Edison, AT&T, Metropolitan Life, Schaefer and Rheingold breweries, the *Daily News*, the *Mirror*, and the *Journal-American*. Few of these jobs required much education or skill. Most of the customers grew up during the Depression. Getting a high school diploma was not a priority—getting a steady job was. So they appreciated it when they got one. Most were dependable workers, loyal to their companies. It was rare for anyone to get fired, and both management and labor tried to avoid strikes. When there was one, it was rarely a long one. And there was never a worry of scabs taking their jobs. In those days, it just wasn't done.

Many customers had city jobs. They were seen as having it made because they had security, pensions, and good benefits. Some were cops and firemen. Others were in transit positions or had low-level city-agency jobs. However, the majority of Doherty's customers worked in construction. It seemed there were more Irish working as carpenters, steamfitters, stone-derrick men, tile-setters' helpers, wire-lathers, ironworkers, or laborers than any other ethnic group. It was rare for anyone not Irish to get full membership in any of these unions. The Irish took care of their own. No others need apply.

At Doherty's, the bar would crowd up with construction workers starting at 4 P.M. and would stay busy until 6:30 P.M. when they went home. We seldom saw any of them at night during the week. Their jobs were too demanding to stay out late. Business would then be slow until 10 P.M. when the late-shift workers arrived. Cops, firemen, service-industry men and women, some Long Island Rail Road workers, newspaper

people, and others would pack the bar until closing time at 4 A.M.

Most customers in Woodside bars like Doherty's were moderate drinkers who stopped off for a few drinks on a regular basis to relax and to talk with others like themselves. (Not one bar in Woodside had a bad reputation. Rarely were there fights or disturbances in any of them.) In many respects, a neighborhood bar is a blue-collar worker's country club. Not only is it a place to socialize, but patrons can also find jobs and favors there. Doherty's had a reputation of being a great place to go if you were looking for work. For example, five Doherty's customers were hired by the Long Island Rail Road because of phone calls I made. Many customers got construction jobs because of contacts made in the bar.

#### LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Much as I would like to think that the charming personalities of mother and son were responsible for Doherty's success in these years, I have to credit our prime location. By the mid-1940s Woodside was filled with people and with the noise of trains screeching and whistling their arrivals and departures. The Eighth Avenue subway line put in a station at Broadway and Sixty-fifth Street in 1932, and the el and Long Island Rail Road trains continued to run. The rattling clatter of the passing el trains interfered with conversations, listening to the radio, and sleep. The cacophony was worse during the warm weather when windows were opened wide to let the heat out and fresh air in. If you got over the noise, you still had to live with the lights from passing trains flashing onto walls and mirrors.

The existence of all these transportation systems caused the building of housing complexes, which attracted more people. Doherty's was located just down the block and around the corner from the Metropolitan Apartments (affectionately known as "the Mets"). The Mets attracted working-class families because it offered affordable rents and amenities these people never dreamed of having. Each building was U-shaped, so every room had an outside view, which provided sunlight during the day and fresh air at night. Every apartment had a gas stove, steam heat, a Frigidaire, electricity, and a bathroom with modern plumbing. For many Irish, who

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New York City*



were living in crowded tenements where everything was falling apart and the bathroom was shared with dozens of others, having a private bathroom was the height of luxury.

There was, however, one problem with the Mets. All apartments looked the same from the outside, and all had the same floor plan. Patrons of Doherty's who had had a few too many would often wander into wrong apartments, upsetting both the proper tenants and themselves.

#### IRISH BARS AND RESTAURANTS IN WOODSIDE

By 1950 there were thirty-nine bars in the neighborhood. Only four were not Irish-owned. None of the bars served food, even though a New York State law required each establishment to have a restaurant. This restaurant requirement was never a problem. (All bars did keep refrigerators, stoves, and some unopened cans of food.) State inspectors were always most cooperative. Whenever one came into Doherty's, for example, I would greet him with a generous handshake as soon as he flashed his badge. None of the inspectors ever made a comment. It was said around Woodside that some of the inspectors shook so many saloonkeepers' hands that they had to take early retirement and move to Florida to ease the pain in their palms under the palms.

Woodside didn't have a nice restaurant until after World War II. Before then, there were only three places to eat on Roosevelt Avenue: the White Castle at Sixty-ninth Street, Bickford's at Sixty-first Street, and Woolworth's at Sixty-third Street. But in 1950 Joe Kiernan from County Kerry bought a bar on the corner of Sixty-first Street and Roosevelt Avenue and turned it into a restaurant. His Woodside Steak House hired only Irish bartenders and waitresses, and it became the place to eat in Woodside. Kiernan hired Joe "Flattop" Fink to play the piano on weekends, which he did for more than thirty years. Fink had a big following because he knew all the Irish songs and old favorites, and he could play off-key to accommodate all the off-key singers who were in love with their own singing.

In the early 1960s Joe Donovan, a New York City fireman, bought a bar on the corner of Fifty-eighth Street and Roosevelt Avenue. He convert-

ed an unused back room into a dining area, modernized the kitchen, turned the ordinary bar into an Irish pub, and got rich. Donovan's is still the busiest bar in Woodside.

#### OTHER WORK IN WOODSIDE

Many Irish found business opportunities in Woodside besides owning bars or restaurants. The Irish owned two of the three funeral parlors in Woodside. The Dennis Kennedy Funeral Home was on Fifty-ninth Street and Roosevelt Avenue. Irish-born Joe Chalk operated his funeral home less than a block away from Doherty's. (Joe got so much business from Doherty's that he gave us a discount when we paid the funeral expenses of poor customers.) Old-timers claimed that during Prohibition Joe ran a speakeasy out of the same basement where he did the embalming. The story continued that drinkers didn't mind this, but they did keep a watchful eye on him to make sure he didn't mix up the fluids.

Gaffey and Ward, and the Goldens (Tom, Sr. and Tom, Jr.) had very lucrative real estate offices on Roosevelt Avenue. Tom Mathews operated a photography studio, and Pat Lynch owned a travel agency. Pat O'Day and Jim Conlon had their law office on Sixty-first Street, near the train stations. They were the attorneys for Doherty's, and we referred many customers to them. We never got a complaint about either one.

Entrepreneurs also came to Woodside to provide services to the many bars. Walter Shea started a beer lines and pipe cleaning business, which he ran for thirty-nine years. The Curtin Brothers, Denny and Joe, supplied ice to bars for several decades until ice machines put them out of business. The Flaherty brothers had a ginger ale and club soda bottling plant in Long Island City. They made their own deliveries and prospered for years, but the invention of the soda-dispensing systems ended their bottling business. D'L. Dineen took advantage of the new technology by selling ice-makers, soda-dispensing machines, and air conditioners, along with service contracts, to bars all over Queens. We all bought from him because he was dependable.



### THE BITTER ENDING

No period in American history saw as many social, economic, political, and cultural changes happen so fast as the 1960s. None of these

wasn't prejudice as much as fear that was behind the resentment of Doherty's customers. Their attitude was, "as long as I got mine, it's okay for you to get yours"



changes were to the liking of the customers at Doherty's. By the end of the decade, they were bitter, angry, and resentful of the "sellout" by the Democratic party to "liberal, America-hating, commie atheists." They saw affirmative action as a direct threat to them. These customers felt they had had to fight for everything they ever got, and they didn't like for others to reap the benefits of what had taken them years to achieve. The changes in the immigration laws in 1965 caused more bitterness. Customers were concerned that immigrants from "God knows where" would move into their neighborhoods and take over Woodside. They were afraid of losing what they had. It

None of these changes angered the Doherty crowd more than the antiwar protests and the hippies. Most of the customers were either veterans of World War II or Korea or had relatives who were, so they couldn't understand why anyone would not want to fight for their country.

### THE FINAL BLOW: SALE OF DOHERTY'S IN 1978

Doherty's was put up for sale in 1977. By then, I had worked behind the bar for twenty-eight years, and I was tired of working weekends, Wednesday nights, and more than fifty hours a week. But that wasn't the main reason. I wanted to be a teacher. I had gone back to college at night at age thirty-six and had spent the next eleven years getting a

*Illustration:  
Another busy  
holiday evening  
at Doherty's in  
Woodside.*



bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in secondary education, followed by state certification to teach high-school social studies. But I put this dream off because I had two children in college and two more to educate.

By 1977 I was ready to sell. I got in touch with all the Irish saloon-keepers who had been after me for years to sell the bar to them. Now I was ready to do business, but no one was interested. So I lowered the price and offered a ten-year lease at generous terms, but still I got no response. These bar owners had seen Woodside's future and didn't like what they saw. So a year later, I went to Tom Golden, our real estate man and asked him to find a buyer for Doherty's. A week later he came in with Elias Alonzo and Pepi Hernandez, both from northern Spain. Doherty's soon became the Santa Maria, and it did very well for years. It is now Galaragua's Sports Bar and is only open at night.

I became a high school teacher and spent thirteen years in a public high school in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. I found I had fewer discipline problems than the other faculty members because of my saloon background.

I maintained my ties to Woodside by tending bar every Sunday afternoon in an Irish bar a

block away from Doherty's. The owner was quite happy about all the new business I brought him. That bar is now closed, however, and there is an empty lot where the Woodside Steak House once stood. A fire of unknown origin gutted it.

Nowadays there are only a handful of Irish bars left in Woodside, all on or near Sixty-first Street and Roosevelt Avenue. They attract a crowd of mostly young, single, recent Irish immigrants.

None of my old customers live in the Mets now. They all died or moved away. Gone too are the Germans, Italians, Greeks, and Jews. They've been replaced by Asians and Hispanics, who moved into Woodside for the same reasons the Irish did years before.

My mother lived in the building until 1994. A week after her ninety-fifth birthday she had a fall, and her doctor told me she couldn't live alone any longer. Reluctantly, I put her in a nursing home, where the staff loved her stories and her outrageous ways. She died a year later.

My mother's philosophy of treating people nicely and giving them the respect they deserve was the hallmark of Doherty's appeal to its customers. She always said, "Overlook their faults. We all have them." Not a bad way to look at life.

*Illustration:  
A view of the  
exterior of  
Doherty's in the  
1970s. With the  
community  
population  
continuing to  
change during  
that decade,  
selling the  
business in 1977  
involved some  
difficult decisions.*

