



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

A man you never knew

Word has reached me, carried on the wind, that Bruno Selmi, legendary owner of Bruno's Country Club in Gerlach, Nevada, has passed on. I had known that Bruno wasn't feeling well, after stopping in for a visit last year, but am forced to admit that I was nursing a strong, and stupid, hope that he might live on forever.

Some eras in our lives remain so formative, so rich with experience, that our subconscious keeps them in a special place, preserved in a kind of memorial amber. Bruno and his watering hole featured prominently in the personal amber rooms for many of us who once called the great Nevada Outback our home.

Bruno was an immigrant, arriving in Nevada in the 1950s without much

English. He bought the Country Club, in those days called the Longhorn Saloon, for a few thousand bucks. Ultimately, he would own most of Gerlach, build the only motel for a hundred miles in any direction, and become the de-facto mayor of a town that never had one. He was a kind of outback Al Swearengen, without the Shakespearean diatribes. Rather, he was acerbic, and possessed a razor wit, which he could — and would — occasionally unleash.

He was a man you could never really know.

The truth is, Bruno never said much at all. He either liked you or he didn't, and if he didn't he would tell you — and he meant it — to get out of his place and go across the street. Only an idiot would ask what was across the street, because the answer was quite clear: nothing but whistling desert.

If less is more, and it often is, Bruno's quiet and laconic nature helped build him into the giant he was, and it may be the reason he was so universally respected, even by those who faced his ire. Because at the bottom of all that ire was a generous heart. He was the kind of guy who would advance a man's paycheck from his own till.

When the first Burners started coming into Bruno's — before Burning Man became the over-hyped and

strangely corporatized art-funk techno blowout it is now — they were as nervous and shifty as any troop of dandies stranded at a frontier trading post.

Bruno didn't like them, once warning a man wearing a skirt, and with a hockey puck stuck in his lower lip, that he should be careful walking around the desert because the bird he had wired to the top of his hat was a game species. I only know that is true because I was there when it happened, saw the fear in the poor man's eyes, and heard the bar break up in laughter. But I also know that Bruno eventually came to like them — certainly he liked the money that came with them.

What made Bruno's such a great place wasn't just his stuffed raviolis on a cold day, or the generous drinks he poured. It was the abiding sense, compounded by all of that open desert, that we truly were on a lost frontier, and that the world outside still held the promise of rugged exploration and wild discovery.

The cast of players who inhabited the Country Club on a Saturday night only reinforced the notion. Miners, cowboys, truckers, hunters, itinerant singers, Indians, Mexicans, whites and Basques, we were all drawn to Bruno's in a kind of marvelous modern



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

Bruno's Country Club — frontier outpost and watering hole.

rendezvous.

It could, and sometimes did, get rowdy

But the world is always shrinking, slouching toward a kind of sad and somnambulant uniformity, and I think that's a large part of the reason I hold memories of the Country Club, and of Bruno — the master of ceremonies — so dear. His death is, in many ways, the last door on the wild frontiers of my youth slamming shut. Even as things have changed in the intervening decades, his continued life held that door open for a very long time.

I can foresee a day, maybe not long from now, when I will return to the Country Club, belly up to the bar, and order a drink from a sassy bartender with pink yo-yos stuck in his ears. He won't care about anything I

might have to say, any stories I might tell of another life, because he was never there to see just how Western the Country Club could be on a Saturday night. He will never have seen Bruno pull out his shotgun to restore order.

And I can imagine my instinctive reaction to the new guy's attitude — the strongest urge to give him an Augustus McRae style pistol-whipping.

But I probably won't. We've graduated from pistol-whipping surly bartenders, it seems. Instead, I'll probably just shrug, stare at my own reflection in the mirror, and pull at a mournfully weak bourbon and seven. And at some point I'll rally, and raise a quiet toast to Bruno Selmi, and all the other ghosts of yet another lost frontier.

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